

Narrative and Non-Narrative Traditions

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Summary

In this first part of this essay I shall attempt to throw some light on narrative and non-narrative traditions; in the subsequent part I shall briefly examine the implications that these traditions can have on design methods. A narrative is a set of facts / ideas / pieces of information that follow one another in such a manner that when these bits and pieces of data are viewed together, they conjure up a totality that is quite different from the

arithmetic sum of the data. A non-narrative, on the other hand is again a set of inputs and data that refuse to add themselves up to some obvious totality, but nevertheless have a capacity to point to unspeakable infinities.

In a terminology used in art, the figurative work of art suggests the use of identifiable objects and figures; whereas an abstract work of art offers no recognizable clues about its content. Semioticians such as Barthes and Kristeva have spoken of the meaning of signs and how signs comprise of the signifier and the signified. Both narrative and non-narrative traditions are based

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Depiction of the Buddha in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and the same in the Hinayana Buddhist tradition.



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on their own set of signs, though the degree of abstraction inherent in those signs that maybe said to belong to the non-narrative traditions are usually far more complex and sophisticated than those deployed by a narrative tradition.

The shortcomings of the non-narrative inclination arise out of its opacity to easy interpretations. 'What is the Sound of One Hand Clapping?' is clearly not as easy to interpret as 'The audience broke into claps that far from being appreciative, was actually a sense of edginess to the obtuse density of the performance.'

The second part of the essay describes two recent projects done by design students – one of which is in the narrative tradition and the other with a non-narrative approach.

Part 1: Narrative and Non-Narrative Traditions

A prince, who had the best of this world, is surrounded by high palace walls meant to shield him from the suffering of people. One day his charioteer drives him through the city of ordinary people and the prince encounters four sights that change his life. He sneaks away from his ivory tower and seeks to understand the cause for human suffering. Surely, this narrative is familiar. The prince is the prince of the Sakya clan – hence Sakyamuni, better known as the Buddha, whose life and teachings hold immense meaning even in present times.

Another conversation attributed to Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna, happens between Nagasena (presumably Nagarjuna's pseudonym) and the Bactrian king Menander. The king who arrives on a chariot rhetorically

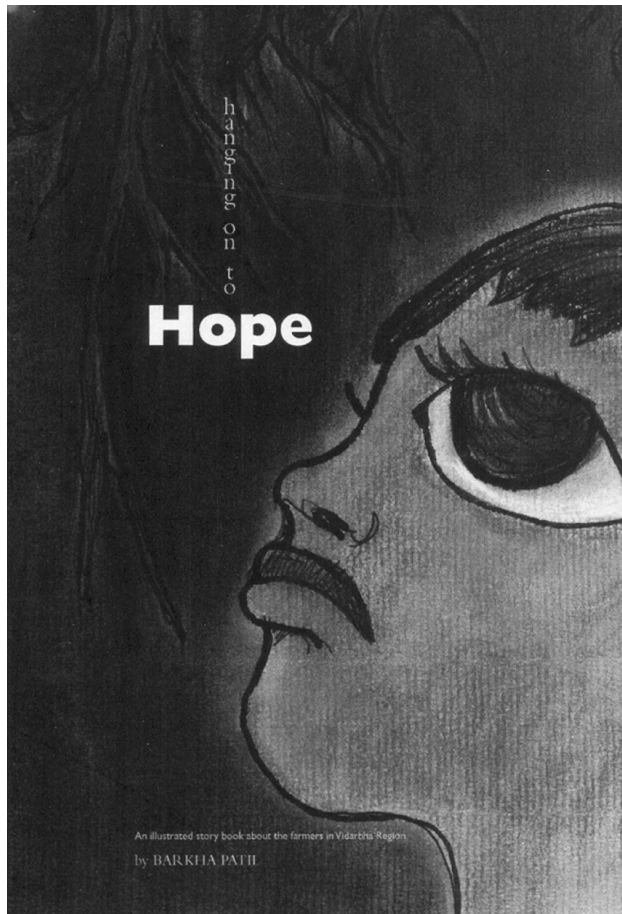
asks Nagasena, "Who is Nagasena?" In reply, he gets this answer-

