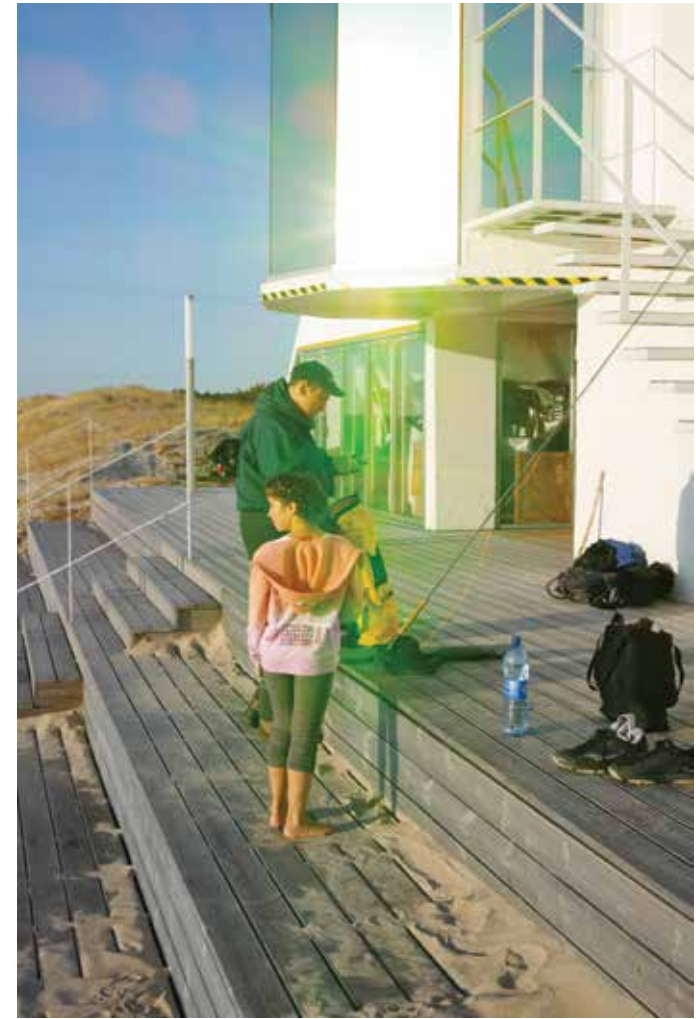




Denim Sky
Rosalind Nashashibi

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Interverification
By Miljohn Ruperto

Let us pull on the strands of Rosalind Nashashibi's film, *Denim Sky* (2018–2022), to reveal a cosmology the artist has carefully spun. We can start from Nashashibi's reference materials,—the *I Ching* (c. 1000 b.c.e) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Shobies' Story* (1990)—which are woven into the film's robust internal structure. Using synchronicity to allow for the reception of emergent aesthetics, we will follow the thread which leads Nashashibi to construct types of acausal relational possibilities: alternatives to an artist's or film director's willful imposition upon the other.

Part I and Part II. Interverification

A chain of command is easy to describe; a network of response isn't. To those who live by mutual empowerment, "thick" description, complex and open-ended, is normal and comprehensible, but to those whose only model is hierarchic control, such description seems a muddle, a mess, along with what it describes. Who's in charge here?

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Shobies' Story*, 1990

For many artists, anxiety arises from their relationship to representation. The issue of instrumentalization of the other through representation pushes the artist to constantly re-evaluate their relation to the subject represented. Since representation opens up negative complications regarding responsibility around power dynamics, artists are compelled to invent new possible relational scenarios. It seems difficult to find a convincing configuration where the artist does not impose their aesthetics upon the subject. After all, the represented will always be (tautologically) represented by the artist in an artwork.

Rosalind Nashashibi's *Denim Sky* offers a possible configuration to address this issue. Nashashibi's film reconfigures the dynamics in the operation of representation from within the film, by centering around Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Shobies' Story*, and from without, by employing divination as the film's organizing logic.

