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Spatial Navigation and Narrative Construction across Media

Introduction

In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich argues that database and navigable space are the two dominant forms of new media, while the database logic is asserted in opposition to narrative, the relation between navigable space and narrative has not received enough attention and remains unclear. This paper is a preliminary discussion upon this question, which, from another point of view, is also a way to explore the narrative potential of new media that so many scholars have been striving for.

In a broader sense, this paper is to find the relationship between three variables: navigation, narrative and media. Not surprisingly, as a basic human experience of being in the world, navigation through space is a common phenomenon in narrative across different media, but it always appears marginally and only plays a supporting role in narrative. The typical way of navigation, which is to follow a character from one place to another, usually serves two functions in the narrative: to display the wandering state of the character, and to disclose the space information dynamically from a mobile point of view. Such a way of representing space is deemed superior in narrativity in contrast to description, which is often regarded as the antithesis of narration, an interruption in the line of fabula (Bal, c1985), at the same time, it requires more than the latter. It sets moving and continuity as its prerequisite conditions, and will finish naturally once the character stops moving. What we have witnessed is an embarrassing situation of navigation in narrative existed before new media that, while it does have a sense of narrative, it could hardly surpass its marginalized position to gain our attention. To be sure, the appearance of navigation is a matter of degree varying in different narrative genres, yet even in traditional travel story or adventure narrative which apparently involves navigation in an environment as its central storyline,

navigation actually serves as the transition between actions rather than a form valuable in itself, and often comes with narrative ellipsis in the discourse level. This is where new media marks its difference that, for instance, in the game structuring as a first-person navigation through space, story time and discourse time become one and the same, navigation and action are weighted equally, navigation may even monopolize the whole process which strengthens a sense of permanent flowing.

In this paper I try to invoke a navigational narrative existed before computer becoming its “perfect medium” (Manovich, 2002: 248). It refers to those works which rely heavily on navigation to construct narrative and have a strong sense of flowing. It is distinct from the mainstreaming narrative which tends to organize human experience into a sequence of events, therefore, remains obscure as a marginal narrative form in our general impression. In this sense traditional travel stories are excluded from my discussion. I try to argue that navigational narrative is transcultural, transhistorical, transmedia, though my selections to be analyzed in the below are unavoidably subjective and impossible to stand for all.

