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Telling Stories with Objects: Narrative and Materiality

Abstract: This essay explores the intersection of narrative and materiality, examining how physical objects and their material properties shape our understanding of stories and their meaning. Through two case studies – Zachary Thomas Dodson's novel "Bats of the Republic" and Orhan Pamuk's "The Museum of Innocence" – I delve into the ways in which objects are used to tell stories, create meaning, and evoke emotions. I argue that materiality matters in narrative, influencing how readers engage with and interpret texts. I also investigate the blurred lines between fact and fiction, highlighting how narrative fiction can imitate factual discourse and vice versa. By analyzing the material properties of objects and their role in storytelling, I hope to shed light on the complex relationships between narrative, materiality, and meaning-making.

Keywords: Narratology, object-oriented, narrative, materiality, Orhan Pamuk, Zachary Thomas

As a phenomenon that transcends individual media, narrative can be embodied in different physical supports, or "materialities." In language-based narrative, materiality has long been taken for granted: it does not seem to matter whether Jane Austen's novels are realized as print, as audio books or as digital files, printed in large or small characters and in Courier or Garamond, because these factors do not affect the reader's construction of the story and of its world. According to psychologist Rolf Zwaan (2005), the mental processing of narrative consists of building "situation models," or mental simulations of the evolution of the story-world, that are independent of the medium and of its particular inscription. Yet with the surge of materiality and of the mode of existence of objects as topics worthy of philosophical investigation,[1] it is now widely accepted that "materiality matters," though it is hard if not impossible to tell exactly how: it would take technological methods that go far beyond traditional literary scholarship (which is still largely based on the critics' intuition) to identify the effect of material factors such as visual appearance or the sense of touch provided by the text on the experience of the reader.

1 See Harman 2011.

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Another problem when dealing with materiality lies in its tangled relations with mediality. If we regard media as means of expression, they differ from each other through the material substance in which they encode information. Take digital media: their materiality lies in what singles them out as digital. But what exactly are they made of? Bits? Pixels? Electric current running through logic gates? Code that takes input and displays it on a screen, according to technologies that renew the display many times per second, so that the inscription is ephemeral and modifiable? The materiality of book-supported narratives is much easier to conceive, because it is solid and durable: books are made of pages of paper bound at the spine, and these pages bear permanent inscriptions. It does not really matter to the user how the inscription reached the page – whether by letter press, by photographic means, or by printing a digital file. The description of the materiality of digital texts must take into consideration how the system works, but the materiality of books can be intuitively grasped without reference to the production process.

The difficulty of distinguishing materiality from mediality is demonstrated by the pioneering work of Katherine Hayles. In *Writing Machines*, she forcefully states the importance of taking the materiality of texts into consideration:

> My claim is that *the physical form of the literary artifact always affects what the words (and other semiotic components*) mean. Literary works that strengthen, foreground, and thematize the connections between themselves as material artifacts and the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotic signifiers they instantiate open a window on the larger connections that unite literature as a verbal form to its material forms.[2]

But when she turns to the task of demonstrating how materiality matters in specific texts, Hayles obscures the distinction between mediality and materiality by naming the project MSA – *medium*-specific analysis.

How would a MSA approach deal with a work such as Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu?* Would it differ from a MSA analysis of other book-bound narratives, such as Jane Austen's novels, or the Sherlock Holmes stories? Not really. It could show how these texts take advantage of the affordances of their material support, but this type of analysis would not be very different from Walter Ong's demonstration of how writing and then print have transformed narrative. Insofar as many texts share the same medium, MSA would capture general features, but it would not tell much about what distinguishes Proust from Austen and from other book-supported narratives. To avoid this cookie-cutter approach, Hayles redefines

2 Hayles 2002, 25, italics original.

materiality not as what entire media are made of, but as how individual texts deal with their physical substance, how they reflect on its affordances:

