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*The Impasse of
Current Narrative
Typologies and the
Aesthetics of 360°
3D Filmmaking*

Abstract

The core purpose of immersive technologies is to provide their users with a state of full psychological and physical “immersion”. Yet immersion is a binary phenomenon, as post-digital filmmaking gravitates towards the breakdown of orthodox narrative structures where audiovisual works shot in 360° 3D oppose the very type of experience they strive to deploy. To crack the code of narrative design in the new 360° 3D medium, the author advocates the deployment of *vizome*, a blend of *virtual reality* (VR) and *rhizome*. Based on the concept of rhizome, as introduced by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, who had determined rhizome as a *modus operandi* of “an acentered... [and]... nonsignifying system” that “has no beginning or end; ...always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (Deleuze, 1987), akin to a mass of roots, and having simultaneously multiple exit and entrance points, the vizomatic narrative is in conflict with a pure linear progression of the object-oriented, cause-and-effect, hierarchal story line.

Vizome is evaluated on the grounds of *connection*, *heterogeneity*, *multiplicity*, *asignifying rupture*, *cartography*, and *decalcomania*, whereas a classic narrative is decoded via a number of widely accepted narratological canons. For virtual reality cinema to operate properly, the Deleuzoguattarian schemata must go from being a mere metaphor to a practical post-digital utility that arrests the imposition of outdated cinema aesthetics by blending the binaries of vizome with the established narratological canons such as *summary*, *scene*, *omission*, *pause*, and *stretch*, to name a few, which, in turn, renders 360° 3D films a truly immersive experience.

Keywords

vizomatic taxonomy, narrative design, 360° 3D cinema, virtual reality, embodiment

Introduction

Chris Milk, the owner of *WITHIN*, a celebrated virtual reality company, shot *Clouds Over Cidra* in a lauded breakthrough proprietary 360° 3D spherical technology; it follows a twelve-year-old girl in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan in her innate human quest for freedom, allowing viewers to be “physically” present (*immersed*) at the scene. Chris Milk’s works are displayed in many renowned art galleries – in London, New York, and Beijing, to name a few – and he is considered to be the master *par excellence* of the VR medium, also giving various interviews and partaking in virtual reality summits across the globe. It would be considered an insult to question his cinematic and virtual reality expertise if this only concerned the technical aspects of his work. What is rarely appraised, however, is the depth of immersive experience his films provide since the principal aspiration of virtual reality, in whatever form it takes, is to bestow upon the audience a sense of “being there”.

In this regard, *Clouds Over Cidra*, like many other films currently shot in 360° 3D video, appears to oppose the very form of experience it strives to deploy. While the quality of cinematography in the film is commendable, the construction of its narrative within the spherical space soon becomes problematic, as it violates the freedom of the viewer by which he / she has accepted the rules of immersion. The narrator in the film, presumably a homodiegetic one, spoken in the voice of a twenty-six-year-old, speaks in the present tense, thus making the narrative effectively analytical (in contrast to the immediate now), unless she is utterly unreliable. Moderately rapid cutting between perception images and affection images amplifies the narrative confusion, as the spherical frame is much more accommodating to both types of images in a single shot without delineating them compositionally, a technique often used in flat screen cinema. In fact, the film suffers in its choice of format and adds very little to the core of visual information that could have benefited more from an *IMAX 2D* frame, both in style and scale. The problem is also in its narrative duration, which creates “a knock-out effect” whereby an immersive experience is lost by virtue of imposition of

the next sequence for which the audience is not ready, mentally or physically, since fast intercutting does not function well in a fully spherical video. *Clouds Over Cidra* also shows the limits of the established narrative taxonomy as regards *summary*, *pause*, *anachrony* (*prolepsis* (flashforward) and *analepsis* (flashback)), and the interaction of an “immediate now” (*immersion*) because flashback sequences, so widely used in flat screen films, take the audience out of an “immediate now”. Thus, it becomes obvious that the 360° 3D viewing frame inherently objects to classical film editing techniques and narrative structures, calling for a new, unorthodox narrative configuration to be deployed in order to provide viewers with a truly immersive and psychosomatically full experientiality.

