

INTRODUCTION

"Art is not about itself but the attention we bring to it."

--- Marcel Duchamp

"After the first wave of abstract expressionist art, there developed an emphasis on the painting as an *object* in the world rather than a *window* on the world."

--- Buddhist painter Abhayavajra

The *Reality Mechanic* is not a "story," nor is it intended to be a story. Like the painting Abhayavajra describes above, it strives to be "an *object* in the world rather than a *window* on the world." It does this by stressing form over content.

Existence framed as fiction and human experience framed in fictions both serve as environments for the protagonist self: dissipative, semiotic *processes* that are both an emergent property *of* and an organizing principle *for* the flow of signs. As Reality Mechanic, Sam Paradise, says to young Wanda Willoughby, we are "stuck in a domain of codes and can't get out." My Zen practice (my attempt to detach from my domain of codes) is subjective and personal; however, as a writer with an audience, my practice becomes communal. We tell stories to make meaning of existence. Clearly

then, they are all at base lies. *The Reality Mechanic* offers no meaning, no cathartic moment, no contrived moral or insight; experimental, as much a collage as a narrative, it simply strives to be interesting to an interesting and open mind. Its value is proportionate to “the attention we bring to it,” just as the attention we bring to each and every act of our lives is how we discover life’s value, where one’s small definition is made whole and eternal.

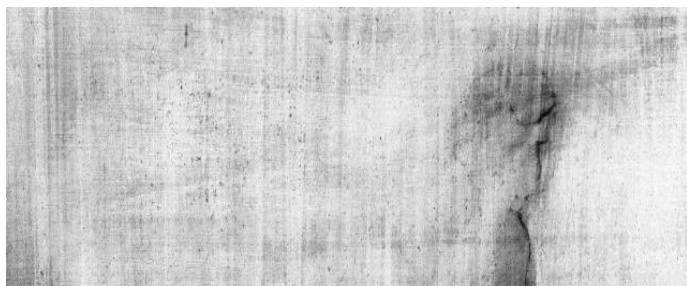
In short, we find an appeal to that part of our consciousness just underneath the need to make sense of things; a confrontation with that infinite game of uncertainty, awe and wonder that is the fount of our own creativity, the key to the soul, and our only honest embrace of existence. I do not suggest that we do away with the entertaining page-turner. The creative ambiguity of language allows us the necessary conceit, or more sympathetically stated, the satisfaction and the *illusion*, of self-directed meaning-making and soul searching. But I *am* suggesting that we be open to a different way of engaging a text, engaging it as “an *object* in the world rather than a *window* on the world.”

The shape of art; the shape of the *text*, can shape consciousness. If humanity continues to suspend disbelief in the illusion of its own existence, does not free itself from its myriad diverse and conflicting narrative frames, it will not survive. It will continue to proselytize, defend and/or

aggressively subject the “other” to its fictions, fight to the death and kill over its Grand eschatological fantasies, its myriad confabulations and tribal memes, its ancient nonsense; arguing its claims, implying some contrived insight or sacred moral; manipulating pathos to certify the reader’s emotional existence, personal identity, cherished cause—each of these *domains of codes*, at base, serving the same, central purpose—to maintain the human ego and its fantasy of a *self*.

Paul Andrew Powell

PROLOGUE



The unusual, the difficult, the lengthy, the intransigent, and above all, the interesting, should expect to find their audience.

--- Elizabeth Hardwick

It hurt when you died. It hurt a lot. And being totally ignored, after all that intimacy, after all that emotional openness and vulnerability we shared—hey, that hurts too. It hurts to be ignored. You think you're saving my feelings? By ignoring me?

I thought it would make it easier for you if we just broke off, completely.

Listen, you offered me a happiness that I had not experienced in, well, decades, possibly ever. That's a very big deal. You made me so happy! So happy, happy, happy! I couldn't wait to pull up to your door and see you standing there, that beautiful smile.

I tried to be honest. I tried to be honest about us.

I know you tried to be honest with me, and I appreciate that. The problem is without a doubt on my end. But, listen, it is a problem as old as love itself. A broken heart does not reason well; a broken heart is suspicious, and in pain, and desperate, and the imagination and the logic of a broken heart no longer recognize honesty; they combine to justify any jealousy, any indictment, to

construe absurd scenarios for possible reunion—It is a mild form of insanity.

I'm so sorry.

A friend asked me if I ever told you that I “loved” you. I said I never did, and he just shook his head. “People need to hear that,” he said. I know it probably wouldn’t have made any difference in the long run, but I did love you, fell in deeper than I should have.

I could have loved you.

I want to thank you for, well, helping me discover who I really am—what I really am. You know how damned anxious I was. God, I was so nervous.

You were good to me. That was nice.

I treated you like a Goddess! I wanted to treat you like a Goddess. I adored you and wanted you to feel adored, every night, respected and

appreciated, every moment. I love you! But here's what hurt. It really hurt when you just slammed the door in my face and tossed me off like a piece of disposable trash. I didn't exist anymore. Go away. No response. I have someone new. That's what hurt. I didn't deserve that (*shakes his head in despair*).

