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For a Social Narrative

For more than twenty years, I have wrestled in my work with one question: where do form and social use come face to face in absolute equality? Why should one stand above the other?

I am nearly certain of the singular moment this challenge arrived: reading the introduction to a collection of poetry by Vladimir Mayakovsky. The writer argued that Mayakovsky had squandered his talents urging people to boil their water instead of writing more love poems.

How did this aesthetic hierarchy arise? Where public health is a waste of one's talents and neurotic self pre-occupation is automatically a higher art? Whatever else you call it, this is not a social outlook: it is an anti-social aesthetic value system. One sees this prejudice everywhere: in canons, formal recognition, and intellectual celebration. Indeed it is the formal framework greeting our introduction to the work of a radically socially conscious poet.

This is interconnected with the political quandary we presently find ourselves in. A culture with anti-social aesthetic hierarchies has produced an acutely anti-social media eco-system. It has mobilized violence. Dissonance has been amplified. Collaboration on common need has been chopped at the knees.

One thing is certain: like never before, minute to minute, second to second, media is shaping the world. Must we seriously accept the presumption that we are forced to look inward? That, as a conscious people, we cannot shape it for the better? Is media somehow pre-designed to fracture, to distort, to pollute, to darken?

Of course it isn't. That which we make is precisely that which we make of it.

Take nuclear weapons, as a blunt but clear example. They are a fact. They exist. Now, we can either control them or wield them to destroy. These are radically different outcomes.

This is a call for the urgent creation of social narrative. An ambitious stab at the desperate reply, designed to stitch people together rather than rip them apart. A place where borders slowly disappear like smoke from an extinguished fire.

A social narrative unifies a weakened and dispirited people - it solves urgent problems - it answers desperate cries otherwise being ignored. Where one stood alone, in the social narrative two stand together.

Two also stand together in the form of strategy and tactics.

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Advances in technology have quickened the heartbeat of events. And so any social narrative worth its salt will be able to operate on a dime. It will respond to events. It will reach across shapes and tribunes. It will exist in the physical body, the analogue object, the human respiration and cry, but also in the virtual, the digital, the instant, the global, the stream, the torrent, and the GIF. These are the tactical concerns.

Take, for example, the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Puerto Rico. In the hypothetical response to a material catastrophe, the Social Narrative Workshop would mobilize quickly to develop and implement a rapid response designed not to “raise awareness” but to effect direct material change. We would strive to find a way to combine creativity, technology, and engineering— to return power and water to the people. We would force the hand of responsible power or simply circumvent it altogether.

Other scenarios might include famine, or cholera; the return of the black plague; government repression; the outbreak of war. These are tactical problems that require tactical solutions.

But there are strategic needs as well. These start with an enduring problem instead of an urgent crisis. These require duration. These require extended thought. These culminate in something altogether different. In place of the placard, the monument. Monuments, like weapons, are also what you make of them.

The closest analogy to these strategic undertakings would have been the filmmaking division of Kanun - the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults – established by Abbas Kiarostami in Iran in 1969. Under his direction, the institute produced a body of seminal social narrative films – both short and feature – and altered the course of Iranian and World Cinema.

But whereas Kanun explicitly served children’s welfare, the social narrative would serve human welfare more generally. What sort of enduring problems might the strategic undertakings confront? The persistence of racism. The permanence of war. These are grand human problems. They deserve grand human engagement.

This isn’t an idealized narrative - the argument has to be convincing. Paradoxically, peace must always be fought for.

The Social Narrative Workshop - Combing Artists, Storytellers, Designers, Scientists, The Social Sciences, Engineers, Programmers.

Using social narrative to solve urgent and enduring problems.