**1) *Painting of Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival. (24.8 cm × 528.7 cm)*
(Fig.1)**

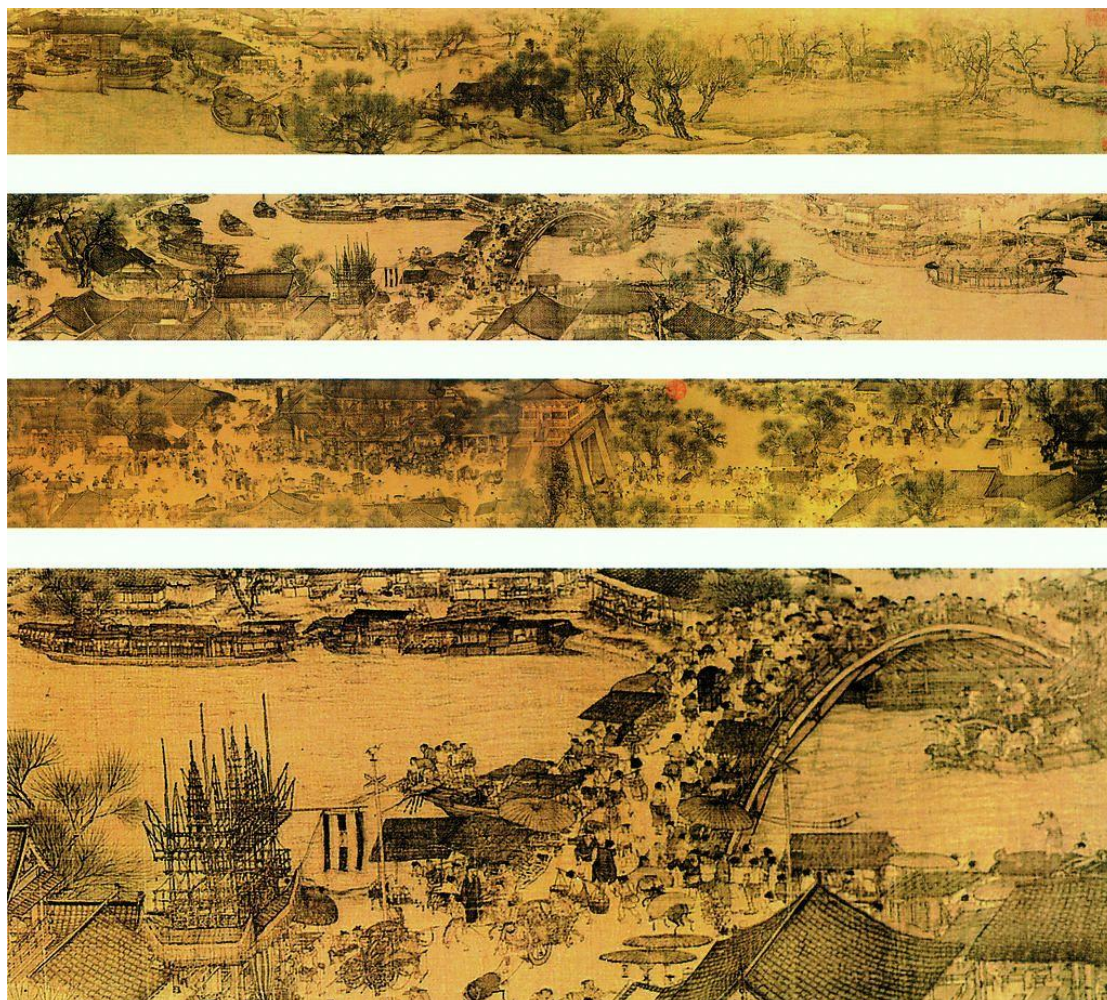


Figure 1. *Painting of Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival.*

A Chinese long hand scroll painting generally attributed to the Song Dynasty artist Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145). It captures the daily life of all levels of the society from the Song period at the capital Bianjing, and a sort of festive spirit and worldly commotion on a specific festival day. It is known for its geometrically accuracy and a high inclusiveness involving 814 humans, 28 boats, 60 animals, 30 buildings, 20 vehicles, nine sedan chairs, and 170 trees, of which the realistic style represents a panoramic documentary of ancient Chinese lifestyle.

The painting is a masterpiece which perfectly instantiates the shifting perspective principle in Chinese painting system. The composition of the painting is based on a mobile focal point and accords with a hand-scroll way of viewing the painting. Other than staring at a painting hanged on the wall, the proper way to appreciate such a painting is to unfold it from right to left smoothly, therefore viewing the painting almost like one walks along the river and sees everything on the way.

This Chinese panorama might remind us its counterpoint in western system. Whereas the former approximates to navigation experience, the latter calls for a sense of immersion. According to Oliver Grau (2003), panorama is one of the most exceptional vehicles for illusionism in western tradition, just as fresco rooms, circular cinema, and computer art in the CAVE, it creates a 360°illusion space and addresses the eye with a totality of images. We could attribute this contrast between navigation and immersion to the different systems of perspective which need no more elaboration here. Comparatively speaking, what we need to notice about *Painting of Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival* in terms of narrative is its peculiar way to manage hundreds of characters. Because of the mobile focal point, there is no center in the picture, making everyone a narrative center in its own right, therefore engendering a form of “multiple-focus narrative” (Altman, 2008: 241-91). Painstaking effort must be paid to create such numerous characters, nevertheless it also becomes an undeniable allure to its followers. During the subsequent dynasties, about 20 to 30 variations of the painting have been made, with each following the overall composition of the original faithfully but varying widely in detail to represent the life of its own dynasty. Usually many more people are added on a much longer picture, in the Qing dynasty remake (11 meters by 35 cm), which is an unprecedented tour de force, the number of people drawn is

over 4,000.

