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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The principal purpose of p.o.v. is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Studies at the University of Aarhus. We will also invite contributions from colleagues in other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.

Every March issue of p.o.v. is devoted to the short film.

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Storytelling and Film
Fairy Tales, Myth and Happy Endings

Brian Dunnigan

> The result therefore of our present enquiry is that we find no vestige of a beginning and no prospect of an end.
>
> James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*

> Be sure to exhaust what can be communicated by stillness and silence.
>
> Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*

Film has developed out of a narrative and dramatic tradition in which the art of storytelling is a central concern. Yet filmmakers have also challenged the seductive and manipulative power of story through playful resistance to narrative convention or by exploring other elements of the medium: the interplay of image and sound, rhythm and gesture, rather than reliance on plot mechanics or character psychology. But the audience for non-narrative film is small: the rapt faces of the aircraft passengers watching the flight attendant point out the nearest exit, remind us that we enjoy the frisson of disaster but need to believe in the possibility of a happy ending.

Why story?

The appeal of storytelling as a form of communication and entertainment comes precisely from this ability to excite then resolve tension and restore equilibrium in a neat and satisfying way. Stories are all pervasive in our culture: news stories, soaps, tabloid scandals, medical histories, workplace gossip and the endless stream of movies, videos, and dvd's that frame our dreams of memory, adventure, and escape. We are storytelling creatures who seek to report experience, clarify tangled emotion, define and amuse ourselves through narrative: jokes, anecdotes, myth, romance, parable, folktale, history, fiction. Stories, it is argued,[1] inspire, heal, inform, and empower: forms of consciousness, ways of thinking that help us to deal with the unexpected, to imagine other possibilities. We identify with the protagonist, the one who struggles at the heart of the narrative to connect past, present and future in a coherent, causal way that bridges the empty spaces[2]: her struggle is our struggle to make our lives meaningful and different. We can change by rewriting our stories, and make our lives more interesting, interpersonal, *and hopeful*.[3]

What is a story?

At its simplest a story elicits our curiosity: someone is in *trouble* and we want to know what happens next, we identify with his or her predicament (we all have our troubles), we want to know how it *ends*. A story entertains by posing a question and finding complicating and surprising ways of holding back the answer: plotting, ellipsis, parallel action, multiple perspectives – are all designed to keep us in suspense. The minimum story is structured like a joke with a beginning, middle and twist in the tale end. But there is another aspect to the compelling nature of story.

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[1] Kearney, R. *On Stories.* London: Routledge, 2002:
Bruner, J. *Making Stories.* London: Harvard University Press, 2002

[2] Kermode, F. *The Sense of Ending.* London: OUP 1966

[3] Zipes, J. *Creative Storytelling.* Routledge, 1995

Narrative is derived from the Latin *gnarus* or *"knowing"* and story from the Welsh root *"to see"*: in oral cultures story implied guidance, direction, instruction, knowledge. The story*teller* was originally a seer or teacher who guided the souls of his listeners through the world of mystery which is also this world; the angelic space between the divine and the chaotic; Blake's eternity in an hour. The oral storyteller suspends time; in the immediacy of his presence and the improvised interplay of teller and audience the story is alive, immediate and eternal; through developing patterns of meaning and catharsis the listener is released from time and his human self: the pleasure is both aesthetic and emotional. For Paul Schrader screenwriting is embedded in this oral tradition:

> I do not think that screenwriting is really about writing at all. I think it is about telling stories. Screenwriting has a lot more to do with the time your uncle went duck hunting and the bird got away, than it has to do with great literature. You do not have to be particularly gifted in terms of craftsmanship of language to be a good screenwriter; all you have to be able to do is be able to tell a good story. [4]

Then too, good stories have certain formal characteristics: an inviting beginning that gets straight into the action; a clear and well-developed plot; believable but unusual characters; a problem that comes early and helps to create *suspense*; action that builds to a *climax*; no superfluous explanation; repeated rhythms and phrases; an ending which is surprising and resolves the problem in a satisfying way. The key concept here is *reversal*: what Aristotle [5]defined as a change of fortune for the protagonist that along with *discovery* illuminates the meaning of the story events for both the protagonist and the spectator. What propels and defines the story is the desire of the character, what he is after and how he copes with adversity along the way: because the task must be difficult with complicating turns and twists to keep us watching. To which could be added Levi-Straus's observation that simple narrative patterns underlie most stories: the dialectics of struggle/victory; bound/free; lost/found/; problem/solution: universal plot-themes constructed around desire and catharsis.

