

# Communication Through Space: Interior Design and Narrative Environments

## Introduction

There is much power in the spaces in which these stories take place because they hold parts of the story tucked away, hidden details that can change our comprehension of events and alter the appreciation we have for place in the written narrative. We are currently stuck in this stagnant form of enjoying entertainment; it remains in the realm of the visual and we process what takes minimal thought – anything beyond that line is left unnoticed and unappreciated. When engaging with prose, we tend to flow through it and leave no time to slow down and be mindful of anything other than dialogue and action. Books hold a whole world within their pages, yet we remain inclined to only envision a fireplace, a wallpaper pattern or that one lone chair because that is what the author provides. Any means of character dialogue and interaction is simply not enough to build a narrative. We need a sense of place, a sense of interiority to ground the story. These spaces are a canvas to which the audience can apply themselves and engage with, it is not enough to just witness. One must inquire.

When we see these stories translated onto the screen, all the gaps within the text are filled and we are presented with the whole picture. We just as easily sit back, engage with the dialogue and interactions, and simply enjoy the show. But there remains a lack of inquisition, the eye may wander away from the camera's focus but there's no line of curiosity that follows. No questioning of why certain design choices were made for the sake of storytelling.

I intend to address the question, to what extent can a space alone tell the story? By identifying the present role of setting in the narrative model I can highlight how it is currently immensely reliant on characters and events to dictate its identity. My research evolves our perception of a story's space by analysing how it can shift into a new character and voice with its own story to tell.

## The Scenario at Hand

I begin with film and literary critic, Seymour Chatman. I found his work to be definitive in his opinion of the relationship between visual and written narratives and how he expertly ties these narratives together.<sup>1</sup>

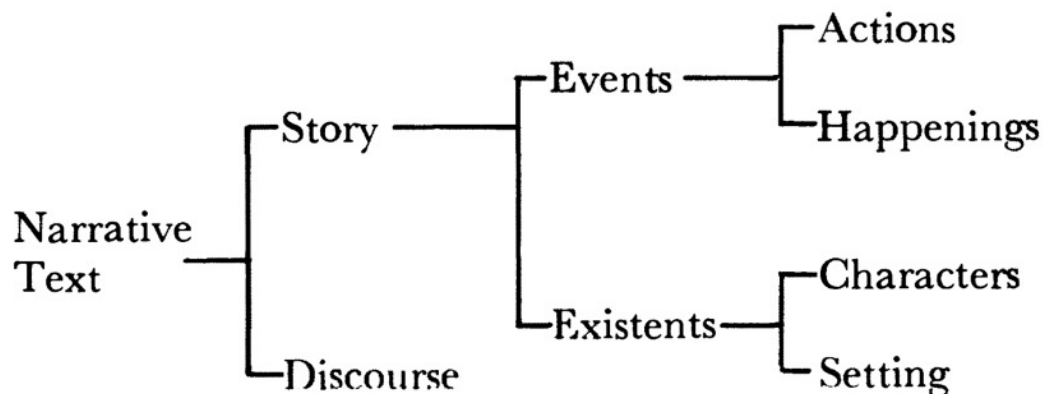


Fig. 1: Chatman's Model; depicting his breakdown of narrative text (1978)

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<sup>1</sup> S, Chatman. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978) pp. 96-107

Chatman's model (Fig. 1) perfectly represents his theory of the setting being an existent element of a narrative – that the place of action is a passive tool in a storytelling space, he defines the location in text as an idea rather than a tangible and visually perceived place (Chatman, 1978). Whilst I agree that the understanding of a written space is a consequence of the imagination, I find that giving settings as such the label of something conjured up through random thought which is dependent on the primary text's language takes away its storytelling ability. This interpretation makes the location in which a story takes place a stagnant, intangible and unpredictable thing – just a passing element of the story that has no meaning or significance. According to Chatman (Chatman, 1975, 53) the places in the verbal narrative to be a 'non-scenic...nonplace' which 'transpires in a realm of ideas rather than place.'<sup>2</sup> Ultimately the perceiver's eye is limited to what we read on the page, that we remain in this intangible and undefinable realm when engaging with written stories – we are not motivated to seek out any more than what we can read or see. He compares this with the cinematic narrative, where even if the points out of focus are simply a sea of black, one would assume it was nighttime or a fogged-in area – rarely a sense of nowhere (Chatman, 1975, 54).