> Materiality thus emerges from interactions between physical properties and a work's artistic strategies. For this reason, materiality cannot be specified in advance, as if it preexisted the specificity of the work. An emergent property, materiality depends on how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact as well as on the user's interactions with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops – strategies that include physical manipulations as well as conceptual frameworks.[3]

In this perspective, materiality becomes synonymous with how "literary works interrogate the inscription technology that produce them."[4] Hayles' conception of materiality as an emergent property is characteristic of self-reflexive and experimental texts, which she demonstrates through readings of Talan Memmott's digital *Lexia to Perplexia*, Mark Z. Danielewski's graphically complex print narrative *House of Leaves* and Tom Phillips' painted-over Victorian novel *A Humument* may appear excessively narrow, – do not conventional narratives also depend on a physical support? –, but the consciousness of materiality that emerges from experimental texts reflects back on all the texts that share the same physical support. In other words, it takes *House of Leaves* and its subversion of the reading conventions associated with the book to become aware of how these conventions have traditionally operated for Austen or for Proust.

Multimodality

A book can be experienced on the two-dimensional level of its individual pages through the eye that scans their surface, as well as on the three-dimensional level of the volume through the hand that holds the book and turns the pages. From the very beginning of the codex book, the flat surface of the page has been hospitable to both words and pictures. In illustrated storybooks, a form particularly popular with children, the images are not objects within the storyworld, but extradiegetic documents that the reader can see but the characters cannot.[5] Image and text thus provide separate, though complementary modes of access to the storyworld. Starting around the nineties, a new form of multi-modal narra-

3 Hayles 2002, 33.

4 Hayles 2002, 25.

5 Even when the image depicts what the characters see, the characters don't see the image, because it does not exist within the storyworld.

tive developed in which images are no longer extradiegetic illustrations, but representations of intradiegetic objects that play a role within the plot.[6] These objects can be material things connected to the characters, or the various kinds of ephemeral written documents that constitute the paper (and now digital) trail of human lives: handwritten or typed letters, emails, web sites, newspaper articles, maps, photos, sketches, diagrams, train tickets, hospital admission forms, birth and death certificates. The use of such documents suggests a return to the 'pseudo-factuality'[7] that dominated the novelistic production of the eighteenth century, a feature by which fiction hid its fictionality by imitating a genre of factual communication such as letters, diaries, and autobiographies. Now imitation extends beyond the purely verbal, to affect the appearance of documents. The contemporary forms of multi-modality in narrative fiction owe more to the use of genuine documents in nonfictional texts, such as memoirs, historiography, biography, and instruction manuals, than to the traditional case of illustrated children's stories.

In what follows I will explore how narrative fiction deals with materiality in its most primordial manifestations: namely, materiality as solid, tangible object. Skipping over the 'immaterial materiality' of described objects, where matter becomes language and therefore one-dimensional (since language is primarily a temporal medium), I will discuss experiments with two and then three full dimensions.

Two-dimensional materiality

My example of multi-modal narrative that uses primarily two-dimensional reproductions of written documents is Zachary Thomas Dodson's 2015 novel *Bats of the Republic*. Created by a book-designer doubling as literary author, *Bats* uses maps, genealogies, hand-drawn images of bats and other animals, and reproductions of written documents to complement the written text. In keeping with contemporary narrative trends, *Bats* interleaves two stories that take place at different times in the same world; the world-state of story 1 evolves into the world-state of story 2, and the main character of story 2, Zeke Thomas, is a descendent (by adoption) of the main character of story 1, Zachary Thomas. But things are not that simple. Each of the two stories consists of several branches, one of which is presented as a novel composed in the world of the other story, so that instead of a clean

6 See Gibbons 2012; Hallet 2014.

7 See Foley 1986.

hierarchical structure, we have what Douglas Hofstadter calls a "strange loop" or "tangled hierarchy."

