Story-drivers

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In his provocative book *Earth Moves*, Bernard Cache suggests architecture should be regarded as ‘a cinema of things.[[1]](#footnote-1) He emphasises how architecture can create a setting wherein a dramatic impetus animates everything -- *moves through* everything -- not only through the people but also through the objects that host the people, so that stories take place in an energised scene.

This idea is close to the brilliant notion that lights up one of the masterpieces of film criticism, Fereydoun Hoveyda’s ‘Sunspots’, in which the concept of ‘mise-en-scene’ is detailed possibly for the first time. Hoveyda explains that cinema works best when it captures and channels an ever-unfolding force that runs through the represented spaces and temporal rhythms of a film and also through the audience in the dark room. When a film really works, he explains, energy can be discerned pulsing coherently in space, in time, and in people so that the animus of a scene flares through all the components of an individual shot and then arcs like electricity from shot to shot, from moment to moment, from screen to audience and back again. In every film, a peculiar set of rhythms and melody-lines (visual as well as sonic) combine to generate an energy-signature that carries, excites, and transforms every part of the film. This is the mise-en-scene.

Mise-en-scene, therefore, is more than spatial. Characters, objects, spaces, luminance, time-patterns, and viewers all get altered as the dynamics play out. The result is pantheistic and protean. When a film lights up like this, a charge is harnessed, swirling out of the filmed environment, zinging around us and through us. Irradiated by the cinema screen, we the spectators are sometimes bathed and buffeted by a force that’s vital and activating, like the sun. Hence the name of the essay: ‘Sunspots’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Parametric design, I think, is like this too. More than spatial. In architecture, parametric design facilitates a ‘cinema of things’. By designating and manipulating a set of determinant features, it helps us understand how an existential drama can play out in a built environment, depending on how those features or constructive parameters relate to each other so as to generate outcomes whelped from the ‘genetics’ of liveliness – the *virtues* – that are poised to emerge from the determinant features of the design. In such a parametric ‘cinema of things’, we see a building not as a stable entity, not as a finished nominalist thing; rather a building emerges as an event, as something animated, an ever-unfolding verbal-noun.

And within such unfolding, we see an array of possible dramas occurring in *everything –* in the materials as well as in the experiences that constitute the environment moment by moment. In other words, we can see architecture as a script, as a system facilitating the enactment of a dramatic array of designed stories. (‘Drama’: from the Ancient Greek ‘dra’ – to do, enact or perform.)

A script is an array of parameters, not so different from a parametric design-set. Story-writers often think of the parameters as ‘drivers’ or factors that can be manipulated into different relationships so that the writer can ruminate on all the possible storyline-outcomes before settling on one particular, published version. There is endless debate about the exact number and names of the narrative drivers, but generally speaking the main onesare:

Setting (in time & place),

Character,

Mood,

Tone,

Plot & Intrigue,

Themes &Values.

From the active relationships poised amongst these parameters, stories emerge as systems of possibility that listeners assess in relation to presumptions about plausibility. Notably, the story-drivers are more qualitative than quantitative. And they are powerful precisely because the qualities tend to prevail over the quantities, assessed as generative factors in the drama of lived experience. This is because what everyone is looking for is: acceptable astonishment or viable surprise felt as the assertion of heretofore unglimpsed possibility playing out within the constraints of plausibility.

To conclude, let me reiterate then speculate. To reiterate: ‘everyone is looking for acceptable astonishment or viable surprise felt as the assertion of heretofore unglimpsed possibility playing out within the constraints of plausibility.’ To speculate: considered alongside Cache’s notion of ‘a cinema of things’, I wonder, might ‘the surprising experience of negotiating possibility within plausibility’ serve as a working definition of good parametric architecture?

A bedroom with a bed in a room

Description automatically generated

**Sydney, Marrickville Crime Scene, 1953** (Justice & Police Museum Archive)

A scene driven by: Setting (in time & place), Character, Mood, Tone, Plot & Intrigue, Themes &Values.

1. Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). p.29. See also all of Chapter 9, entitled ‘Oscillation’ . [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. First published in *Cahiers du cinema* in 1960, ‘Sunspots’ was republished in Jim Hillier’s influential anthology *Cahiers du cinéma : 1960-1968--new wave, new cinema, re-evaluating Hollywood,*Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)