PALIMPSEST

The Art of Memory was fabled to have begun with a poet named Simonides. According to Cicero, Simonides was able to identify, out of the mangled wreckage, the bodies of several dinner guests after the roof caved in. Having escaped the night before, he was then able to achieve this feat by remembering the placement of each around the table. In the Classical use of the Art of Memory, which was initially a tool of rhetoric, striking images were conceptually mapped on to parts of a speech and then to a well-known architectural feature of the hall in which the speech was to take place. By scanning the architectural features within the hall, the rhetorician skilled in the Art could remember all the aspects of his speech. The hall would provide the order and a frame of reference through which complex orders and sets of information could be remembered.

Georges Méliès, Kenneth Anger and Roman Signer.

In his talk Jesse Bransford has presented us with a history of a conceptual world framed by classical arches and populated by the grotesque . . .

In trying to come up with a thematic link for these disparate artists, I hit upon the idea of the Magician and the performance of "tricks" or "magic." At the time I thought that it was a half-baked idea but soon became enamored with the possibility of using this "other" category to reframe familiar work; that a new reading could emerge. What happens when the performances of Signer become read like a Méliès or the ritual aspect of Anger's shorts get confused with a Roman Signer performance. Under this alternate framework, an umbrella exploding in the landscape becomes infused with a new meaning that goes beyond a mere document of a performance.

. . . an interesting transition, that occurs in the early Renaissance, (and one of my few contributions to the argument Frances Yates builds)* is that the memory space which comes to us from Robert Fludd is a stage. In other words, the memory space has been equated with a theater. In Fludd's model we are on the side of the spectator, looking in. Objects are placed on the stage like props or performers.

*Yates's book, "The Art of Memory" is the primary source of all information pertaining to the medieval Art of Memory here.

With this lecture series, entitled "Passing Time," I wanted to capture somehow, the ephemeral back and forth of ideas and connections that often occurs conversationally between artists, writers, historians, etc. This series is less about one person lecturing, and more about the sharing and presentation of things that are unfamiliar or of things that are familiar shown in an entirely new way.

However, something that Yates only partially picks up on is that in the other, most famous of surviving texts on the Art of Memory, by Guilio Camilo, the space that the loci is built upon is situated in the arena surrounding the stage. The site for the memory location is now in the audience. This array becomes a place where things are placed. And where they are in that space is built on a model. The centerpiece of this model or stage is a configuration of seven columns that are supposed to refer to the seven pillars of Solomon's temple built on the seven pillars of wisdom. Immediately after this idea of the seven pillars of wisdom or virtue, we have the seven planets. Here we have an idea of mapping a mental conception of the universe onto a physical representation, a theater. Anyone who has taken a class on medieval art will recognize that these seven planets were very important in determining things like fate, free will, and were used in all sorts of magic and witchcraft. It is interesting to note in Camillo's theatre that immediately after this first biblical reference to Solomon's temple we get increasingly stranger associations ranging from astrological to the outright magical.

(The Living Card Deck)

. . . you have created a mental space that you are familiar with that is proportionately accurate that isn't too big and isn't too small; we're not talking fascist architecture here, we're not talking Gaudi, we're certainly not talking about any of the modernists. This is a very rigid structure comprised of classical architectural spaces.

. . . I love the addition of the flaming goblet in this short because, in an actual magic trick, it wouldn't really be necessary but in the context of a film, it creates an atmosphere of transformation, ritual, and performance. It's not so much that he has to distract your eye from not seeing the trick or slight of hand rather it adds to another kind of narrative. Méliès realized that within the language of film, once you accept what you are seeing on the screen, any one thing can appear to have an effect on another, thereby creating the "magic" of cinema. Things that would be impossible in everyday life become infinitely possible, thus, a deck of cards comes to life.

The last thing I want to say about these spaces: In these conceptual spaces that are mapped onto a physical world (the theater of the world), the architectural detailing is very important. Because

as you are ambulating through the space in your mind's eye, it becomes increasingly of issue that you remember where you are, "where did I turn left, where did I turn right, etc.?" These choices become accentuated by architectural nuance as well as the images placed within.

It often seems to me that at this point, the combination of performance, theatre and film hasn't quite been figured out.

So, in this space you say what comes next?

Méliès performs all the tricks. He is the actor, director and cameraman.

You place things in the space. What becomes exceedingly controversial as time (history) goes by; the primary reason why the middle Ages frowned on the Art of Memory is because pictures to remember are not beautiful images. The original texts were very specific. They are to be SHOCKING images, they are to be jarring images, frankly, the more disturbing the images the better. So you are putting things you are going to remember in this space. The pre-Christian guys don't care if it's moral.

(The Black Imp)

It is about efficacy.

The theme of the trickster: the dark side of the historical magician figure. On the one hand someone who is a philosopher or an academic. And on the other you have the devilish imp, the con man who "fools the eye."

As we can see, over time, the Art is becoming systematized and organized.

This film is a great demonstration of the art of Méliès and the innovative use of jump cuts to convey this idea of objects magically appearing and disappearing. What I'm hoping is getting suggested here is that all of this iconography that we learned about . . . "this means this" and "this means that" is built out of this lore of how to remember things. I grew up agnostic, so when I go to a church I have no idea what I am looking at so it is only through a lot of research that I have any sense of what these things are all about. Something I got from reading these books is that the concept of memory is becoming increasingly defined by these various visual iconographies; these visual languages are built on this idea of striking images that are easily remembered and put into uniform spaces. Cathedrals, for example, are generally the same everywhere throughout Europe, with some variation.

