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In this essay I will be researching the three words, Narrative, Relationship, and Flow, regarding art and design, discussing the different ways in which they can relate. My analysis will include theories such as, Jurgen Habermas'; Theory of Communicative Action, along with John Woods concept of Meta-Design, and an insight into Mihayl Csikszentmihalyi's research on 'flow state'. I will look into artists and designers such as, Miguel Covarrubias, Vivienne Westwood, Tim Georgeson, Tracey Emin, Matt Smith, and Vincent Van Gogh.

Narrative within art has always been around as there has always been a motive behind the creation of something. Humans have always told stories and shared experiences, Paleolithic paintings evidence this, and archaeologists are constantly discovering new narratives that our ancestors have left behind. George Nash, an archaeologist at the university of Coimbra in Portugal, compares recently discovered prehistoric paintings, 'The cave art in Spain is mostly handprints, but the cave art in Indonesia is much more



Fig. 1 The painting at Leang Tedongnge in Sulawesi, Indonesia

sophisticated and likely contains more of a narrative' (Nash, 2024). (See figure 1). In reference to semiotics, Nash believes that this cave art most likely held an important narrative to the those at the time

of its creation, 'It's like the symbol of a cross. Any Christian can form a complex narrative from a simple figurative design' (Nash, 2024). This suggests that this

Paleolithic painting, was not meant for present day humans to see, as we cannot comprehend the narrative meaning behind it without understanding the context of the symbols which have been painted. This could be said about narratives within art and design today. Not everyone will perceive the imagery in the same way and therefore will not be able to understand the narrative of a piece of art the way it is intended to be seen.

The Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, exhibit collections of work which have narratives rooted within them. However, these are not always obvious to the viewer at first glance, similar to the cave paintings found in Indonesia. Miguel Covarrubias was a Mexican artist who was familiar with the dance scene and created a lithograph piece titled

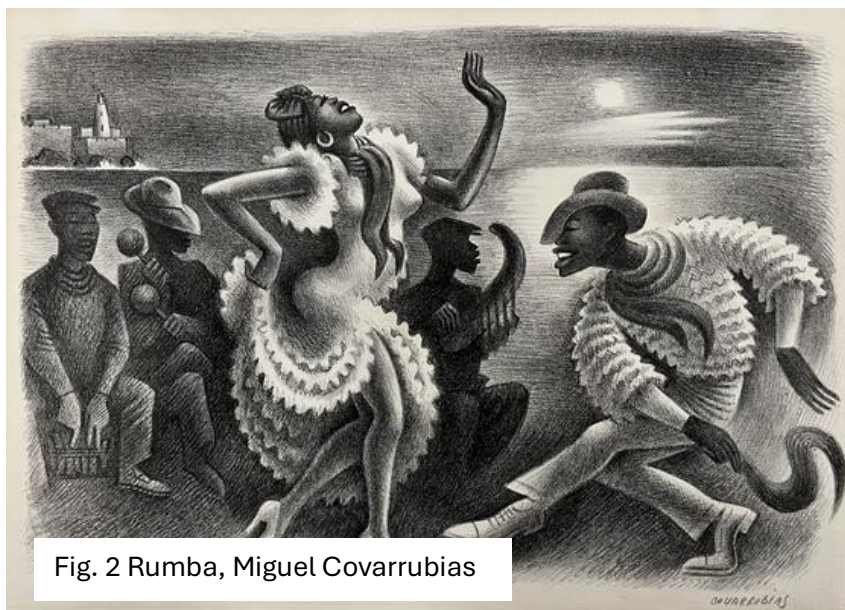


Fig. 2 Rumba, Miguel Covarrubias

Rumba, inspired by the Cuban origin ballroom dance (see figure 2). Professional ballroom dancer, George Pytlik, describes Rumba to be, 'essentially a story of the lady seducing

the man she is dancing with' (Pytlik, 2016). Continuing from this he also says that rumba is, 'a beautiful expression of a love story when danced with passion and quality' (Pytlik, 2016). Miguel Covarrubias' work is not just two people dancing, but instead a depiction of a love story taking place through dance. Furthermore, he has made a

subtle reference to the origin of the rumba dance by incorporating the Castillo del Morro on the Port of Havana in the background.

