ANTI-NARRATIVE: GAMES, BLOGS & OTHER NON-LINEAR FORMS

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ABSTRACT

'Narrative cannot survive the Moment of Information', so said the cultural critic Walter Benjamin, talking of film in its early days. Today the same claims are being made, but this time in relation to the internet, mobile phones and other information and communication devices.

Looking at blogs, simple games, and online memory and history sites, this workshop explored the proposition that new media productions operate through the formal logics of the database or through the rules of the game, rather than primarily through the 'laws' of narrative, and that as a consequence such productions may be said to challenge or bypass 'traditional' narrative structures – at least if these are understood as involving linearity, a sense of an ending, and a closed web. The question then, is how do we read, consume, use, enjoy, learn from, or with, such structures?

ANTI-NARRATIVE?

> *'The decomposition of narrative films, once subversive, is now normal.'*

(Burgin, 2004: 8)

'Narrative cannot survive the moment of information'. Writing The Storyteller, from which this quote comes, in the early years of mass communications, the cultural critic Walter Benjamin was pessimistic about the future of narrative (Benjamin, 1992). He believed that the advent of a form of life based on news and information, increasingly located in a perpetually renewed present, would leave no space for the temporal complexity of narrative's 'once upon a time'.

In recent years Benjamin's sense that narrative and information do not mix has been revived, this time in relation to contemporary digital information networks, understood to present a series of challenges to narrative, as a form, as a lived practice, and as a powerful cultural logic.

In this article, which is based on a workshop on anti-narrative for CP3, I want to look at some of these challenges, and to suggest that narrative is more resilient and more innovative, more capable of mutation, than those who fear its demise allow. Not least because there are many ways to understand 'what narrative is' and 'what its limits are'. With this intention in mind, I set out to avoid framing the relationship between narrative and information in

oppositional terms (narrative or information, database logic or narrative logic), instead I will suggest that the particular form of mutation narrative is now undergoing involves an ongoing engagement with information. Narrative may be de-composing in response to information, but it may also be re-combinant, combining with information technologies, information logics, information systems, in new ways, to make new kinds of stories.

Students taking this workshop explored these questions partly through consideration of developments in narrative theory, and partly through an exercise designed to explore the possibilities for the production of a database narrative (described on page 25).

'LIKE LIFE ITSELF'

Those who challenge narrative take on a formidable opponent. Narrative's heart is in fiction, but it is also the organising principle in many other forms, fictional and non-fictional, across many media. Narrative is also something that is lived. We often understand our lives in terms of our life story, something that is biographical, narrated back to us. This narration both makes us what we are, and makes us social beings. Narrative has often been understood as something shared in another way too. Narrative has been understood as trans-cultural, trans-historical, immune to the vicissitudes of social change, cultural change, technological change, existing across the ages, emerging in all cultures. Famously, the theorist Roland Barthes declared that the numberless narratives of the world are simply 'there, like life itself' (Barthes, 1997).

Influential structuralist and formalist accounts of narrative developed in the final decades of the twentieth century when a series of narratologists set out to expose the universal rules of these numberless tales, to find the common structures they believed underpinned all stories, from Russian fairy tales to narratives of scientific progress, to the science fiction of their time. These theorists largely operated either via various forms of the analysis of plot or through a focus on character or actant as the bearer of the plot (see Greimas, 1996).

The rules for narrative the structuralists explored were not confined to literature, but were quickly explored in relation to different forms, and in relation to different media platforms. In fact structuralist theory, understanding narrative as a closed, complete, abstract architecture, actually demanded a particular form of indifference to the medium across which narrative travelled. This might be best understood if we look at narrative theorists' work with structural accounts of narrative, deployed in a series of explorations of the cinematic apparatus as a narrative machine, in the 1970s and 1980s, since here accounts of cinema (rather than film) such as that offered by Christian Metz explicitly connect the story unfolding on the screen with the expectation of the tale already held by the spectator (see Metz, 1974).

THE FADING OF NARRATIVE

Today narrative's centrality does not seem quite as 'natural' as it used to. Often sidelined, its relevance as a form capable of grasping contemporary experience is questioned. Undoubtedly the rise of cybernetic technologies and mass communications media is bound up with this transformation which, as the Benjamin quote opening this piece might suggest, can, in its beginnings at least, be traced back at least as far as the 1950s. Perhaps more usefully in these contexts however, the contemporary challenge to narrative can be connected to that more general shift that goes under the name of the post modern, given voice in the mid 1980s in Frederic Jameson's seminal writings on the cultural logic of what he describes as late capitalism, avowedly a form of social organisation influenced by information.

In The Cultural Logic, Jameson argued that the certainties of modernity have been overtaken, all that is now possible is the schizophrenic encounter with a world at once too large to contain or encompass and too close to see in the round. In these conditions (elsewhere described in terms of dirty realism and explored through consideration of Ridley Scott's Blade Runner) interpretation of all kinds is threatened and narrative falters. Jameson's response to this situation was to call for new forms of cognitive mapping.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY `NARRATIVE DOUBTS'

What are we to make of these arguments? Today new kinds of cultural productions – games, network sites, mobile interactions, new forms of cinema, interactive television – which do not obviously work with narrative, as it traditionally has been defined, and that sometimes seem to actively work against it, are increasingly visible. For example, in the place of the Classical Hollywood narrative film with its linear narrative is the special effects film, with its insistence on sensation and its de-prioritisation of narrative complexity and cohesion. A different challenge to narrative is to be found in new forms of documentary film that increasingly rely on non-linear techniques (Gus Van Sant's Elephant is an example here). Finally, there is the rise of the anti-narrative film. This takes pleasure in straining or deconstructing the traditional structures of narrative film, rethinking narrative space (for instance Time

Code) or narrative temporally (Run Lola Run, Elephant) or both. As Victor Burgin points out, films involving narrative decompositions of this kind are quite normal these days (Burgin, 2004: 8).