There is something that lies in the physicality of space which makes it easier to justify its existence, we can see it so we can believe it. Chatman calls out this widespread need to come to a justified conclusion surrounding the setting when we are engaged in visual storytelling; to make certain design choices comprehensible, to make certain queries make sense (Chatman, 1975, 57). But this line of questioning and searching ends when we go back to the text and understandably so because the mode in which we perceive has changed. It now solely relies on methods which authors use to induce the mental image and the imagination of the reader.

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<sup>2</sup> S, Chatman. *New Literary History: Towards a Theory of Narrative* (1975) pp. 52-61

One could be presented with three paragraphs of an in-depth description of a setting, but still find it difficult to visualise it the same way we would if given a physical snapshot of that scene because the images we think up are fleeting – there is no way to immediately capture the picture we have mentally painted.

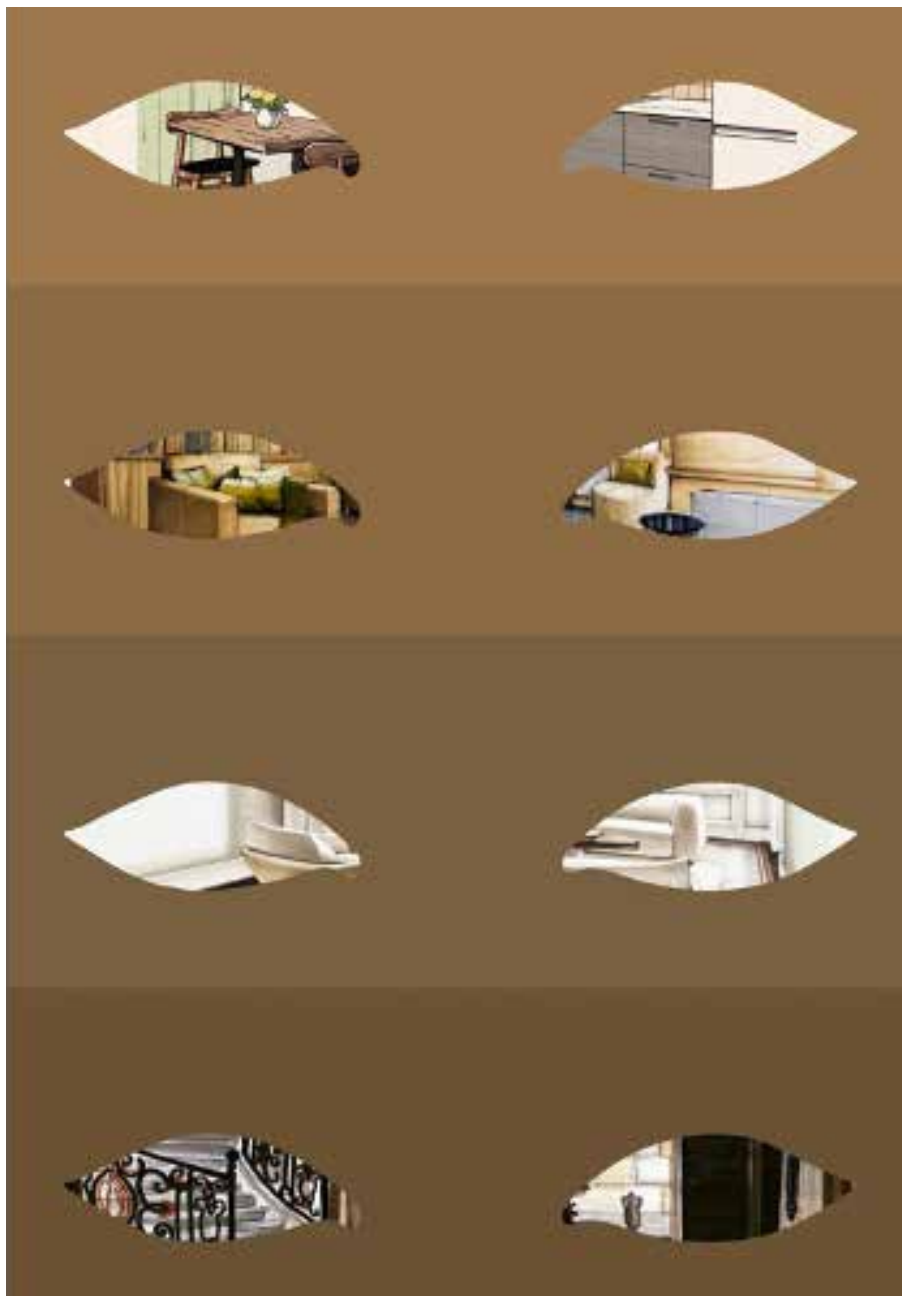
Cinema keeps the audience grounded and present with its narrative because it is all unfolding right before our eyes, we don't have to think too hard to soak up the tale. The means of having to sense a space through text can bar any possibilities of identifying its full storytelling ability because the boundaries of what that space can be are ever-changing and undefinable. The mode of narrative which the author adopts, the eyes that describe the place, can be pivotal in how we understand their fictional spaces because those eyes are our gateway into the story.

