

APPEARANCES AND PHENOMENA

Michael McGarry

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Ungers, O.M. 1982. *Morphologie / City Metaphern*. Köln: Walter König.

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Auerbach, Erich and Edward W. Said. 2013. *Mimesis The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

3

Barthes, Roland. 1977. "The Death of the Author" in *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Pess.

O.M. Ungers' wonderful atlas of phenomena *Morphologie / City Metaphors Morphologies*¹, communicates through paired images and nouns in English and German. Each two-page spread directly provokes six potential relationships between images and words; the wonder being the transferability across scale and medium, phenomena as universal metaphors represented through appearance and overlaid by the cultural specificity of language. The book is a pleasure of representations.

Auerbach and Said's seminal work on mimesis², positioned likeness as central to representation in western European culture. First photography and now virtual reality has disturbed the assumed value of likeness as the means of coming to terms with the world. The limitations of this are now apparent in the digital experience of the work relative to that imagined. The hand-drawn sketch has the attribute of possibilities, the computer drawing the certainty of but one. Ungers' atlas of representations directly evidences the potency of the gap between underlying thought and its particular manifestation.

Representation is a creative phenomenon of displacement, an imaginative space between two positions, provoking and allowing for engagement and advance. Artistic practice determines the relationship between the artist and her/his work, while hermeneutics (interpretation in the widest sense) determines the onlooker's engagement. These processes of engagement are (separately) relational and with significant elements of reciprocity - in other words we are affected by that which we perceive such that our perception is further altered; 'separately' as suggested by Barthes³ in that the engagement of author and reader is through the work and not between author and reader.

The practitioner develops through action within her/his discipline, that very action informing future practice. For some, this action takes place at multiple remove from the ultimate incarnation. Architecture is an obvious example, architects speculate, posit, imagine remotely before persuading and informing others to build. The point applies to all artistic practice, we operate at some remove, and are influenced by our response to that which we confront. Our perception is predicated on the present representation of a

4 Schon, Donald A. 2011. *Displacement of Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge.

5 Schon 2011, 31-33

7 Van Schaik, Leon. 2015. *Practical Poetics in Architecture*. Chichester: Wiley

6 Lawson, Brian. 2006. *How Designers Think*. New York and London: Routledge

8 Mallgrave, Harry Francis. 2011. *The Architect's Brain Neuroscience, Creativity and Architecture*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell

9 Zeisel, John. 2006. *Inquiry by Design*. New York London: W.W.Norton & Company

10 Zeisel 2006, 30

11 Arendt, Hanna. 2019. xxii "Introduction Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940". In *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn. Boston and New York: Mariner Books.

future condition. In psychology, displacement is understood as the purposeful redirection of an emotion or impulse from its original object to another.

Gadamer's *horizons* and Bordieu's *habitus* provide parallels; both originate in Heidegger's spatial ontology, both understand experience and existence through spatial phenomena where further insight is acquired at the edges of that which is known. The underlying human impulse is to understand the world through what we know, we exist in a liminal condition, relieved only by the prospect of future speculation and knowledge. David Schon's⁴ elegant explanation as to how new knowledge forms is useful. He gives two opening historical explanations, firstly that new concepts form by revelation (implicitly divine) or secondly that that which appears new is simply a rearrangement of the preexisting (as in reducivist). The former (divine) is of little use to most of us and the latter does not explain the very real evidence we have of advance in thought and knowledge.

Instead, and by way of elaboration, Schon posits the situation of entering into a metal room with a thin wall that reverberates whenever it is jarred⁵. The thought arises that the room is a kind of a drum but there is also the reciprocal process, that the original concept (the drum) is now reimaged by virtue of its momentary transference to the room. Design and artistic practice is typically non-linear, iterative, associative, suggestive, sometimes resonant and often metaphorical. This relatively recent understanding was founded on the empirical evidence from observed design processes rather than how it had been theorised or rationalised (Schon, Lawson⁶, Van Schaik⁷, and others), and has been relatively recently confirmed in advances in neuroscience (Mallgrave⁸ and others) where the importance of non-linear neural linkages is now accepted. Simply put, the character of much of our brain activity is associative rather than causal, reciprocal rather than linear, nimble rather than consistent.

The intellectual lineage is clear, originating in Dewey's philosophical pragmatism and his learning by inquiry, followed by Schon specific identification of the generative metaphor and his theory of displacement of concepts, and Zeisel's⁹ identification of the occurrence of conceptual gaps in creative practice. The last is important, the paradigm shift made possible through generative metaphor¹⁰.

