A Brief History of the Idea of Narrative

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1.      Introduction

The title of this essay is intended as an homage to John Durham Peters and Stephen Hawking. In

*Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999), Peters charts the arcs not of

communication methods or technologies, but the way in which we conceive of communication; not

how do we communicate, but how have we *thought about* communicating. Hawking is invoked, on

the one hand, because contemporary conceptualizations of narrative, particularly in the 20th century,

are the progeny of multifarious efforts to develop a *science of narrative*. On the other, Hawking's

seminal monograph, *A Brief History of Time* (1988), distills an impossibly immense subject -- the

history of the universe -- into an impossibly compact space. Narrative may not be so sprawling an

object of study as the cosmos, but it is nonetheless expansive.

      This exam traces the variegated, interrelated, evolving, diffuse, and circuitous ways in which

narrative has been thought about. This effort begins with (who else?) Aristotle and Plato. Though

Aristotle will figure far more prominently in these proceedings, Plato provides a useful counterpoint:

while Aristotle devised a rudimentary codification of narrative as form, Plato critiques its content and

use. We then spring forward several millennia to find Georg Lukács challenging the enduring

Aristotelean framework, and anticipating by nearly a century Marie-Laure Ryan's call for a "media-

conscious narratology" (Ryan and Thon 4). I will traverse the well-trod terrains of Russian

Formalism and French Structuralism, and investigate how these movements and their devotees

produced scrupulous and purportedly *empirical* principles intended to transform the study of

narrative and literature into a science: narrative's *scientific turn.* A Structuralist splinter faction

turned their focus to temporal dynamics, laying the groundwork for *narratology.*[1] Narratology puts

time at the center of narrative attention, as both interior and exterior to narrative. Here, narrative is

proposed as an historical and temporal coagulant conditioned by tradition and cultural context. I then

turn to an essential but under-appreciated counterweight to print-centric narratology is *orality*. In

their indispensable accounts of oral storytelling systems, Albert Lord and Walter J. Ong illustrate not

only how media and cognition interrelate, but underscore the importance of identifying medium-

specific narrative affordances. In the following section, I provide a brief survey of how narrative

theories and epistemologies filtered into other fields and disciplines such as Marxism, economics,

postmodernism, historiography, and cognitive science. The final section examines the collision of

narrative and new media, as well as ongoing attempts to (once again) formulate a "unified theory" of

narrative that can account for its protean, media-inflected instantiations. The conclusion proposes

several lines of inquiry for how my study of narrative might proceed from this point forward.

This paper proposes that "classical," print-biased narrative semiotics -- including Formalism,

Structuralism, and Narratology -- highlight the necessity of a medium theory approach to narrative

study. The intersection of narrative and computers (video games in particular) provoked

contemporaneous efforts by ludologists and *neo-narratologists* to grapple with the interpenentration

of narrative and the medium/media through which it is instantiated. While the penultimate section of

this essay only skims the surface of how narrative and new media have, and continue to, transform

one another, this basic adumbration of *neo-narratology* forms a horizon against which we might

begin to assess the profound effects of narrative's *medial turn.* This turn may prove as pivotal, if not

moreso, than the *scientific* and *post-structural turns* that preceded it. The *medial turn* suggests,

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[1] Though Tzvetan Todorov is most often credited with leading the brigade, classical narratology as we now know it -- chiefly through the work of Mieke Bal -- owes more to Gérard Genette than Todorov.

furthermore, that the study of narrative can be freed from its putative moorings in literature and literary studies, and situated in a communication studies framework that foregrounds the intertwining and mutually transformative effects of stories and the medium/media through which they are told.

A disclaimer: though the so-called ludology vs. narratology debate is beyond the scope of this exam, the contretemps between these two camps stemmed from what the ludologist camp decries as "narrativism," the narratological diktat that "everything is a story, and story-telling is our primary, perhaps only, mode of understanding" (Aarseth, qtd. in Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 49). While I am skeptical of the dogmatic bent of Aarseth and his entourage, his caveat is usefully appropriated. This essay features multiple scholars for whom narrative is (in one instance literally) the *lingua franca* of humankind; the bedrock, scaffolding, and ballast for communication, lived experience, and cognition. Is this essay, in and of itself, a narrative? As Fredric Jameson muses, is there nothing outside of stories? If this is a narrative about narratives, then how does narrative account for itself? Ong notes the same difficulty in writing about orality: "Once the word is technologized, there is no effective way to criticize what technology has done with it without the aid of the highest technology available" (79). To write about narrative is to simultaneously reproduce and obfuscate the qualities, characteristics, and biases I aspire to expose. One could argue that narrative is so intrinsic to communication that its power and influence are effectively invisible to us, even in a reflexive and critical study. Let it be noted that this narrative about narrative avails itself of certain tools inherent to its subject to expose, analyze, and critique the subject itself.

1.i      Defining Narrative

Narrative is as ubiquitous as is it difficult to define. In "On the Very Idea of a Definition of Narrative," one in a series of ripostes between Marie-Laure Ryan and David Rudrum, Rudrum asserts that though "we all recognize [a narrative] when we see one," committing to a concrete,

agreed-upon definition proves an elusive prospect (197).[2] Definitions are risky, Rudrum contends,

because not only are they unlikely to endure, but they "can all too easily foster a myopic view of

one's subject...imposing narrowness and hierarchization on the field" (200). Narrative is so mercurial

and prolific that Rudrum deems it impossible to unite a disparate "set of distinguishing properties or

features" under a single, all-encompassing umbrella (201).

However inadequate, evanescent, quixotic, or irrelevant defining narrative may be, the

attempts have been manifold. Even Rudrum offers a definition of sorts: narrative is "a complex

family of...language games, all of them mutable depending on the narrative context," though lacking

"a common set of rules" (202). Peter Brooks notes the similarly reductive grammatological

adumbration offered by Structuralists such as Barthes and Todorov, who identify narrative as

"essentially the articulation of a set of verbs" (111). Brooks himself takes a narratological tack, with

the respective onus on experience and time, defining narrative as a mediator "in our negotiations

with reality," and a representational grappling with "temporality: man's [*sic*] time-boundedness, his

consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality" (xi). Narrative is both a way of speaking

and a way of thinking. By transubstantiating the chaos of existence into a coherent and

communicable form through narrative emplotment, we declare "our refusal to allow temporality to

be meaningless, and our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our

lives" (Brooks 323).[3] N. Katherine Hayles provides an empathetic approach:

> narratives allow us to construct models of how others may be feeling and acting, models that
> coevolve with our ongoing interior monologues describing and interpreting to ourselves our
> own feelings and behaviors. ...narrative has an explanatory force that literally makes the
> world make sense. (*Mother* 197)

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[2] Rudrum prefers a use-based approach that acknowledges narrative's contextual mutability: "a text is narrative if it is commonly used as a narrative," and, thus, "is more a contextual than a textual property" (202, 197, 198).

[3] *Emplotment* is defined as a form of mediation that transforms meaningless, atemporal sequences of events into a "universally human '[experience] of temporality'" (White 173).

Bordwell underscores causality: narrative is "a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space" (qtd. in Eskelinen 108).[4] Post-classical or *neo*-narratologists such as Ryan seize on "storyworlds" as the preeminent present-day narrative form. Narrative is a nexus comprising "a world (setting) situated in time, populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot) and undergo change" (Ryan 2-3). Myriad definitions stress the centrality of recipients, or *narratees*, in narrative ontology. Gerald Prince quantifies narrative as "one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees" (qtd. in Dubbleman 3).[5] Do these definitions clarify or occlude? Is narrative a kind of language or grammar? A means of imposing order onto chaos? Of calming and configuring the tumult of temporality? A causal chain? An exercise in empathy? Is narrative comprehensible only in the context, and by the terms, of its articulation and reception? One need not agree with Rudrum to be sympathetic to the plight he tries to evade. An understatement, perhaps, but no less germane: "narrative is a contested concept" (Eskelinen 105).

The purpose of the present essay is not to consolidate and/or reconcile these (and other) narrative definitions, but rather to trace their trajectories and intersections as these (and other) narrative conceptualizations emerge, fluctuate, dis-/re-aggregate, splay, and mutate. I will maintain narrative as a supple, pliable term adaptable to its eclectic variants, both contested and contradictory.

This malleability notwithstanding, there are six signature narrative attributes requiring special attention. They are neither exclusive (I will discuss other equally important aspects) nor sacrosanct

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[4] Hayles quotes Bruner to underscore the importance of causality: the "principal purposes narrative serves is to create a sense of *why* things happen," and "invest actions with meaning" (*Mother* 199). Configuring chaos into order is one of Hayles' privileged narrative functions, suturing "discontinuities in time, location, differential inputs, and diverse perceptions to create a single stream of storytelling that tries to...create coherence" (*Electronic* 80).

[5] Aristotle pondered whether drama should be "judged in itself, or in relation to its audience?" (7). The post-classicists underscore the vital role played by recipients: "while the author creates the storyworld through the production of signs, it is the reader, spectator, listener, or player who uses the blueprint of a finished text to construct a mental image of [a] world" (Ryan and Thon 3).

(several will be contested), but are worth highlighting here due to their recursiveness over the course of the following analysis. If narrative were a musical score, these would be its leitmotifs:

- The *narrator* -- someone who tells the narrative

- The *narratee* -- someone to whom the narrative is told

- *Pastness* -- the narrated events are antecedent to their telling; they are being *recounted*. Even events that occur in the future comport with this principle

- *Temporality* -- a double movement: the events being recounted take place in, and transpire over, time (i.e. *story time*); the recounting of these events takes time (i.e. *narrative time*)[6]

- *Coherence* and *Meaning* -- narrative is invariably *selective*. The narrator has chosen which elements to include/exclude from the story.[7] Their organization into a narrative sequence endows the chosen elements with *coherence* (both for the narrator and the narratee). The organization of the selected elements into a coherent order effectuates meaning

- *Teleology* -- what separates narrative from non-narrative forms is that narratives end. Moreover, it is the conclusion that endows all that precedes it with meaning and morality

## 1.ii    Aristotle vs. Plato

In the *Republic,* Plato wrings his hands over the corruptive influence of stories, which can "produce in the youth a strong inclination to do bad things" (68). His concern centers around issues of style (69). Indexing the vices of mixed-media storytelling (the extent to which narration and imitation (i.e. acting) should commingle in the presentation of epic poetry), Plato is dubious of poets or performers assuming multiple roles in what is meant to be a single station society, and deplores the corruptive influence of imitating degenerate or "slavish" personages: "though they must know about mad and

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[6] Ricoeur's three-pronged scheme of "utterance-statement-world" indicates a "time of narrating, a narrated time, and a fictive experience of time projected by the conjunction/disjunction between the time it takes to narrate and narrated time" (2: 77).

[7] Even Homer "never attempts to make the whole war of Troy the subject of his poem" (Aristotle 48).

vicious men and women, they must neither do nor imitate anything they do" (72). Such are the

transgressions that merit expulsion. Only the "pure imitator of a decent person" need apply (ibid.).

The *Poetics*, Aristotle's treatise on dramatic plot, concerns the "number and nature of parts of

which a poem is concerned" (1). Contradistinct from Plato's claim that imitation corrupts moral

character, Aristotle argues that representations, even those that achieve only "minute fidelity," offer

liminal opportunities to contemplate otherwise painful events, such as a death (6). Though the arts of

imitation (Tragedy, Comedy, Epic poetry) concern "men in action," they differ according to

"medium, objects, and manner or mode" (Aristotle 3, 1). Drama and epic poetry, for example,

diverge in duration and complexity. In drama, character is subservient to action (Aristotle 13). As

theatre is consumed in a single sitting, it must imitate actions that can be "embraced in one view...by

the memory," contra the epic, which can contain a "multiplicity of plots" (Aristotle 15, 35). Drama

and the epic share a "structural union of parts" integral to an organic whole: "if any one of them is

displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed" (Aristotle 16). Diegetic events

should surprise through Reversal or Recognition, while maintaining causal logic (Aristotle 19). Of

this whole (beginning, middle, end), the end is "the chief thing of all" (Aristotle 12).

While Plato does fixate on issues of style, he is equally exercised over content: by imitating

morally corrupt characters, poet-performers become susceptible to their turpitude; ergo: fictional

representations *exert effects* upon otherwise upright citizens. Aristotle, by contrast, considers

performers and audiences fully capable of differentiating between fiction and reality. It is far more

important to attend to the construction, or *form*, of these representations in order to maximize their

potential impact. This contest over the evaluation of narrative as either "a matter of form or a matter

of content" (Ryan, qtd. in Eskelinen 109) has continued to the present day.

2.      The Scientific Turn

*Poetics* remained the narrative treatise *sine qua non* for over two millennia before Georg Lukács

challenged Aristotelean essentialism. In *The Theory of the Novel* (1914), Lukács argues that rather

than a comprehensive structural model, Aritstotle's framework is based on content "bound to the

historical moment" (152). The organic holism of the dramatic world -- "all embracing and closed

within itself" -- mimes the small, self-contained world of Greek antiquity (Lukács 46, 33). The hero

is the axis around which all action revolves; and heroes "[know] no interiority" (Lukács 89, 88).