"Nagasena is only a name, since no person is found". The king asks him who the agent of actions is. The master asks him if the hair, the head, the hairs of the body, the nails, the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the sinews, the bones, the marrow, the kidneys, the heart, the liver, the membranes, the spleen, the lungs, the intestines, the mesentary, the stomach, the excrement, the bile, the phlegm, the pus, the blood, the sweat, the fat, the tears, the serum, the saliva, the mucus, the synovial fluid, the urine or the brain in the head are Nagasena. Is Nagasena material shape, feeling, perception, the habitual tendencies, or is he separate from these five aggregates? The king says no, but cannot believe that Nagasena does not exist and wonders if he is telling a lie. Then Nagasena asks the king about the chariot in which he came. Is each of its components, the pole, the axle, the wheels, the body, the flag pole, the yoke, the reins, the goad, the chariot? Are all of these parts the chariot? Is the chariot apart from these parts? The king says no. Then Nagasena says: "the chariot is only a sound" and wonders if the king lies. So the king is obliged to admit that "the chariot exists (merely) as a name". Then Nagasena concludes that "according to the highest meaning, the person is not found here".

What is the difference between the two narratives? The first reads more like a story that is easy to grasp and remember; the second one is far more "abstract". The Hinayana Buddhist forbade icon-worship, was highly abstract, and had a few who took that path. Mahayana Buddhists, on the other hand, invited sculptors and artists to make beautiful icons that gave the Buddha a human face that was infused with such feeling that it moved even those that had never seen the Buddha. Hence, the Mahayana (meaning greater vehicle) Buddhist

view came to be regarded as the pop version of a difficult path; one that had several followers.

Though there is nothing perhaps that is entirely abstract; there are ways of seeing that are not as “story-like” – and one may call these as a “non-narrative” way of seeing. To put it simply, with the help of another example – when Piet Mondrian draws trees as realistic trees, these may be regarded as narratives (one could



also use the word story); when Mondrian starts drawing lines and squares, some of which are coloured yellow, blue and black, he moves into the realm of the non-narrative.

One may say that the narrative tradition uses symbols whose signifiers form a part of a collective understanding; whereas in the non-narrative tradition the decoding of signifiers requires a priori acceptance of not just the language used for signification, but often of meaning itself (or the lack of it). In other words if the narrative tradition seeks to draw its strengths from innovatively using a common database of accepted conventions, the non-narrative tradition relies on what one may call ‘a leap of faith’.

Part 2: Student Design Projects

Having clarified the distinction between the narrative and non-narrative traditions, one may now move to some observations regarding the possible implications of these on design methods and design solutions. The gist of the argument can be summarized thus:

The formulation of a design brief is a key step in the design process. Such a method is used by designers in an attempt to articulate the problem that is sought to be addressed. By clearly articulating the problem, the designer intends to prepare the ground for those solutions that would be most relevant. However, there has been a class of problems, (often referred to as “wicked-problems”) that defy easy articulation. Very often, these are problems that are very acute and at times appear as various crises that confront people and even civilizations. The argument proposes that a transition from narrative descriptions of problems and narrative ways of seeing to non-narrative understandings may

offer possibilities of a more open-ended (fuzzier) design brief – and this in turn may lead to more comprehensive design solutions.

Give below are examples of responses from two design projects – one of which has a clearly articulated design brief and the other a far more fuzzy “problem-statement”

The first example is a project on a storybook based on the agrarian crisis; the second is a film on representations of time. Hanging On to Hope: An illustrated storybook about the farmers from Vidarbha

Though the subject of the project is related to a social crisis, I didn't want this book to be a social message. I just wanted to express my feelings about the whole issue of the farmers suicides which have been taking place in Maharashtra. It is a project which deals with the emotions of farmers in Vidarbha; what are the hardships that the farmer faces and what does he and his family go through. I feel that people should at least be aware of the situations that these farmers face. Thus I didn't have a specific audience, in my mind, for the book, when I started it. I just wanted to voice my concern for the farmers.