I propose that the new narrative design has to be “vizomatic by default” to resolve the aesthetic impasse of current 360° 3D filmmaking and display the immersive capacities of spherical video in full. The ultimate success of rhizomatic narrative configuration largely depends on the accomplishments of a field experiment, for “to create a [vizome] is an experiment that must be risked” (Wallin, 2010), yet the encouraging sign is that a vizomatic spectatorship prototype already exists. Before such a model is discussed, it is important to note the binaries of vizome and classical narrative taxonomy.

The binaries of vizome and narratological canons

Vizome is a fairly novel conceptual blend of rhizome and virtual reality (Cudworth, 2016). The inception of *rhizome* was fleshed out in the seven-year project *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, which confirmed rhizome as a *modus operandi* of “an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system” that “has no beginning or end; ...always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (Deleuze, 1987), forming a mass of roots, and having multiple exit and entrance points simultaneously, as it resists a pure linear progression of object-oriented, cause-and-effect, hierarchal movement.

Unlike narrative design, found in graphic arts, photography, or drawing, the vizomatic narrative may be split at any given plot point but it will reconstruct itself on “one of its old lines, or on new lines...[just as one] can never get rid of ants because they...can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed” (Deleuze, 1987). Or to use the narratological framework of the preeminent literary critic Seymour Chatman, it may be said that vizomatic structure does not contain *satellites* (minor plot events), only *kernels*: major “narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events” (Chatman, 1980), with the logic of connection, but in absence of hierarchy. Chatman departs from the traditional view that events in narratives are radically correlative and thus causative; instead, he asks whether there may be a “mere sequence, a depiction of events that simply succeed one another but in no sense owe their existence to each other” (Chatman, 1980). In doing so, he proposes a classification of “revealed” plots versus “resolved” plots (Chatman, 1980), whereby the former, not requiring causative sequences, transpire analogously to the processes of the vizomatic root, in a “pattern of the postmodern multiplication” of multiplicities (Habibi, 2013).

Multiplicities, along with the rest of the six Deleuzoguattarian principles intrinsic to vizome (*connection*, *heterogeneity*, *asignifying rupture*, *cartography*, and *decalcomania*), form the core of the analytical context that has been successfully used to decode various artefacts, whether Seyed Habibi’s (2013) *Rhizomatic Dissemination of Postmodern Ethical Decadence in Ian McEwan’s Amsterdam* or Sarah Culler’s *Rhizomatic Narratives. Embodied Form and Formlessness* (Habibi, 2013), to name a couple. However, a revealed plot analysed *ex post facto* is not a revealed plot *en construcción*, particularly in the domain of virtual reality and 360° 3D cinema. In this, the Deleuzoguattarian schemata must morph from being put forward as “the rhizomatic thought process” (Habibi, 2013) and a “remedy to an inadequacy in narrative theory” (Habibi, 2013) into a post-digital utility that ceases to conduct violence against viewers by imposing visual norms of the orthodox cinema, displayed in a classically understood community-mediated setting (Wilson and Nash, 2011).

The current inquiry into the feasibility, merits and scope of vizomatic narrative configuration in 360° 3D cinema is a section of the theoretical part within the qualitative content analysis of a larger field experiment, currently in the development phase. What is clear from the onset of the inquiry is that the Deleuzoguattarian principles and the elements of the narrative taxonomy, such as *focalization*, *voice*, *narrative distance*, *narrative levels*, *duration*, and *space*, are, in fact, binaries, no matter how justifiable the use of vizome is in the “escape from the straightforward single-thread analysis of traditional narrative theory” (Habibi, 2013).

The difficulty in fusing the binaries while discussing the vizomatic narrative configuration is that they seem to operate according to the parameters of two entirely different classes of taxonomy. This is why, in spite of the rather brilliant assessments Seyed Habibi comes up with in his take on Ian McEwan’s *Amsterdam*, or Sarah Culler comes up with in her evaluation of Kafka’s *The Trial*, Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, the reading of vizomatic narrative construction, without a solid acknowledgment by the creators of the work surveyed, remains deeply speculative.