Such heroes admit clear destinies oriented toward the same objective ends. These are not,

furthermore, the destinies of heroes alone, "but the destiny of a community" (Lukács 44, 43, 66). The

hero's fate, identity, and community are inextricably enmeshed.[8]

        For Lukács, the novel is a narrative form distinct from Aristotelean drama in terms of its

psychological interiority, articulation of subjective experience, and the fragmented nature of the

reality in which that experience transpires. The novel "[carries] the fragmentary nature of the world's

structure into the world of forms" (Lukács 39).[9] In a famous phrase, Lukács identifies the novel as

"an expression of...transcendental homelessness" (41). Lacking the totalized, self-contained,

objective reality of the drama and epic, novels articulate the internal quest for coherence in a

contingent, incongruous, and idiosyncratic "world gone out of joint" (Lukács 17). In a proto-

postmodernist framing, Lukács argues that the novel diffuses experience into a subjective (if

interconnected) splay (75).[10] There is no single, all-encompassing reality, only a necessarily

fragmented experiential collocation pieced together "from the immeasurable infinity of

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[8] The epic hero "is a fully finished and completed being...completely externalized. ... His view of himself coincides completely with others views of him" (Bakhtin 34). "Outside his destiny, the epic...hero is nothing" (Bakhtin 36).

[9] "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given" (Lukács 56).

[10] Due to the increased independence and complexity of the novel's constituent parts, these parts must be structurally and causally conjoined to engender "a strict compositional and architectural significance" (Lukács 76).

the events of life," and delimited by "the scope of the hero's possible experiences" (Lukács 50, 81).

The protagonist's true journey is that of self-discovery, transit across not exterior topography, but the fraught terrain of the mind and soul; of the hero "towards himself" (Lukács 80). The protagonist comes to realize that the world, *their* world, is not only imperfect, but irredeemable. Coherence is only attainable *within* subjects themselves: a "purely interior reality...more or less complete in itself"; their only destiny is "self-recognition" (Lukács 112, 81).[11] Situating self-discovery as a centripetal force has ideological consequences. The subjective and individualistic nature of experience implies that human agents, rather than fulfilling a divinely preordained program, "have some significant control over their own destinies" (White 33). However, the more we narrate this interior, introspective experience, the more we see experience through a narrative lens. We are at once the authors of our lives, "and at the same time the observer of that life as a created work of art" (Lukács 118). We become self-conscious observers of our own narrativized worlds.

In his introduction to *Theory of Prose* (1925), Gerald Bruns considers Victor Shklovsky's efforts as emblematic of the modernist drive to "develop a theory of rationality adequate to a universe of randomness"; a diabolically complex world is made comprehensible by "[laying] bare its deep structures" (qtd. in ix). Shklovsky formed the vanguard of the Formalist movement, which in seeking to liberate literature from "historical bondage to extra-literary forces" such as "social scientists, psychologists, political scientists" etc., eschewed the investigation of *theme* (too abstract, too subjective), and devised a theoretical model grounded in "pure form...a relationship of materials" (Shklovsky 189). According to Shklovsky, the "existence of special laws of plot formation" explained the proliferation of homologous narrative patterns "separated by thousands of

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[11] Ong associates the "exterior crises" of the drama and epic with their shared lineage with sport, or *agonism* (44). Narrative "fashions the narcissistic, infantile consciousness into a 'subjectivity'" and promotes "the illusion of a centered consciousness" (White 36). Brooks argues that this centrality of the self was meant to compensate for the "explanatory force lost with the decline of the collective myth" (268).

years and tens of thousands of miles" (17). There are no new stories, only iterations developed as either "parallel or antithesis" to their precursors (20). Shklovsky posits *motifs* as irreducible narrative units found in a "general *fund*" (17, emphasis in original). Storytellers assemble units from the fund into plots, and the combinatory potential of these accumulations is nigh-infinite (Shklovsky 52). Here is the origin and essence of the *scientific turn*: semantics supplanted by syntax.

Shklovsky is sensitive to the interrelationship of narrative and medium, but whereas Lukács examined the shift from an objective/exterior world to a subjective/interior world, Shklovsky is more attuned to the mutation of structural features: how print gave birth to formal features and temporal configurations distinct from drama and epic poetry, including "several parallel lines of narration," and "simultaneity of action" (101). While Shklovsky was not indifferent to cultural context, noting that "the addition of local material" affects the text (46, 68), he considered *form* the ultimate determining factor of content; not authorial consciousness, "but the device" (Shklovsky 171, 204).[12]

Formalism had a limited shelf life, but its clarion call -- devising positivistic schema tailored to narrative analysis -- was repurposed by Vladimir Propp in his pivotal *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928).[13] Echoing Shklovsky's concern that literary analysis was inordinately fixated on an author's "creative abilities, and geographical and social background" (xx), and perhaps taking to heart Aristotle's dictum that "most important of all is the structure of the incidents" (11-12), Propp proposes a classification system for folk tales analogous to botany (8). Like plants, folk tales are

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[12] Medvedev and Bakhtin were having none of this. In *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), they excoriate Shklovsky and lambaste Formalism (the "will to system") as junk methodology that segregates literature from the material environment, or "social intercourse," in and through which it acquires meaning (6, 7). "Semiotic material" is just that -- *material* -- and can only be evaluated in relation to its "material articulation," audience, and the immediate context of its utterance (Medvedev and Bakhtin 7, 132).

[13] The emergence and entrenchment of rationalism and empiricism as prevailing enlightenment values goes some way to explaining the zeal with which they were applied to putatively "creative" endeavours, no less so considering the "nineteenth century's obsession with questions of origin, evolution, progress, genealogy" (Brooks 6). Hayles exposes the irony implicit in the very notion of a *scientific* turn*,* as the quest to discover "underlying structural elements...had already by 1950 been largely repudiated in the physical sciences" which diverted "from universalizing, totalizing perspectives" and embraced "local, fractured systems and modes of analysis" (*Chaos* xii, 2).

"organic formations" analyzable "according to [their] component parts and the relationship of these parts to each other and to the whole" (Propp 19). The hundred-odd folk tales that comprise Propp's study are a "collective product" evincing "highly pronounced formula characteristics" (Pirkova-Jakobson, qtd. in xx). Propp argues that folk tales are not comprised of esoteric themes, but sequentially arranged *functions*: causal chains of action. For Propp, the irreducible narrative unit is *action* (25). Sequence is inviolable, no function can "be defined apart from its place in the course of narration" (Propp 21). Functions are not only causally oriented -- "functions fulfilled influence one another" according to "logical and artistic necessity" -- but the sequence is "always identical" (Propp 70, 22). The thirty-two functions Propp identifies have paradigmatic variations, but are invariably slotted into the selfsame syntagmatic order. Propp, thus, effectively transformed a "cultural object into a scientific one" (Ricoeur 2: 38).

Though it took nearly two decades, Propp's morphology proved enormously influential, particularly in invigorating French Structuralism.[14] In "The Structural Study of Myth" (1955), Claude Lévi-Strauss extends Propp's work beyond Russian folk tales to the analysis of mythology as a type of language subject to consonant grammatical and structural rules (430). Myths are comprised of constituent units (*mythemes*) with no inherent meaning; meaning is generated through their combination (Lévi-Strauss 431). The "true constituent units of a myth are not isolated relations but *bundles of such relations*...combined so as to produce a meaning" (Lévi-Strauss 431, emphasis in original). Lévi-Strauss argues that narrative is distinguished by its immanent *translatability*. Because stories, unlike languages, can survive a bad translation, a myth's substance must lie not in "style...or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells" (Lévi-Strauss 430, emphasis in original).

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[14] Structuralism owes an equal debt to Roman Jakobson, and the synthesis of Propp and Jakobson forms the nucleus of Structuralism. In *Fundamentals of Language* (1956), which concerns the "laws that govern language," *Morphemes* are identified as "the ultimate constituents endowed with proper meaning"; *morphemes* are combined into bundles dubbed *phonemes*, and *phonemes* are combined into *syntagms* (Jakobson 5, 14, 15). As per Propp and Shklovsky, Jakobson notes homologous patterns throughout world languages: "The supposed multiplicity of features [is] largely illusory" (39).

Instead of evaluating structure through sequences (as per Propp), Lévi-Strauss proposes a paradigmatic model in which every iteration of a myth is superimposed onto every other (a myth consists of "all its versions") (435). Each bundle is consolidated into a "complex pattern," and these patters are accorded a thematic "law" (Lévi-Strauss 432, 442). Even divergences between *mythemes* in a pattern reaffirms their thematic congruence (i.e. the integrity of their "law").

Finding Propp's sequential model far too rigid, a "frozen syntagm," Claude Bremond incorporates opportunities for branching trajectories (31). In *The Narrative Message* (1964), Bremond disputes the single-vector chronology of Propp's functions (a *de facto* irreducible unit), proposing a model with bifurcating vectors. Bremond claims that this *multivalent* model more accurately represents the complexities of plot: an overarching structure with "pivotal-functions" (narrative nodes that allow the action to swing in different directions) that, by structuring "the possibility of a contradictory option," instigate divergent outcomes (25, 12, 24). The more pivots, the more diverse and dilatory a "map of possible itineraries" (Bremond 16).

Dissolving Propp's "unilinear chain," Bremond argues that functions need not be chronologically calcified, but operate "in relationship to two or three others" (30). The basic units of narrative are *clusters of functions* open to alternative arrangements (29-30).[15] As with elements in chemistry (Bremond's preferred analogy), an "interplay of affinities and repulsions is established between the sequences" as they accrue into "larger ensembles" (30); units with polarities. Narrative sequentiality should be reconceived as "a network of sequences" whose combinatory potentialities catalyze myriad possible permutations. The "freedom of combination" afforded the artist ensures "the possibility of original creation" (Bremond 42, 26). Bremond's mutable model, moreover, moves

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[15] Each cluster contains three functions: one "which 'opens' the possibility of a pattern of behavior or an event...the passage to actualization of this possibility...and the result of this action which 'closes' the process by success or failure" (Bremond 33); i.e. a mini-Aristotelean beginning-middle-end arc.

Structuralism into ever closer alignment with the scientism it sought to emulate:

> [N]arrative forms seem to be innumerable. No more so...than are plants, and...a hierarchical classification subsuming mutually exclusive species under more general classes is not an illusion. An autonomous science of narrative could be formed...so that problems of the comparative analysis of narrative forms (in diverse cultures, *media,* authors, etc.) could be posed in new terms. (52, emphasis in original).

Contrary to the increasingly elaborate schemas proposed by Lévi-Strauss and Bremond, A.-J. Greimas audaciously distills Propp's thirty-two functions into six, still in service of a method that can "transcode signification into a scientific system of signs" (Schleifer, qtd. in Greimas xv). As with any other objective process, narrative "can be analyzed into a limited number of elements recurring in various combinations" and, as a result, "all events (possible combinations of elements) are foreseen and the conditions for their realization established" (Greimas xvi). Greimas establishes a set of six units -- *actants* -- organized in binary relationships: Subject/Object, Sender/Receiver, and Helper/ Opponent. These pairs form recursive circuits of action, with the Subject's acquisition of the Object conditioned by the Sender and Receiver, and the Subject's ability to fulfill the Object's purpose is helped or hindered by Helpers and Opponents. As with most of the theorists discussed thus far, Greimas perceives "remarkably *recurrent*" patterns exhibiting "distinguishable *regularities*" (xlviii, emphasis in original). These regularities form the axes of Greimas' narrative grammar.

In "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" (1966), Barthes declares narrative ubiquitous (79),[16] contending that the purpose of the Structuralist project "is to master the infinity of utterances (*paroles*) by describing the 'language' ('*langue*') of which they are products" (80). The "'art' of the storyteller" is to generate narratives "from the structure (the code)" (ibid.). In other words, narrative is an art of *bricolage*.

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[16] Narrative is "international, transhistorical, transcultural," encompassing "a prodigious variety of genres," and an "infinite diversity of forms...present in every age, in every place, in every society" (Barthes 79).

Building off of Bremond (how pivot-functions enable divergent outcomes) Barthes stratifies

narrative structure into "hierarchy of instances." Narrative units accrue meaning as they traverse

these strata: "A unit belonging to a particular level only takes on meaning if it can be integrated in a

higher level"; a unit "means nothing in itself" (Barthes 86). Meaning emerges not through

sequentiality alone, but by transiting both horizontal *and* vertical axes. We read not only "from one

word to the next," but "from one level to the next" (Barthes 87).

Barthes offers much more than a mere *introduction* to Structuralism, but attempts to

synthesize its multiple lines of inquiry -- Saussure, Propp, Lévi-Strauss, Bremond, Greimas, Todorov

-- into a unified framework. His prismatic model is difficult to do justice to in summary. It involves

three levels of description: *functions* (per Propp and Bremond), *actions* (Greimas), and *narration*

(likened to Todorov's "discourse") (Barthes 88). Narrative units are divided into functions and

indices: functions (split between "cardinal" and "catalyzers") are distributional, and dominate the

unfolding action (x-axis), whereas indices are integrational, enabling movement between levels (y-

axis) (Barthes 91-94). Broadly speaking, Barthes elucidates narrative units both according to what

they do (their function), what they mean (how meaning accrues as units scale the hierarchy), and the

significance of narrative act (88).

2.i      The General Fund and Combinatory Potential

In its overtures to scientific legitimacy, Structuralism is preoccupied with atomization: identifying

the irreducible constituent units of narrative, as Jakobson did with language, and cataloguing how

these units are syntactically configured.[17] Irrespective of what element, cluster, sequence, sentence,

or combination thereof more accurately or meaningfully constitutes such a unit, the terms of their

assembly, what Bruns calls *combinatory potential* (qtd. in Shklovsky xi), remains a contentious issue

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[17] Wolf and Herman dub these units "narratemes" (qtd. in Ryan and Thon 230). Derrida also proposed such a "unit" for writing, called a *graphie*: "[a] unit of a possible graphic system" (46).

in narrative theory today. Accordingly, there are two aspects of atomization requiring emphasis here.

