

INTIMATE TO ICONIC: MAPPING THE STRUCTURE OF STORIES

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Abstract: Six years ago I started writing a novel that explores the relationship between the intimate and the iconic. As this is a first novel, my understanding of these concepts developed at the same time as my awareness of story structures. These separate skills have now fused into a single conceptual tool, in which story structure is seen as a pattern that becomes more or less complex depending on its reliance on raw sensation. This tool is useful for finding symmetries between fields that mythologise, such as science and culture.

1 INTIMATE TO ICONIC

A story told to a lover becomes different when announced on the television news. While this might seem obvious, it took me years to figure out the framework that explained why. Intimacies lend themselves to one structure of expression, while mythology prefers another. In this paper, the term 'mythology' refers to a story so pervasive and important that it informs the logic of a broader system of meaning, such as religion or science.

Intimacy and mythology differ in their relationship to raw sensation. Their inner structures reflect this difference of proximity. The most intimate understanding is a solo experience, a wordless personal bubble created by the senses. Its elements are multiple,

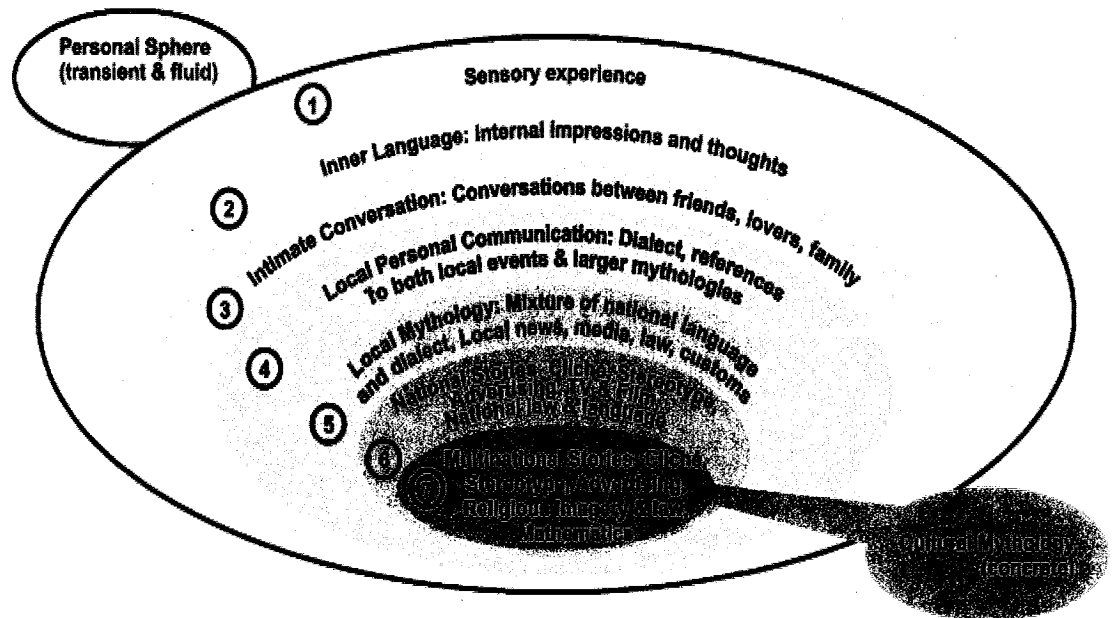
simultaneous, transient and have a wholistic relationship with each other. In terms of structure, I describe this as 'fluid'.

This solo awareness undergoes a transformation when it steps into language, and streamlines further as it climbs into the public domain. In order to be understood by a wider audience it must lose its reliance on contexts such as the body or a shared personal history. Instead it refers to defined symbols that are commonly known and solidifies into a few key ideas. In terms of structure, it becomes more 'concrete'. The new simplicity also makes it less resonant – less rich in meaning for a listener.

This is a lesser-known reason why a public announcement can't generate the same physical reaction as the privately-spoken words *I want you*. A lovers' whisper has the benefit of an association with additional unspoken information: physical and emotional sensation. The down-side for a writer is that this additional unspoken information is difficult to simulate with words alone. Intimacy's dependence on a local context makes it resistant to the abstractions of language.

