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Emergence and Posthuman Narrative

All narrative is a function of architecture, and architecture is always a reflection of its time, especially the architecture of information. The humanist novel, with its concern for individual autonomy, authenticity, and mimetic representation through visual detail, is often designed to depict the world at the human scale: the scale of the every-day world where Newtonian physics work, as well as natural language, and common metaphor. It is the human scale of face-to-face interaction. But at a time when people increasingly understand the world at larger scales, a time when even the concept of the human is being eclipsed by a posthuman awareness, the optical metaphor of the human scale may be less relevant to an architecture of the novel than one that relies upon a larger scale: an architecture which privileges emergence over cause and effect, or pattern over individual viewpoint. By seeing emergence as an organizing principle in the architecture of novels, a mode of narration opens up in both their creation and criticism that complements the contemporary, posthuman ground of being as well as the architecture of the humanist novel once fit the humanist conception of “mankind” and became the “natural” way to write. An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a keynote address to the Centre de Recherches en Littérature Américaine, Université Paris Sorbonne.

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