The first is the recurring notion of what Shklovsky calls a *general fund*, a common repository from which authors select narrative units for combination. Jakobson variously refers to this as a "lexical storehouse," a "filing cabinet of *prefabricated* representations" and "preconceived possibilities" (72, emphasis in original).[18] Turner calls grammar a "dynamic repertoire" (156). In the computer era, Hayles refers to a "reservoir of possibilities" (*Think* 120). Ryan calls hypertext "a construction kit" that, as with grammar, can be used to form "an infinite number of sentences" (Landow, qtd. in Ryan 4). Pearce identifies *story systems* as a "kit of generic narrative parts that allows the player to create their own narrative content" (qtd. in Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 145). In Lev Manovich's computer-*cum*-cultural logics framework, the fund is the database.[19]

For some, such funds imply an impediment to original creation: "no new plots...only the possibility of repeating others" (Brooks 262). The fund curtails creativity: a finite number of units means that configurative potential is circumscribed and preordained. For many Structuralists, however, composition would be impossible *without* recourse to a fund of some sort.[20] Furthermore, though units are limited, their combinatory potential is infinite. Propp proposes that it is "possible to artificially create new plots of an unlimited number," and rejects concerns that structural constraints are unduly restrictive: the storyteller follows her/his "own taste" to make schemes "come alive" (111, 112). Shklovsky concurs that the agglomeration of motifs is limitless (52). Mieke Bal argues that due to the "innumerable possibilities for succession and embedding...an infinite number of fabulas can be formed" (191). The *general fund* and *combinatory potential* of the units therein emerges as a major

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[18] Speakers combine these representations into "linguistic units of a higher degree of complexity" (Jakobson 72).

[19] Medvedev and Bakhtin are the rare dissenters, arguing that creativity cannot occur through a "recombination of ready-made elements" (140). The "organic connection between sign and meaning...exists only for the given utterance and only under the given conditions of its realization" (Medvedev and Bakhtin 121).

[20] For Barthes, it is "impossible to [produce] a narrative without reference to an implicit system of units and rules" (81).

tension surrounding how contemporary narratives are authored. With the proliferation of new media narrative forms in which audiences play increasingly active, configurative roles, traditional concepts of authorship have been thrown into profound confusion.

3.      Narratology and Time

According to Brooks, "[t]he middle decades of the nineteenth century seemed to have an unlimited appetite for narrative" (170). In *Genres in Discourse* (1978), the influential Structuralist Tzvetan Todorov closed out the 1970s by calling for "a discipline that seems to me to have every right to exist and that should be called *narratology*" (qtd. in Mills and Barlow 380, emphasis in original).[21] The groundwork for this discipline was already in the process of being laid.

In the magisterial *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Gérard Genette expands the scope of the Structuralist enterprise -- locating the universal in the specifics, and revealing "the hidden complexities that are the *secret* of the simplicity" (23, 138, emphasis in original) -- to enfold how narrative "works to subvert, replay, or even pervert the normal passages of time" (Brooks 20). In liberating narrative from drama's yoke (the novel is *semiotic*, not *mimetic*), Genette claims that Aristotle's emphasis on the "superiority of the purely mimetic" exerted a millennia-long influence on the "evolution of narrative genres" (173). Genette takes issue with Aristotle's (and the scientific models *Poetics* precipitated) privileging of sequential action as the sole source of meaning. Though Genette prefers analysis "without regard to medium" (25), he picks up a thread left dangling by Shklovsky: what differentiates literary narrative from oral storytelling forms is its potential *temporal complexity* ("several parallel lines of narration," and "simultaneity of action" (Shklovsky 101)). As a counterweight to the fetish for chronological sequences, Genette exhaustively indexes the

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[21] Todorov says that Structuralism is to myth as grammar is to language, an assortment of "'rules' about how to put together a sentence 'correctly'" (qtd. in Mills and Barlow 353). Todorov extends Propp's criterion of "chronological succession" by introducing a hierarchy of order (reminiscent of Barthes' "hierarchy of instances"). Events do not simply succeed one another, but that succession induces transformations. Succession plus transformation are the "two principles of narrative" (Todorov, qtd. in Mills and Barlow 362).

multitudinous dynamics of temporality in narrative structure.

Genette examines narrative events according to their order, duration, and frequency, and not only provides a meticulous lexicon of temporal "moves" (e.g. *prolepsis, analepsis, anachrony*), but demonstrates how these dynamics undergird putatively esoteric aspects such as mood and voice (31). In concordance with Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Barthes (that narration is "completed only in relation to the moment of its utterance" (Barthes 212), and the cultural context in which that utterance transpires) Genette proposes several modes of *focalization.* Focalization enriches the Formalist notions of *fabula* (story) and *suzjet* (plot) (Shklovsky 170) by including narrative *perspective(s)*.[22] Genette's analysis accounts for interrelations between "narrative and story, between narrative and narrating...and between story and narrating" (29), and acknowledges events as they transpired, their selective reconfiguration into a plot, and the (physical, emotional, ideological) perspective(s) of the person or persons telling the story.

Mieke Bal's admirable *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985) mostly recapitulates principles proposed by Genette, including *focalization,* "the relation between 'who perceives' and what is perceived" (8).[23] Bal defines *narratology* as "the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that 'tell a story,'" and *text* as "a finite, structured whole composed of language signs" (3). According to Bal's formulation (as a text, the narrative has been "converted into signs" to be "'told' in a medium"), narratology is a "reflection on...narrative determinants of the production of meaning in semiotic interaction" (8, 14).

Whereas Genette and Bal are chiefly concerned with temporal dynamics *within* narrative,

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[22] Mieke Bal defines *fabula* as a "series of logically and chronologically related events caused or experienced by actors," and *story* (i.e. suzjet) as a "*fabula* that is presented in a certain manner" (5); i.e. as "the result of an ordering" (78).

[23] Bal defines *perspective* as "the placing of the point of view in a specific agent," and *focalization* as "the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen,' perceived" (80, 142). Perspective includes "both the physical and the psychological points of perception. It does not cover the agent that is performing the act of narration" (Bal 143). There is, therefore, a distinction made between "those who see and those who speak" (ibid.).

Paul Ricoeur's epic three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1983-85) investigates how narrative imposes order upon the human experience of time, thus representing the triumph of coherence over chaos (1: 4). Ricoeur synthesizes Augustine's musings on time, Aristotelian emplotment, and Heideggerian phenomenology into a framework in which narrative organizes (and infuses with meaning) otherwise meaning-*less* temporal progression. Time and narrative are dialectically entwined: "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner or a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (1: 3).[24]

While Ricoeur's tripartite *magnum opus* is an embarrassment of riches, two items merit foregrounding. The first is a second dialectic: narrative and action. In concurrence with Jameson, Ricoeur contends that human action is immanently narratable because it is "always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms" (1: 57). This latent signification makes our actions (and the contexts in which they unfold) comprehensible and morally resonant (1: 58). Because action is semiotically prefigured, we anticipate meaning coming to fruition through narration: the transubstantiation of *what we do* into *what it means*. "[A]re we not inclined to see in a given sequence of the events of our lives '(as yet) untold' stories?" (1: 74).[25] Human action has a *prenarrative* quality: our actions adhere to the semiotic schema that makes action make sense.

The second item is Ricoeur's notion of *narrative tradition*, which is "constituted by the interplay of innovation and sedimentation" (1: 68). Sedimentation refers to the gradual accumulation of stylistic, aesthetic, and thematic tropes that inform narrative type, form, and practice. These

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[24] Ricoeur equates narrative with Aristotle's *muthos*, the "organization of events" (1: 31, 36). Emplotment is a means to "re-configure our confused, unformed, and...mute temporal experience" (Ricoeur 1: xi). Sequential events are causally related, and emplotment makes events "contiguous with each other" (Ricoeur 1: 39). Ong refers to this as *rhapsody,* the stitching together of songs (13).

[25] White notes that by enabling the "transition from within-time-ness to historicality," the "narrative function" exposes the "plot-like nature of temporality itself" (51). Because we perceive the always ongoing transit from past to present as a causal chain, we adduce a similar causality in the "imaginary" relationship between (past-)present and future. Causality allows the consciousness to apprehend the present as a fulfillment of (the promise of) the past, and imagine the future as the (possible) fulfillment of the present (White 149). Time, in a word, is rendered "narrativistic" (White 171).

traditions evolve through innovation, but innovation only occurs in conversation with the *topoi* it transforms. Tradition is clarified through Ricoeur's critique of Structuralism. Ricoeur seeks to re-infuse narrative with cultural and historical specificity lost in the fine grain of structural composition. Structuralism sought to liberate narrative from the Romantic obsession with originary authorship (stories surfacing out of some inscrutable psychological ether), but in doing so subordinated the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic, and eliminated "history to the profit of structure" (2: 31).[26] Narrative, Ricoeur argues, "is not atemporal," but "proceeds from the sedimentation of a practice with a specific history" (2: 14). He laments the Structuralist dependance on a "finite number of basic differential units" arranged according to "a set of combinatory rules" which turns narrative into a "closed set of internal relations" (Ricoeur 2: 30). Per Bakhtin and Medvedev, these models elide the inherently cultural (or "symbolically elaborated") contexts in which narratives emerge, and derive and transmit meaning (Ricoeur 2: 32).

Ricoeur critiques Structuralists such as Bremond, Barthes, and Greimas (his model makes all narrative operations "foreseeable and calculable" (2: 56)), but reserves special opprobrium for Propp. Propp's *tale* is an object of "analytic rationality" so "rigid, mechanical, and constraining" that it cannot be "told by anyone to anyone" (Ricoeur 2: 38, 39).[27] Narrative is not simply sequential, but *causal*. Causality is isotropic and circuitous, mobilized through movements and lacunae (delays, detours, ellipses) that culminate in "unforeseeable outcome[s]" (Ricoeur 2: 48). Structuralism neglects the historical and temporal dimensions of experience (that events happen *to* people in

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[26] Albert Lord will later claim that oral composition inverts this hierarchy, subverting the syntagmatic to the paradigmatic: the "underlying patterns of formulas and the ability to make phrases according to those patterns" is more important that the formula or content itself" (44).

[27] Jameson contends that Propp's thesis cannot address "the movement of storytelling in time": "what is ultimately irreducible in Propp's analysis is narrative diachrony itself" (122). Greimas is posited as a "methodological improvement over Propp" by illustrating the disjunction between "the narrative surface" -- i.e. superstructure -- "and the underlying actantial mechanisms" (Jameson 126). Greimas identifies the "deep structures" that underlie narrative composition, rather than simply displaying their fixed sequential arrangement and surface properties (Jameson 256).

specific contexts in unfolding time) and fails to appreciate how memory, anticipation, and perspective influence not only lived experience, but narrative engagement, or "refiguration" (Ricoeur 3: 160). Ultimately, Ricoeur situates authors and readers -- and all the messy and complex subjective, social, and historical idiosyncrasies that human agents imply -- at the epicenter of the nexus of configuration and refiguration. Moreover, refiguration (i.e. reading), is a potentially generative act, a mediation between the world *as it is* and *as it could be* (3: 179).

In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1992), Peter Brooks enriches Ricoeur and Walter Benjamin with Freudian psychoanalysis ("a primarily narrative art" (xiv)). Brooks aspires to excavate the "force" that compels readers to move through a novel, the "inner action" of which "is nothing but a struggle against the power of time" (Lukács, qtd. in 111). Like Ricoeur, Brooks considers narrative semiotics (Formalism and Structuralism) inadequate to the task of explaining this compulsive force. Clinical accounts of narrative architecture offers little to no insight as to "what impels its movements of transformation" (Brooks 319). Through temporal obliviousness, semiotics elides "the play of desire in time that makes us turn pages" (xii).[28]

For Brooks, narrative is at once a developmental tool and ambient environment: "Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative," a cognitive skill we begin to develop the age of three (3). Narrative is a cornerstone of identity-construction: "we constitute ourselves in part through our fictions," are "a composite of all that [we have] read, or heard read, or imagined as written" (xiv, 19). Per Lévi-Strauss, narrative is innately translatable, transferrable between media "while remaining faithful to its original structure and message (4). Narrative is, per Ricoeur, the ongoing human endeavour to fashion chaos and incoherence into order and coherence. We want to make the story of our self and the society in which we exist make sense, both to others and to ourselves.

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[28] Brooks asserts that Structuralism offers less "systematic model[s] for analysis," and more "suggestive metaphor[s]" that encourage "us to think about narrative as a system" (17).

With its emphasis on death and closure, Brooks attempts to reconcile Ricoeur's overarching thesis -- how narrative orders the "inexplicable and impossible" through "succession and time" (Brooks 10) -- with Benjamin's assertion, set forth in his 1968 essay "The Storyteller," that death is narrative's defining metaphor: the teleological orientation signifies a confrontation with mortality. Once "a public process," we pushed death "out of the perceptual world of the living," and into the perceptual worlds of our fiction (Benjamin 93, 94). This figurative death is a fire against which we warm our "shivering life" (Benjamin 101).[29]

Narrative is a "discourse of mortality" in which endings are paramount: the end shapes the beginning and middle, and only the ending "can finally determine meaning" (Brooks 22). Echoing Ricoeur's notion of protention and retention, reading entails a constant interplay of perspective, "anticipation and retrospection" (Brooks 28). As narratives unfurl, we reconsider and reconfigure "the provisional meanings of the already read" (Brooks 23). Causality is omnidirectional, working backwards and forwards and, per Barthes "hierarchy of instances," upwards and downwards: "the effect of an event...often comes only when it takes on meaning" retrospectively (Brooks 280).