Strictly speaking, a single still image may not be able to offer complete narrative information, it is no more than a snapshot taken from the middle of a sequence of following characters. Yet as Altman (2008) argues, single view taken with sufficient level of narrative drive implies the full process of following thus offers possible insights into narrative. From another point of view, its “incompleteness” also offers an opportunity for remediation. At Shanghai Expo 2010, *Painting of Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival* is remediated as a digital installation which is 30 times the size of the original (120m × 6m), aiming to enclose and immerse the viewer inside a giant virtual space (Fig. 2). The still image is adapted into a 4 minutes animation,

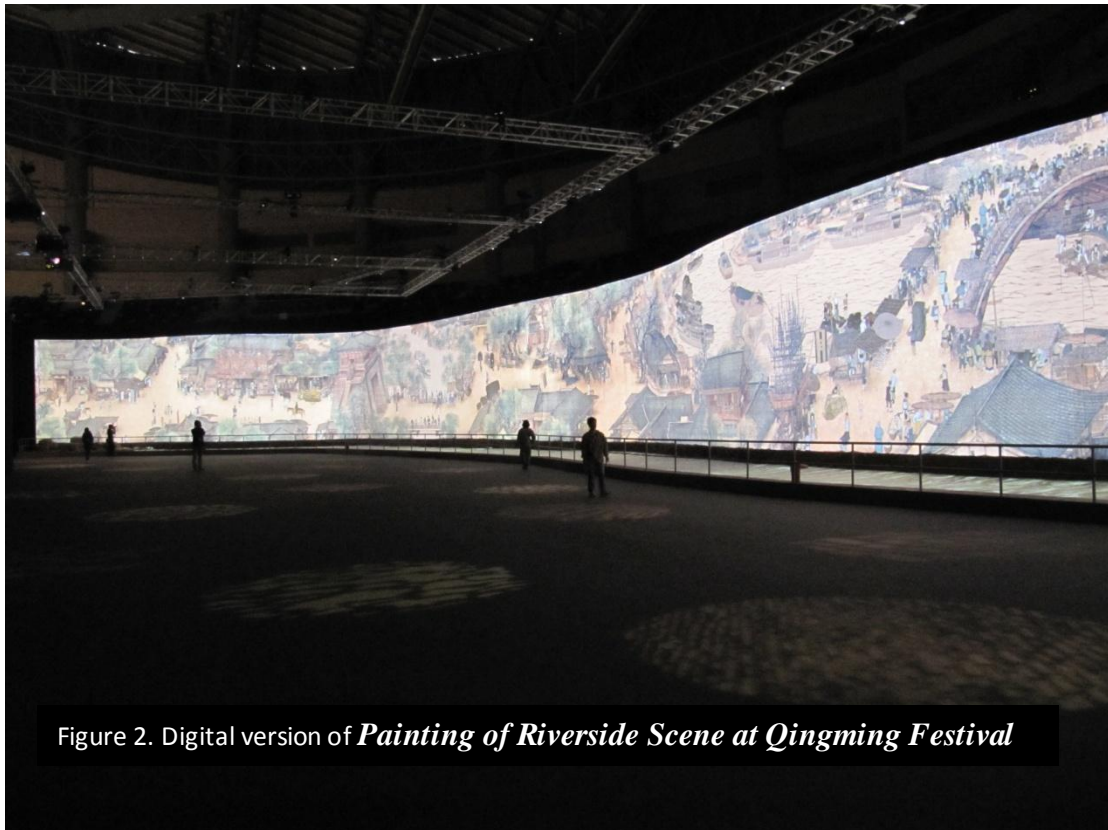


Figure 2. Digital version of *Painting of Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival*

of which the most difficult job is to calculate and produce the flowing itinerary of each character. While the viewer is walking along the virtual river, his eye is attempted to follow whoever catches his attention until distracted by other character, he may frequently shift his focus, or just leaves himself blindly immersed in that worldly commotion.

2) *Dream of the Red Chamber (Hongloulou in Chinese).*

Created in mid-18th century by Cao Xueqin, acknowledged in China as the pinnacle of its novels and a never-faded obsession among readers. The text is deliberately and systematically ambiguous and could be seen as an exemplary open work according to Eco's definition (1989). The writer Borges has shown a lasting attention to its elusive and confusing quality (Sun Haiqing, 2006), and refers to the novel in his famous short story *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

I have some understanding of labyrinths: not for nothing am I the great grandson of that Ts'ui Pên who was governor of Yunnan and who renounced worldly power in order to write a novel that might be even more populous than the *Hung Lu Meng* (*Honglouloumeng*) and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost. (Borges, 1970: 48)