Vizome is evaluated on the grounds of **connection** (any point of a vizome is connected to another), **heterogeneity** (a vizome propagates itself when one multiplicity (a part of the vizome), while connecting to another, changes its nature), **multiplicity** (a vizome is neither subject nor object, only its magnitudes, expressed in numbers, as they connect with other multiplicities), **asignifying rupture** (a vizome can be broken at any point but will reconstruct itself since its breakdown is its unity), **cartography** (multiplicities connect with others from multiple entryways in an exploratory fashion like a map, which is “connectable, detachable, reversible, and susceptible to constant modification”), and **decalcomania** (“a rhizome is always an aggregation that actively resists rigid organization and form”) (Deleuze, 1987).

A classic narrative, in turn, is decoded via a number of established narratological canons, three of which – **narrative voice**, **focalization** (perspective), and **duration** – are at the

forefront of narrative discourse for 360° 3D filmmaking. Voice is a fundamentally quadruple arrangement in which a narrator is either a homodiegetic narrator (appearing as a character in the story-world) or a heterodiegetic one (outside the story-world), operating on an extradiegetic plane (first-level narration) or an intradiegetic one (second-level narration) with a metadiegetic plane taken into account when an embedded narrative occurs within second-level narration on an intradiegetic level (Huhn et al., 2014). The configuration is, in some way, an extension of focalization because (a) a homodiegetic narrator is innately tied to first-person narration (Nieragden, 2002), embodied on both an external and an internal level as a *focalizer* (Fludernik, 2009), and (b) external focalization is persistently heterodiegetic (Nieragden, 2002), forming a nexus between a third-person narration and an extradiegetic plane. The residual effect of such schemata is that narrative voice here in no way addresses its cognitive, emotive, and ideological positioning. To view voice as an auxiliary to focalization would be inaccurate. It is only when ideological perspective and stylistic idiosyncrasies attributed to various characters are added that voice has weight and proper designation in taxonomy, because focalization depends exclusively on visual perspective (more on internal / less on external) and access to consciousness (as in zero focalization) (Fludernik, 2009). The authenticity of “voice(s)”, however, due to dependence on the ideological and psychological angle, may only be assessed in correlation with that of the *implied author*, who, as an incarnation of the omniscient narrator, mediates all other voices.

An implied author is inferred from the tonal variations, stylistic choices, and idiosyncratic motif of his narrative design, and the entire range of signs, signature-specific, to his artistry that creates a clear mental image of him (Hale, 2009). The image of the implied author in many other instances, where the film is the work of a collective effort, is rather opaque, although a few scholars, such as Chatman (1980), would still find an implied author to always be present.

Apropos to the case, it should suffice to look at the closing, botched airplane hijacking scene in Niels Mueller’s *The Assassination of*

Richard Nixon, a film “about social alienation in America... in its attempt to connect society’s dysfunction and popular misery with the actions of a hypocritical, mendacious ruling elite” (Laurier, 2005). As the scene progresses, its final moments are accompanied by the voice-over of the main protagonist, hijacker Sam Bicke, who explains the chief rationale for his actions at the moment of his death. Yet it is a peculiar narrative instance, recounted by the unreliable narrator (told by Sam, in a flashback, after the death has occurred), where amidst the majority of shots via Sam’s focalization, there is a sequence of frames from the perspective of the approaching airport police, something Sam could not have imagined and cannot focalize. The perspective of the police is not defined until the very moment Sam is shot (once the police are seen), which makes the alternative focalization ambiguous, unless, of course, it is seen as the perspective of an implied author, a narratorial link between the director Niels Mueller and homodiegetic narrator Sam Bicke.

While narrative voice, focalization and duration are paramount in the discourse of 360° 3D cinema filmmaking, sequentiality is another aspect which is currently problematic in virtual reality films. What occasionally works is *blended sequentiality*, the mixing of anachronies with analepsis in a more complex ordering. It does not pose structural incompatibilities as long as it preserves the logic of a story, except in 360° 3D cinema, where editing techniques may overcomplicate the narrative configuration, since “cuts” (elliptical by default) could potentially be mistaken for anachronies (elliptical in form) (Chatman, 1980).