Story 1 is made in part of a Victorian novel titled *The Sisters Gray* set in 1848 about two sisters in Chicago in need of husbands, as well as of a series of letters to one of the sisters by her future husband, Zadock Thomas, who has been sent to the Republic of Texas to deliver a mysterious letter to a general. *The Sisters Gray* (which can be found in the library of story 2) is presented through a fac-simile picture of a book. Printed on paper browned by age, with many spots and blemishes, and using a typography and graphic presentation typical of the nineteenth century, the book within the book arouses a nostalgic awareness of its old-fashioned design. Story 2 is a collection of documents that includes narrations by different characters, as well as a novel titled *The City State*, which, as we are told in *The Sisters Gray*, was written by the mother of the sisters of story 1. It takes place in 2143, after a catastrophe has destroyed the United States and reduced its population to a handful of city-states governed by totalitarian regimes, and it deals with a mysterious letter inherited by Zeke Thomas from his grandfather. This letter, which is obviously the same one as the letter of story 1, is physically contained in an envelope marked "Do not open" at the end of the book. When we reach the envelope, we leave the realm of images and enter the domain of real objects. The envelope contains a long and thin piece of paper with the continuation of story 1 narrated by Zadock; it ends (spoiler alert) with Zadock escaping from captors and approaching a strange man. On the reverse side is the continuation of story 2 narrated by Zeke; it ends with Zeke escaping the city-state of the Republic of Texas and meeting Zadock, who hands him a letter.

But the materiality of *Bats* does not stop with the flatness of paper products. The reader is instructed to fasten together the beginning and end of the letter into a three-dimensional Moebius strip that makes story 1 flow into story 2 and story 2 into story 1 in an endless loop: an ending that may not bring the two stories to a satisfactory conclusion on the diegetic level, but that brings closure on the metadiegetic level, by enacting materially the metaleptic entanglements of the two stories, each of which contains a novel composed in the world of the other (fig. 1).

Three-dimensional materiality

Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* was inspired by the fascination of the author for objects that he found in antique and junk stores around Istanbul – mostly mass-produced objects that document daily life in Istanbul in the mid-twentieth century. As a writer who earlier in life aspired to be a visual artist, what could Pamuk do with his collection, gathered over more than a decade? One pos-

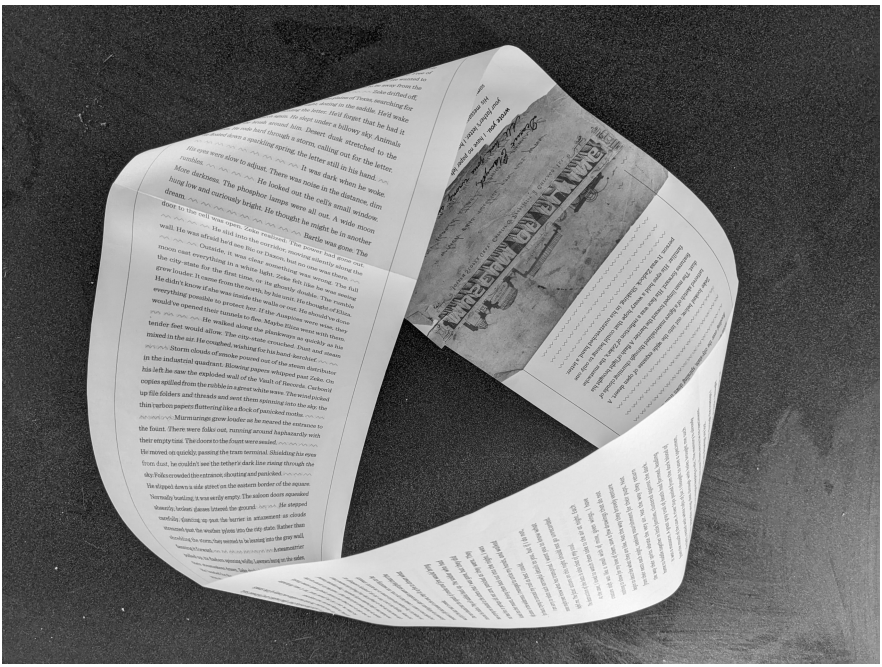

Fig. 1: The Moebius strip from *Bats of the Republic* by Zachary Thomas Dodson: a three-dimensional textual object. © Marie-Laure Ryan.