Though *Honglouloumeng* is mentioned only once in the novella as cited above, it is deeply involved in its central motif, which is about a sinologist's exploration of an ancient Chinese enigma, namely, the garden of forking paths, the labyrinth created by Ts'ui Pên. A big twist comes when the sinologist finally reveals that the garden in which all men would become lost is actually the novel itself, that "the book and the maze were one and the same thing" (Borges, 1970: 50). So many clues indicate Borges' resorting to *Honglouloumeng* to fabricate his writing, of which the most prominent one is the image of the garden of forking paths. Three layers of meaning may lie in this symbolic image of labyrinth, one is the sinologist's residence, a physical labyrinth imitating a Chinese garden with avenues, pavilions, lanterns, Chinese music, vases and books, which could easily remind us the dominant image in *Honglouloumeng*, the Grand View Garden, a "perfect summing-up of the garden-centered mid-Qing literati culture" (Scott, 1986: 83). The second stands for an imaginal labyrinth much more ambitious than a physical one, "one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars" (Borges, 1970: 48). The last one reveals the theme of the novella – the book is the maze – by which Borges skillfully shakes our stereotyped assumption of a labyrinth and turns it into a virtual one, and at the same time, reflects narrative's unbelievable ability of world constructing. "The book is a maze" actually means "the world evoked by the book is a maze" or "reading the book is like wandering in a maze".

The three layers of the garden of forking paths offer us a deep insight into the

narrative art of *Hongloumeng* and arouse our great interest in its unique world-creating strategy. The novel freely plays with the border between reality and dream, truth and illusion, forming a world in which time and space are sinuous spreading into multiple universes and with countless identified characters living in it. In such an endless world, what is related to my topic is its center story space, namely, the universes usually called as “the mundane world” where the Grand View Garden lies in.

The mundane world is a realistic world full of details of daily life of the traditional upper class Chinese families. There is little apparent cause-effect logic in the narration, making the narrative structure seemingly episodic and lack of design. But once we free ourselves from the linear reading habit and follow each character patiently, we would be amazed by all sorts of accuracy of a virtual world constructed by the narrative strategy of navigation. The narrator is always following a character, like a camera dumbly documenting whatever is seen or heard. If each character maintains a unique itinerary, there are tens or hundreds of itineraries interweaving together. There is rarely clear cut in the following, only shifting between the characters, thereby reserving a number of extremely long takes, precisely, long tracking shots for most of the time. The shifting is freely, swiftly and meanwhile deliberately, delivering various subtle information of the complexity of the world.

In this way, *Hongloumeng* forms a space-time continuum in its most accuracy. Space is foregrounded compared to a traditional linear narrative based on events evolving through time. This is firstly reflected in the novel's precise geographical representation of its main locations – the house and the garden – of which the intricate and perplexing design has attempted plenty of readers to map out, or