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[4] McGrath, D. & Macdermott, F. *Screencraft: Screenwriting.* Rotovision, 2003

For Freud reality was whatever frustrates or tempers our *desire*: we need to be thwarted, to encounter obstacles to that desire: frustration disrupts routine and propels us into action, renewal and reinvention. From here it was a short step to see all life as a mythic war between nurture, growth, delight and the death instinct: a story of growing up, attaining a sense of moral achievement by setting limits to our wanting. Yet these very limits are what the storytelling impulse seeks to transgress.

Screen Stories

Screenwriters and filmmakers are part of this transgressive/ redemptive tradition and in many ways cinema, especially classical Hollywood, is closer to the energy and engagement of oral storytelling than other narrative media. The novel for example is a more private production and pleasure, full of words and digressions to be enjoyed in solitude: whereas the screenplay is written to be *performed* before an *audience*: film is both narrative and dramatic, a melding of text, image, sound and music experienced in one sitting; a form of *enacted* storytelling which in its classical form is action oriented and goal-driven while remaining internally ambiguous.[6] The roller coaster action is the attraction and addiction, the adrenalin rush of the modern multiplex experience. But in the best work there is more to contemplate:

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[5] Aristotle. *Poetics.* London: Penguin, 1988

> Oedipus investigates the causes of the plague and, upon discovering that he has murdered his father and married his mother, blinds himself: this is the plot of Oedipus Rex. But the tragic action lies at a deeper level, where the complex relationship between deed and guilt unfolds according to immutable laws, steeped in existential angst. The plot is univocal but the action is fraught with ambiguity, open to a thousand possible interpretations." Umberto Eco[7]

With filmmaking the role of storyteller is taken over from the screenwriter by the director and editor: the storytelling now refracted through framing, light and shade, colour, texture, objects, sounds, movement, – the shot/counter-shot and mise en scene of *cinema.* Suggestion and ellipsis mean we can never know for certain what the characters are thinking or feeling nor do we know the complexity of our own subliminal experience in the immediacy of the images coming to us in the darkness; we are only partly guided through the mystery. The best screenwriters study and understand the specific qualities of the medium and their role in the shaping dream of a film: they know that what they write will be open to reinterpretation by actors, directors, and editors.

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[6] Armes, R. *Action and Image.* Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994

[7] Eco, U. *The Open Work.* London: Hutchinson, 1989

For the screenwriting manuals too often emphasise story *structure*[8] and struggle to find a language to illuminate the deeper, ambiguous and *collaborative* process of film writing and filmmaking. Too often they speak a rhetorical language (the irony here is that storytelling itself can be seen as a form of rhetoric; controlling, ideological, manipulative) or resort to a technical jargon that kills the object of their love: in these books you will also find the more profound insights on storytelling and dramaturgy reduced to commandments and formulas ready to be used by script editors, insecure teachers and development executives to pull the recalcitrant, meandering storyteller back into line. The rules are out there but like death itself from which story snatches life, they need to be forgotten before you can begin to tell your own tale or respond with intelligence and sensitivity to the tales of others.

Fairy stories

The Ur- stories of our culture that are available to all, are the folk or fairy tales: narratives of initiation and redemption with their own formal and familiar patterns, rituals and rules. They define universal plot themes from (Cinderella's) hidden worth being finally recognized to the theme of re-birth.(In this sense *The Sleeping Beauty* is a story about stories: about how story's kiss wakes us up and produces desire; produces reality.)The overarching tale that shadows all this daydreaming and wishful hoping is the one where the questing self meets helpers and enemies and the ending is always happy. Walter Benjamin[9] saw the first true storyteller as the teller of fairy tales: economical, elliptical, lacking psychological explanation or pedantic exposition they communicate directly as oral narration; fairy tales are true stories not the elaborated, over-determined literature of high culture. For the great folklorist, Max Luthi[10], fairy tales are works of art that place Man at the centre of the action overthrowing the old myths of a traditional, static culture with cunning and high spirits; charting a journey from narcissism to Love.