Desire, so "central to our experience of reading narrative," is the propulsive force that Brooks endeavours to explicate (35). In narrative, desire is "desire *for* the end" -- i.e. for "death" -- and all else is prologue to this "ultimate moment" which reveals "the meaning of life" (Brooks 52, 140).[30] This desire, however, cannot be satisfied. Meaning is ultimately indeterminate, "is never pinned down or captured since there is a perpetual sliding or slippage of the signified from under the signifier"; the end, therefore, can provide no comprehensive "intelligibility, meaning, [or] understanding" (Brooks 56, 60). This is the irony implicit in narrative desire: readers seek the

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[29] Ricoeur considers narrative closure a bulwark against incoherence. The end implies a stability (or return to equilibrium) that fulfills the "reader's expectation that some form of consonance will finally prevail" (2: 21, 25).

[30] Telling is "another form of desire," the desire "to be heard, recognized, and listened to" (Brooks 53). Because narrative requires interlocutors, we should be concerned not only with "what a narrative is, but...why it is told" (Brooks 260, 236).

"knowledge of death" denied to us in life, but due to its inherent semiotic instability, narrative can never satisfactorily provide this death. Closure "is always provisional" (Brooks 281).

Benjamin's thesis, however, is grounded in a specific *mode* of narrative -- print -- and he contrasts the "Edenic context of oral storytelling" with the "privatized 'fallen' world of the novel" (Brooks 163). As narrative was industrialized and assumed primarily printed forms, it was "gradually removed...from the realm of living speech" (Benjamin 87). Attendant to the "decline of [oral] storytelling [was] the rise of the novel" (ibid.). Benjamin indicates that narrative has medium-specific properties; that which can be "handed on orally...is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel" (ibid.). Oral or performative storytelling is predicated on *situational exchange*, both narrator(s) and narratee(s) are implicated in narrative intercourse. This stands in stark contrast to the novel, which isolates both the novelist and her/his audience (Benjamin 87, 100). The print storyteller is no longer a palpable "present force," but is distant and removed. The novel may conjure a figurative grappling with death, but so too did the novel kill the storyteller.

4.      Orality Recuperated

Brooks surmises that narrative semiotics is less valuable as an analytical model than a "suggestive metaphor, alerting us to the important analogies between parts of speech and...narrative" (17). This is to repeat a recurring refrain that narrative evinces a systematicity approximating or analogous to grammar. However, Brooks also alerts us to a glaring oversight of many of the aforementioned narrative semiotic models: that they treat almost exclusively in *print.* Benjamin notes that written narrative and oral narrative propose not only different (if overlapping) formal properties, but emerge out of different (if overlapping) medium-specific creative *modes* or *systems*.[31]

*The Singer of Tales* (1960) is Albert B. Lord's continuation of research on Homeric epic

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[31] Ryan and Thon attest that "classical narratology was developed primarily with literary fiction in mind" (2).

poetry initiated by his mentor, the philologist Milman Parry. Lord contests the tendency to perceive oral storytelling as anterior or inferior (i.e. the primitive predecessor) to literature, or, as Benjamin suggests, supplanted by literature in a sudden socio-cultural shift.[32] Contrariwise, oral and literate forms are capable of coexistence: two points on a "continuum of man's [*sic*] artistic expression in words" (Lord 130). Contra the self-contained "verbal iconography" of literate texts, songs (Lord's preferred term for oral compositions) are composed through storytelling systems that facilitate the combination of formulaic themes (through paradigms of action, time, and place) drawn from a fund or repertoire of phrases, formulas, and patterns (22).[33] Composition and performance (or singing) occur in tandem, are "at once a transmission and a creation" (Levin, qtd. in Lord xiv).

Contradistinct from the (presumed) linearity of literary narratives, the song is quasi-rhizomatic. Momentary tensions arise as singers are "drawn in one direction or another" by diffuse trajectories in plot and theme (Lord 123). Improvisational latitude is relative, "[varying] from singer to singer, and [dependent] on the song itself"; songs cleave to "the stable skeleton of narrative," and are governed by inviolable rules (e.g. the hero triumphs) (Lord 71, 99). Despite their command of, and reliance on, these constraints, singers are invested with a great deal of configurational flexibility in performance; agency is invigorated, not impinged, by the system's constraints (Lord 45). Every performance is ultimately unique, and no two songs will ever be sung alike (Lord 5, 27).

Ong insists that singing is distinct from memorization, the singer is publicly "remembering

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[32] That said, tensions do arise when oral and literate forms are enlisted to fulfill the selfsame ends. "[When] writing is introduced and begins to be used for the same purposes" as oral composition, the older (i.e. oral) art "gradually disappears" (Lord 20). By contrast, "where writing is unknown...the art of narration flourishes" (ibid.).

[33] Lord notes that these formulae, though common, are also culturally specific, reflecting distinctions in "dialect and vocabulary, of linguistic, social, and political history"; few formulas will transcend their socio-historical specificity (49, 65). Innovation occurs "by putting new words into the old patterns" (Lord 43).

not a memorized text...but the themes and formulas that he has heard other singers sing" (142).[34] The

encounter between singer and audience is sacrosanct, and the song is composed *ad hoc* and *in situ.*

The song is conditioned by the interplay of singer and audience; the audience's "variability and

instability" influences how the song is sung; the oral text, in other words, is *contextually contingent*,

changing and evolving from audience to audience through repetition and reuse (Lord 16). Themes

gradually accumulate an "aura of meaning" through this recursive, poly-contextual use (Lord 148).

Lord contends that the Homeric epics are neither literary nor oral, but written records of a

*peculiar* performance designed for recording: "Proteus was photographed" (124). These *peculiar*

written recordings are subsequently mistaken for the songs themselves (Lord 125).[35] Writing, Lord

argues, tends to subsume formula. The writer, unshackled form the pressures of performance and the

"fickleness of an immediate audience," has time to dwell over syntagmatic arrangement, and

consciously experiment with combining and recombining themes (Lord 132).

In *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), Ong takes Lord's lead,

interrogating the cognitive transmutations precipitated by shifts from predominantly oral to

predominantly literate societies, as well as how writing has reconfigured consciousness and society

more broadly (3, 6). The displacement of orality by writing has profound epistemological

consequences as well, transforming how any given culture organizes and transmits information.

Spoken language is posited as the "prior primary system" out of which writing develops. Writing

does not enhance its progenitor, but assimilates and reduces it (Ong 8, 12, 9). As the products of a

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[34] An act of "repeating...something that one regards as fixed and not one's own," memorization is ideologically aligned with the intellectual proprietorship engendered by print (Lord 36). By contrast, oral themes are "protean...a living, changing, adaptable artistic creation" (Lord 94). In oral storytelling "the idea of an original is illogical" (Lord 101).

[35] Accordingly, had Propp (inadvertently) codified the crystallized corollaries of formerly fluid oral formulae? His folk tales are the *peculiar* written translations of orally transmitted narratives. As the translative act was forgotten, the oral formulae fossilized in these *peculiar* written recordings were mistaken as indigenous to print. Ong would attribute this to literary imperialism, explaining that "[s]emiotic structuralism...generally [takes] no cognizance at all of the various ways that texts can relate to their oral substratum" (161).

principally (or imperialistically) literate society, we are inherently and intractably analytic beings, and, furthermore, oral cognition can never be recovered (Ong 12). Because it is so durable, allowing memory to be recorded and disseminated, writing enables a continuity and complexity of thought that led to the development of "science...history, philosophy," and language (Ong 15).[36]

Invoking Lord and Parry, Ong notes that the practice of oral composition stands in stark contrast to the Romantic ideal of author as "God Himself, creating *ex nihilio*" (22). Working from a fund of formulae, the epic poets *rhapsodized*, stitching together "prefabricated parts" (ibid.). Because it has no fixed (textual) referent, oral storytelling requires "mnemonic patterns": "rhythm," "repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances," and "standard thematic settings" (Ong 34). As Lord noted, writing makes these formulae "more elaborate and fixed" (Ong 38); accordingly analytic thought and linear narrative are the products of "the technology of writing" (Ong 40).[37]

Print accelerated and amplified these effects, inscribing words in space, and embedding them "in the manufacturing process," thus paving the ideological path for intellectual proprietorship (Ong 119, 116, 129).[38] Ong attributes the scientific pursuit of universal patterns to the "exactly repeatable visual statement[s]" of print (125). The closure, finality, completeness, and coherence so cherished by Benjamin, Ricoeur, and Brooks are, to Ong, the lineage of print (130, 129, 135). Print is, as such,

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[36] In an "oral economy of thought," the past "is not felt as an itemized terrain, replete with verifiable and disputed 'facts'" (Ong 97). Writing "freed the mind for more original and abstract thought," a restructuring that Ong credits as the catalyst for Greek philosophy (24, 27). The impact of writing is no less apparent in classical Greek drama: Oedipus is posited as the product of writing; "complex and internally anguished" (Ong 149).

[37] By describing how writing dislodges the locus of action from exterior to interior crises, Ong and Lord lead us to reconsider Lukács' thesis. Lukács described the divergent characteristics of storytelling *forms* (drama and epic poetry contra the novel), whereas Ong attributes these discrepancies to *medium*. Epic poetry is, per Lord, the *peculiar* recording of an oral text, ergo: a form adapted between media. The novel, as a form, has not been adapted -- it is the product *of* writing. Lukács argued that the "world" of drama and the epic is total and self-contained because the "circle within which the Greeks led their metaphysical life was smaller than ours" (33). Their diegetic topographies reflected their immediate existential world. What we might take from Lord and Ong is that the oral world seems total because the oral text necessarily transpires *in situ*. The space of reception is a shared, present space, contra the subjective, psychological space of print. The meaning of an oral text arises through "habitat...gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, [the] entire human existential setting" (Ong 46-7). The print world, the world of "articulated self-analysis," is a concatenation of mental spaces: it both emerges from, and transpires in, *minds*. Oral meaning is communicated in existential settings, whereas literate meaning is concentrated in language itself.

[38] "The first assembly line," Ong writes, "produced the printed book" (116).

the progenitor of Formalism, Structuralism, and intertextuality (Ong 131).

Ong describes narrative as the process by which knowledge and experience are extrapolated from time (and its flow is managed) (137). In oral cultures, stories are an epistemological necessity; a means of organizing, storing, and transmitting information (ibid.). On the one hand, the hyper-interiority (or "inward turn" (Kahler, qtd. in Ong 146)) incited by writing and print inspires, per Lukács, heightened degrees of reflexiveness, introspection, and self-inquisition that subject "unconscious inspiration to far greater conscious control" (Ong 144-5). On the other, it distances the "individual...from the communal structures in which each person is necessarily enveloped" (Ong 174). Either way, there is no going back. As with literate cultures more generally, narrative "now permanently bears the mark of writing and typography" (Ong 148).

Jack Zipes incisively itemizes the ideological implications of transposing oral storytelling into literate forms. In *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1993), Zipes follows Red from her oral genesis as a plucky, precocious seamstress through her literary degeneration into a dim and coquettish seductress. *Little Red Riding Hood* (henceforth *LRRH*) was originally an oral folk tale circulated among 16th- and 17th-century peasant women that addressed labor practices (sewing and spinning) and female initiation rites; a *de facto* exegesis on generational delineations: (pre-) pubescent, mother (childbirth/rearing), and grandmother (post-menopausal). The grandmother's climactic death "signifies the continuity and reinvigoration of custom which was important for the preservation of society" (Zipes 24). In oral iterations, Red (sans hood or cap) is shrewd, clever, and creative, and these versions are more likely to end happily (with Red facilitating her own escape). Her literary counterpart, in sharp contrast, meets with a decidedly grisly fate (Zipes 24, 4).

Charles Perrault committed *LRRH* to writing in 1697, transforming the story into a patriarchal cautionary tale in which a spoiled, insipid bourgeois ninny (Perrault's audience was literate and

upper-class) wittingly plunges into peril. So reconstituted, Red (now replete with hood or cap) is complicit in her (symbolic) rape and (literal) murder. "Perrault transformed a hopeful oral tale about the initiation of a young girl into a tragic one of violence in which the girl is blamed for her own violation" (Zipes 7). As one apparatus of the "literary socialization process," Perrault designed his *LRRH* to reinforce "socially accepted ways of viewing women, sexuality, and nature" (Zipes 74). In the later Brothers Grimm version, Red's rape/murder is prevented only by the timely intercession of a male savior (the woodsman), a proxy for institutional law and order.

Zipes notes, per Propp, that oral versions of *LRRH* display "a remarkable unity in plot and structure" (2), and are accentuated by the cultural contexts out of which they arose. Perrault's feckless Red is perfectly in synch with the bourgeois reconceptualization of "child" as a social and developmental category and "distinct...phase of growth" (Zipes 29). Stories were seen as an integral disciplinary tool to maintain "rigorous standards of comportment, and "civilize children" (Zipes 27). Socialization through storytelling was a formidable means of establishing and regulating patriarchal notions of "virtuous behavior," curtailing the "natural inclinations of children," and inculcating the rules of the adult world (Zipes 29, 28, 31, 45). "Good" girls learnt how to deny their "instincts for pleasure" forthwith (Zipes 46). To disobey was to court death.