Let us start with from without. Nashashibi divides the film into three parts, the titles of which come from the *I Ching*. The titles of the three film parts are generated from a cleromantic source, that is, the names and structures of the parts are formed directly from a contingent event: the flipping of three coins. This leaves the aesthetic logic of the film to chance (the outside), making the artist a subject of imposition too, the same as the subjects of the film. The resulting divination, a material configuration, imposes its organizing principle, its aesthetics, upon both the artist and the subjects, and so all must fit into that aesthetic scheme. The artist and the subjects conform to this formal comportment, shifting the relation of the whole representational dynamic. The aesthetic imposition does not need to be strong; in this case it is a grouping of people. The artist and the subjects now share the same relation to the aesthetic imposition: they are all imposed upon from the outside. This creates a shared intimacy.

Nashashibi cultivates this intimacy by applying organizational logic from Le Guin's *The Shobies' Stories*. In the story, a crew of travelers, the Shobies, go on an experimental interstellar journey resulting in the fracturing of their shared reality into radically individuated realities. The travelers cohere again, both individually and collectively, by sharing their accounts of their experiences with each other. Le Guin instantiates the word "interverify" to describe this operation. In Part I of the film, Nashashibi herself tells the Shobies' story and loosely enacts the story in Part II with her family and friends. *Denim Sky's* project of offering new possible configurations of a family unit mirrors Le Guin's collective, the Shobies, formed from a volunteering collection of motley characters whose relations resist conventions. More importantly, the conceit of the Le Guin's story, that only through the collective operation of sharing stories can one locate themselves subjectively and objectively (also spatially and temporally), is echoed in Nashashibi's version of interverification: the artist presents multiple accounts and stories by her "crew" to create a grouping, instantiating an intimate unit. The sharing of stories becomes the organizing principle for this grouping. Collectively sharing stories has two effects: in sharing, the group coheres and in storytelling, the subject coheres. An egalitarian community, for Nashashibi, is constituted from adding up the subjects' respective good faith in sharing and their exercise of agency. The sharers represent themselves, interverified.

In this intimacy achieved through shared storytelling, there is a rearrangement of the representational dynamic from within. Nashashibi offers self-representation within a shared egalitarian space as a model to address the problem of the artist representing the subject or the artist imposing their aesthetics upon the subject. In Nashashibi’s formulation, the artist and the subjects contribute to the creation of the aesthetics. There is the possibility, then, of no aesthetic imposition (from without), since in their grouping there is also an agreement (to sharing stories), which generates a loose aesthetic scheme. The artist and her crew come together like the Shobies: non-hierarchical. Since there is no imposition, there is also no comportment. The subject preserves their agency and relates to the artist and others only through an agreed sharing. The relational dynamics become defined through the contribution of each participant.

Nashashibi’s strategy of employing divination and using Le Guin’s model creates an inventive address to the problems of representation from both outside going in and inside going out. First Nashashibi reorders the dynamic of the artist imposing upon the subjects, to outside forces (the world) imposing upon both the subjects and the artist. In using divination, this imposition becomes decoupled from an agent. Since no one benefits from the imposition, the imposition becomes an objective imposition, an imposition from the outside: either from the world or nature. Secondly, Nashashibi allocates the reason for the grouping to its own members’ agency; their decision to share stories instantiates the grouping, forming community. This instantiated grouping is non-hierarchical, its members volunteer to present their own stories and represent themselves. This good faith agreement becomes the foundation of a possible egalitarian answer to the problem of instrumentalization in representation.¹

Part III. Apopenia

All these woolen strips, these vain, winged tassels, were nerves of the *nexus rerum*, the connection of everything with everything else, which alone gives meaning to life. We live every moment of our lives swathed in those ties, white because white is the color the Olympians like, or red because blood ties us to death, or purple, yellow, and green. But we can’t always see them, indeed we mustn’t, because then we would be paralyzed, trapped. We feel them blowing about us the minute something happens to dispel our apathy, and we become aware of being carried along on a stream that flows toward something unknown. And just sometimes, but very rarely, those ties twist and turn and weave around us, until one loose end becomes knotted to another. Then, very softly, they encompass us, they form a circle, which is the crown, perfection.

–Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, 1988

Part III of Nashashibi’s *Denim Sky* lays out the aftermath of the interverification operation. The section starts two years later. The relations from the previous parts, which were in a state of suspension, allowing, or perhaps hoping for the potential of new forms of communal configuration, have now “settled” into something more socially coherent—Nashashibi’s immediate family has transformed into a more traditional configuration, for example. The potentiality for a radical restructuring (emergent aesthetics) has now dissipated. There is a deep sense of mourning towards this loss of potentiality that pervades this last section. This lost potentiality slips from the present to be inevitably bound to subjective memory and finally to a collective history. Nashashibi presents this as a natural process: radical potentiality cannot be perpetually sustained—it must meet its eventual temporal horizon. It is actualized/realized or not.

All is not lost, however. In the closing of this temporal window, the structure that brings about potentiality itself is also revealed. Nashashibi introduces remembering (an echo of the Shobies’ recounting) and reuses divination as a way to show that the hidden structure is actually the tension between synchronicity and its sister, coincidence. The two create an axis in the production of aesthetic potentiality. On one end, synchronicity reveals expanding possibilities: it is an aesthetic revelation. On the other end, coincidence is a subjective assertion, imposing its aesthetics upon events. Coincidence is an aesthetic imposition.

Carl Jung first used “synchronicity” publicly in his memorial address to the German translator of the *I Ching*, Richard Willhelm in 1930. Later, Jung used “an acausal connecting principle” as the subordinate title to his book *Synchronicity* (1960). Synchronicity is a relational relation: synchronicity links two or more things by ascribing a relation and then traces this relation through time. This ascription seems to need a subject ascribing, but its importance is relative. The ascription can be merely happenstance. In other words, the importance of the ascription is pegged to the condition of the “objective” relation of things: the range in between “everything being related” to “nothing being related.” If everything is related, then the ascription, and therefore a need for a subject ascribing, is reduced to nil because the ascription is just a description (no willful imposition) since everything has a pre-established relation. Two things being related, then, is not notable. If everything is not related, however, then the ascription comes into its most stronger (willful) version and synchronicity is taken over by coincidence. The subject instantiating synchronicity requires weak ascription.

Since synchronicity is acausal, the relation is always simultaneous; two or more things that are synchronous cannot come before or after one another, they need to be in the same presentness of unfolding time. The measure of synchronicity (how synchronous things are) becomes an operation of comparing likeness/affinity over time. The measure happens in the temporal register. A connective relation between all things must already exist; this connective relation, this hidden substrate, is a synchronic relation.

Coincidence is a subjective application or projection which frames two disparate events into meaningful relation; a subject’s limited imagination frames coincidence. The potential for coincidence is always delimited by the imagination of the individuated imposing subject. It is a willful aesthetic imposition, an assertion of subjectivity. Coincidence is the determinism of subjectivity. Coincidence, then, is not quite acausal because it is a strong imposition which is always “caused” by the subject imposing. It is an instantiation of relation and meaning at once. We can define an event as synchronous or coincidental through the relative strength of imposition, which directly corresponds to the power of instrumentalization: synchronicity (passive subject open to revelation) on one side and coincidence (willful subject imposing) on the other. These are the two poles in the

spectrum of willful imposition. Synchronicity compels the subject to seek meaning outside itself, while coincidence the subject imposes meaning. The operations of divination and remembering can be measured through this axis: in between revelation or imposition.

Synchronic divining is true divining. True divining requires the diviner to radically open themselves up to a logic beyond themselves in order to be receptive to an emergent aesthetic. The emergent aesthetic reveals itself to the diviner. And the diviner must expand and re-orient their world view in order for the emergent aesthetic to make sense. When divining is revelatory, it produces something called a mystery. A mystery is an aesthetic logic revealed, but its source may remain unknown. The diviner is transformed encountering a glimpse of this ungraspable logic: mystery. Their new self becomes the conduit for the divine. The potentiality through synchronic divining is not bound by the limits of the subject, because the subject is open to change. On the other hand, in coincidental divining, the diviner simply imposes their limited understanding upon the signs: The diviner becomes an impoverished (limited) translator of the divine.

When remembering is revelatory, it is called fate. When the logic that sequentially and meaningfully emerges through one’s memories is perceived but remains beyond the subject’s comprehension, it is called fate. With the idea of fate, logic is offered up to divine intervention. Fate fixes meaning outside of Oedipus’ limited awareness, for example. Coincidental remembering is the commonplace definition of remembering; the subject threads meaning through their memories. The subject decides the meaning of their past. Nashashibi’s film locates itself in the realm of synchronicity, allowing divining and remembering to be revelatory, revealing both mystery and fate.