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[8] McKee, R. *Story*. Methuen, 1999

Fairy tales in their simplicity and sense of wonder lay down the tracks of future film genres in their sublimation of the erotic and religious. They express a world full of domestic conflict and social aspiration; but also a poetic vision of man and his relationship to the world where *wishing* makes man move and live. In this sense the Sleeping Beauty is also an image of the human spirit: the story portrays the peril, paralysis and redemption not just of one girl but also of all mankind: the theme of death and re-birth so beloved of the Hollywood happy ending. The literary fairy tale developed by the brothers Grimm with its confident protagonists, psychological motivation and its preference for action over reflection drew its energy from the oral tale while anticipating the directness of contemporary cinema. When David Mamet[11] talks of telling the story in the cut, through uninflected images of a goal-driven character, he is suggesting that film stories work best like fairy tales – simple, direct, complete.

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[9] Benjamin, W. *Illuminations.* London: Harper-Collins. 1992

[10] Luthi, M. *Once Upon a Time.* Indiana University Press, 1976

[11] Mamet, D. *On Directing.* Faber and Faber, 1989

Mythic stories

Fairy tales are essentially optimistic in spirit though more disturbing and complex than Disneyfication will allow. There are other forces at work not so easily domesticated: deeper troubles that might never be finally resolved: where the energy and wit of one individual is not enough; where you might yet be overwhelmed. Film narratives (including of course many of Mamet's films) also draw on the more tragic sense underlying mythic discourse: the chaotic, the demonic, the transitory that threaten human endeavour on all sides: where suffering and moral ambiguity are the consequence of the original overarching myth: the Fall. In the Garden of Eden we first gain the knowledge of good and evil and on our expulsion the consequence of our new self-awareness: suffering, guilt and the longing for a lost paradise. We can of course choose an alternative story: the Enlightenment one that self-awareness leads directly to a sense of responsibility for one's actions and relations in this world.

We can write our own version because whether heroically secular or sacred tales of origin, myths in their original form are bare outlines: allusive, lacking in completeness or logical sequence and therefore perfect stimulus for screen stories and filmmaking: but when they are over-interpreted or reduced to a universalising essence[12] they lose much of their creative power and charm. Like

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[12] Campbell, J. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Glasgow: Collins, 1988
Vogler, C *The Writer's Journey.* Michael Wiese Productions, 1992

Benjamin's approach to history or Jean Luc Godard's to film, there are truths that lie beyond the reach of the selective, linear, sequential grasp of narrative. The fragment, the quotation or the image might be closer to the ambiguous reality of things.

Anti-Stories

The episodic, the multi-narrative, the shifting and contradictory point of view are some of the ways that films continue to slip the net of all-consuming story. Godard has always been more interested in alternative approaches and his last feature film, *Eloge de l'Amour (2001)* is predictably less storytelling than essay: a collage of image and sound, music, still photos, interviews, found footage, documentary, quotations, possible stories - held together by an elegiac voice-over. The film makes us think about our need to tell stories and the struggle for truth between technology and history, memory and ideology, the personal and political. Yet our endlessly narrating consciousness can detect the love story that binds together the elements of an intellectual and emotional life: those ideas, places, people I have loved: and the political story: there can be no resistance without memory which is threatened by state and corporate power. In the fragmentary, the momentary, the meditative there is room for a lifetime of thought as well as emotion: melancholy, nostalgia, the transitory, the absolute strangeness and beauty of the world - without the distraction of narrative tropes. As Tarkovsky believed, a *poetic* logic might be closer to our lived experience: internal rather than external experience, the story of our thoughts, memories, dreams. Storytelling by contrast is melodramatic, full of tricks and artifice: all is vanity.

Yet for many writers and filmmakers in the modernist tradition like Antonioni or Becket there is not even this limited lyrical consolation: all our stories go nowhere: characters are left stranded, lateral plotlines are taken up and abruptly vanish: the Hollywood happy ending never comes because complexity and randomness continue to accumulate and nothing is ever satisfactorily tied up. However compelling there is something mendacious in telling stories but we can't stop: I can't go on, I must go on. With storytelling you have to be careful about claims to veracity, memory is always selective and everyone has their own story. The truth as it happens may turn out to be uncanny or unknowable like in the anti-fairy stories of Kafka: loose ends, hesitations, a lack of connection and conclusion. "There is hope but not for us."[13]

Endings

For most mortals however life without stories is too bleak a prospect: we need to have something to look forward to: to anticipate possible future outcomes based on past and present activity. We want to believe in a hopeful, shareable world where we are understood. However fragile, narrative coherence remains important to our sense of self and acting in the world and catharsis, an essential release from action. But as that world changes and fragments, older styles of storytelling are giving way to new narrative forms; digitally driven developments of a modernist aesthetic that continues to probe for alternative and ironical ways of making sense, creating meaning or acknowledging the impossibility of both.