Excerpt from the student design project by Barkha Patil

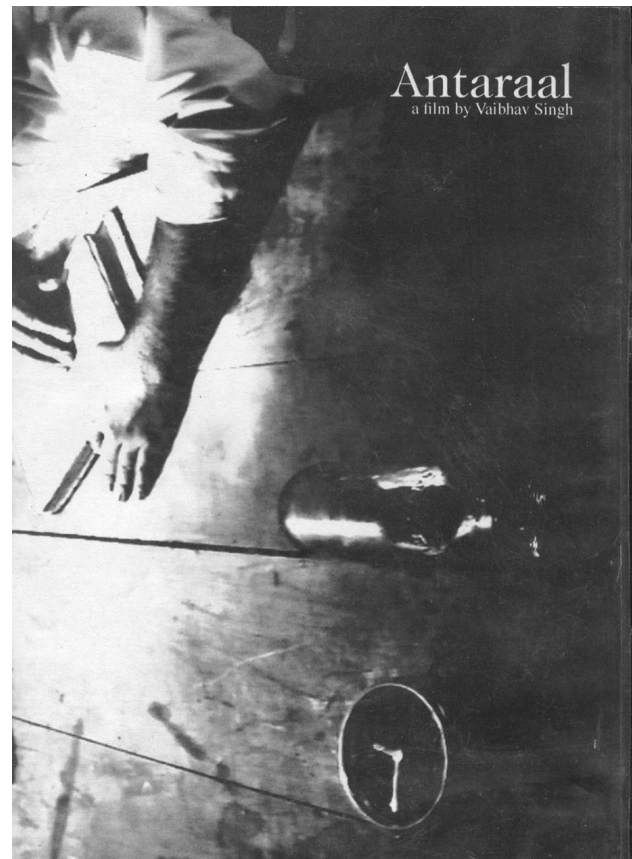
Representations of Time

Pythagoras, when he was asked what time was, answered that it was the soul of this world. (Plutarch) Time is the moving image of eternity. (Plato) Time is a sort of river passing events, and strong is its currents; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place, and this too shall be swept away. (Meditations, Marcus Aurelius) Time travels in divers

paces with divers persons. I'll tell you who Time ambles withal, who Time trots withal, who Time gallops withal, and who he stands still withal. (As You Like it, William Shakespeare)

Time is an avijjamana-pannatti, which means that it is a conceptual construct with no corresponding objective reality, a concept based on the continuous elemental flow. (The Dhammasangani, Abhidhamma Pitaka)

Excerpt from the student design project by Vaibhav Singh



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Student Design Projects in the Narrative and Non-Narrative Traditions.

The first of these two examples has its starting points in a concern for an immediately visible reality. The concern is real and demands a response that if not immediately fruitful, is still a response that seeks to alleviate. Instead of a slogan or some explicit social message, the project approach seeks to describe; and instead of adopting analysis, chooses to narrate a story.

The second example in fact does not have a design brief but expresses an interest in representing time. The statements that form the introduction are clearly eloquent narratives and yet the notion of representing time is far from narrative in its objective. Though the language used is that of cinema, the structure departs from the unfolding of some plot. There is no plot in the representation charted out; and with each viewing the 'plot' changes, confounding the conventional comfort with narratives. The non-narrative inclination is what gives this project its special strength.

In Conclusion

Design methods, when determined by a precise brief, tend to yield solutions akin to narratives; design briefs that include open-endedness or have fuzzy boundaries are likely to result in responses that are charged with the potency of a non-narrative tradition. Goal-oriented processes have the strength of being focused just as a nebulous meandering towards no seeming-goal creates its own resonances.

Notes

The reference to the conversation between Nagasena and Menander is from the Milindapanha, composed roughly between 1st century BC and 1st. century AD.

This particular translation is from ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-EPT/mitch.htm

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