Synchronicity requires temporality. In divination, potentiality from synchronicity reveals itself in the future through mystery. In remembering, potentiality from synchronicity reveals itself in the present through fate.

The title of Part III is, “The wind blows over the lake and stirs the surface of the water. Thus visible effects of the invisible show themselves.” Let us tug on a thread and reveal the structure of the invisible composition of these synchronicities. Roberto Calasso describes the ancient Greek concept of multiple relational

¹ Nashashibi’s overall formulation also clears up her use of film as a medium. It becomes of prime importance that the relation between artist/subject/mediation is precisely articulated. With film, the relations are explicit (more so than the relational murkiness of digital video). The process of filming (from production processes, on-set hierarchies, cinematic conventions etc.) crystallizes into the tool “filmmaking” and the triangulated structure is rendered in vivid clarity—depicting the process of aesthetic mediation intelligibly. Each node assumes full integrity and so dynamics between them are clear. The operation of film as an entangling apparatus becomes easier to follow and map out. Nashashibi’s casualness of using a final video output shows that it is the clarity of film’s dynamics that is important, not necessarily the inherent “film-ness” of the medium or nostalgia for film itself. Translation to digital video severs any type of nostalgic adherence to filmic materiality and power dynamics. Digital video becomes a tool for transmission only and escapes the problems of mediation (a convenient functional output).

substrates which constituted their reality. Calasso's text, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, proposes a synchronized, multi-register reality, where each register is instantiated from a type of aesthetic relation. The types could be infinite. Since Calasso presumes a connective substrate a priori, radical possibility in divination or remembering would always require a radical openness, the opposite of willful imposition. Acausality would be the separation between registers, thereby any attempt to describe a connection between registers would always traverse through the acausal, rendering the connection acausal. Instead of registers, we can also imagine the multiple registers as worlds flowing in time, bracketed by acausality, yet sharing the same space. As one world merges with another, the shape of the shared merger produces what we call through divination, mystery, or through remembering, fate: this is the appearance of synchronicity in the material register. The further away these flows travel to merge with one another, the more intense the potentiality becomes. Coincidence, on the other hand, pulls from the subjective register into the material register. Since coincidence, too, traverses registers, the relation can be considered acausal before the subject's imposition.

In the film, artist Elena Narbutaitė rhymes with Calasso's cosmology when she describes multiple connections while looking at Juan de Zurbarán's *Still Life with Lemons in a Wicker Basket* (c.1643–49) at The National Gallery in London. As she stands in front of the painting, Narbutaitė recounts impressions and memories, spinning a web of multiple relations the painting reveals to her. As she connects with the artwork, we are reminded that instantiating a relation also creates a weird effect: relation creates the possibility of the transference of qualities. The painted lemons trigger Narbutaitė's memory of biting into an apple that had shared a plate with a quince for several days and finding that its taste and fragrance had become indistinguishable from the quince. Nashashibi reminds us that ultimately, these infinite possible relations arise from and are tied to material things in the world. It is in this materiality which all connections and all potentialities rely upon. Divination must still synchronize or coincide with material configurations.

But what is all the effort for? What does this cosmological invention reveal? What happens when encounters with mystery and fate reveal hidden potentialities? Late in the film, Nashashibi recounts a childhood memory: while running through water

at the shore, a fish jumped through her legs. This recounting synthesizes remembering and divining, fusing them together in synchronic harmony. In this scene Nashashibi finally gives a name (through Narbutaitė's exclamation) to the realization of mystery and fate: miracle. Mystery merely suggests an aesthetic logic outside the material register. The miracle instead reveals to the subject the existence of an outside register. This register outside operates on its own independent aesthetic logic and is separated from other registers by acausality. The material register is revealed synchronous with this source of mystery: a register of the divine. In mystery, the diviner transforms; in miracle, the material register transforms.

The film ends with Nashashibi beating a drum on a street, ending the film while announcing the final image: her son Pietro at the end of a rocky pier, twirling a closed umbrella like a spear. From this shore, perhaps Pietro, too, awaits the revelation of a miracle.