sibility was to exhibit the objects in a museum, commemorating the now vanished lifestyle that they embody, and bringing to the fore their "thingness," their three-dimensional materiality;[8] another possibility was to turn them into language by incorporating them into the plot of a novel. Pamuk choose to do both: he created a real museum that displays the objects, and he wrote a novel about the creation of the museum.

Set in Istanbul from 1975 to 1984, *The Museum of Innocence* tells the story of an unhappy love affair that turns into fetishist obsession. The narrator, Kemal, belongs to the upper crust of Istanbul society, a class that tries to emulate European culture at all costs. While engaged to Sibel, a heavily Westernized young woman, he falls in love with Füsun, a salesgirl of stunning beauty who is a poor distant relative of his. They engage for a short time in a passionate sexual relation, but

8 Examples of such exhibits are the Museum der Dinge in Berlin, which displays industrially produced objects from the 20th century, and the Cabinets of Wonders, or Wunderkammers, that displayed disparate collections of exotic objects in the 17th and 18th centuries. Both are mentioned by Pamuk as inspirations.

after Kemal's formal engagement to Sibel, Füsun disappears, and Kemal is heartbroken. His strange behavior leads Sibel to break the engagement. When Füsun renews contact with Kemal a few months later, she is married to a man she does not love. For eight years, Kemal visits Füsun four times a week for supper in her parents' house, where she still lives with her husband, and he spends his evenings watching television with the family. He also steals various objects from the house, because they bear the imprint of Füsun's presence. Finally, Füsun gets a divorce, she agrees to marry Kemal and they set out on a car trip to Paris. During the trip they renew their physical relation, but the next day Füsun drives Kemal's car into a plane tree, killing herself and seriously wounding Kemal. The text is ambiguous as to whether it is an accident or a suicide. After Füsun's death, Kemal creates a museum with all the objects he has stolen from her house, and he asks his friend Orhan Pamuk to writes his life story. Pamuk accepts, but rather than writing a regular biography of Kemal, he will write a novel told in the first person by Kemal. This future novel is the one we have just read, so that the text of *Museum of Innocence* curls back upon itself, through the same kind of effect that we find in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu.*

In addition to the fictional story of the fictional museum, Pamuk wrote a non-fictional catalog, titled *The Innocence of Objects*, in which he describes the contents of the actual museum and how it came into being. Pamuk's museum is in many senses the opposite of Kemal's. It is a real museum that tells a fictional story, while Kemal's museum is a fictional museum that tells what is from Kemal's point of view a true story. In Kemal's museum, objects are in a sense de-realized, since they stand for Füsun and the memories they evoke, while in Pamuk's museum they stand primarily for themselves, for their strangeness and opacity. But while the two museums exist in different worlds, they overlap in many ways, and there is a lot of interplay between the discourses that describe them. Many times in the novel Kemal mentions objects that play a role in the plot and then says: "I exhibit it here." This is literally true of the real-world museum, since one can see a similar object in one of the displays. The novel also contains a map to the actual museum and a ticket that will gain the reader free admission. Yet the novel's true-for-the-real-world elements do not function in the same way as the common phenomenon of imported facts, that is, of statements that happen to be true for both the fictional and the real world: the reference of "here" and the validity of the ticket for the real world truly transgress ontological boundaries. On the other hand, the catalog, which is as a whole a non-fictional account of how and why Pamuk created the museum, contains many passages from the novel, it refers to Kemal and Füsun as if they actually existed and it contains a literary map of Pamuk's Istanbul that shows the settings of events not just from *Museum of Innocence* but from several of his other novels. In other words, the fictional novel con-

tains true statements about the real-life museum, and the nonfictional catalog contains fictional statements about the characters in the novel. The fictionality of these statements is not marked typographically or paratextually, but it is obvious to any reader familiar with the novel.[9]