In the English language the correspondence between the adjectives figurative and metaphorical is significant. We speak metaphorically or figuratively referring to an understanding or experiencing of one kind of thing in terms of another. Hannah Arendt (referring to Walter Benjamin) wonderfully referred to metaphors as the means by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about¹¹. Figurative of course has a second meaning as representing forms that are recognisably derived from life, from the figure, and particularly from the human figure; the semantic implication being that

12 Pallasmaa, Juhani. 2012. *The Eyes of the Skin*. Chichester: Wiley

13 Panofsky, Erwin. 1991. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. New York: Zone Books.

14 Panofsky 1991, 53-54

15 Panofsky 1991, 67-72

16 Greenberg, Clement. 1961. "Modernist Painting" in *Arts Yearbook Volume 4*. New York: Art Digest

18 Foucault, Michel. 2001. "Chapter 1, Las Meninas" in *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London and New York: Routledge.

17 Foucault, Michel. 2011. *The Object of Painting*. London: Tate Publishing

figure is an essential metaphor rooted in our psyche as humans and at the root of our negotiation with the world. Pallasmaa writes “understanding architecture implies the unconscious measuring of an object or a building with one’s body, and projecting one’s bodily scheme on the space in question”¹².

This negotiation is played out through embodied experience, meaning both our presencing of where we are and our sensory capacities. In situations where we are at one remove, our experience is realised through the imagined presence and experience of others; the metric is the figure, our own, or vicariously through that of others, or indeed through objects.

Panofsky in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*¹³ charted where early spatial representations were made possible by and between human figures and goes on to observe medieval attached sculpture (set within its own niche as a consequence of its carving), and the subsequent evolution into renaissance perspectival space with which we are now familiar. Panofsky linked representation with understanding and understanding with self-awareness through existential and cultural identity. His observation in respect of spaces formed in medieval relief work, was that this of course matched the contemporary conceptualisation of earthly space as being contained, defined and finite - hence the appropriateness of the trapped space and figure; unlimited space was a preserve reserved for the Almighty.¹⁴

Panofsky’s slim tome identified that retrospective representations of self are predicated on both how and where we see ourselves; the *what* and *where* of human existence being inseparable. He also articulated the reciprocal, that our future negotiation with the world is indeed influenced by those very representations.¹⁵ If existence is spatial then the representation of space is an acute concern.

Greenberg¹⁶ made the neat observation that modern art was preoccupied with the very process of the depiction of space (depth) using two dimensions (the flat canvas). Greenberg interpreted this as an ethical imperative for the modernists, a coming to terms with reality, in opposition to the suspect illusionism of pictorial tradition of western Europe.

Manet’s paintings sustain Greenberg’s argument with space ruthlessly frustrated in its depth, subtended between figures, perspective distorted or avoided, an overall flatness prevailing. Yet earlier, Velazquez played equivalent games of depth of field where indeed the viewer is enveloped in the optical framework, destroying object/viewer polarities. Manet and Velazquez were preoccupied by the phenomenon of spatial depth as depicted in two dimensions and were therefore of sustained interest to Michel Foucault^{17/18} for whom the representation of space was a critical epistemological pursuit, as with Panofsky.

Frank Stella the American painter lamented the absence of spatiality from twentieth century abstract art and struggled in his own

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Carravagio's *Calling of St Matthew*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Calling_of_St_Matthew_%28Caravaggio%29#/media/File:The_Calling_of_Saint_Matthew-Caravaggio_\(1599-1600\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Calling_of_St_Matthew_%28Caravaggio%29#/media/File:The_Calling_of_Saint_Matthew-Caravaggio_(1599-1600).jpg)

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Stella, Frank. 1986. *Working Space*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

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Stella 1986, 11-12 and 143-144

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Scolari, Massimo. 2015. *The Jesuit Perspective in China*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press

work to find depth close to the surface of the canvas without recourse to the comfort of pictorial illusion. In *Working Space*¹⁹ he recognises similar concerns in the work of Caravaggio²⁰, Carracci, and post-cubist Picasso; work where space is established between the painted figures yet compressed relative to the plane of the canvas²¹.

While western Europe moved from murals to framed panel and canvas, from shallow to deep space and then resurfacing or (flattening) with late modernism, China continued a tradition of the painting as narrative or more accurately narratives, without either single viewpoint or vanishing point, without perspectival diminution, depiction not within a frame but on a continuous scroll. Manet's indebtedness to Japanese printmaking is evidenced in his spatial sensibility, his use of frontal flat colour, and the liberties taken with the conventions of optical perspective notwithstanding his eschewal of both narrative and larger landscapes.