Franz Karl Stanzel, a literary theorist who specialised in English literature, projected a thesis on aperspectivism, defining how the lack of a realistic perspective i.e. identifying an object's compositional relation to another (to the left of, just behind etc) allows for an implicit commentary amongst the objects the author has brought the reader's attention to through the viewpoint, description and emotional reaction of the characters within the story.<sup>3</sup> Whilst Stanzel's theories do place precedence on the roles of characters when it comes to digesting written spaces, an idea I aim to overturn, I believe it is important to understand the nature in which we currently understand literary interiors to identify what can be changed (Stanzel, 1979).

Stanzel states a connection between space and its inhabitants, more specifically, the effects it has on them and how these effects can influence their description of the setting. The reader is forced to experience the space through the eyes of the narrator; the author's job is to put the reader in the shoes of the characters to build an immersive story but what if we removed that path of taking in the story?

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<sup>3</sup> F, Stanzel. *A Theory of Narrative* (1979) pp. 115-122



*Fig. 2: Isabella Ordóñez, 'Looking through the eyes of someone else' (2023)*

Instead of having to view this world through someone else's perspective, under the bias of their own opinions or emotions, we are putting ourselves in that room too. We begin to consider the impacts the interior has on us literally and with that, we can think about how the space makes us feel – what story can be pulled out from the surroundings we have put ourselves in without another's viewpoint muddling the vision. It plays into the whole idea that we don't just ignore a story's settings for the sake of it but it is more that we are distracted by all human involvement and interaction because we are led to believe that is where the story lies: in the dialogue, the facial expressions, a solemn handshake. But a narrative in itself is so much more than simple speech and we'll never gain that full story if we ignore its sense of place. So, whilst Stanzel's thesis begins in the right way of hearing the story space can tell, it fails to reach its full potential when it lacks consideration for the reader's thought process and limits the traction a place has in the story. We must begin to think above and beyond what is right in front of us.