Zipes considers Perrault's appropriation a form of cultural violation that left a lasting and indelible mark on the continued oral circulation of the tale: "it became practically impossible for either oral storytellers or writers not to take into account his version," and it "was reabsorbed by the oral folk tradition...as a result of its massive circulation in print" (7, 31). The literary contaminated the oral as the two grew dialectically alloyed. The Brothers Grimm then re-re-re-appropriated the story circa 1812, and their alterations reflected further attitudinal shifts regarding children and child-rearing (Zipes 32). A "coded message about rationalizing bodies and sex" (Zipes 34), the Grimm's

Red is, as in Perrault, a victim of her own gullibility and burgeoning libido, and rescued from doom only by the last minute intervention of a male savior. Red has been rendered an archetypal damsel in distress, "the model of virtue in danger of being molested and in need of male protectors to rescue her" (Zipes 38). *LRRH* continues to perpetuate "19th-century strictures of purity" that employs women in peril "to enforce...[a] male-oriented sexual pedagogization" (Zipes 39). *LRRH*, in its manifold manifestations, is employed as cultural justification for the governance of female sexuality.

4.i  On the Problem of Oral Narratology

Ong claims that narrative semiotics is "exclusively (and unreflectively...)" fixated on written texts, and that Structuralism elides "the various ways that texts can relate to their oral substratum" (158, 161). The fallacy of the Structuralist enterprise was the insistence on patterns, units, and funds as constituting a *closed system*. "What leads one to believe that language can be...a closed system? There are no closed systems" (Ong 166).

There may not be closed systems, but there are undoubtedly *systems*: constellations of interlocking, interpenetrating systems: narrative, cultural, political, etc. More importantly, there are *fixed texts*. Narratology's central flaw is not its fixation on written texts alone, but its ignorance of the prodigious differences between the media used to transmit narrative. Consequently, classical narratology is ill-equipped to investigate either the singular qualities and characteristics of oral texts and their composition -- "more natural to thought and speech than is sparse linearity" (Ong 40) -- or how these texts intersect and interact with written texts. Furthermore, as indicated earlier, if Propp's *morphology* was the precedent for Structuralism, then Structuralism is predicated on the study not of written texts, but of *oral-literate* hybrids; per Lord, the *peculiar* written recordings of oral texts. Propp's functions may be less the constituent structural units of narrative than the vestigial or fossilized elements inherent to (formerly) fluid oral storytelling systems.

Narratology is more properly *literary* narratology. Ong might attribute this to the analytic

cognitive modes that writing and print implicitly mobilize and reinforce. As an analytic model,

narratology is a phenomenon of print cognition that necessarily gravitates toward the analysis of its

own origins. Because it issues from and is conditioned by print -- is *print biased*; what Ong calls the

"typographic bias" (76)[39] -- narratology is oblivious to, and ill-suited to investigate, the reception-

centric qualities of oral narratives; can only treat in the *peculiar* oral-literate hybrid texts (e.g. the

Homeric epics and folk tales) misapprehended as purely literary forms. It should be apparent at this

juncture that we are dealing with (at least) three distinct textual forms: the purely oral (Lord's

"song"), the purely literary (Lukács modern novel), and the oral-literary hybrid, or *peculiar* text.

I propose two provisional conclusions from the recuperation of orality:

1. Analytical tools that are (necessarily) the product of print cognition are not necessarily sufficient

for, or applicable to, the evaluation of oral texts.

2. An oral narratology would focus not on fixed or "original" texts (there are no fixed oral texts, and

no original authors), but on the storytelling *systems* through which oral texts are composed.

Is *oral narratology* a contradiction in terms? If oral cognition and modes of reasoning can

never be recovered by a print-centric culture, then the oral cognition that would undergird such a

narratology is forever lost to us. Moreover, if "analytic thought" is the product of print cognition,

then presumably there can be no oral analytic model, because *analysis* in and of itself is alien to oral

cognition. These aporias notwithstanding, a hypothetical oral narratology would interrogate -- as the

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[39] I wonder if this is more properly deemed the *digital bias*. Writing and print represent the digitization of analogue language. Ong considers this the apotheosis of the Ramist project. Ramus (1515-72) claimed that if "defined and divided in the proper way, everything in the art was completely self-evident and the art itself was complete and self-contained" (132). If language can be digitized (alphabets, typesetting, phonemes) then the *products of* language must be digitizable also, necessitating methodologies (themselves the products of digital cognition) to determine their constituent elements. What narrative semiotics perceives as universal, underlying patterns are, in fact, the formal, structural, and configurational patterns imposed upon speech in its translation from a purely oral form into a purely or hybrid literate form. Derrida, of course, would argue that digitization (or the extent to which digitization comports with *differance*) is always already manifest in representation; meaning is impossible without it.

work of Lord and Ong indicates -- the predominantly *configurational* properties of oral narrative systems. Contra literary narratology, which skews to sequential and syntactical analysis, an oral narratology (despite Lord's "narrative skeleton") would foreground a paradigmatic and contextual (i.e. performative) analysis.

4.ii    Derrida, *Differance,* and Linearity

In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida pushes back against the phonocentrism advocated by Ong, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Hegel, Rousseau, Aristotle, and Plato (in *Phaedrus*), disputing the tendency to treat speech as anterior to, and the progenitor of, writing; to set speech astride the apex of the semiotic pyramid. Writing is correspondingly reduced to a secondary signifying system; derivative, imperialistic, corrosive; the impoverished residue of "full," "living" oral speech, which *presents itself* as the...nonempircal or noncontingent signifier" (7, emphasis in original). Aristotle stipulated that voice is the "producer of *the first symbols*," (or, in Ong's phrasing, the "prior primary system"), has an "immediate proximity with the mind" (and Nature, and "being"), and is, accordingly, "closest to the signified" (Derrida 11, emphasis in original). This phonocentrism "merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence*" (Derrida 12, emphasis in original).

As the symbol and substitution of speech, writing, by contrast, is always already exterior to meaning; "always technical and representative"; is "accidental, particular" (Derrida 11, 29), and exists "*for the sole purpose of representing*" language (Saussure, qtd. in Derrida 30, emphasis in original). As signification is constituted through the act of speaking, writing signifies nothing, and is entirely exterior to semiotic figuration (Derrida 31, 33). Writing is not only "the clothing of speech," an "accessory signifier," and "a deviation," but by supplementing speech, writing *subordinates* it, and by virtue Nature itself (Derrida 35, 120, 38). Writing is "a dangerous means, a menacing aid," "usurpation," "a deformation and an aggression" (Derrida 144, 39, 41). By "separating language

from writing" glory is restored to the former; reaffirmation of the status of speech as "authentic language" (Derrida 120). In Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, he "condemns writing as destruction of presence and as disease of speech," and "opposes speech to writing as presence to absence and liberty to servitude" (Derrida 142, 168). The "art of writing" is, according to Rousseau, little more than "a mediated representation of thought" (qtd. in Derrida 144).

Derrida refutes Rousseau's thesis. Not only is speech itself a form of mediation, but one that accords with the logic of writing: "writing itself is the origin of language," and "there is no linguistic sign before writing" (44, 14).[40] There is, in fact, no "originary" linguistic sign system or (sub)stratum whatsoever: "From the moment there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We *think only in signs*" (Derrida 50, emphasis in original). Writing, however, "permitted the thinking, *within language*, of...the sign, technique, representation, and language" through *differance* (Derrida 43, emphasis in original). *Differance* is "the formation of form"; we produce the elements of meaning through differentiation and classification, by their *spacing* in speech ("to the voice and to breath") as well as writing (through inscriptive techniques such as notation) (Derrida 63, 65, 70, 17). This is the "manifestly granular structure" of language that Jakobson attested to (qtd. in Derrida 69). "Spacing insinuates into presence an interval which not only separates the different times of speech and of song but also the represented from the representer" (Derrida 203). Derrida claims that

> there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. (159, emphasis in original)

That which writing purportedly usurps, supplements, and degrades -- the *presence* implicit in "natural" living, oral speech -- was never present there in the first place. To the contrary, language is

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[40] Derrida's use of the term "writing" (writing as the "common root of speech and writing" (76)) is distinct from writing as technique or "notation," which would be our colloquial use of the term (i.e. chirography).

always already semiotically constituted. The signified is a myth inaugurated by the chain of

signifiers conjured to compensate for its absence. We perceive language as structure, "a system of

oppositions of places and values" and a "play of presence or absence" (Derrida 216, 167), but

structure is a sort of afterimage that lingers once a language has emerged, and cannot itself elucidate

the *absolute origin* of that language. Rather, *origins* are links in an infinite chain: "each origin [is]

capable of being the effect or the offshoot of another origin" (217). The lack of "fundamental

signified" (Derrida 315) means that transit between structures is more like a Mobius strip.

Consequently, structural analysis, which adheres to the values and orientation of origin and telos (i.e.

speech generates writing), cannot account for the "passage from one structure to another" (258). The

only possible "origin" is the initial compensatory (supplementary) act: writing. Writing brings into

being the inarticulable space, or *differance* (of which all writing is a trace) between elements. With

no "original" to degrade, writing cannot corrode speech; all substitutes are "substituted for a

substitute" (Derrida 314).[41] Yearning for presence is not symptomatic of writing superseding speech,

but is "born from the abyss...of representation"; we crave the chimera of *original* or *authentic* speech

(Derrida 163). Language is the proverbial tower of turtles: signifiers all the way down.

Though *Of Grammatology* predates mass-market computer use by several decades, Derrida's

observations regarding "linearization" will prove remarkably prophetic as we enter the digital epoch.

For Derrida the "line" is "only a particular model"; an ideologically problematic and historically

reductive model that represents the "repression of pluri-dimensional symbolic thought" (86). Derrida

echoes Ong's lament recovering of pre-linearized cognitive modes is a daunting if not impossible

prospect which would require the de-sedimentation of "four thousand years of linear writing" (ibid.).

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[41] "Within the play of supplementarity, one will always be able to relate the substitutes to their signified, this last will be yet another signifier. The fundamental signified, the meaning of the being represented, even less the thing itself, will never be given us in person" (Derrida 266).

5.        Narrative and Marxism

As with Lukàcs, the novel -- as "the one great literary form that grew up together with capitalism and that permits itself to be read...as an allegory of class relations within the capitalist order"; as the representation of "the estranged and alienated and fragmented reality that is modern life under capitalism" (Dowling 94, 106) -- became an object of intense fascination for Marxist theorists. In the first of the four essays that comprise *Dialogic Imagination* (1943-41), "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin elaborates Lukàcs' project, distinguishing the novel as a "zone of maximal contact with the present" and "between the represented object and contemporary reality"; the novel is, in fact, the expressive genre of  modernity, "with its diversity of speech and voice," contra the epic, which is the glorification of the "completed, conclusive and immutable" past (11, 31, 25, 17). Other genres collapse into the novel: "letters, diaries, confessions," the rhetoric of the court, "philosophical tract[s]," and "manifestos that are openly political" (Bakhtin 33).

     In "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," Bakhtin traces the formation and maturation of novelistic language (and the novel as a unique linguistic construct) as "a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other," systems comprised of "*heterogenous* linguistic and stylistic forms" (47, 48, emphasis in original). Bakhtin locates the gestation of novelistic discourse in the "complex and centuries-long struggle of cultures and languages" and highlights two formative factors: *laughter* and *polyglossia* (83). Laughter, the tradition of "parodying and travestying" as comic equivalency, dates back to Grecian satyr plays, "just as sanctioned and canonical as their...tragic manifestations" (53, 54). Parody serves as a corrective that elicits "a different and contradictory reality" to "straightforward genres," and "paved the way for the impiety of the novelistic form" (Bakhtin 59). Because parody purposefully alienates and repurposes meaning while remaining tethered to an original referent, it simultaneously deflates

and reinvigorates meaning, while also drawing attention to its own status as an object of

representation: "Language is transformed...into a working hypothesis for comprehending and

expressing reality" (Bakhtin 61). Polyglossia has concomitant effects, "[freeing] consciousness from

the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language," that is, regarding one's own

language as a (*the*) singularly authentic, essential, or absolute means of representing reality (ibid.).[42]

In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," the oracular Bakhtin presages not

only the narratological fixation on temporality (Genette, Bal, et al.), but the insights of preeminent

new media scholars and *neo-narratologists* such as Lev Manovich and Marie Laure-Ryan. Bakhtin

assigns the neologism *chronotope* "(literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal

and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (85). The chronotope is "a

formally constitutive category of literature" that fuses "spatial and temporal indicators...into

one...concrete whole" (ibid.). The chronotope synthesizes "literal" representation and metaphor.

Spatial and temporal intersections -- the chronotope of *encounter*, often on a road -- can initiate "the

collapse of *social distances*" (Bahktin 243, emphasis in original).

> Time...fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road); this is the source of the
> rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course: "the course of a life," "to
> set out on a new course," "the course of history" and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the
> ways in which road is turned into a metaphor, but its fundamental pivot is the flow of time.
> (Bakhtin 244)

As the "organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel," chronotopes define a

"literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality" and comprise the gravitational

center around which "[a]ll the novel's abstract elements -- philosophical and social generalizations,

ideas, analyses of cause and effect" -- orbit" (Bakhtin 243, 250). By virtue of his exhaustive survey

of generic forms (Greek romance, ancient biography and autobiography, folklore, chivalric romance,

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[42] "[L]anguages interanimate each other and objectify precisely that side of one's own...language *that pertains to its world view*, its inner form, the axiologically accentuated system inherent in it" (Bakhtin 62, emphasis in original).

etc.), Bakhtin's chronotope is a prism refracting more than the interplay of reality and representation

("indissolubly tied up with each other" in relations of "uninterrupted exchange" and "continual

mutual interaction" (254)), but the ways in which any given era conceives of time and history (i.e.

circular, linear, ruptured) and the meaning(s) of space as a social, political, and historical construct.