Thus, in the place of traditional narrative, or alongside it, a series of different logics and forms have appeared, notably the interrogatory form of the database and the action-based form of the interactive platform, the former offering new prospects for perpetual re-combination, or re-assembly, and the latter drawing the spectator/user into the formal economy of the production in a new way.

These appear to inform, in some cases to organise, contemporary productions. More, these new formations are migrating from the specific platforms for which they were designed, transforming older media forms, (cinema often appears to be closer to gaming than it used to be), and diffusing into the cultural arena in general; which is to say they are diffusing into everyday life.

If these forms present a challenge to the supremacy of narrative then this challenge is mounted not only in relation to literary form. They also lay claim to being forms that resonate with new forms of life itself. Today, after all, our everyday lives increasingly stretch across networks, we weave in and out of different sites, real and virtual, our work is full of halts, abrupt changes of direction, re-thinks, and discontinuity. Partly for these reasons, or because of these formations, the argument that narrative is waning seems to make some sense. Certainly, film theorist Lev Manovich's influential suggestion that today we live in an age dominated not by narrative but by the database and its operator, the algorithm, has much contemporary purchase (Manovich, 2002).

However, before succumbing to this idea, or indeed, in order not to succumb to it, I want to question what is meant by narrative in these accounts? I want to ask what kind of narrative has expired here?

If the argument is that closed, linear, narrative does not run on non-linear systems, then clearly this is hard to dispute (although it can be argued that linearity becomes simply one possible mode of a more complex non-linear system). On the other hand this is simply to state than one particular understanding of narrative, developed at a particular historical conjuncture in relation to particular media technologies, does not fit a new media technology particularly well.

The question of linearity is exemplary here since many of the debates around narrative and anti-narrative operate with a highly constrained – and actually historically specific - sense of narrative form, essentially operating with structural accounts of narratology founded on the fierce exclusions and geometric precision of structuralism, with its refusal to countenance anything that might exceed a closed text. My point is very simple. Other forms of narrative might fit better.

In particular, a more expansive view of narrative, one less indifferent both to the reader and to the role of material production within narrative, might offer new perspectives on narrative's future. The work of Paul Ricoeur, a narrative theorist and philosopher of time might be invoked here. Ricoeur sees narrative understood as a form of temporal reconciliation, a way of ordering human experience in time, as a form of extensive emplotment. The narrative arc as he describes it is a traversal or crossing with three distinct moments, which together constitute the tale. The first moment is pre-figuration or the story yet to be told, the second is configuration, or the work of poesis, and the third is re-figuration, or the re-opening of the tale into the horizon of the reader, when it is finally known to its fullest extent.

What kind of tales might be made in this way? One answer to this is new ones. If this extensive definition of narrative is adopted, many contemporary digital productions currently considered to have gone beyond narrative (or indeed to have sunk beneath it) might be brought back within its folds. Indeed, interactivity itself, thought through within the terms of this approach, may be conceptualised as a form of narrative assembly, involving assets organised both by humans and machines. This form of narrative assembly is by virtue of its continual re-configuration, potentially at least, always open, non-linear and inter-subjective. Thus, in the place of a series of oppositions - narrative/anti-narrative, narrative/database, interaction/reading, random access/linear sequence, fixity of the tale/database perm, founded partly on a restricted reading of narrative – and of narrative's capacity for mutation – we begin to be able to consider forms of narrative re-composition that engage with information technologies (including databases and algorithm) in new ways.

This approach to thinking about digital media forms is useful as an analytic approach; it allows us to say, 'this is narrative, and can be productively explored within narrative's grounds'. The really interesting proposition here however, is to consider how the creative possibilities of these newly re-composed forms of narrative might be further exploited. These creative possibilities include integrating automated sorts with un-predicable outcomes into tales in which humans and machines might both be said to be players.

A DATABASE NARRATIVE

The aim of this exercise was both to point to the centrality of the database to new forms of narrative production, to consider ways in which new forms of narrative/anti-narrative might be produced through automation when it is creatively used, and to underscore the difficulty of the move into narrative as meaning is taken.

■ Divide an A3 sheet into a 4x4 grid. This is the database.

■ Use newspapers and other contemporary media to cut out and collect assets for each square in the grid and distribute randomly. Assets might be pictures – faces, backgrounds, colour blocks, words, letters, they may be linked or not. No direction is given.

■ Decide on a rule (or algorithm) to select/order certain assets. This might be based on colours, on subject areas, on random or automated sorts (try using a mobile phone to generate numbers), or on discursive rules. The rules may be fairly complex, or contain several stages or operations. The rules may be circular or continuous or once only.

■ Run the algorithm either for a fixed period of time, or until the sort operation has been performed on each asset, or until it is clear this operation is open-ended. The assets should move around the square. Some will be discarded. Others will change places.

■ Consider the results. Some questions here are these:
  'How can you make sense of what you have produced?'
  'How can you connect the assets in their new order?'
  'Are there ways to consider the array in terms other than narrative?'
  'Is the process 'finished'?

■ Students discovered many different kinds of rules to operate the database and produce particular arrays of assets. All understood that they were structuring or producing their artefacts using database 'methods'.

■ All the students wanted to explain the results of the exercise in narrative terms.

■ Other students decided that they had used a narrative principle to select their assets in the first place. This provoked consideration of ideological questions in relation to computerised sorts.

■ Students considered how different kinds of rules tended to automate narrative in more or less extensive ways, and tended also to produce circular forms of narrative.

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