As to the duration, Gerard Genette (1983) outlined four principle relations between the story time and discourse time that govern it: *summary* (narrative time is shorter than story time), *scene* (narrative time equals story time), *ellipsis* (narrative time has gaps and is therefore closer to zero in story time), *pause* (story time stops) (Genette, 1983). The scheme does not end with Genette. Chatman (1980) and Jahn (2005) extend a fifth principle to its core: *stretch* (narrative time is longer than story time), and, thus, the five categories – *scene* (Genette, 1983; Chatman, 1980) / *congruent presentation* / *isochrony* (Jahn, 2005), as well

as *speed-up* / *acceleration* / *panorama* (Genette, 1983) / *summary* (Genette, 1983; Deleuze, 1987), *ellipsis* / *cut* / *omission* (Genette, 1983; Chatman, 1980; Jahn, 2005), and *stretch* (Deleuze, 1987) / *slow-down* / *deceleration* (Genette, 1983) – are used interchangeably in today’s debates. Apropos to 360° 3D filmmaking, ellipsis, stretch, and pause are of special concern, since it is the scene that seems to be a preeminent natural habitat for immersive experiences in virtual reality.

In a classic film narrative pause is pre-determined by its narrative, unless, of course, another pause is added when an audience member simply steps out, in which case the discourse still continues but unintended ellipsis sets in. The total discourse time is not affected. A pause in reading is determined not only by the narrative itself but also by the reader, who can take time off the discourse for as long as desired; hence, discourse time, however, is extended. By contrast, the virtual milieu is still fresh terrain to compellingly assert how pause functions, for the variables can be manifold, depending on the particular type of VR technology used. When 360° 3D films are viewed on portable devices, the effect of discourse time and pause is closer to that of reading, although it can be further extended by rewinding a sequence to view another angle. In a community-mediated setting for 360° 3D cinema, discourse time is not extended, but pause and ellipsis begin to coalesce.

“Freeze frames” as a pause and narrative device for a “pure description... when the film actually ‘stops’... [such as in] Joseph Mankiewicz’s *All About Eve*” (Chatman, 1980), especially accompanied by a voice-over, are contradictory to immersivity, which calls for a scene in the present tense by default. Because even traditional “cinema can only occur in the present time. Unlike the verbal medium, film in its pure, unedited state is absolutely tied to real time” (Chatman, 1980). Classical films are edited elliptically, although cuts and ellipsis are demarcated in cinema, with cuts being a mere ellipsis derivative: “the manifestation of ellipsis as a process in a specific medium... more precisely, a cut may convey ellipsis, but it may simply represent a shift in space” (Chatman,

1980). Cases where ellipsis and cuts merge are rare, but they do exist, such as in Michelangelo’s film *La Notte*, where cuts are deliberately used as serious gaps in chronology. Even so, ellipsis, cuts, and pause (regardless of which one is used and how often) do not operate properly in 360° 3D film, the contemporary medium that prefers immersivity and scene as the propelling engine of its narrative experience.

Spherical cinematic preference for the here and now is further boosted by its “ressentiment” with respect to the opposite: speeding up the events, where the “directors often resort to gadgetry...[and] ‘montage-sequence’” (Chatman, 1980), which could not be construed as an authentic summary. Unless made as a collage-like montage sequence à la *Cocoon* (a 360-degree by 220-degree spherical immersive video installation at the SAT Immersion Experience Symposium in Montreal in May 2015) and accepted at face value with no particular narrative present, immersivity (a required element of the VR experience) is lost. Which leaves not only the application of summary but also the use of stretch, which is rather moot in a 360° 3D space. Stretch is a rare enough phenomenon in literature (Jahn, 2005), but often used in film as a “slow motion” effect or a repetitive editing and overlapping (Chatman, 1980). While not currently employed in mainstream 360° 3D films, it is feasible enough that it might be used in the future, for instance, in a narrative event that simulates, for viewers, a state of cognitive impairment (such as being under the influence of a controlled substance), without the loss of their full experience in immersivity.