In the closing essay, "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin asks why the study of style is

segregated from the "social life of discourse...in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and

villages, of social groups, generations, and epochs. Stylistics is concerned not with living discourse,

but with a histological specimen made from it" (Bakhtin 259). These specimens evince the Romantic

fetishization of the author as an "originary" genius. Bakhtin, like Propp, deplores this seemingly

arbitrary fixation on tropes or themes, which he considers wholly inadequate to the task of evaluating

the syncretic complexity of the novel; a "phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and

voice" (260, 261). Here Bakhtin lays the groundwork for one of his most enduring contributions,

*heteroglossia*, which denotes the cacophony and confluence of a legion of voices, languages, genres,

and styles consolidated into a "higher unity" in literature (263).[43] Language,

> at any given moment of its historical existence...is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents
> the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past,
> between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools,
> circles and so forth... These "languages" of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of
> ways, forming new socially typifying "languages." (Bakhtin 291)

As "living languages" are incorporated into literature, they become dialectically intertwined: the

former are "deformed and cease to be that which they had been simply as dialect," but they

simultaneously deform the latter, which "cease to be...a closed socio-linguistic system" (Bakhtin

294). The result is "a dialogue of languages" (ibid.).

Like Bakhtin, Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially*

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[43] Drama, by contrast, is monoglossic in the sense that "there is no second all-encompassing plotless (nondramatic) dialogue outside that of the (nondramatic) plot" (Bakhtin 266).

*Symbolic Act* (1981) runs the gamut from medieval romances through to the 19th-century novel. In his thoughtful exegesis, William C. Dowling writes that one of Jameson's most trenchant theses is that "narrative or 'story' is not specifically a literary form," but manifests in a variety of forms across a multiplicity of media (95). The "invariant structural features" apparent in all of these instantiations suggests "a more universal dimension," by which Jameson concludes that narrative is an all-encompassing "epistemological category" (ibid.). Echoing Ricoeur and White, narrative is less structure or form, and more of a set of "abstract...coordinates within which we come to know the world, a contentless form that our perception imposes on the raw flux of reality giving it...the comprehensible order we call experience" (ibid.).[44] Marx told history as a "providential plot," and Althusser's musings on modes of production are incomprehensible unless narratively contextualized and conditioned: "a structure or system of relations" that constitute a sort of story (Dowling 96, 97).

Repudiating Marxist empiricism, Jameson surmises that because reality is narratively manifest (manifestly narrative?), it must be interpreted *as* narrative. By conceiving of culture "as an arena of class struggle and revolutionary conflict," interpretation is dislodged from the bourgeois pedestal of literary criticism. The gauntlet thrown down to Marxist thinkers is to plunge into the cultural muck and rescue narrative interpretation by claiming it as an essential "form of understanding...from the denial and repression of History" (Dowling 100). Narrative's "historic function" is paradoxical: the "systematic undermining and demystification, the secular 'decoding,' of those preexisting inherited traditional or sacred narrative paradigms which are its initial givens" (Jameson 152). If narrative is "the specific mechanism through which the collective consciousness represses historical contradictions," then "History" here implies master codes or

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[44] Echoing Derrida's claim that every signifier signifies another signifier, Dowling notes that "anything we try to substitute for a story is, on closer examination, likely to be another sort of story. ...even mathematical proofs...exhibit something of the dynamics of plot and closure" (96).

narratives -- "predetermined conceptual limits" -- that necessarily distill, reduce, and impoverish any "complex reality" explained (i.e. rewritten, allegorized) thereby (Dowling 115, 101).[45]

Jameson's analysis takes an avowedly base/superstructure bent, and he charges Propp with conflating the two. Jameson champions Greimas' success in fulfilling Propp's project of

> reducing a wealth of empirical or surface narrative events to a much smaller number of abstract or 'deep-structural' moments. Such a reduction allows us not only to compare narrative texts which seem very different from one another; it also allows us to simplify a single involved narrative into redundant surface manifestations of a single recurrent function. (120)

Accordingly, Greimas and Lévi-Strauss "insist on a radical distinction between the narrative surface (or manifestation), and some underlying deep narrative structure" (Jameson 122). "It now remains to be seen whether a narrative system is conceivable from which," contra Propp, "the...traces of surface representation or narrative 'manifestation' have been completely eliminated" (ibid.).

Marxist narrative theory even undergirded new media analysis. Lev Manovich enlists Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* "as our guide to the language of new media" (xiv).[46] Vertov is essential to Manovich both because cinematic language serves as the *lingua fraca* of computer interaction, and because film, like Manovich's signature cultural-*cum*-computer *database logic*, is fundamentally "indexical." Accordingly, editing (including "temporal montage" and "montage within a shot") "is the key twentieth-century technology for creating fake realities" (xviii, xvii). Vertov theorized that "film can overcome its indexical nature through montage, by presenting a viewer with objects that never existed in reality" through a play of "perspective, scale, and lighting," and the imbrication and juxtaposition of layers and competing semantic worlds (Manovich xviii,

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[45] Jameson "ascribes to narrative a collective function" (Dowling 115). Historical events can only recover their "original urgency...if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme...the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity; only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot" (Jameson 19).

[46] "A hundred years after cinema's birth, cinematic ways of seeing the world, of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one experience to the next, have become the basic means by which computer users access and interact with all cultural data" (Manovich xv).

xix). While the camera permits a perspectival unshackling and a heretofore unknown mobility and

scope (whether distance, intimacy, or speed; that which transcends "the limits of human vision") in

image capture, the subsequent collocation of those images distorts or even discards their contextual

origins and/or singularity (Manovich xx, xxx, xxi). Part of Manovich's fascination is with the lack of

"a well-defined language" in Vertov's film: "Rather, it proposes an untamed, and apparently endless,

unwinding of techniques...as cinema's new way of speaking" (Manovich 242). Vertov's "orgy of

cinematography" is a circuitous chain of signification which, per Derrida, has no originating,

underlying signifier (Manovich xxviii). Indeed, Vertov's "unwinding of techniques" seems

concomitant with Derrida's proposal that writing (as trace, as *differance*) evokes the inarticulable

space between elements. The "language" that Vertov's film discovers -- and this "discovery is film's

main narrative" -- is self-consciously articulated through the techniques of its own composition: the

technical capabilities of the equipment used to manufacture it. The "story" is precisely the film as

catalogue of "the full range of possibilities offered by the camera," or, in other words, the story of

industrial assembly and manufacture articulated as a "visual epistemology" (Manovich 243, 276).

Vertov accomplishes that which "new media designers and artists still have to learn -- how to merge

database and narrative into a new form" (Manovich 243).

5.i      Narrative Diffused

As the theoretical and methodological principles of narrative semiotics congealed, the tenets of

Structuralism and narratology resonated with scholars in a variety of fields and disciplines including

postmodernism, cognitive science, historiography, economics, and film studies.

In *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (1974), Christian Metz applies Saussure and

Structuralism (Barthes in particular) to the development of a "cinematographic grammar" (117).

Metz admits that his is not a grammar *per se*, but rather a typology of syntagmatic configurations

with a parallel analytical orientation.[47] Film, Metz asserts, is not "language" in the sense of a "*system*

*of signs* used for *intercommunication*"; cinema, rather "is one-way communication" (75, emphasis in

original). Images are not irreducible units like phonemes or words, which are semiotically activated

through syntagmatic configuration, but statements with innate, already actualized meanings (Metz

101).[48] Metz argues that narrative has had a deterministic impact on film grammar: the cinema would

have taken a very different form without narrative.

What "distinguishes [narrative] from the rest of the world" is its Aristotelean wholeness, or

*completedness*; a discrete entity with a beginning and ending (Metz 17). Narrative is temporally

trifurcated, unfolding *over time* (the "time of the thing told"), *in time* ("the time of telling"), and *out

of time* (the suppression of the "completely real" and the "*here* and *now*") (Metz 18, 22, emphasis in

original). *Pastness* is evident: "an event must...have ended before its narration can begin," and the

power of narrative is so potent that the image "vanishes behind the plot it has woven" (Metz 23, 45).

With a plethora of possible alternative applications, cinema need not necessarily have

"[evolved] into a machine for telling stories," but early iconographic directors such as George Méliès

and D.W. Griffith "wanted above all to tell a story; they were not content unless they could subject

[filmmaking] to the *articulations*...of narrative discourse" (Metz 93, 95, emphasis in original). As

narrative became the cinematographic lodestar, filmic techniques ("filmic-narrative" procedures)

emerged and were refined out of narrative necessity, and gradually cohered into a sort of narrative

syntax (Metz 96).[49] The art form of film was forged in a narrative crucible.

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[47] "The study of cinema of an art...can be conducted according to the methods derived from linguistics" (Metz 97).

[48] As with many of the preceding scholars, Metz defines the "event" as the basic unit (*cineme*, perhaps?) of cinema (24). Later, he describes the shot (a large unit) as akin to a "'sentence'...indeed the smallest 'poetic' entity" in film (66). These irreducible "always actualized" units are arranged into sequences that represent "a complex [cinematic] segment of *discourse*" (Metz 65, emphasis in original). Reminiscent of Bremond's clusters, these "blocks of reality" always exist "in *relation* to the plot": the "screen instance" (the image block) is the signifier, and the "diegetic instance" (its narrative purpose) is the signified (Metz 115, 143, emphasis in original).

[49] Even nonnarrative films "are governed essentially by the same semiological mechanisms" (Metz 144).

In the introduction to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Jameson notes that (pre)modern metanarratives were predicated on "two great myths": emancipation ("the liberation of humanity"), and the teleological movement toward a "totalizing" epistemology ("the speculative unity of all knowledge") (ix). The *postmodern*, according to Lyotard, evinces an "incredulity toward metanarratives," and as a result great galvanizing social forces are "being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements" (xxiv). This "crisis of narrative" undermined "science, literature, and the arts," and entangled humanity in volatile and unstable semiotic webs whose "properties...are not necessarily communicable" (xxiii, xxiv).

Narrative is posited as a mechanism of indoctrination and social control. From the moment we are born, we are "positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around [us], in relation to which [we] will inevitably chart [our] course" (Lyotard 15).[50] Narrative delimits "customary knowledge" -- how a given society defines its "criteria of competence" -- and legitimizes social institutions (Lyotard 20, 23). The pragmatics of narrative transmission -- "'know-how,' 'knowing how to speak,' and 'knowing how to hear'" -- cement "the social bond" (Lyotard 21).

Lyotard chastises those that would define narrative as a "diachronic costume of...structural operators" (19). Morphology is only valid insofar as it accounts for the immediate circumstances of its object of study: the functional efficiency of any given biological system evolves in tandem with local conditioning factors. In a long-overdue corrective to Propp, Lyotard asserts that no living entity develops in isolation, but development is inherently context-dependent. Nature inevitably "produces the least complex local morphology compatible with...initial local circumstances" (Lyotard 59). As an epigraph of sorts to the *scientific turn*, Lyotard's asks not whether narrative should aspire to scientific axiomatization, but if science, in all its newfound quantum incoherence, is a stable or

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[50] Because people self-identify as "characters in...[a] master narrative," historical events are invented by agents who "produced lives worthy of having stories told about them" (White 151, 173).

suitable chassis for narrative study. The more science embraces chaos as status quo, the less it correlates to the supposed universal semiotic systems and patterns scaffolding narrative.

Ricoeur is one of the foremost inspirations for Hayden White's *The Content and the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), an investigation into the clashes and collusions between literary and historical narratives and narrativization. White contends that narrative is the cornerstone of not only subjective identity, but also how subjectivities entwine as a society.[51] Narrative is a "system of discursive meaning production" by which we situate ourselves as subjects within various "social formations" (White x). We have experiences (are "beings-in-time"), and those experiences are made comprehensible through their (re-)configuraiton into, and transmission as, narratives: the translation of "knowing into telling" (White 1). As a society, we are collectively invested in narrative as a primary means of forging meaning from experience. If that investment wanes, it could corrode "the possibility of socially significant belief" (White x).[52]

Ostensibly, the prerogative of the storyteller is antithetical to the historian's, who claims that that reality "should simply be" (White 4, 3). This segregation is meant to maintain the putative differences between representations of "real"/actual contra "imagined"/possible events (White 4). Where some see a chasm, White sees a bridge: narrative is an "[instrument] with which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, and resolved" (ibid.). White traces the use of narrative in historiography through the examples of the annal (a chronological list of events), the chronicle (central subject and situation, but no closure), and "history" (16, 4). Historical narratives are self-contained and teleological, and endings endow events with "a structure, an order of meaning" that does not arise through chronology alone (White 5).

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[51] "To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the...nature of humanity itself" (White 1).

[52] There is a universal "psychological impulse...not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity" (White 4). Moreover, the past was populated with people pitted in struggles and conflicts commensurate with any encountered "in myth, religious parable, and literary fiction" (White 175).