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[13] Frank Kafka to Max Brod in Brod, M *Franz Kafka* Da Capo Press, 1995

And to understand the relationship between storytelling and film narratives we need to go beyond merely formal concerns to the medium itself and its metaphorical possibilities: to the process of storytelling as it is refracted through the movement from script to screen: where the story is transformed or disappears altogether. Stories can be limiting, tyrannical, ideological and always partial: but there is no escape. Another story is always just beginning: an endless branching pathway in hyperspace that connects us all. As a character in *Eloge de l'Amour* remarks, "It's strange how things take on meaning when the story ends." To which his lover replies, "It's because that's when history begins."

To be shown how to be talked to

Narration and parabasis in contemporary film – and Almodóvar's *Hable con Ella*

Morten Kyndrup

I

What is narration? Many answers to this question within literary narrative theory have focused on the relationship between levels and positions within the narrated universe. This applies especially to the structuralist traditions, beginning with Vladimir Propp. Hence, a number of these endeavours – undertaken for instance by A. J. Greimas and his successors – have often concentrated on an attempt to discover the fundamental scheme or recipe for a generalised narrative. And this in pursuit of the ability to describe the master narrative of which any narrative in the world – past, present or future – may be considered a particular version.

Along the way, these endeavours have led to valuable results. Generally, however, they have been unable to attain their goal. Firstly because the basic hypothesis is probably wrong: not each and every narrative in the world is inscribable into a single scheme. But secondly because in concentrating on the narrated universe, these traditions have ignored what may be the single most important characteristic of the narrative as such: the fact that it is told. Any narrative is told by someone to someone. In other words, it is characterised by a fundamental communicative differentiation of positions which in the very (enounced) act of enunciation of the narrative in a specific way regulates the competences of these positions – implicit senders and beholders of the narratives – in relation to the narrated universe. This is above all true of their *epistemic competences,* that is the question of who knows what and when. But closely related to this are also their axiological competences, concerning the ascription of values to what happens within the narrated universe. Any given narrative performs a certain temporal distribution of these competences – a *sjuzet* that produces the imagination of a fabula. A fabula which has been the basis: that which is told. This upside down operation is decisive: what is narrated – fabula – is logically and ontologically a function of the narrative although the narrative appears as though it were ontologically subsequent, i.e. secondary to what is narrated, constituting one possible representation of it. Like a motif and its depiction.

II

When the new art form, the film, first began to tell stories, from the very point of departure it had to realise that this was no simple matter. Although the passing of time – the most important parameter of any narrative – is inherent to film as a media, a narrator was still missing, and consequently, so was the possibility of that differentiation of competence across a time span which is constitutive of a narrative. The sheer sequence of camera shots was insufficient to establish that kind of a narrating position. Camera shots in managed at best to illustrate a story, but even that – as we can see from the efforts to tell stories in early film – appeared strangely diffuse. The problem was and is that although the camera physically did and still does constitute the point from which the space is "seen", this fact in itself does not establish the impression and the illusion of that differentiation of levels and positions which elevates the entire structure to the status of a narrative.

As we know, film soon realised this. Thus, development of a formal convention became the issue. A formal convention which on the one hand made it possible through the very composition of the pictures to establish a system of narrative positions inside the narrated space, capable of transforming the raw motifs of the living pictures into a *seen* world, a narrated world. And which on the other hand, as it appeared, managed to make these constructions so unstriking, so natural that the basic qualities of film as multidimensional sensory experiences were not obstructed by them.

It is a well-known fact that the development of that convention was fully achieved. Mainstream film language unremarkably and smoothly fits in even advanced and hyper complex differentiations of narrator and focalizer positions inside the narrated spaces.