I chose my fate. You don't have to suffer. Let it go. Let go of the pain. Detach.

No! I will NOT let go! I will not—detach! Don't give me that detach bullshit!

(Pause)

Life is suffering. It's why we exist! It's what gives life its meaning and purpose. We laugh, we cry, we laugh, we cry, either way, on-and-on, it doesn't matter, because from it all a plan for us emerges, order somehow emerges, history becomes an object, a body...yes, that's right, it all arises from the aggregate, random longings of the human heart, from the perfect chaos of the human heart...

(Pause)

...we suffer because love is precious; because without love we could never survive. I'm suffering because you mean something to me. I love you. If

I didn't love you, it wouldn't hurt so bad. So please...*please* do not tell me to...to let go of my...my...love (*shakes his head in despair*).

(*Pause*)

Don't you understand?!

(*Pause*)

I chose my fate.

ARRIVAL



...a little flare of lightning flashed out of a bulb in his head...

...an instant strangely dilated...

...a lift and rise...a trajectory...

...a rapid, accelerating levitation pursued by light. The light was enormous. An underground river of light pouring into him. An angelic, mysterious field of light and he in its midst—out! out! out! Then a sharp cry of anguish, like the sound of his death, and he shook through his feet. A nightmare, “Oh God” ...

...and look at all the pretty treetops resplendent with autumn leaves...

...and the streets...circling...below...wheels within wheels...and the narrow, sun-struck, aluminum-roofed trailers radiating out...

...the sky tilts...

...and there is Archer Road, a thin, straight line angling off to the horizon, where a semi-truck, like a tiny toy, moves far below now in a curious silence past the drive-in, closed for the season...

...a vast cauldron of vertigo, a face, blazing eyes, mounting in the sky...

Order. Measure. Structure.

Self. Time. Space: The Holy Trinity.

I am an insubstantial, transitory process now, empty, in a way. A murmuration of signs within a lexical field of consciousness. In Self Organized Systems Theory the organizing principle for this murmuration could be called an attractor; in Zen Buddhism, Anatta: non-self.

Directly under his window: *whisk whisk whisk.*

*the effect of all this
encoding would be
to increase the size of the
universe*

---Hans Moravec

He stood naked before the full-length mirror, the sacred sphere cupped protectively in his hands, in a sparsely furnished studio apartment on the second floor of a brick rowhouse at, “37 Ivy Street,” he whispered, throat dry, sensation there like fire. He sensed a fair-sized city—*probably over five hundred thousand. It's roughly—2:30 p.m.*

A face. He needed a *face*. And he needed a history and a destination: a story with a plot. His *logos*, that *principle of reason and creative order*, required that environment.

He opened his eyes and became immediately blinded by an intense stroboscopic flashing. The mirror was a sparkling beast. Hundreds upon hundreds of human heads, clustered like fantastic grapes, flashed in and out of existence. Each became startled as if by some horror then vanished back into glittering ephemera.

One must see one's self in the mirror—of one's own mind. That is how they do it. They imagine themselves situated in the environment, talking, going here and there, being a—something more than—just being. I must learn to create a story about me so I can function among them.

Someone is sweeping outside. He crept to the window.

Old Mrs. Killoran, sweeping dead leaves off the sidewalk: coarse-haired, fat, baggy-assed, dirty, babbling to herself and dancing a nifty two-step with her broom. Hmm... Sam watched attentively.

His briefings had emphasized how intricate and thorny even the most mundane human realities could be. It was in their stories, those innocuous narratives accumulated hour-by-hour, day-by-day over a lifetime. *They give themselves names, think they're really Jimmy or Jennifer. They manufacture these stories in the cybernetics of their minds from the passing of myriad, unremitting events, spin them into a cat's-cradle of self-referential signs creating a mental space big*

enough to seem real. And they're stuck inside it—like a fish stuck in water.

Well, of course, that was his assignment: to untangle the mess. It would be tricky—and dangerous. It meant *entering the material, objective world*. It meant entering space, that beautifully woven tapestry of multi-dimensional geometries. And time—yes time, the ever-living, programable organism; its prodigious narrative gravity; that vast whirlpool of fate teeming with infinite destinies. And it meant, of course, and at last, selecting a face from that bewildered herd of faces transforming in the sparkling mirror. Yes, he must leave the *Zero*. He, who could span a universe in the eternal sunshine of the spotless mind. *And so could you*, he thought, as he gazed impassively down at the old woman toddling off, dragging her broom beside her, *if only you could see it. These beings are entirely mesmerized by the idea of what they are. They have become stuck in their own fictions.*

He shuddered. *What a magnificent mess.*

At any rate, he had his assignment and his plan. He would lead them to the still forest pool.

Of course, there could be one other problem.

*The Adversary.*²

A student, filled with emotion and crying, implored, “Why is there so much suffering?”

Suzuki Roshi replied, “No reason.”

² NARRATIVE: A semiotic cocoon within which the ‘I’ undergoes metamorphosis. It is well guarded.