Narrative maps a "structure of relationships" onto historical events, and events are infused with meaning through their synthesis into an Aristotelean whole (White 9). This is a deceptively *selective* process, with events included and excluded according to their significance (White 10). Narrative, however, conceals the lacunae-riddled nature of its finished form, conjuring a veneer of "completeness," "continuity," and "coherency," "[straining] for the effect of having filled in all of the gaps" (White 11).[53] By virtue of its teleological cohesion, narrative *moralizes* (14). Closure resolves contests with moral consequences: Who wins? What is gained? Who loses? What is lost? Narrative, in this sense, is a simulacrum of the moral order we seek (but rarely find) in lived experience. By narrativizing real events, those events are suffused with a "coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure" that "can only be imaginary" (White 24).

Can historical events be "truthfully represented" through "imaginative" discourses such as myth (White 27)? White claims that narrative historiography, literature, and myth are equally valid "distillates of the historical experience of a people, a group, a culture" (45). In wresting events into circumscribed sequences, historical narratives "test the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness" (ibid.).

Narration, as an act that enfolds how "historical interpretation is achieved and the mode of discourse in which (an)...understanding of matters historical is represented," is ideological; narration can only transpire in the context of one's "system of beliefs, values, [and] ideals" (White 60, 88). Because the inclusion and ordering of historical events is selective, the same historical events are open to profuse and "equally plausible descriptions or narratives" (76).[54] These representations determine "the value, meaning, and worth of the 'reality' represented" (ibid.).

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[53] Brenda Laurel surmises that the necessary selectivity of art captures "what is essential in the most effective and economic way," and audiences are capable of filling in the blanks to make representations believable (Laurel 118, 145).

[54] The sifting through, selection, and ordering of facts "involves a vast accumulation of choices" the sum of which "we call narrative history" (Fulford 44).

Comprehensibility, however, engenders emancipatory reflexivity. Though bearing the stigma of fictionality, narrative's "fixed order" evokes the causal chain of agents bringing about their own destinies through purposeful action. Readers indulge in "fantasies of freedom," and conceive of reality as it *could be*: "how ideal community might be achieved...[how] things might be otherwise" (White 89, 157). Contrary to Benjamin's *death*, closure evinces a "vision of humanity finally reconciled with nature and with itself" (White 165). Fiction is truth and potential in disguise.

If, on the one hand, "life makes sense only insofar as it is worked up into a story," and on the other, history is the product of "human agents seeking...to endow the world in which they live with symbolic meaning," then our actions are doubly inflected (White 167, 178). We filter history through a semiotic sieve so that our lives and actions, individual and communal, can be reconciled with our past. We want our story and the story of history to harmonize. Consequently, history is inseparable from our narration of it.

Donald N. McCloskey takes a similar tack to White's in "Storytelling in Economics" (1990), disputing the proclivity to treat economics as non-literary (that is, as distinct from fiction). Much like those produced by science and historiography, economic texts tend to be praised as inherently objective: as "transparent, a matter of 'mere communication,' 'just style,' simply 'writing up' the 'theoretical results' and 'empirical findings'" (McCloskey 10-11). Noting that "the novel and economic science were born at the same time," McCloskey contends that, quite to the contrary, "scientific prose like literary prose is complicated and allusive" (7, 11). Indeed, as "saturated with narration," economics balances our two principal means of understanding and explaining -- metaphor and story -- and "ninety percent of what economists do is...storytelling" (McCloskey 5, 9).

Invoking Propp to highlight the explicitly structural composition of storytelling in economics, McCloskey argues that economics is even more, well, *economical* in its basic functions than the

schematic proposed by Propp. "The actions of an economistic folklore are few: entry, exit, price

setting, orders within a firm, purchase, sale, valuation," etc. (McCloskey 13). Taking his lead from

Brooks and White, McCloskey posits "the sense of an ending" as a primary constraint imported from

fiction, as well as the selectivity intrinsic to the task. "Stories...are selective," the alloyed products of

the raw materials we pick and choose: "nothing is given to us by the world in story form already. ...

We decide what matters, for *our* purposes" (McCloskey 18, emphasis in original). Because stories

are selective, they inhere gaps and lacunae. Contrary to White, however, McCloskey surmises that it

is precisely these "blanks" that incite the imaginative interplay between the text and its reader.

McCloskey quotes Iser's assertion that "[w]hat is missing...stimulates the reader into filling the

blanks with projections" (19). This parsimony, be it scientific or fictional, is precisely what allows

the material to "[expand] in the reader's mind" (Woolf, qtd. in McCloskey 19).

5.ii     Narrative Triumphant

At the turn of the millennium (wherefore art thou, Y2K?), Canadian journalist Robert Fulford took

narrative out for a victory lap. His 1999 Massey Lecture, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in*

*the Age of Mass Culture*, examines narrative through five lenses: gossip (a "folk art version of

literature"), master narratives ("a drama [we] did not write but must perform"), news and urban

legends (created by "everyone who tells them"), postmodernism, and romances (1, 34, 64). Far from

dissipating, narrative is thriving: "This has been the century of mass storytelling" (Fulford 151).

Events are compressed and "simplified, stripped of extraneous detail" through narrative; stories

"explain, teach, and entertain"; narrative is the "juncture where facts and feelings meet" (Fulford 9).

Narrative is the bedrock of subjectivity: the self is a gestalt, comprised of "stories we tell ourselves

and others to structure our personal histories" and "communicate our sense of self to others" (Linde,

qtd. Fulford 13). To lose this narrative thread is to "disintegrate as personalities" (Auster, qtd. in

Fulford 13). Civilization, too, exists "as a series of narratives" (ibid.). Stories are our epistemological

heritage, a continuum linking us "us to ancestors we can never know" (Fulford x). Narrative is

"central to our existence, our companion, forever puzzling, forever irreplaceable" (154).

Per Brooks, White, and Ricoeur, narrative is an attempt to process and "*contain* the

terrifyingly haphazard quality of life" in all its randomness and contingency; an exercise of control

over chaos (Fulford 15, emphasis in original). Because humans are "symbolizing, conceptualizing,

meaning-seeking animals," we are always attempting to imbue experience with sense (Geertz, qtd. in

Fulford 15) By atomizing experience into apprehensible units, and (re)assembling those units into

wholes, we render existence "acceptable...*bearable, endurable*" (Fulford 17, emphasis in original).

Postmodernism took a jaundiced view, eyeing "the devious ways of narrative with a

certain suspicion" (Fulford 96). The "unreliable narrator" is the quintessential emblem of "the age of

relativism," a dirge for "all that was certain, orderly, and purposeful" (Fulford 97). Gone is the notion

of narrative as a beacon of truth, supplanted by credos of "complexity, parody, ambiguity, and ironic

self-awareness" (ibid.). As Poststructuralism assumed, "language floats free of an author's intentions

and will be interpreted in as many ways as there are readers" (Fulford 103). Narrative may engender

empathy, but it is also deeply misleading (Fulford 152). Truth and falsehood commingle: "Narrative

picks up misinformation as a clothes dryer accumulates lint" (Fulford 94). The coherence narrative

purportedly provides is an illusion, a malicious "deception" (Fulford 105). By shoehorning reality

into abstract, bounded structures, narrative lulls us into a false sense of credulity and complacency,

befogging the cruel randomness of existence. In two words: "narrative lies" (Fulford 105).

Far removed from the postmodern fusillade, cognitive science credits narrative as the catalyst

of consciousness; the linchpin of experiential reality and psychic coherence. Stories are pedagogical:

"the building blocks of human thought...the way the brain organizes itself. ... When we compare one

story we know with another, we are assembling elements that make our brains work" (Fulford 83). In *The Literary Mind* (1996), Mark Turner posits narrative as "a basic principle of mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories" (v). Narrative "is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it" (Turner 4). Narrative imagining is, in fact, "inseparable from our evolutionary past," and throughout human history been one of the paramount forces operating upon and molding the mind (Turner 25).

Parable is pivotal: projecting one story onto another makes the interpretation of experience possible, provides the basis for "thinking, knowing, acting, creating, and...even speaking," and enables an "understanding of a complex of objects, events, and actors" (Turner v, 5). Stories -- "events in space" as basic as liquid poured into a container (the story of *into*) -- are key components of infant cognitive development, including rudimentary apprehensions of "animacy and agency" (Turner 13, 24). Causal relations are learned through "spatial image schemas such as *links* and *paths*" (Turner 18, emphasis in original).[55] Image schemas, such as "[m]otion along a path" and "bounded interior," are "skeletal patterns that recur in our sensory and motor experience" (Turner 16). Through the gradual interplay of perception and interaction, we learn to combine simple schemas into increasingly complex compound schemas. As we apprehend how schemas interrelate, their repeatability -- what Turner calls the "invariance principle" -- establishes perception as "a basis for action" (31, 16). Though the particularities of individual experience will differ (both between individuals and within the repertoire of experiences of a given individual), we come to appreciate action as consisting "of small spatial stories, repeated again and again" (19).[56] We understand events as having an "'internal' structure," including causal forces, and set the "elements and parts of an

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[55] The "human brain is uncommonly sophisticated in its capacity for constructing sequences" (Turner 18).

[56] We can identify "small spatial stories on the basis of partial information," and are, as ever, capable of filling in the gaps (Turner 19). Despite their inherent incompleteness, the recursive nature of spatial stories permits conceptual and anticipatory activities such as predicting, evaluating, planning, and explaining (Turner 20).

event" into dynamic interrelationships (Turner 28, 29).

The dynamism of event structures mirrors the distributed cognition of perception. Perception "is entirely fragmented across the brain," and these fragments are not "assembled in any one place" (Turner 110). As with perception, the "aggregate meaning" of a parable resides in an "array of spaces and in their connections" (Turner 85), and are the product of the "parallel activity in the brain of *many different* maps" (Edelman, qtd. in Turner 110, emphasis in original). The brain is capable not only of coordinating "different mental spaces distinguished by temporal viewpoint and focus," but can apply these processes to the inference and approximation of alternative *subjective* (read: empathetic) viewpoints (Turner 122).

Turner's most provocative claim contests the axiom that grammar is antecedent to narrative (the basis on which narrative semiotics adopts grammatology as its theoretical precedent). To the contrary, Turner contends that "parable preceded grammar" (141). As "the origin of language," parable "creates structure for voice by projecting structure from story. The structure it creates is grammar" (ibid.). Because the cognitive capacities of pre-linguistic hominid communities were rooted in parable, Turner surmises that they "used parable to project structure from story to create rudimentary grammatical structure for vocal sound" (142). As grammatical structures emerged from story, they gradually coalesced into a "network of related grammatical constructions" (Turner 147). This accounts for the shared structural characteristics of grammar and narrative: both originate from parable. "Language is the child of the literary mind" (Turner 168).

Narrative imagining "partitions and categorizes [analog] wholes into related elements," or *units*, that, once atomized, can (as with any delimited digitized units) be recombined "into infinitely many products" (Turner 146). Not only does grammar surface from story, but story is malleable architecture, adaptable into any number of other structural blueprints. "Once grammatical structure is

established by projection of narrative structure, it can be adapted to express vast ranges of conceptual structures beyond the structure that gave it rise" (Turner 155).

5.iii     The Analogue/Digital Dyad

If Turner's claim holds, and stories are predicated not on "single lexical items" but structure itself, then stories were not made comprehensible through syntax, but syntax through stories. At the risk of inciting a chicken/egg *mise en abyme*, how does this reflect upon the Structuralist enterprise? Had Structuralism reverse-engineered stories to expose the linguistic architecture that narrative had itself brought into being? What came first: the *narrateme* and its organizational pattern, or the parable?

This issue can be partly clarified by returning to the (now kaleidoscopic) characteristics of *constituent units.* With his emphasis on image schemas, Turner reminds us of Metz's framework that takes the *image event* as constituent unit of film semiotics. Turner and Metz's theories align, in part, because they propose symmetrical units: simple story schemas and events, respectively. Neither unit can be further atomized, nor do they have an asymbolic precursor. As analogue elements, they are irreducible and already semiotically activated composites.

In *My Mother Was a Computer* (2005), Hayles argues that the analogue and the digital often operate in concert. DNA is often perceived as "digital code, but the truth is more complex: DNA combines the digital (the double helix of base pairs) with the "analog process of protein folding," enjoying the advantages of both the discrete and the continuous (Hayles, *Mother* 29). Digitization "allows fine-tuned error control and depth of coding, whereas analog processes tie in with highly evolved human capabilities of pattern processing" (Hayles, *Mother* 56). Digitization is the domain of intricate configurational procedures (how information is atomized, stored, transmitted), whereas our perceptual world -- our embodied, material, temporal lived experience -- is analogue. In a sense, digitization is an authorial process (combination of units into structures), whereas the analogue is a

receptive one (how we engage with and interpret those structures). Narrative requires both.

Pursuant to the proposal of a *digital bias* (p. 33, footnote), this dyad extends to language and narrative. Yes, language can be digitized (i.e. alphabetized), but when we read, we perceive words, groups of words, and the sequences into which these words and groups are composited.[57] Turner's astonishing leap is to propose that language is not comprised of units, but that units are necessitated by language. This seems self-evident in certain respects. Per Ong, spoken language preceded its written and representational (ideographic) counterparts, as well as alphabetization. It is precisely the *digital bias* induced by the regime of print and the scientific turn that presumes the *a priori* existence of the *-eme* (as the atom precedes the molecule, and the molecule the cell, etc.). In other words, we perceive evolution as a process of *aggregation*, whether the evolving entity is a plant, language, or story; as though the alphabet was anterior to language, the letters awaiting discovery. Turner reverses the teleological chain: spatial story structure preceded the *-emes* later proposed as the basis of their composition. Whatever insoluble units or combinatory systems that Structuralism proposed were, in a sense, irrelevant. Not only did the structures underpinning configuration exist, but they may have been the origin of everything else that followed.