This development process has been quite lengthy – but still short when compared to parallel developmental processes within other art forms. If you compare this process with the development of the formal language of literary fiction within modernity, you will see a striking parallel. But the decisive difference is that film evolves through the various phases in a far more compressed manner. What I have in mind here is not particularly the partnership between the classical realist novel and mainstream film: this partnership is due to the viability of reducing precisely this kind of novel to its fabula and then basing a film on this by constructing a new sjuzet, another representation of the “same” fabula. This indeed has resulted in many miserable films, “filmatizations", the core problem of which is exactly the fact that they have been conceived on the basis of fabula and not in terms of sjuzets in their own right. Many of these, however, have been useful as form-experiments along the way. The remarkable and interesting similarities between the evolution of these two art forms, however, are primarily connected to the parallel rebellions they contain against the mainstream narrative conventions of form – temporally displaced but formally incredibly parallel. The fact that modernism arrives with such a delay in filmic conventions is not really surprising: this convention necessarily had to be fully developed before becoming the target of the modernist rejection of it – a rejection still usurpatory and thus still deeply dependent on its target.

III

This rejection evidently takes place at different levels and in varying keys. These include so-called “filmed modernism” – as exemplified by the Orson Welles film based on Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1963) – in which it is primarily the thematic level that illustrates this endeavour. The representation in film of an absurd, meaningless world does not give priority to critical questions concerning filmic representation as such. The latter, however, is true of several other movies which beyond any doubt may be labelled modernist, also with regard to the art form itself. Films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* (1982) unfold one continuous objectifying exposure of the filmic conventions of construction. The representational mechanism as such is here taken *ad absurdam*: close-ups at the thematic level are filmed at such distances that we are unable to distinguish the characters from one another; the sound more or less consistently vanishes into roaring incidental sound; the break-down of construction includes the movie, the shooting of which the film is about – from beginning to end any attempt to create traditional sjuzet/fabula-relation is consistently blocked. *What you see is what there is*, one might say with a revision of a mantra from the computer world to come. The fact that also this frenetically exposed artificiality has its own level of coolly calculated enunciation is another story – as has been the case for similar *Spielverderbereien* in other art forms. But thanks to the generally compressed developmental history of film, late-modern formal thinking was already at film's disposal in the heart of its modernist phase. So the form experiments in film took a new direction. The substantial cost of film production may have contributed somewhat to this direction as well: film industry simply needed at least something of an audience.

Whatever the exact reason may be, modernists' frenetic experiments with form, literally turning their backs to the audience, have in contemporary film been succeeded by paratactic constructions which often in the very same movement both expose and objectify their constructional effort *and* fulfil this effort. In other words, they establish a credible fictional space in terms of a sensuous reality. An effective illusion is established, the constructional character of which is simultaneously exposed: the effects are maximised and at the same time the mechanisms of maximisation are pointed out. This takes place by means of differing types of advanced constructions of enunciation, constructions that we have labelled "paramodern" elsewhere. The art theorist Thierry de Duve even speaks about an "enunciative paradigm" within art.

Objectifying the construction of enunciation in this way does not amount to a revocation or a denial of the illusion of the fictional universe. These constructions are distinctively parabasic but they rarely appeal to ironic distance or to postmodern lightness. The parabasis may be positioned in formal construction or may be drawn closer to the fabula level. One could mention Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995), David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999), Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) – and of course Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), both subscribing with paradoxical efficiency to classical melodrama and distinct objectification of form at one and the same time. Von Trier's latest opus *Dogville* (2003) goes one step further and dares to formalise the presented world into sheer and explicit coulisse. Despite this – and despite further objectification through for instance voice-over narration – the formation of illusion is almost frighteningly effective. The protagonist's painfully consistent act of desisting from action in response to continuing humiliation, takes the beholder to a position in which acceptance of the cruel revenge is felt as a fully justified deliberation. And this is despite the fact that most average beholders would hardly accept "revenge" of that kind in the real world.

IV

Von Trier's work, however, in its exploration of the constructional possibilities of the formal language of film, consistently challenges the borderlines of what may be widely accepted. A beautiful example of a film which in its narrative mode with laid-back lucidity maintains the transparent lightness of the construction as well as the weight of illusion, is Pedro Almodóvar's *Habla con Ella, Talk to Her* (2002). On the one hand, this film uncompromisingly insists on the presented space's authentic references: to loneliness, to disability, to melancholy, to lack of love – and to beauty, to music, to the good, to passion. And on the other hand, it constantly makes explicit its own constructional set-up to such an extent that throughout the film, at no single point do you lose the feeling of being lead through something and on to something which you cannot (yet) identify.