An artist's work is a way for them to communicate visually, and therefore for the viewer to receive this communication, context is necessary. Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action suggests, 'The context of communication is never neutral; it is always shaped by its conditions and history, affecting its meaning' (Habermas, P.59). This theory indicates the process of passing ideas, where both people are working towards a mutual understanding of the information at hand. However, this aim can be affected by one's knowledge of social, and historical context. Expanding from this, Covarrubias' intentions were to portray a love story through the movement of dance, however can only be understood by another viewer if they have existing knowledge of the history behind the dance being portrayed. If there is not a mutual understanding, then it can be interpreted differently, giving the artwork a new meaning that is personal to the viewer. By understanding the context of the dance displayed, as well as the historic origins depicted in the background, the viewer can fully immerse themselves into the story that was originally intended by the artist.

The fashion industry is embedding storytelling more recently into catwalks and collections to campaign and spread awareness of important social, political, and environmental issues. Dr Benjamin Wild, Senior lecturer at Manchester Fashion Institute, explains why having a narrative is important within this industry, 'Consumers want more meaningful experiences that enable them to explore their identities and connect with others' (Wild, 2024). He suggests that by revolving new fashion around a

story, gives the designs more meaning, and if done successfully, the consumers find themselves apart of this meaning.

Using fashion as a vehicle for change, Dame Vivienne Westwood has always emphasized the narratives which have driven her designs. She says in an interview with State of the Style World, 'My clothes always tell a story, I couldn't survive, I wouldn't know how to start if I didn't have a story' (Westwood, 2019). This perspective

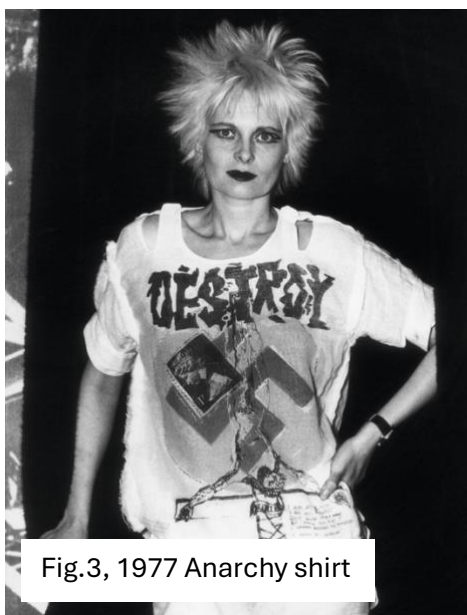


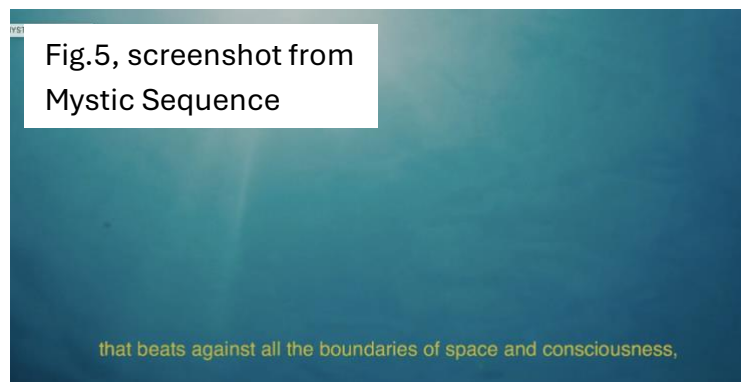
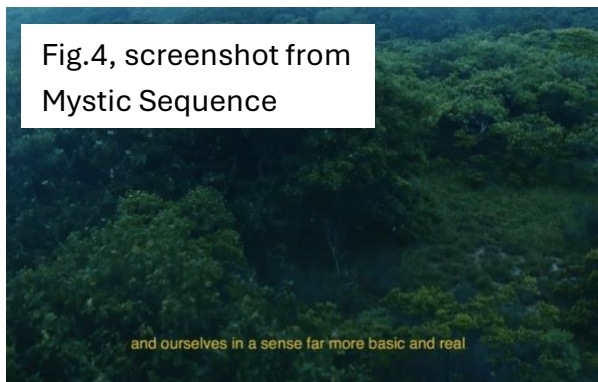
Fig.3, 1977 Anarchy shirt

reestablishes the importance of having something to tell through design, whether it be your own personal story or a fight for a cause. David Herman discusses in the book Narrative Theory, that art does not work primarily on its own, he says, 'Aesthetic experiences need to be understood as part of the broader ecology or environment of human experiences' (Herman, p.174). Suggesting that artwork should still

be visually appealing or intriguing to the viewer, whilst effectively pushing the underlying message it was made for. With Westwood's unique adaptation of punk fashion, she created striking fashion designs with strong messages which can be established through semiotics of symbols, images, and words which she included (see figure 3). Narrative in design is planned and carefully thought about, it gives the work meaning, whether it be the story of someone's day, or a political campaign. It enhances the importance of the piece, encouraging the viewer to think.