The novel consists of 83 short chapters, and each of them is represented in the real-world museum by a box that shows some of the objects mentioned in the chapter. There are three types of relations between the text of the novel and the objects of the museum: (1) Objects collected in the real world because they can stand for objects that are important to the plot. For instance, it was easy for Pamuk to gather 4213 cigarette butts to represent the ones that were smoked by Füsun and picked up by Kemal. (2) Objects that play no important role in the plot, but that Pamuk wanted to use both in the museum and the novel, because he fell in love with them for some mysterious reason. For instance, there is a display that contain only one object, a quince grater, that Pamuk found in an antique shop. To insert it in the novel he invents a rather convoluted episode in which the police stops Kemal on his way home, searches him, finds the grater and suspects it of being a weapon (this takes place during a military dictatorship). (3) Objects shown in the museum that could not be fitted in the novel, such as the belongings of Kemal's and Füsun's fathers, both of whom die during the story. The museum shows complete collections of all the objects that they used during their daily lives, as if these collections captured the essence of the living person.

But the most important object in the plot is not found in the museum. This object is Füsun herself. She is represented through her dress, panties, combs, earrings, etc., but the dress envelopes an absent body, and we see no picture of her face. I call Füsun an object because this is what Kemal turns her into. He never cares about what she thinks, about the long-term effect on her life of his obsession with her – he only cares about her appearance. He refers to her as "my beauty," and that is what she is for him: a thing of beauty, an object of aesthetic pleasure. She is an allegory much more than an individuated character – an allegory of the artist's obsession with beauty, and also of the *genius loci* of Istanbul. After her death, "Istanbul [becomes] a very different city,"[10] a city of paved streets and concrete buildings rather than the sensory feast of noises, sights, and smells that it was before.

9 An interesting – and probably inadvertent – combination of factuality and fictionality is also found on a street sign in Istanbul that points to the museum. It reads: "Pamuk, Kemal: this direction," joining together the real author and the fictional character.

10 Pamuk 2010, 492.

Of the relationship between the novel and the museum, Pamuk writes in the catalog: "And yet just as the novel is entirely comprehensible without a visit to the museum, so the museum is a place that can be visited and experienced on its own. The museum is not an illustration of the novel, and the novel is not an explanation of the museum."[11] For the visitors who have not read the novel, the museum brings two kinds of experiences: first, an experience of materiality, of thingness, that language cannot fully express, but that Pamuk tries to convey through the artistic arrangement of objects in every frame (an arrangement reminiscent of the boxes of the artist Joseph Cornell). Pamuk's comments about a particular frame is valid for all of them: "As they gradually found their place in the museum, the objects began to talk among themselves, singing a different tune and moving beyond what was described in the novel"). And also: "I was trying to make a sort of painting with the objects, but they were telling me something different."[12] What they tell Pamuk in their stubborn resistance to being turned into a painting is that their meaning resides in their pure presence, not in their relations to Kemal and Füsun. If objects are declared innocent, it is because of their insistence on being themselves and in telling their own story.

In addition to displaying the thingness of objects through the artistic arrangement of the frames, the museum is meant to capture the spirit of Istanbul through its geographic location, as well as through its spatial design and specific content. It is located in Çukurcuma, the ethnically diverse, occasionally run-down, but vibrant neighborhood where Füsun's family lives. Visitors will have to walk through the same streets as the characters in the novel in order to reach the museum, and even if they have not read the text, they will imbibe the atmosphere that inspired it. The presence of Istanbul is also conveyed through the yellowing, mostly amateurish photos that are used as the background of the displays or grouped together as collages.

