



## *And Then Patterns*

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*When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity, and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative, where object and substance have disappeared.*

—Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*

During the earlier years, when he was living in small markets in the Midwest, he would imagine the scene:  
A man, a well-dressed man, perhaps himself at a

somewhat older age, standing alone in the living room of a sparsely decorated city apartment, staring vacantly out a window. And then, as if the camera had pulled back (it was more or less a still scene, yet he imagined views from different angles and distances, suggesting a motion-picture aesthetic and thus introducing the element of time through the backdoor), a longer view, of the window as one of several scattered specks of bright light in the shadowy façade of a tall building, which in a still longer view, is revealed as one of many similar, but not identical, structures composing an anonymous city landscape.

The image was, even in its vagueness, a comfort. Its unmistakable subtext of urban sophistication appealed to his unabashed ambition to become a famous novelist, to write the kind of books that would be talked about at exclusive parties, at which he half-ironically pictured himself drinking expensive liquors of unknown provenance and conversing wittily with the other witty

people. But there were deeper reasons as well, older reasons: the cityscape evoked dim memory-fragments from his childhood in St. Louis, or was it Chicago? riding with mom and dad to ballgames, 55 miles per hour down the interstate, watching the buildings grow taller, spying the landmarks, the Sears Tower or maybe the Arch, getting closer and closer to something unnamable, wide-open and strange—that vertiginous feeling of *downtown* (he still got a tingle every once in a while on the rare occasions he had cause to venture south of Canal Street). But strangely enough the greatest comfort came from the feeling of *being watched*, an inverse paranoia derived from that sense of an external presence implied by the image's very existence *as an image*, even if that presence were only some other version of himself. He imagined his life proceeding with the steadiness of film-time, one event following the next as one image follows the other, with regularity, 24 frames per second. An accumulation of movement, of action, of incident—the building blocks of a narrative.

But even from the beginning there was a sinister quality to the image, a feeling like that still shot from Griffith's *Intolerance* of the wealthy industrialist Jenkins working alone at his desk in a vast, empty office, medium-long view. A palpable absence at the center of the world. And there was an unavoidable moral component as well: the question of more-or-less willfully succumbing to a condition that he could not yet name, but would later conceptualize as a peculiarly contemporary, peculiarly Western form of alienation. The atomization of existence. Life as a tiny person with a tiny window and a tiny TV set and a tiny computer in a tiny apartment in a big city. But even this more-or-less conscious descent into disaffection would come to have its appealing aspects. A sense of being *with it*. With the times. With—what was that German word?—with the *zeitgeist*.

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Years. The long drive to the city. Lectures, notes,

exams. Cold cafeterias. Smoke-filled bars. Girls who knew a thing or two about literature. Drunken laughter. Road trips. Infrequent visits to place formerly known as home. A day job at a magazine. Smoke-free bars. Microwaveable dinners. Layoffs. Drinking during the day.

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fugue \ 'fyüg\ *n* (1597) **1:** a polyphonic musical composition in which one or two themes are repeated or imitated by successively entering voices and contrapuntally developed in a continuous interweaving of the voice parts. **2: a disturbed state of consciousness in which the one afflicted performs acts of which he appears to be conscious but of which on recovery he has no recollection.** (Merriam-Webster's, 11<sup>th</sup> ed.)

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Now a second scene, this one with audio. A man sits in a chair facing a computer screen in a cramped studio

apartment. Car horns, sirens, the hum of the central processing unit. Rhythmic sounds, marking time.

The man is him, as he appears now, in the present. He has, in fact, been sitting in the chair for an indeterminate period of time (ten minutes? an hour? five years? there was no way of knowing...), much as he might have done yesterday, the day before, and probably the day before that. In each instance, a period during which nothing whatsoever had *happened*, nothing, that is, but the production of raw, incomplete, unfinished *text*. A non-narratable event, if ever there were such a thing.

Narratable events: Throw out the coffee grounds. Take out the bottles. Shut off the computer. Check the burners. Lock the door. Do the dishes. Twenty-five pushups. A bowl of Wheaties. A cup of tea in the evening. Lock the computer. Shut off the burners. Check the door. Pace back and forth in the moonlight. Some days just get out of bed and lie on the floor for a while, no longer asleep

but not quite awake.

In other words, a life more reducible to a code, a cold mathematics. Mechanical rhythms that both mimic and deny the relentless progression of time.

He does not wish to minimize the role that drug use had played in shaping his new sense of time. But neither does he wish to exaggerate it. It is better conceived as part of the normal aging process, a creeping relativism, a sense of the years going by faster.

He looks at the screen, fixing his gaze on the words *off the map*. He longs for knowledge of the exact moment when he fell off the map, when he lost the narrative thread and went from being the observed to being, almost exclusively, the observer.

It is possible to be both at once. Or to go back and forth between the two roles.

He remembers when writing was fun and not some struggle for existence.

He is not cut out for the monastic life but he understands the impulse—what could be simpler? He ponders the words *the monastic life*. A paradox.

He understands the vitality of insisting on one's own imagery; he is not yet ready to make the narrative leap.

*The human perception of time is a relative phenomenon. We judge the passage of time in accordance with the amount of time we have previously experienced. For a child of four, a year represents one-quarter of his lifespan and time may seem to stretch out forever between one Christmas and the next. For a man of 40, that same year represents only 2.5% of his lifespan. And the Christmases come much faster.*

After making a couple spelling corrections and silently reading over the paragraph, he gets out of the chair,

stretches his arms above his head, and gazes blankly out the window. He lives on the ground floor, under a streetlight.