Designers' relationships with the things around them will impact the process of their creations. From their relationship with tools, materials, and processes, to where they gather their inspiration, stories, or what is occurring within their daily lives. In the online article *Design Theory and a Changing Scientific Worldview*, Daniel Christian Wahl suggests, 'What we know, and how we know affects the way we see the world, and therefore how we design and act' (Wahl, 2017). Furthermore, saying that as designers our perception of the world - our designs - are influenced by the way our environment reacts with us.

Tim Georgeson is a multidisciplinary visual artist who creates cinematic spaces revolved around the human condition and the connection of everything. In his film *Mystic Sequence* (see figure 4 and 5) he visualizes the relationship of the land and the



sea, and how we are connected to everything within these spaces, morphing two extremes of the bird's eye views on land, to deep below the water's surface. In the article, *Artists for The Ocean*, Emily McDermott describes Georgeson to, 'ruminate poetically on the fact that nothing in this world is an abstraction separate from its surroundings: everything and everyone is intertwined' (McDermott, 2024). Highlighting that we have a natural connection to everything in life, and this brings the intrinsic need

to design accordingly. Similarly to Georgeson having this intuitive feeling to create these films based on relationships within nature, projecting his own values of his relationship with nature too.

Other designers, still inspired by the world around them, use their relationships with other factors to drive their creations. Tracey Emin's 'Everyone I have ever slept with' tent piece (See figure 6 and 7) is an example of an artist who uses human on human relationships to inspire creation. This piece is a small fabric tent which has been embroidered with the names of those who Emin has slept with throughout her life. Although this sounds provocative, the names are not limited to those she has shared intimate relations with but also, 'friends to family members, each name serves as a poignant reminder of the connections that have shaped Emin's life and informed her identity.' (SINGULART, 2024).



Fig.6 'Everyone I Ever Slept With' Tent exterior

Although this could be seen as quite a literal approach to my chosen word of 'relationship', this piece was not just for Emin to showcase all her connections

through her life, but instead a conversation provoking and controversial piece, which encouraged the viewers to take a step back and evaluate their own relationships, not just romantic but platonic and familial also. Melanie McGrath, a journalist for Tate



Fig.7 'Everyone I Ever Slept With' Tent interior

Magazine, gives her opinion on the tent saying, 'The tent is too crudely symbolic. The tent is womb, home, exile, intimacy, loneliness done out in nylon' (McGrath, 2002). This piece makes people feel uneasy and

uncomfortable, it is displaying the personal relationships of somebody, but it has been thoughtfully arranged for this exact reason. Not every artist will display the romantic, aesthetically pleasing sides of relationships, and this can be a good thing. The uncomfortable display of relationships provides the audience with a chance to create new relationships with one another discuss the art.

The definition of 'relationship' is, 'the way in which two or more people or things are connected, or the state of being connected' (Oxford languages). In design it is not always the final products which represent ideas of relationships – like I have previously analysed – instead it can be the act of creating in collaboration with one another, these connections made through the act of making are what displays relationships within design.

John Wood's concept of Meta-design suggests the importance of creating collaboratively, as well as the connections that are created through this. The concept of meta design is that designing with others establishes relationships, not just between the designers who worked together, but also between the product and audience. Meta

design is a way of prioritizing how people communicate and co-create (Wood, 2022). In Woods manifesto he states, 'Meta-design is a toolbox for collective metamorphosis [...] Meta-design belongs to everyone' (Wood, 2020). Essentially suggesting that, when adopting the thinkings of meta design theory, designs can be ever evolving through the collaboration of others constantly being reimagined through new perspectives.

Andrew Blauvelt's essay 'Towards Relational Design' reinforces the concept of Meta-design, as he discusses the shift from designing standalone products to creating systems which allow continuous interactions and change from others. 'The nature of design itself has broadened from giving form to discrete objects to the creation of systems and more open-ended frameworks for engagement: designs for making designs' (Blauvelt, 2008). Designers leaving space for the audience's adaptations creates this connection between designers and their consumers, almost like an unspoken conversation through design, which forms a subtle relationship between the two sides, merging them together as one through the collaboration of design.