The conflict between these traditions of east and west is highlighted in the account of the Jesuit's arrival in China in the Scolari's *Oblique Drawing*²²; renderings that functioned to successfully persuade in Europe were considered as absurd distortions by the Chinese, again an affirmation of Foucault's position that in addition to cultural significance, the representation of space through figure was of epistemological significance. In larger landscapes and spaces beyond the dimension of conversation, human presence as metric adopts different guises. Narratives of sequence, time, and travel were used to map the incomprehensible by the pioneers, the European pilgrims, and the native Australians' walkabouts represented in their extraordinary planar images.

Systemic poverty limited cultural development in Ireland to talk, music, and ultimately text; language (particularly when borrowed from an overlord) became instrumental in a sophisticated survival made possible through guile, wit and irony. Irish aural and oral traditions are immensely strong with consequences for a particular spatiality, space delimited/understood by the topographical relationship between conversing characters, and secondly the prolific use of the descriptive narrative with place being defined through its occupation. The former echoes the concerns noted above (Panofsky, Manet, and Stella), the latter a nod to Gadamer. The reference to character rather than figure is important, character absorbs personality, a presence beyond objective material presence.

Before the arrival of cinema, Irish society's exposure to picture making was mainly through religious iconography. The Protestant scepticism for the visual left the imaginative field open to the Catholic churches each of which had its obligatory fourteen stations of the cross and (commonly) one or more stained glass panels, the extent of the latter being a measure of local wealth. The stations of cross are a spatial reconstruction of the path taken by



"Views of Westport House" by George Moore.
From left to right: West View and East View.

Both images courtesy of Siobhan Sexton Mayo
County Council with the consent of Lady Sheelyn
Browne.



- 23 Henry, Paul. 1920. *Errigal Donegal*. <https://imma.ie/collection/errigal-co-donegal/>
- 24 Keating, Sean. 1929. *Nights's Candles are Burnt Out*. <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/nights-candles-are-burnt-out-90693>
- 25 Dillon, Gerard. 1946. *The Little Green Fields*. <https://www.nationalgallery.ie/art-and-artists/exhibitions/shaping-ireland-landscapes-irish-art/education-programme-shaping-1#na>
- 26 O'Brien, Flann. 2007. "The Third Policeman" in *The Complete Works*. New York London Toronto: Everyman's Library.

Jesus Christ on the day of his crucifixion and depict events and places within this defined narrative. The stations are distributed around each church, are experienced sequentially, viewed from below and at relatively close distance. The available techniques of marquetry, carved or painted wood, combined with the imperative of the narrative, produced distortions of perspective typically resulting in severely foreshortened and compressed space. As in Panofsky's observations, the spatiality is articulated through the device of the ensemble of figures. The second cultural exposure to compressed space (physical rather than depicted) was the confessional, a tiny dark cubicle of black darkness aiding anonymity, a space to seek relief from past misdemeanours and from which to escape absolved into the dim light of the church.

Picture making for the Irish land-owning class focused on portraiture with the spatial depictions favouring landscape rather than interiors. These paintings of landscape tended to be frontal, tonal, concerned with silhouette, a limited spatial depth achieved by layering. The beautiful twin *Views of Westport House* (1761) by George Moore are among the richest spatial descriptions, two planar views (more accurately *aspects*), recto and verso, the landscape predicated on the existence of House, depicted within a formal language of book and picture; the House as ersatz figure. The landscape idiom continued into the twentieth century with Paul Henry's wonderful silhouettes of the west of Ireland²³ where depth is subtly suggested by colour tone. Seán Keating's publicly commissioned paintings for the new Irish state²⁴ reveal their cultural origin in Ireland's religious picture-making and particularly in the formal construction and depiction of depth in the ubiquitous stations of the cross. Gerard Dillon achieved something similar and tackled landscape using the most planar of viewpoints, eschewing perspective and imagined as seen from the air²⁵. The relationship between figures as a device of spatial articulation and marking is as with Carravaggio - expansive in the lateral and vertical axes but compressed in the third dimension at right angles to the canvas.

The Irish landscape is a narrative of places of habitation, event, and local feature, articulated through human presence, and understood through its representations (visual and aural) as much as through its direct experience. Myth is a particular representation of a narrative, an attempt to explain the inexplicable through the collapse of time and physics, phenomena revealed. Reciprocal translations also apply (as in Shon's example of metaphor), specifically the influence of a culture of visual representation on that of the written narrative.

Brian O'Nolan (1911-66) was an Irish author, surrealist in all but name working under multiple pseudonyms, a liver of two or more lives. As Flann O'Brien he penned *The Third Policeman*²⁶ (1967), an epic romp through imagined spaces and occasions, a twisted commentary on Irish social life in the first half of the twentieth century. Obliquely, the book is concerned with the gap between the appearances of things and their meaning, appearances in his

case being those of phenomena. In the novel, the main protagonist murders, and then enters some circular sequence thereby returning to a police station that inhabits the thickness of a wall. The first appearance of the police station is as planar apparition in other words, frontal as if in a drawing.