I would like to suggest that Méliès is playing against an alter ego of himself.

So far I have been stuck in the Middle Ages and now I would like to present an image that is a little more contemporary, and that has a text attached to it. A drawing by Andre Masson, a surrealist, loosely described, and friends with Georges Bataille. This was an illustration Masson did for Bataille's secret society called Acephale. Keeping in mind this idea of the striking image and what this striking image is supposed to convey:

> "Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition against crime, but a being who is unaware of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of innocence and crime; he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a sacred heart in his right. He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself in him, in other words as a monster."

—Georges Bataille, *The Sacred Conspiracy* (1936).

These shorts are all one take. There is a notion that time is passing uninterrupted as in the performances of Roman Signer. With Kenneth Anger, we don't see uninterrupted footage, but a different kind of time, one that he himself compared to the ritual time of a performance or ceremony. Often his films are referred to as invocations. It is this quality that first attracted me, the idea that a film could be more than the sum of its parts; more than a document of an activity, such as a performance or a staged drama. That the film could become the performance; that it does not merely tell a story about a thing but is that thing.

When I stumbled upon the description of this image I was taken aback because, in essence this is a memory image, this is an image used to connect certain principles of Bataille's secret society, the Acephale. So it didn't go away, it just went in different directions.

(Rabbit's Moon)

As I said before and as I have been hinting at, this system becomes formalized over time. You have a mental space that you build and you have these physical objects that you put into the space. The idea was that you could ambulate through this space in any order, forward, backward, it didn't matter. If you had a space committed to memory in the proper fashion you could pull

things out of sequence depending on how you "walk" through. Over time, certain images and certain kinds of spaces became idealized and codified. When you see these crazy charts from the middle Ages and wonder "what are they doing?" Not only are they trying to understand the way things are put together but they are also trying to map a secondary meaning on to them toward an ultimate understanding of the maker; an understanding of the question "why are we here?"

The early stages of Film, Magic and Nostalgia

In his chart of the angelic powers Fludd was not just content with the angels but he had to have everything, so you get the "Plan of Universal Causes." This system is based on a 10-base rather than the earlier 7 pillars of wisdom. There are a ton of these all over the place (memory wheels, lullian wheels). This is all tacked into how we remember things. If we can remember them we can know them.

It should be noted that Anger's first introduction to film was as a child star in "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

These spaces, to me seem very foreign. I think this is because we don't live in this universe anymore or rather, we are inheriting a universe that casts off a lot of the concerns that we have been talking about. Piranesi's prison engravings are an example of the antithesis of a good memory space. This is what we would classify as on its way to becoming the modern space we are used to, it's a fractured space, it's a disoriented space, it's a confusing space. The scale of it defies its use as an effective memory space. You are overwhelmed by it. These are all modernist architectural concerns!

The artificial landscape of this film seems to suggest an earlier period of studio filmmaking in Hollywood. A nostalgia for the past that never really existed. A childhood on screen.

But these ideas of architecture are closer to our understanding of the way systems work. The world got so big that at a certain point, the complexity became overwhelming.

Here, the trickster figure appears again in the guise of the Harlequin, not unlike the "Black Imp" or even Roman Signer as himself.

There is another place that I see vestiges of the Art of Memory all the time and it amazes me.

Roman Signer:
The magic trick stripped bare . . .
The magic trick with the magic taken away . . .

One of the things that has become really interesting in the world of complexity that we live in, amidst the so-called information overload, is that to get a total picture of something is becoming increasingly difficult. This is a map of Japan. The internet in Japan. (This) is the .jp domain and its old so I am sure it is five times the size that it is here. This is an accurate representation of all the nodal point connections of terminals active in Japan at a particular point in 1999. Not many people will recognize that and it is not really very useful for human use, but it is an accurate representation.

A narrative that is not readily available to us, which in turn, lends itself to the idea of magic and illusion.

The thing that is interesting to note is that this is a distributed network. Because it provided for a failure redundancy. When the internet was built it was to tell nuclear missiles when to launch. So if you knocked out one terminal or 10 terminals, the system would still function. This was not so in a centralized or even partially centralized system. It plays HAVOC on your memory; it plays havoc on the human interface that has to navigate through this. Imagine having a memory space that starts (here). This is not a memory space anymore, it is a labyrinth. This really illustrates the difference between a memory space and a labyrinth.

Obscure and beautiful activities that take place in the landscape. The landscape both real and artificial is another common thread as it has been used as a stage by all three.

It becomes about finding ways to simplify and symbolically represent or annotate the information being presented. I was blown away, going to the JPL and MIT web sites and listening to these guys wax poetic about the Art of memory; the way this medieval concept was re-integrating itself into our world as a means to navigate the overly complex territories that these guys were dealing with.

The Theatrical Landscape

I put this forward as a reason for a renewed interest in image and iconography. I think we are finally getting back to a point or cultural mode where these pictorial languages can have use value again.

The idea of a narrative being stripped to it's barest essentials: a beginning, a middle and an end. These conventions follow the performance in the most flat-footed way.

A man sits in a chair facing another chair, the chair blows up, man leaves . . . !!

ADAM PUTNAM

Partial transcript of a lecture given
February 7, 2005.

JEESE BRANSFORD

Partial transcript of a lecture given
February 21, 2005.