Finally, regarding *frequency*, a third possible tension between narrative time and story time, Genette (1983) distinguished three narrative representations of an event: *singulative* (describing once what happened once), *repetitive* (describing several times what happened once), and *iterative telling* (describing once what happened a few times). Chatman (1980), furthermore, divided singulative representation into *singulative* and *multiple-singulative*, which gives “several representations, each of one of several story moments, as in ‘Monday, I went to bed early; Tuesday, I went to bed early; Thursday, I went to bed early,’ etc.”, [not to

be confused with repetitive representations] “of the same story moment, as in ‘Yesterday I went to bed early; yesterday I went to bed early; yesterday I went to bed early,’ etc.”.

The positioning of narrative frequency is not limited to literary works only; to a certain extent, cinema deploys frequency as a reflective, non-empathetic, and “alienating or decidedly modern factor” in storytelling (Huhn et al., 2014), most remarkably in *Rashōmon* (1950) (repeating a single event from different angles to accentuate various focalizations by four characters) or *Run Lola Run* (1998) (repeating a single introduction of an event that eventually forks into three different endings). However, the singulative form remains the principal and obligatory form in cinema, with repetitive representations deployed relatively infrequently, merely as special effects (Chatman, 1980) or as a patterning device in flashbacks or thought-form sequences through the post-classical editing style. Iterative retelling of a single allegation that describes several repetitions of the same event is seen even more seldom. It is mainly used to choose a particular concept over the story, as in Steve McQueen’s *Shame* (2011), which portrays a morning routine to stress the dullness of the repetition for pornography and sex addiction that is meant to desensitize both the main character Brandon and the film viewer in chorus. It is important to note that repetitive sequences appear particularly displeasing in 360° 3D films, when the content is viewed with VR optical glasses instead of desktop computers.

The above illustration raises a few fundamental questions for 360° 3D cinema, however: first, through what devices does one even up the sense of ‘being there’, which is coloured by a viewer’s personal, pre-conditioned experience, with that of the first-person perspective, which is frequently authorial and, thus, does not correspond with the viewer’s; and, second, how does one reconcile “a deep personal embodiment” (a viewer’s first-person point of view) with the perspective of another character / player present who may focalize the perspective of the narrator / author?

A blueprint for a 360° 3D vizomatic viewing experience

Mark Lombardi, an American neo-conceptualist artist, used pencil-drawn diagrams for six years before his death in 2000 to map the “charts of shady deals and shaky agents, and org charts of world-class con men, revealing the genealogy of wickedness in the highest places of corporate and government power” (Dowbenko, 2003). The diagrams, entitled *Narrative Structures*, interpret this interconnectedness of banks, corporations, private individuals, military and government by “juxtaposing and assembling... [loops with] a set of stacked, parallel lines to establish a time frame, the flow of money and other key details as indicated by a system of radiating arrows, broken lines” (Lucarelli, 2012). The key is to look at the sheer multitude of size in drawings ranging from small prints to those measuring 5 x 12 feet as if to mirror a multitude of private corporations, federal agencies involved and the size of their influence over the world’s function mechanism. The established social order revealed “is a political underground stem” (vizome), where connections are made within the narratives of the diagrams (Figure 1) and, outwardly, with the audience (Figure 2). One cannot simply approach Lombardi’s paintings and then merely walk away: the drawings *Narrative Structures* are tied to the spectators, who are chained by them, and they, in turn, are tied with each other in time and space, even after the exhibition is over. The act of psychosomatic immersion is therefore complete.

Such is also a residual psychological effect after having watched *Mark Lombardi-Kunst and Konspiration*, directed by Mareike Wegener in 2012, which examines the legacy of Lombardi’s work in the contemporary art scene. Comprising mostly of interviews by art critics and Mark Lombardi’s friends, immediate family and associates, the film rarely ventures beyond the zone of information widely available in print and on the net. It does, however, feature a rare interview with the artist immersed in his creative pursuits and at the apex of his fame; perhaps it is the only remaining video record of him alive and the unexpected visual prowess of his presence might only inflate the conspiracy theories surrounding his death, as he