As I came round the bend of the road an extraordinary spectacle was presented to me. About a hundred yards away on the left-hand side was a house which astonished me. It looked as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside and indeed very poorly painted. It looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child.

That was not in itself sufficient to surprise me because I had seen pictures and notices by the roadside before. What bewildered me was the sure knowledge deeply-rooted in my mind, that this was the house I was searching for and that there were people inside it. I had no doubt at all that it was the barracks of the policemen. I had never seen with my eyes ever in my life before anything so unnatural and appalling and my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions was missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder...

I kept on walking, but walked more slowly. As I approached, the house seemed to change its appearance. At first, it did nothing to reconcile itself with the shape of an ordinary house but it became uncertain in outline like a thing glimpsed under ruffled water. Then it became clear again and I saw that it began to have some back to it, some small space for rooms behind the frontage. I gathered this from the fact that I seemed to see the front and the back of the 'building' simultaneously from my position approaching what should have been the side. As there was no side that I could see I thought the house must be triangular with its apex pointing towards me but when I was only fifteen yards away I saw a small window apparently facing me and I knew from that that there must be some side to it. Then I found myself almost in the shadow of the structure, dry-throated and timorous from wonder and anxiety.²⁷

Access is achieved by the device of a window sash, swung effortlessly and without resistance (physical or intellectual) into a third dimension, confounding the flatness of the apparition:

He then turned sharply in towards the house and made for a small window which looked to me unusually low and near the ground. He flashed a torch on it, showing me as I peered from behind his black obstruction four panes of dirty glass set in two sashes. As he put his hand out to it I thought he was going to lift the lower sash up but instead of that he swung the whole window outwards on hidden hinges as if it were a door. Then he stooped his head, put out the light and began putting his immense body in through the tiny opening. I do not know how he accomplished what did not look possible at all. But he accomplished it quickly, giving no sound except a louder blowing from his nose and the groaning for a moment of a boot which had become wedged in some angle. Then he sent the torchlight back at me to show the way, revealing nothing of himself except his feet and the knees of his blue official trousers. When I was in, he leaned back an arm and pulled the window shut and then led the way ahead with his torch...

The dimensions of the place in which I found myself were most unusual. The ceiling seemed extraordinarily high while the floor was so narrow that it would not have been possible for me to pass the policeman ahead if I had desired to do so. He opened a tall door and, walking most awkwardly half-sideways, led the way along a passage still narrower. After passing through another tall door we began to mount an unbelievable square stairs. Each step seemed about a foot in depth, a foot in height and a foot wide. The policeman was walking up them fully sideways like a crab with his face turned still ahead towards the guidance of his torch. We went through another door at the top of the stairs and I found myself in a very surprising apartment. It was slightly wider than the other places and down the middle of it was a table about a foot in width, two yards in length and attached permanently to the floor by two metal legs.²⁸

Unlike the devices of spatial release in the work of C.L. Lewis or J.K. Rowling, O'Brien's revealed spaces remain compressed, indeed squeezed, and occupied. The unfolding of the police station is through its occupation by figure(s), the presence and movement of the two corporeal entities, the narrator and the

enormous Sergeant Pluck (the policeman's bulk magnifying the tightness of the occupied space).

In the book the bicycle takes on the attributes (and indeed gender) of its previous owner and is the device of spatial engagement with landscape, collapsing distance and time, reducing all to its own metric. The displacement of personality from person to bicycle provides the means of spatial discovery:

I led the bicycle to the middle of the road, turned her wheel resolutely to the right and swung myself into the centre of her saddle as she moved away eagerly under me in her own time.

How can I convey the perfection of my comfort on the bicycle, the completeness of my union with her, the sweet responses she gave me at every particle of her frame? I felt that I had known her for many years and that she had known me and that we understood each other utterly. She moved beneath me with agile sympathy in a swift, airy stride, finding smooth ways among the stony tracks, swaying and bending skilfully to match my changing attitudes, even accommodating her left pedal patiently to the awkward working of my wooden leg. I sighed and settled forward on her handlebars, counting with a happy heart the trees which stood remotely on the dark roadside, each telling me that I was further and further from the Sergeant.²⁹

Space has two manifestations within O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, the first is material, substantive, activated by figurative presence, enclosed, its phenomenological genesis being the occupied cave; the second is ephemeral, temporal, thin, restless, momentary, layered, frontal, activated by movement, its genesis being the journey. Both manifestations operate through corporeal agency, one directly, the other vicariously in the form of the bicycle.

Our presence is central even in our absence.