At the other end of the continuum is mythology, which is as flat and clear as a billboard. In some ways, mythology informs language. It provides a common reference point for its terms precisely because it is so permanent and clearly defined. In fact, mythology is so at home in language that its messages are usually recognised instantly, without regard for the listener's personal circumstances. Unfortunately this lack of ambiguity can also be dull, in the way that a cliché lacks most of its original flavour.

Below is a graphic representation of the change in a story's structure as it progresses from intimate to iconic, from fluid to concrete.



Stories begin as internal experience (1). When this flow of sensation ventures into language it manifests as a pattern of imagery, a complex network of relationships. In intimate spheres of communication (3) this pattern retains much of its complexity, due to additional expressive elements that come from personal, contextual information. The more public the story becomes, the more it relies on terms that are well-defined and easily reproducible, which causes it to simplify. Detail is lost as the pattern acquires familiarity, until eventually only cartoon simplicity remains, an omnipresent cliché (7).

2 USING STRUCTURE TO SOLVE PROBLEMS: A

My main concern as a writer is that I'm not communicating effectively. Story structure contributes to this problem. Mythologies contain gaps due to their monumental scale and simplicity, which leaves me to blunder through unmapped experiences in my daily life, an existential road with no map, until beaching myself on the next visible idea. At an intimate level, the problem is reversed –an unbroken river of feeling carries me along but I can never fully describe it.

When I used the above framework as a guide, I realised that the imagery of personal experience was more easily conveyed when it rode on the structures of myth (examples are *Star Wars* and anything by Shakespeare). Likewise, if the sensory flow borrowed some mythological signposts, it too would become more accessible (good poetry). In daily use, the various levels are often combined, a salad of structure. Everyone performs these tricks naturally, but like any skill, my understanding of its mechanics improved my ability to achieve the desired literary effects.

3 USING STRUCTURE TO SOLVE PROBLEMS: B

My novel-in-progress links physics (mythology) to erotic moments (intimacy), and at first this caused endless frustration. The problem was the jolt that occurred when I combined imageries from separate fields – it was impossible to casually shift from titillating prose to outlines of physics experiments. Once I understood that these images were from conflicting ends of the intimacy spectrum, however, the problem was fixed using symmetry. I analysed each subject according to story structure: fluid and concrete tendencies were identified in physics' descriptions of matter, and then in prose descriptions of desire and love. The result was a series of frameworks that had a similar layout, and could therefore be matched together.

With a common framework, imagery was compared across disciplines and their terms used interchangeably. Like spoken languages, one mythology sometimes articulates a concept that another does not grasp. When their terms are exchangeable, each language can be extended using the signifiers of the others. A fictional example from my novel was presented at the lecture.

4 MOVEMENT

After matching concrete images across disciplines, another problem arose. How to synthesise those that were fluid? After all, these experiences were hard to pin down no matter what field they appeared in. In order to capture them in text I needed a deeper understanding of the logic of fluidity. For this, I turned to the arts.

The arts specialise in the expression of ideas that are transient and personal. As a consequence, each of the arts understands the importance of sensory flow and has ways to refer to it. I generally use the term 'movement' (Rosen).

Recognising 'movement' is a matter of detecting a relationship between a variety of elements, such as the pattern of images that comprise a story or a metaphor. These elements create a constellation, a shape in which the spaces are as important as the luminaries. The points can be harnessed in text and the spaces are left to the imagination of the reader. Creating outlines might seem like a vague way to communicate, but the effect can be surprising – if done well, it will resonate with feeling. This is actually more accurate if your objective is to communicate feeling.

'Movement' can be found in most well-made artworks, with signifiers such as colour, sound or imagery punctuating it to make it visible. By mimicking this structure, intimacies can be (sometimes, not always) conveyed. A constellation of blurry factors is more structurally similar to the experience of sensation than a precise ladder of reasoning. When I discovered this, I could begin to capture unnameable things.

Mythological ideas can be simply stated, whereas intimacies must be insinuated (hence the difference between eroticism and pornography). Many writers know this instinctively, but now there are structural reasons for it too.

5 KATACHI

At the conference, I was most surprised by the concept of *katashi* due to its likeness to artistic 'movement'. In *katashi* I saw the same abstraction, the same recognition of signifier and flow, the same emphasis on the relationship between elements (Ogawa, p. 3). It was this similarity that prompted me to speak at the ISIS Congress in Sydney. I hoped it would provide further evidence of the potential symmetry between scientific and artistic forms.

References

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