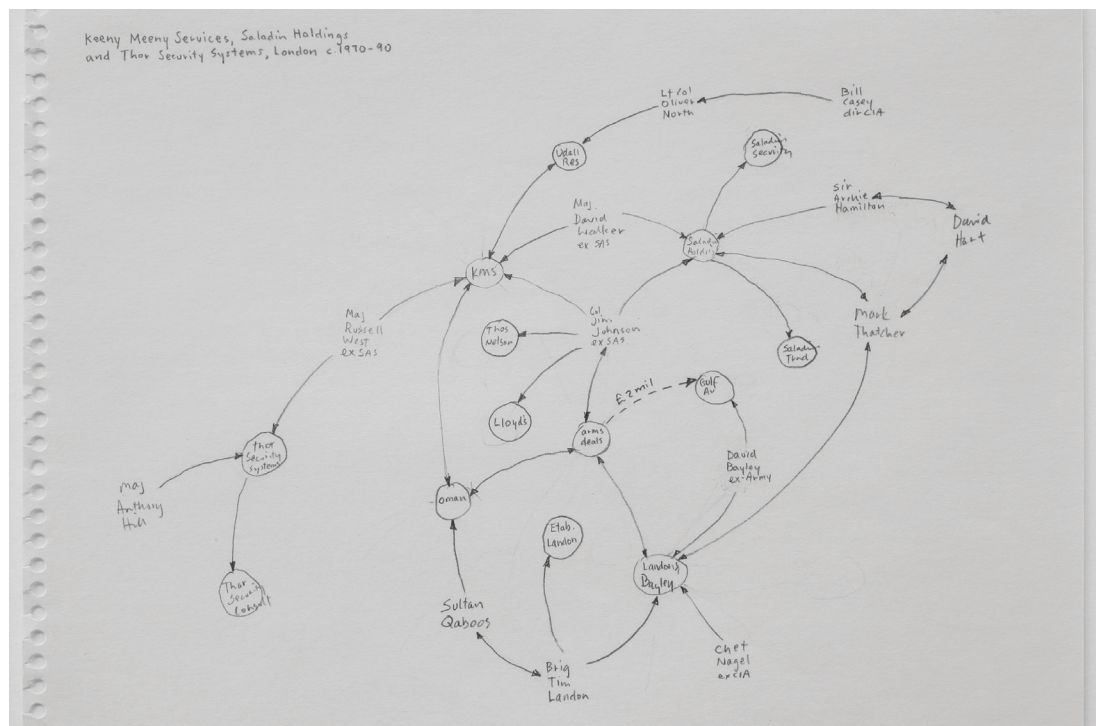


Figure 1. Keeny Meeny Services, Saladin Holdings and Thor Security Systems (London: Mark Lombardi, c. 1970-90)

comes across in the film as being just an artist instead of a political preacher with an agenda in sight. The senselessness of his departure is underscored even more by the monochromatic soundtrack and the never-ending stream of museum visitors of all ages and from various strata of society as seen in the film's closing shots.

What emerges at the end is the concept of *vizomatic narrative kinetics* and its propagation in public space, which, in itself, becomes a default model for 360° 3D cinema; as the drawn lines switch into active verbs that expand dynamically as they connect in multiplicities, each of the dots or circles (representing a legal entity or an interested party), too small in size to be legible from a distance, “pulls” the spectator “in”. In pondering each dot, one actually contemplates all of them simultaneously; the focal points are not the loops, but the lines that connect them, which in turn connect to the audience and generate a further movement within (Figure 3). The audience is a constantly shapeshifting mass of “viewer bees”, cross-connecting along the *x, y, z* axis and becoming a part of the

Narrative Structures: a metaphor for vizomatic connections in 360° 3D space.

A very similar vizomatic connection occurs in Dennis Del Favero's *Scenario*, the world's first interactive video installation, shot and displayed in 360° 3D format. Although it is an installation, Del Favero regards his work as a film, written by playwright Stephen Sewell and entered into the Sydney Film Festival in 2011. The narrative was based in part on the notorious Fritzl case of 2008: an Austrian father kept his daughter in the basement of his home for 24 years, raping her repeatedly and thus fathering her 7 children. The interactive configuration of the installation depended on a proprietary artificial intelligence system that tracked the movement of the viewers who had to help the daughter, in an interactive game, to collect her disembodied parts in her escape from the offender. The interaction between the humanoid story characters and the audience was intensified by its 3D format, as the audience psychosomatically became a part of the story space, initially centred as a fascicular root tree, yet, as the story progressed, it morphed into a ‘kinetic vizome’.