Habla con Ella is the story of the more or less mentally retarded Benigno and his beloved Alicia, a doctor's daughter with whom he has fallen in love at a distance and whom he could never have. But he gets her anyway when she is involved in an accident and ends up in a coma – Benigno trains to be a nurse and takes care of her day and night at a clinic. And he *talks* to the brain-dead Alicia and at one point takes care of her so intensely that he impregnates her. He is imprisoned for rape; she gives birth to a child and miraculously wakes up from her coma. Benigno commits suicide in jail unaware of her recovery. Interwoven into this story is the one of Marco and Lydia. Marco is chronically weighed down with a feeling of sorrow or loss – maybe due to unhappy love – which makes him cry, also any time he experiences something beautiful or just intense. And the bull fighter Lydia, also unhappily in love with an ex-partner, for some time dating Marco but then starting to see the ex-partner again behind Marco's back until she is seriously injured (by a bull) and also ends up in a coma at the same clinic as Alicia. Here Marco and Benigno meet each other, taking care of the two brain-dead women, Benigno trying to convince Marco about the usefulness of *talking to them*. Marco discovers the truth about Lydia's ex-lover and hence even loses his loss. He goes away and returns too late to prevent Benigno from committing suicide. The movie concludes with Marco and Alicia meeting each other; it ends with the beginning of *their* story (announced through a screen text: "Alicia y Marco" – just as all the other sequences of the film have been announced. But this time the beginning is the end.

The narrative point of the fact that this beginning becomes the final moment of the movie is that *this we did not know*. There has been no anticipating redundancy of this ending, no deictic indication at all as to where the movie was about to go narratively. As already stated, the pointing out of the enunciative level of the film as such is distinct. The direction of the story, however, is experienced as one continuous enigma. To watch this movie is just like being led through a curved tunnel with an unpredictable course. You are being led with wonder through the events, you know literally nothing but at the same time you know that somebody knows what you don't know. This indeed differs from the classic construction of enigmas in which a certain universe is constructed with good and bad, up and down, out and in, and in which of course there may be uncertainty as to how the game will end – but this uncertainty will be well defined by these abductional frames. *Talk to Her* withholds both axiological and narrative directedness. It obviously knows what it wants and that it wants – but does not make these things clear. Not until the end; where the tunnel ends, it becomes apodictically evident how everything that happened has been leading to exactly this conclusion. But on the other hand, this could not be known along the way. As we know: just like in real life. The difference is that this is overtly artificial construction, which means that the opacity – no matter how much it looks like something familiar to us – has been installed there, exactly in this manner.

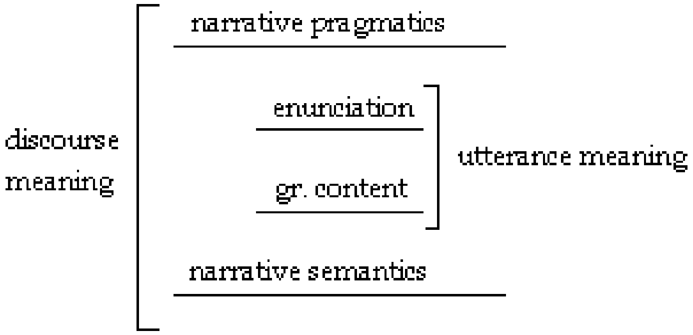
Through a sovereign gesture, *Talk to Her* sets reference and act of enunciation in relief in a completely paratactic stance. The classic narrative choice between showing and telling is replaced by a distinctly narrated showing; a parabasic narrative in which the parabasis is not a revocation at any level. On the contrary, in itself it performs a confirming gesture toward what is narrated. In constructions like this we see, but simultaneously we also observe ourselves seeing. We cry and we know that not just something but also someone has made us cry. The very construction convincingly comprises a weight, which is both its own result and reference. In that sense, the filmic narration is thereby surprisingly but evidently turned upside down. Or perhaps rather: is finally set on its feet.