But what will the visitors who have read the book get from the museum? Playing the fictional game of make-believe, will they be moved by the thought that "this is Füsun's dress, these are Füsun's earrings" – as people may be moved by seeing relics from saints or the dresses once worn by Marilyn Monroe? (Fig. 2). I doubt that visitors will share Kemal's fetishism: the visitor knows that Füsu*n* does not exists, and the museum does not break the ontological divide between fiction and reality. Moreover, the aesthetic arrangement of objects in each window detracts the spectator's attention from the novel they refer to, and they become self-referential. Pamuk himself has doubts about the visitor's ability to connect

11 Pamuk 2012, 18.
12 Pamuk 2012, 83.

Fig. 2: A display at Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence, showing Füsun's dress and belongings. It shows the influence of Joseph Cornell's art boxes, as well as of cabinets of curiosities (Wunderkammer). © Marie-Laure Ryan.

the objects in the boxes to specific details of the novel, and this is why he does not want the museum to be an illustration of the novel: "From watching visitors to the museum who had also read the book, I realized that readers remember no more

than six pages of descriptive detail in the six-hundred pages of the novel. Readers who look at the displays were more likely to remember the emotions they'd felt while reading the novel than the objects in it."[13] Judging by the comments on Amazon, the main emotions people feel while reading the novel are character-oriented, not object-oriented: contempt for Kemal, and pity for Füsun. If the artistic arrangements of objects inspire an emotion, this emotion is nostalgia. Both the novel and the museum remind us of a past perceived at the same time as very close and very remote: very remote, because technology steadily accelerates the rate of change of the world, but also very close, because some of us can actually remember using the kind of objects displayed in the boxes. Nostalgia involves a feeling of loss, and for Turkish readers of a certain age, or for foreign readers who rely on their imagination, this loss concerns the Istanbul of their youth.

If Pamuk is right about the limitations of memory, the best way to experience the relation between the novel and the museum is not during a visit to the physical museum, but by revisiting the museum through the catalog (which contains reproductions of most of the frames), and by re-reading the novel at the same time. As they look at the photos of the frames, and then read the corresponding chapters, readers will become aware of many details that they had not noticed during their first reading. The second reading will be like an Easter egg hunt for the objects that Pamuk inserted in the novel not because they are important to the plot but because he fell mysteriously attracted to them when he found them in a junk store.[14]

Conclusion

If the two works I have discussed have something in common, beside their display of materiality and their attempt to harness sources of meaning that go beyond the temporality of language and the spatiality of the page, it lies in their combination of the openly fictional with the pseudo-factual. The openly fictional resides on the level of plot: allegorical treatment of Füsun resulting in a lack of psychological verisimilitude for Pamuk; dystopic anticipation for Dodson, a theme typical of science fiction. The pseudo-factual lies in the imitation of real-world, truth-claiming documents or institutions: technical drawings, field-guide illustrations, and photographic reproduction of a nineteenth century book for Dodson; a museum for

13 Pamuk 2012, 121.

14 Çukurcuma, the neighborhood where the museum is located, is full of antique and junk stores. Walking through its streets makes it easy to imagine where the objects in the museum come from and why Pamuk became fascinated with them. Çukurcuma as a whole is a true Museum of Innocence.

Pamuk, a kind of institution normally devoted to the factual. In their combination of the conspicuously fictional with the pseudo-factual, these works demonstrate that from a narratological point of view fact and fiction do not exist in complete isolation from each other: fiction can imitate factual discourse, while factual discourse occasionally learns some techniques from fiction, for instance in New Journalism.[15] But the relation is not entirely symmetrical, because fiction, not being committed to the truth, can imitate any form of factual representation by suspending its truth-claim, while factual discourse must worry about preserving its credibility. In other words, narrative fiction does not compromise its fictionality by mimicking real-world discourse or documents, but factual narrative can compromise its factuality by looking or reading too much like narrative fiction.

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15 See Wolfe 1973.