In positive psychology the term 'Flow' is the mental state someone can get into whilst they are performing an activity and are completely immersed into it, with full enjoyment (Wikipedia, 2019). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – known as the father of flow – researched this mental state as he was fascinated by artists and creators who were known to get lost in their work in a positive and almost meditative manner. Csikszentmihalyi believes it takes a certain type of mindset to reach the flow state, 'Control over consciousness is not simply a cognitive skill' (Csikszentmihalyi, P.21). He suggests that one must remain disciplined and motivated with what it is they are creating to stay deeply focused and

ultimately perform the best within their practice. When an artist is in flow they are not concerned about the outcome of their work and instead deeply appreciative of the process and how it feels to create.

Fine artist John Pototschnik discussed the controversy between artists, considering which is more important, the process or the result. Painter, Matt Smith (See Figure 8) said, 'For me, the process and challenge of painting is one of the most enjoyable pursuits I partake in. There is no end game, just a continuous journey of learning and discovery' (Smith, 2023). This feels like the main reason for creating and designing, not for validation or awards, but instead for the sole purpose of enjoying what it is you are doing for yourself as a creator. However, Pototschnik makes an interesting argument



Fig.8 Evening Over Superior,
Matthew Smith

that, if the process, 'is one's sole motivation and not the resulting work, why offer it to the public, keep it for yourself as a record of your adventure' (Pototschnik, 2023). This argument seems solid at first,

however if an artist has endured an incredible experience through the process, learning new things, experimenting throughout, why would they not want to share it and let others appreciate this process as well? 'The painting is what I leave behind...the process is for me and the painting is for whomever would like to enjoy it' (Smith, 2023). When an artist is in flow state, they are dedicated and focused on one thing only and that is what they are creating at that one time, not thinking about the end result, how it

will look, what viewers will think, or even what they will think themselves, it is all about being present in the creative process.

It can be apparent when an artist has reached flow in the process of their work. The artwork has a sense of movement or life to it, it adopts the feelings that the artist had whilst creating it. Vincent Van Gogh, an influential artist, is well known for his abundance of artworks, after leaving the hospital he threw himself into painting where he would complete a new piece of work every day (Vincent Van Gogh Biography, 1890). This intrinsic urge to continuously create is a display of Van Goghs flow state and how he was so embedded within his work, even after completing his pieces he had to make more. When looking at his paintings his attention to detail, depth, and the overarching composition of how every paint stroke interacts with the next is a skill that not every artist can acquire, and this detail can only be achieved through being completely dedicated to one's work. (See figures 9 and 10).



Fig.9 Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat, Vincent Van



Fig.10 Undergrowth, Vincent Van Gogh

Flow is an important aspect for any designer.

This could be how the paint and brush work in

harmony and flow together onto the canvas. Inspiration or ideas for a new project which

flow to them before creating. The main aspect of flow is that it puts the focus on the making rather than the reward from the outcome. It brings a sense of peace and joy to the creator, rather than pressure of finishing or creating the best thing ever made. It is important for designers to not lose the connection to their work through focusing on the wrong things, instead enjoying the process, and leaving what's to come for the future, 'We find the activity rewarding simply by doing it rather than being solely focused on the potential rewards received upon its completion (Csikszentmihalyi, 2016).

Over the course of this essay, I have discussed narrative, relationship, and flow, in regards to art and design. Through this analysis it is clear that these words are each an important aspect to the design process. Narrative can be obvious or subtly displayed to the audience however, it is always important to the designer, otherwise they would not have spent the time to create. Relationships matter from the connection between the artist and, their muse, their medium, their audience, and collaborators. A good relationship with these things results in successful outcomes and the opportunity for more relationships to be built. Finally, flow is entirely personal to the creator and is important for creating meaningful and enjoyable pieces, it is interesting to think about the difference between artwork which has not been created when in the state of flow, and if this changes for the viewer. These final thoughts have led me to this question:

To what extent does a designer need a personal connection to their work in order to enter a flow state and create a compelling narrative?

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Figure 4 and 5

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Figure 6

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Figure 7

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Figure 8

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Figure 9

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Figure 10

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