## Design as a Symbolic Anthology

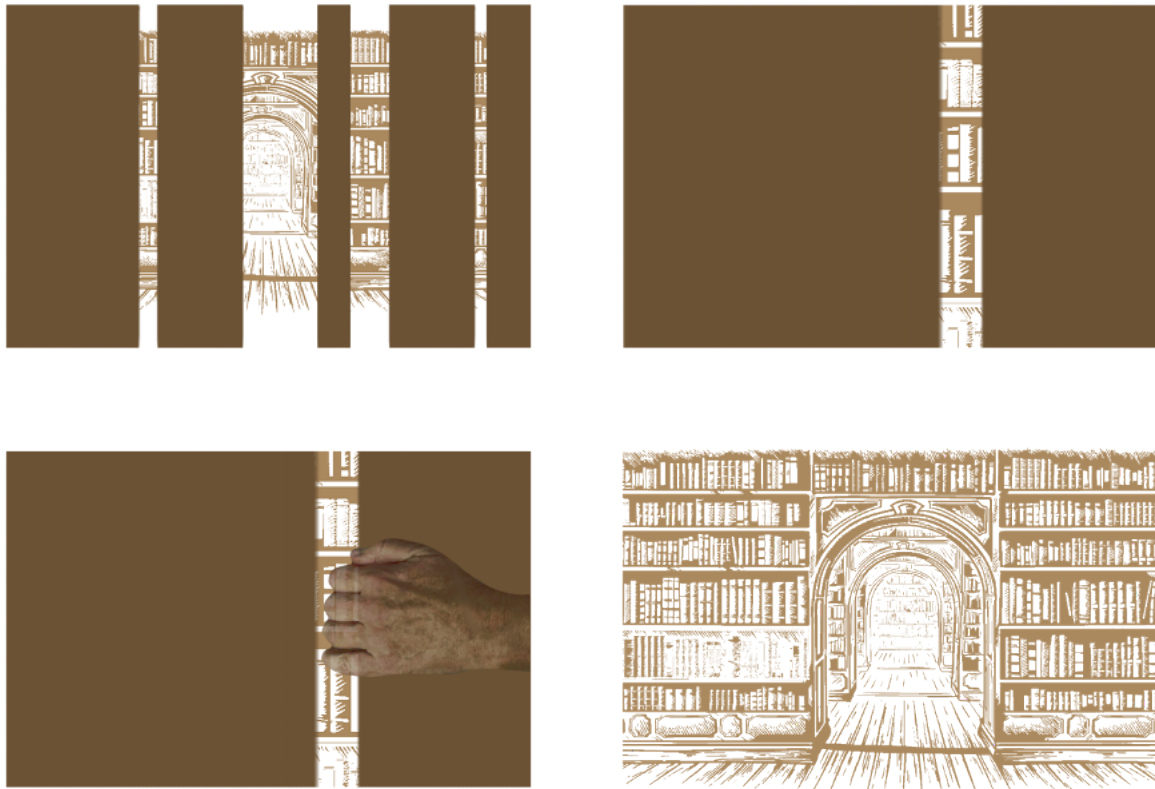


Fig. 3: Isabella Ordonez, 'Pulling back the curtain' (2023)

I felt it necessary to investigate how exactly we can draw elements of the story from the places they're set in, in hopes of formulating a type of 'end goal' within my argument. We cannot simply look at an interior and hear everything it is trying to say in one glance, one must combine the wider context of the story with our inclinations and understanding of the symbolic qualities of objects and design to reap the benefits of this new perspective towards storytelling. I turn to David Lodge's (author, critic and professor in literature) theory of metonymy and apply this to the design of verbal and visual space to break down the process in which we can retrieve a new narrative from its interiority.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> D, Lodge. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature*. (1977) pp. 116-123





Fig. 4: Isabella Ordóñez, 'My take on metonymy' (2023)

Lodge establishes that the setting of a scene is an anthology of metaphors, symbols and wider contexts through the material, textural, and compositional nature of the space being described or shown (Lodge, 1977, 117). These hidden qualities available amongst the design elements draw our focus to the beginnings of all the stories tucked within the whole scene. When pulled apart, we can learn something new about the characters who inhabit the space. We can learn about their past and their relationships. These aforementioned hidden qualities also allow us to detect subtle foreshadowing of the future plot. From Lodge's interpretation, it is suggested that the reader's role shifts away from a spectator to an investigator, it is now one's responsibility to read between the lines of the description we've been proposed and turn it into a definable place for themselves.