Figure 2. Audience examining Mark Lombardi's work
(Riga: Aigars Ceplitis, 2018)

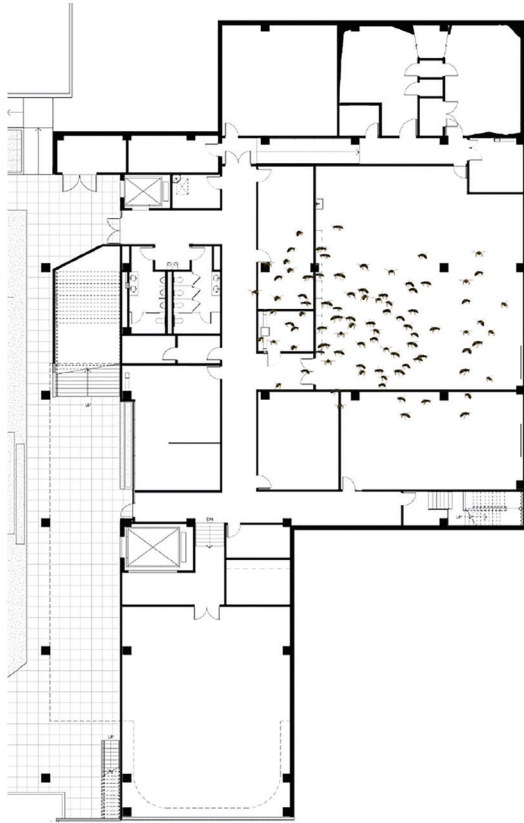


Figure 3. Simulation of Mark Lombardi's exhibition at Pierogi Art Gallery in New York (view from above)
(New York: author unknown, n.d.)

Scenario is a model illustration of a well-functioning vizome because its interactive narrative exhibited at least four of the six underlying principles by which vizome is defined: connection (the audience constantly switches between being a *focalizer* and a *focalizee*, depending on the course of action pressured by interactivity), heterogeneity (in *Scenario*, narrative levels propagated via metamorphosis), asignifying rupture (the main storyline could be broken but it would spring up again along new lines), and cartography (in helping the raped humanoid daughter to get out of her confinement, the audience connected the meta narrative levels of the story with the multiple entryways in an exploratory fashion).

Conclusion

Regardless of the advancements, the configuration of machinery to control the flow of a narrative is expected to stay the same in

years to come, generally via a sensing device, a projection screen, or a head-mounted display. They all provide a heightened sense of personal presence (a), an emphasis on transformation (b), a social element or “social architecture” at its core (c), a serial structure (d), an interactive gaming environment (e), an “absence of a discrete, ‘completed’ product” (f), platform affordances (g), and multiple proscenia (h) (Alexander, 2011). However, even the most celebrated 360° 3D films, such as those of Chris Milk (today’s mainstream in spherical filmmaking), do not meet all the necessary parameters, as their lack of transformative (b) and open-ended (f) factors, along with the rather unsophisticated narrative design, limit the depth of immersive experience for the viewer. Unless their narrative strategies mimic the shapeshifting vizome of Lombardi’s *Narrative Structures* or Del Favero’s *Scenario*, both of which display a stronger social architecture (c) by the sheer virtue of the intermingled audience setting and “separate iterations over time and space” (Alexander, 2011) (d), springing up simultaneously *en masse*, on multiple exhibit platforms (h), the artistic and functional value of such films will not have a lasting appeal. The need, therefore, is, first, in the vizomatic narrative taxonomy, a fusion of the Deleuzoguattarian principles with the established narratological canons, and, second, in the fission of the 360° 3D frame from the clutches of flat screen narrative techniques.

Fortunately, new narrative circumstances are coming into play, the observational and interactive visual frames of a vizome, whereby the audience has become *focalizees* in the total narrative schemata. Such a shift should result in vizomatic immersion, which, just as in video games, is sensual and multi-medial in nature, but, unlike games, moves away from a cause-and-effect, gratification-oriented storytelling environment towards a full psychosomatic embodiment.

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