Narrative Models and Meaning

Per Aage Brandt

Narrative sequencing of linguistic utterances is a basic dynamic principle of discourse. Other forms of sequencing include prescriptive, descriptive and argumentative concatenations of utterances; it has been suggested (e.g. by A.-J. Greimas) that prescriptions, descriptions and argumentations are always, explicitly or implicitly, framed by a narrative setting, either in an overarching discourse or in the very process of living experience.

In explicitly narrative discourse, it is possible to stipulate a textual architecture in which some structures are local and others global. Local structures are utterance-based, whereas global structures are properly discursive. We may view the structural situation as follows:


narrative pragmatics
discourse meaning
enunciation
gr. content
utterance meaning
narrative semantics

The microstructures of enunciation[1] – the avatars of first-, second-, and third-person-hood in grammatical expressions of narrative, descriptive or argumentative contents – integrate into a macro-structure, namely a larger context of narrative pragmatics containing narratorial forms, speech acts, scenarios of communication: instances of "storytelling".

Correspondingly, the microstructures of grammatical content integrate into a macrostructure of entire "stories told", organized by the narrative semantics of the human mind and the cultural circumstances that make stories both intelligible and plausible within specific discourse genres.

The theoretical separation of narrative pragmatics and narrative semantics should make it possible to distinguish two major problems in narratology: 1) What is fiction?, and 2) What is a story? (1) refers to narrative pragmatics, and (2) refers to narrative semantics. It is possible to answer or develop either question separately.

Let me briefly state that (cf. 1) fiction has to be of a certain genre, for example the genre called f*able*, or the genre called *joke*, just to stay in the realm of "simple forms", as André Jolles[2] has suggested. Genres in discourse are enunciation-based pragmatic designs equipped with functional performative determinations; and they are always correlated with certain content-based semantic designs. So, fables are expected to be didactic, and jokes are expected to be funny and to produce social relief of some sort. Within such genres, a fiction[3] achieves its format, its finite extension, thereby allowing listeners and readers to know when to stop waiting for more input and to start interpreting. Each genre thus develops its own narrative semantics (cf. 2) and a general outline of the specific event structures it will be likely to unfold. In a sense, its pragmatics 'drives' its semantics, as the following examples may show.

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[1] Cf. Brandt 2003.

[2] Jolles 1930.

Here is first a classical short didactic fable and an analytic sketch in terms of Mental Space Semiotics.

Aesop:[4] The Bundle of Sticks

> An old farmer had three sons who quarreled among themselves from dawn to dusk. One day, the farmer fell gravely ill. Wishing to make peace among his sons before he died, he called them to his bedside and asked them to bring a thick bundle of sticks.
>
> ″Can you break these in two?″ asked the farmer, handling the sticks to his oldest son.
>
> ″Of course!″ the young man answered scornfully. But even though he tried until he was red in the face, he couldn’t break the bundle of sticks.
>
> ″Why, those sticks are no thicker than my finger,″ mocked the second son.
>
> ″I could break those sticks like straw,″ boasted the third. And they both tried with all their might, but neither could break the bundle of sticks in two.
>
> Then the father drew three sticks from the bundle and handed one to each of his sons. ″Can you break them now?″ he asked. And they did so easily.
>
> ″Let the sticks teach you,″ said the father to his sons, ″how strong you are when you are allied together, and how easily you can be broken on your own.″
>
> *In unity there is strength.*