Applying the idea of metonymy to narrative space coincidentally expands on Chatman's earlier "transpires in a realm of ideas" (Chatman, 1975, 54) because by taking these imagined ideas and transforming them into their theories and stories finally gives precedence to the setting and the setting alone; we've now established a noteworthy sense of meaning there. We have used our own experiences and memories to build the world which hosts the story – it is now no longer a fleeting image; it is an essence of who we are as audience members.

## Design as a Symbolic Anthology

To further my analysis of interiors acting as an anthology of metaphors and symbols, I'm going to refer to Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), a two-act tragedy play that follows the Loman family, headed by Willy Loman, whose obsession with achieving the American Dream coupled with his slow slip into senility ends in disaster.

For the sake of argument, I have included both the original scene header and two visual interpretations for the stage (Fig. 5 and 6) so we can better visualise how the text encourages a wider and more symbolic representation of the story.

“Before us is the Salesman’s house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality.

The kitchen at centre seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen. At the back of the kitchen there is a draped entrance, which leads to the living room. To the right of the kitchen, on a level raised two feet, is a bedroom furnished only with a brass bedstead and a straight chair. On a shelf over the bed a silver athletic trophy stands. A window opens onto the apartment house at the side.

The entire setting is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent. The roof-line of the house is one-dimensional; under and over it we see the apartment buildings. Before the house lies an apron, curving beyond the forestage into the orchestra, this forward area serves as the backyard as well as the locale of all Willy’s imaginings and of his city scenes. Whenever the action is in the present, the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its door on the left. But in the scenes of these past boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping “through” a wall onto the forestage.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A, Miller. *Death of a Salesman*. (1949) pp. 1-2



*Fig. 5: Roslyn Packer Theatre, Sydney. David Fleischer. (2021)*



*Fig. 6: Syracuse Stage, Indiana. Erhard Rom. (2007)*

So, let's begin to break down Miller's original writings in hand with the shown visual interpretations and identify the narratives surrounding the design elements of the Loman home – following Lodge's metonymy theory. Fig. 5 can be taken as a symbol of a dire financial situation, a barren and neglected space which visually shows a lack of care – this can also be reflected in the inhabitant's family dynamic. We can extend this point by mentioning a failure to nurture, the home and its relationships, or a painful reminder of the protagonist's failure to become a successful businessman. The architecture of the design itself upscales the interior, making doors and windows larger to create a rather overwhelming and surreal composition. The inflation of the Loman's home links to a trait in the protagonist – a tendency to exaggerate and dramatize the truth in order to paint himself in a positive light. Furthermore, the odd scale of the space connects to a series of flashbacks throughout the story, all projected from the protagonist's unstable and unreliable mind. Us as the audience are aware of Willy's ability to deceive and manipulate so we can regard these flashbacks as points of misalignment with the true story. All of the above can be taken at face value, this is all in line with my inclinations and understanding of the narrative.

My point is that by approaching a space inspired by the notion of metonymy one can direct that interior's narrative in any way they deem fit, and it won't be wrong. What's powerful about Lodge's theory is that there is no risk of being incorrect or being any less influential in terms of storytelling because it all comes down to personal interpretation. This is proven by the fact that whilst the designers of fig. 5 and 6 are working with the same text, they have managed to create two completely different scenes – neither of which is the best or most accurate to the original scene header. It begins to introduce a new outlook in which we do not have to simply follow the story sequence, we can inquire and discover when we give more than a moment's thought.

The Death of a Salesman case study shows what a single snapshot can generate in terms of connections from space to wider meaning. Generating a line of inquisition from interior to theme to plot point to emotion to the reader influences how once perceives the story in which the story takes place.

## **Conclusion**

Narrative studies have exhausted the theory that interiors within the fictional world rely on the focus of character and event alone, with considerable neglect of the role of the audience member – the one engaging with the story. I would argue that such views made not only literature but also cinema feel rigid and limiting in the way they spatially narrate. By discovering a new perspective, inspired by metonymy, we can unlock a series of wonderment and intrigue within these stories by drawing a connection from ourselves to the places in which they are set.

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