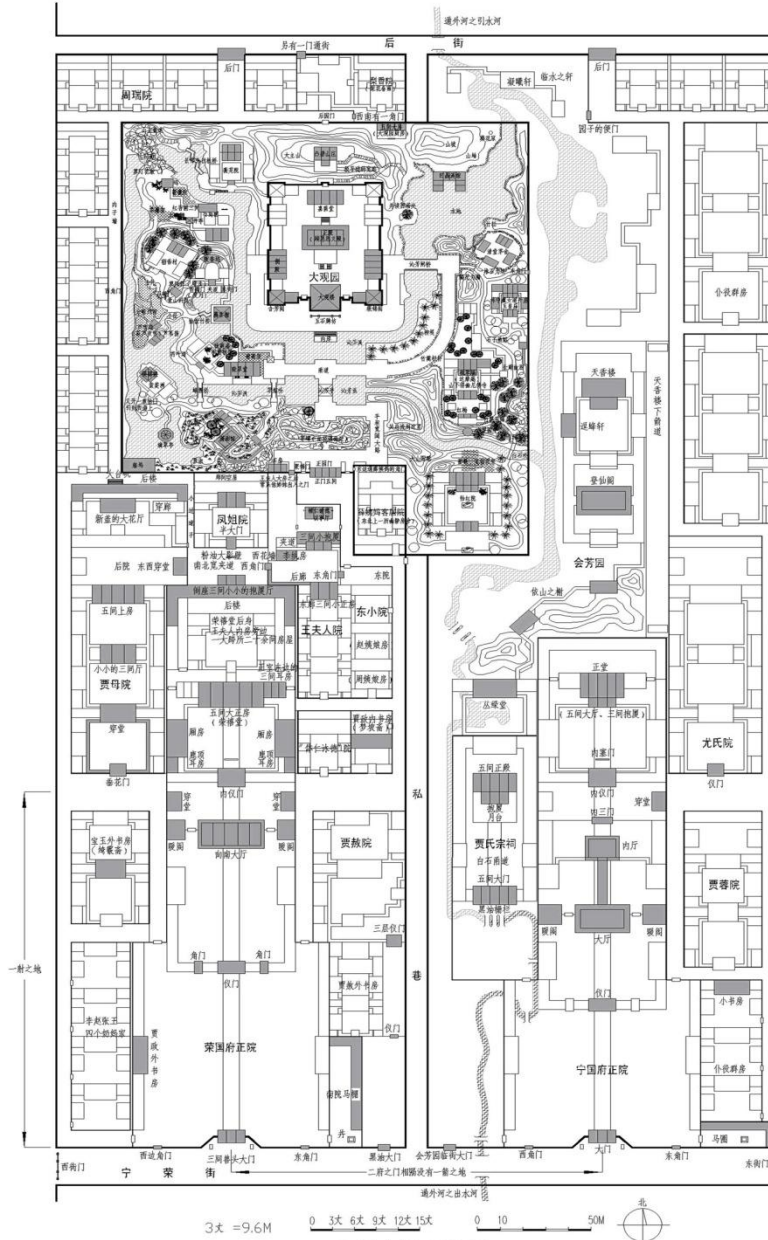


Figure 3. The cartography of *Hongloumeng*

even to reconstruct them in the real world (Fig. 3). Many scholars recognize their cultural and architectural significance and believe they are copies of real ones in the past, yet no one is able to provide archaeological evidences, which conversely assures them the imaginative and fictional power of the novel. An interesting contrast is Joyce's *Ulysses*, which offers an archive of geographical fact of Dublin on

16 June 1904. Joyce himself has made a famous remark to Frank Budgen: "I want ... to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book." (qtd. in Budgen 69). Navigational narrative plays an important role in the making of the cityscape, which is intensively employed in the "Wandering Rocks" chapter through the spontaneous performances of Dublin citizens. Actually "Wandering Rocks" appears more episodic than *Honglouloumeng* to me, as its itineraries are distinguished by section breaks and only occasionally intersect. It is hard to find any meaningful pattern in the arrangement of the various meanderings of the novel's characters, only through plotting into cartographic space of Dublin can they be resolved into a coherent totality. Therefore "Wandering Rocks" forces the reader to adopt a detached and aerial perspective to see space as the real character who actually dominates the narrative.

While navigation in *Ulysses* only covers one day and one chapter, it is employed throughout a whole book and a lifelong period in *Honglouloumeng*. If the juxtaposition of simultaneous events in space is a slice of time, then it is extended into a permanent continuum. Space itself is no longer a static stage, but in transformation through time. Neither time nor space is privileged in this time-space continuum, instead, they are combined into an inseparable whole. This naturally fosters an open world in which a multiplicity of events and a great many relationships are rendered without offering simple cause-effect connections between them. Readers are invited to make connections by themselves and give their own interpretations.

Though being an oral text, *Honglouloumeng* is a novel composed more by seeing than telling. This is certainly because Navigation privileges the logic of seeing, yet a deeper reason is that seeing also entwines into the novel's theme. Jia Baoyu, the center character in *Honglouloumeng*, is a character with no action. He is the adolescent heir of the family, highly intelligent, but rejects all the dominant Confusion rules and masculine authorities and has a great sympathy for girls. Entitled as "Lucky Lounger" and "busy doing nothing" by authorities, he likes to spend all his time wandering in the garden, observing the lives of the young girls from various social classes. By maintaining the protagonist as an observer, the novel shatters our stereotyped expectation for actions in the central storyline, which corresponds to the nature of navigational narrative, that it is narrative without a center.

3) Film full of tracking shots such as *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), or even entirely done in one moving take such as *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002).

Film naturally suits a navigational narrative, for the camera is automatically a moving eye. We have witness along the film history an evolvement of camera movement involving space design, shooting techniques, mise en scene, etc. Moving camera becomes a norm in film making, as David Bordwell (2006: 135) describes, "At a higher level of ambition, there seems to be a competition among directors to see how lengthy and intricate they can make their traveling shot." He explains the reasons of this prevalence as, first, a mobile framing, like quick cutting, boosts the scene's energy. Besides, it gives the flat surface of the screen a third dimension.