6.     Narrative and New Media Collide

At this juncture, precisely at the moment of narrative's purportedly maximal victory, a sharp and profound pivot takes place: narrative and new media collide. Telling stories with computers -- and, to an arguably equal extent, through video games -- will challenge core criteria of narrative semiotics, and impact how narratives are conceived, developed, and deployed more broadly. In *Computers as Theatre* (1991), Brenda Laurel applies *Poetics* to the reconceptualization of computer interface design. Janet Murray's seminal *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1998) provides an insightful survey of

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[57] Readers "perceive words...as patterns perceived at a single glance" (Hayles, *Mother* 56).

these transfigured (and transfiguring) narrative forms. Murray is an early proponent of Deleuze and Guattari's *rhizome* as the bedrock of a postmodern or *neo-narratological* framework. With abundant points of entry, no definitive beginning or end point, and no preordained trajectory, *rhizomatic* story structures foreground exploration, enacting "a [never-ending] story of wandering" (Murray 133). Driven to survey narrative spaces as comprehensively as possible, users grow less invested in completion, and more in seeing "everything there is to see" (Murray 87). Spatiality, exploration, and agency form a feedback loop: the more elaborate, immersive, and capacious the diegetic environment, "the more active we want to be within it" (Murray 126).

Contemporaneous with Murray, Espen Aarseth combines the Greek words for "work" and "path" into the neologism *ergodic* to distinguish the "non-trivial" effort required to traverse such texts (1). In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich proposes that as three-dimensional virtual space becomes a germinal cultural logic, the "psychological movement" of literary narrative is supplanted by the aesthetics of "spatial wandering" (2001, p. 78). Accordingly, Henry Jenkins asserts that as new media narratives come to privilege "exploration over plot development," storytellers become "narrative architects" (qtd. in Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, 2006, p. 124, 121). Following the so-called *narratology vs. ludology* dust-up (c. 2004-6) -- wherein the ludologists charged narratologists with attempting to infiltrate virgin disciplinary territory, and narratologists and cultural theorists complained that such an academic embargo impeded robust interdisciplinary analysis -- both camps conceded that the principal difference between games and traditional (i.e. print) narrative was that the latter are interpretation-dominant, and the former configuration-dominant: "with games the user interprets in order to configure, whereas in [narrative works], the user configures in order to interpret" (Hayles, *Electronic* 8). With dilating configurational and navigational control, audiences play an ever-more integral part in defining, directing, and even co-

authoring new narrative forms as they unfurl.[58]

6.ii    Neo-Narratology and a "Unified Theory"

At this stage, other scholars begin to clamour for a more capacious narratology, one that accounts for every medium as "a unique environment with a unique set of communicative skills" (Koenitz et. al. 26). A generative elaboration of Jenkins' *transmedia storytelling* concept, *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology* (2014), edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, proposes a *media-conscious narratology* that consolidates "medium-free, transmedial, and medium-specific narratological concepts" (4, 9). Variations of this narratology imagine narrative as a sprawling diegetic space or *world*. Ryan notes a cultural drift away from standalone, self-contained stories, and toward the development of open-ended worlds in which a multitude of stories might transpire (1). This narrative sandbox is a nexus around which "different media converge," and might include "serial storyworlds that span multiple installments, and transmedial storyworlds that are deployed across multiple media platforms" (Ryan and Thon 3, 1). Ryan and Thon insist that *storyworlds* are "crucially shaped by the affordances and limitations of the media in which they are realized," and a media-conscious narratology is necessary to amend classical narratology's fixation on literary fiction (2). Ryan is adamant that the "choice of medium makes a difference as to what stories can be told, how they are told, and why they are told," and thus proposes a "[turn from]

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[58] The extent to which new media narrative audiences are co-authors is a deeply contentious issue. Murray considers procedural authors (the author of story systems) choreographers that "[supply] the rhythms, the context, and...steps that will be performed," while users are dancers employing "this repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance" among the preordained stagings the system permits (153). At most, the user is the "author of a particular performance," a "derivative" form of authorship contra "the originating authorship of the system itself" (Murray 155, 152). Manovich differentiates *artisan* authorship (the Romantic ideal of "authentic creation" which entails "making something from scratch"), and *industrial* authorship ("creativity as selection," which entails "selecting combinations of different options"); framing the latter as authorship via assembly-line (120). Aarseth is similarly skeptical, noting that hypertext reading tended to be "portrayed...as a kind of co-authorship, with the reader creating her own text as she goes along" (77). Aarseth argues that new media narrative adheres to preestablished paradigms "of authors, readers, and texts," and that lofty claims of newfound authorial agency are akin to confusing "the influence of a city's tourist guide with that of a city planner" (78, 139). For Aarseth, the "politics of the author-reader relationship" turns on the question of "whether the user has the ability to transform the text into something that [the author] could not foresee or plan for" (164).

'classical narratology'...to a phenomenological approach focused on the act of imagination required of the reader, spectator, or player" (25, 43).

In "First Steps towards a Unified Theory for Interactive Digital Narrative" (2013), Koenitz et. al. concur that preexisting definitions designed for "established media forms are insufficient for the analysis of emerging forms of narrative expression" (21). Here too the authors underscore the importance of medium-specificity: "each medium [is] a unique environment with a unique set of communicative skills," and the "unique technological aspects of each artifact defining their narrative possibilities" (Koenitz et. al. 26, 27). Interactive digital narrative (IDN) requires a new theoretical framework "guided by developments in contemporary narratology, which cast narrative as a flexible cognitive structure not tied to any particular form" (Koenitz et. al. 21).[59] Structuralist narratology (Propp, Greimas) is identified as the excavation of a "complex set of layers and components...that results from a special logical organization" (Koenitz et. al. 23); i.e. *structure is the product of a system*. *Poetics* is jettisoned because it "encourages linearity and truncation of thought" (Jennings, qtd. in Koenitz et. al. 23).[60] The malleability of IDN presupposes a "call for descriptive models based on contextual tendencies, and on users' expectations" (ibid.).

In this "evolving framework," IDN are "comprised of a system (the digital artifact), *process* (the user interacting with the system and the system's reactions), and *product* (a particular instantiated narrative)" (30). The system "supplies both content and structures...and provides a flexible presentation of narratives" (ibid.). The authors propose the term *protostory* as encompassing "the concrete content of an IDN *system* as a space of potential narratives defined by settings, environment definitions/assets, characters, and *Narrative design*" (ibid., emphasis in original). A

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[59] On the computer-science end, IDN is "a technical problem to solve," contra the humanities, which investigates it "as a process for discovering new expressive forms" (Koenitz et. al. 21).

[60] Digital media present opportunities "to express cyclic narratives" contradistinct from Aristotle's "neat beginnings, middles, and ends'" (Jennings, qtd. in Koenitz et. al 23).

*narrative vector* is a "sub-structure in a narrative design that provides a specific direction for the narrative" (Koenitz et. al. 31). Like Bremond's clusters, vectors "[work] in connection with the preceding and the following parts of the narrative," as well as with "other available elements of the protostory" (ibid.). IDN actualize Bremond's thesis that the potential must exist for a narrative *to* branch: in IDN the narrative *can* branch. Control over the selection and configuration of vectors confers "a level of authorial control" upon users (ibid.).

7. Conclusion

In 2014, video game wunderkind Ken Levine dissolved the bulk of his *Irrational Games* workforce to focus on the development of what he calls *Narrative Lego*, the building blocks of "narrative-driven games...that are highly replayable" (no page). Whereas the notion of narrative as Lego is not new -- Murray posits the computer as an authorial instrument that facilitates the assembly of "multiform plots" through a "system of interconnected 'frames'" with "Lego-like connectors" (212, 208) -- it both appeals to notions of units and combinatory potential, thereby reviving signature principles of narrative semiotics, and exemplifies the *configuration-dominance* attributed to new media narrative forms. Lego, thus, brings into bold relief the extent to which narrative and the medium/media through which it is realized are intimately intertwined, as well as the mutually transformative effects that narrative and media continue to exert upon one another.

Narrative, for example, has thoroughly transformed video games. From their genesis as rote rule sets articulated through rudimentary two-dimensional graphics, video games have flourished into a dynamic art form featuring emotionally-charged narrative arcs that unfurl across sprawling worlds flush with complex characters. The intricacy and resonance of a a game's story have become key evaluative criteria in game criticism, and controversies have even erupted over the extent to which players maintain control over the configuration of narrative vectors as the game narrative

unfolds. Video games have, in turn, transformed narrative, and *configuration-dominant* narrative

forms that extend and enrich the audience's agency in defining and directing story arcs have

infiltrated other media. In avant-garde theatre productions such as the revered quasi-*Macbeth*

adaptation *Sleep No More*, audiences are ceded extraordinary latitude to navigate capacious diegetic

spaces and interact with objects. *Sleep No More* theatrically actualizes Manovich's claim that

computer-*cum*-cultural logics of the "database" and "spatial wandering" are still in ascendance (78).

　　While new media narratives recuperate and refashion some tenets of narrative semiotics, they

also expose manifold differences between *interpretation-dominant* and *configuration-dominant*

forms. In beating back the narratologists, the ludologists challenged certain pillars of "classical"

narratology. *Pastness*, for example, seems not to apply when players are choosing narrative vectors

in "real time." For the ludologists, this meant that the baby should be thrown out with the bathwater.

Other scholars, such as Ryan and Thon, argued that narratology should expand and evolve to

ascertain the qualities and characteristics of these narrative iterations. The *medial turn* thereby

incited a *neo-narratological* account of the various ways in which stories are "crucially shaped by

the affordances and limitations of the media in which they are realized" (Ryan and Thon 2).

　　What is perhaps most intriguing is that this *medial turn,* and the narrative transmutations

initiated by computers and gaming, was prefigured by the study of oral storytelling systems. Certain

discrepancies between literary and oral texts are strikingly similar to those between literary and

digital texts. Both video games and oral compositions unfold in "real time," and share the quality of

*presentness*. Both oral and digital texts are *configuration-dominant*. Like the Homeric epics that

preceded them, "paradigmatic alternatives are encoded into the database...whereas the syntagmatic is

dynamically generated on the fly as choices are made that determine which items...will be

used" (Hayles, *Mother* 53). Jennings and Harrel suggest "African oral storytelling as a theoretical

model" applicable to the analysis of interactive digital narrative, as it features "numerous crises and peaks and more than one climax" (qtd. in Koenitz et. al. 23). Murray in particular anticipated the extraordinary consonance between oral and digital storytelling systems, observing that Homer's epic poetry was composed "through a process that involved stock phrases and formulaic narrative units" in much the same way as digital narratives "are generated by substituting and rearranging formulaic units according to rules" (153, 197, 194).

The correlations between oral and digital narrative systems, and the flaws, shortcomings, and/ or biases of print-centric "classical" narratology they expose, underscore that a communication studies framework is integral to apprehending and analyzing the *medial turn*; the interpenetration of narrative and the medium/media through which it is instantiated. The *medial turn* does not negate the significance of the *scientific* or *post-structural* turns, but is a commensurate and complementary phenomenon that acknowledges, appropriates, and repurposes certain tenets of those prior turns while simultaneously opening up a generative new dimension of narrative study. The biases of "classical" narratology do not necessitate the wholesale dismissal of its principles, but these biases are, rather, indicative of the extent to which a medium such as print contours, conditions, and circumscribes -- sometimes imperceptibly -- narrative expression. Likewise, the ludologists were forced to grapple with the biases innate to their field of study, and the transmutation of their cherished objects of inquiry by narrative. Video games exemplify not only the mutually transformative intertwining of narrative and media, but indicate that these medium-specific transmutations can prove promiscuous. A medium theory approach to narrative study should attempt to continue to uncover the (sometimes invisible) contexts and conditions of the twin influences of media upon narrative and narrative upon media, scrutinize their mutually transformative effects, and trace the channels of the (in turn transformative?) diffusion of these transformations.

I find it especially intriguing that computer-induced narrative mutations have seeped into as putatively antiquated a site as theatre. As a hybrid form typically generated through the combination of a text (the playscript) and a contextually-conditioned oral performance (the production), might theatre provide a useful bridge between, and enrich our understanding of, print, oral, and digital narrative forms?

What seems to conjoin all narratives, be they print, oral, digital, or theatrical, is that each is instantiated through a *system.* Oral narrative -- Homeric epics, bardic storytelling, *commedia dell'arte* -- persisted through the inheritance not of fixed texts, but storytelling systems and the combinatory potential of their constituent units. Murray contends that procedural storytelling in digital media captures "experience as systems of interrelated actions," evoking a system world replete with "interrelated entities" (274, 283). This systematicity has ideological effects: with the "ability to represent complex systems," comes a renewed sense of the "incalculability of life" (Murray 240, 243). (Hayles' *Chaos Bound* (1990) contributes important insights into how deceptively simple systems produce "incalculably" complex patterns and outcomes.)

How might we approach narrative systematicity from a communications studies perspective? How are these systems specific to, and conditioned, contoured, and circumscribed by, media and their unique affordances? How are these systems culturally specific? How do they emerge, evolve, converge, and intersect? What new forms of cultural competence or capital do they imply? The effort to identify overlaps between, and synthesize, print, oral, digital, and theatrical narrative frameworks could be propelled by a focus on narrative as first and foremost a system. I am eager to pursue lines of inquiry suggested by Koenitz et al., and explore how *systems theory* might be applicable to, and enrich, the contemporary study of narrative.

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