It is possible to give a long list of films which obtain marvelous long tracking shots, but tracking shot not necessarily involves navigational narrative. For example, there is no sense of navigation in Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), as its space, which is confined in a room, is too limited. Max Ophuls' film, say, *Le Plaisir* (1952) is partially navigational (on the discourse level), for the camera still follows actions through time and maintains a traditional story. For most time, a film may insert a navigation section into its main storyline, more or less like the "Wandering Rocks" in *Ulysses*. The typical examples might be the 5 1/2 minute Dunkirk Retreat scene in *Atonement* (2007), or the dizzying tour of the television studio in *Magnolia* (1999). Overall, they are the most attention-grabbing embellishment and have not essentially changed the narrative form yet.

I take *Elephant* and *Russian Ark* as appropriate examples for analysis, as they both provide a sense of endless flowing and experiment in narrative. As we all know, *Elephant* chronicles the day of a high school massacre similar to that which occurred at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. Yet unexpectedly, the alarming event is somehow adapted into an uneventful narrative. Van Sant refuses, not only to examine the ins and outs of the matter and its cause-effect development as in the way we usually deal with such topic, but also to put someone as its central character. His attention focuses equally on every character, even the two killers are not treated more special than other. Only a few shorthand shots implicate the motivations behind their killing, such as being relentlessly targeted for spitballing and other tortures, or the scene of violent video games.

In a sense, Van Sant's ambition is to recreate the time-space continuum of that day. He is leisurely following the character one by one, recording both the itinerary and fate of each. Personal point of view is highlighted, especially when people intersect. When the people stop moving, the camera keeps panning or prowling like wandering in the space. The casual daily life appears uneventful but meanwhile stressful, as we all know what will happen later. If there is anything that helps forming the totality of a centerless narrative, I believe it is the atmosphere of the space. The film is inventive and effective in creating a subjective ambience, which is in a subtle change forever. It is almost poetic in the beginning, then we sense an ominous omen, then cold, dry, devoid of emotion in the violence. It fitly reminds us the message in the film title, an elephant in the middle of the room.

Russian Ark is a film without parallel in its consisting of a single, uninterrupted 90-minute mobile shot. Actually I see this film as a transition between traditional cinema and new media work. Partly because its shooting process involves digital techniques that it is shot with a high-definition video camera and recorded on a non-reusable hard disk specially designed to hold 100 minutes. It is said there were two false starts each took five minutes, leaving no further margin of error.¹ And partly because it creates a space approximate to a virtual database space. The film is like a virtual cultural tour to Hermitage Museum in which so many historical events or ceremonies are lively staged. The audience is assumed to identified with an off-screen character, who follows an European stranger moving into and out of different historical periods, encountering Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Nicholas the First and Second, cavaliers, officers, spies... yet without any temporal leaping in their ride. Here, continuity helps to flatten time stealthily. The contradiction that all things taken place in the past but narrated in a present continuous tense is explained in Sokurov's assertion that "[t]here is no past or future in history, just as there no past or future in art, only the present."² But meanwhile, it also resonates with the aesthetics of continuity that dominates the areas of new media. From this point of view, it is not that time is flattened, but the space is transforming from a physical one to a virtual information space. Therefore the film could be seen as a specific trajectory of a user traversing in a database, which is one possibility among all.

¹ Mark Cousins in *Prospect*, July 2002 <<http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/6375-10.cfm>>.

² "Plane Songs: Lauren Sedofsky Talks with Alexander Sokurov," *ArtForum*, November 2001. <http://findartides.com/p/artides/mi_m0268/is_3_40/ai_81258061>

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I summarize some distinctive features of navigational narrative as:

- a. diverging from the action-based storytelling convention, its basic narrative unit is formed more by character's movement and perception than by action. With this unprecedentedly foregrounding of the logic of seeing, the beginning-middle-end pattern of traditional plot is challenged.
- b. it has a narrative capacity of innumerable characters, and a potential of "network narrative" (David Bordwell).
- c. it is an ideal incarnation of chronotope (Bakhtin) in which time and space are interdependent and equally weighted, and it makes chronotope as its narrative subject.

To be brief, moving and seeing are necessary conditions for navigation, and characters for narrative. The navigational narrative is the interaction between the two. It normally materialized as following multiple characters through space, with the intersections between the following itineraries as where narrative is intensified. Navigational narrative orients toward a time-space continuum, forms a panoramic world without center, and holds a narrative potential for extreme intricacy.

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