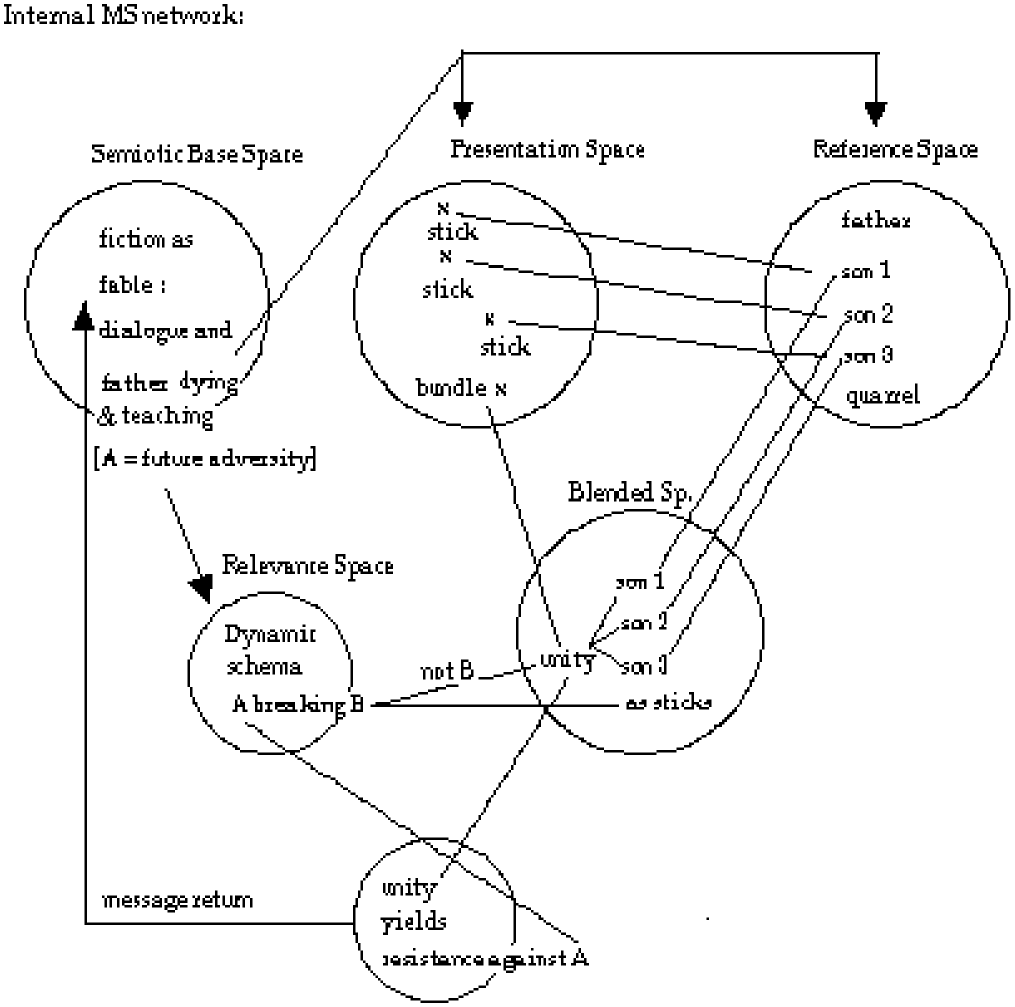
---

[3] How do we 'define' the fictivity of fiction? The problem has not yet been solved, to my knowledge. My suggestion would be that fictive stories have characters that are persons we 'by definition' can only meet in the third person — so even when they refer to themselves in the first person, they never address *you*, personally, in the second person, and *you* cannot address *them* in the second person.

[4] Pinkney 2000.

The pragmatic didactic of the text is explicit in the text: in the father's view, the sticks map onto his listeners, the sons, and the configurations of sticks then signify the dynamics of corresponding relationships between the sons. The narrative unfolding is centered around the simple experiment of breaking the bundle and the intimidation produced by the wrong estimations professed by the breakers. Why would the pedagogical father choose this indirect demonstration instead of telling his sons to 'stick together'? He manifestly wishes to highlight the dynamics of the breaking and to do so by letting it apply to social as well as physical items.

Therefore, an *internal network* of mental spaces including a blend where the sons are sticks will account for the core semantics *and* the referred demonstrative pragmatics built into this fable, which is then in *an external network* used by the 'Aesopian' speaker in new situations where the entire story, now a parable, appears in a Presentation space juxtaposing an actual Reference space that contains the problem it is supposed to comment on. The internal network is, I suggest, the following:


Internal MS network:
Semiotic Base Space
fiction as
fable :
dialogue and
father dying
& teaching
[A = future adversity]
Presentation Space
x
stick
x
stick
x
stick
bundle x
Reference Space
father
son 1
son 2
son 3
quarrel
Blended Sp.
son 1
son 2
son 3
unity
as sticks
Relevance Space
Dynamic
schema
A breaking B
not B
unity
yields
resistance against A
message return

Second, here is a joke that was rated and declared to be preferred over thousand other jokes by a large American test population, as reported in the science journal *Nature*[5] (so it is scientifically proven to be funny!):

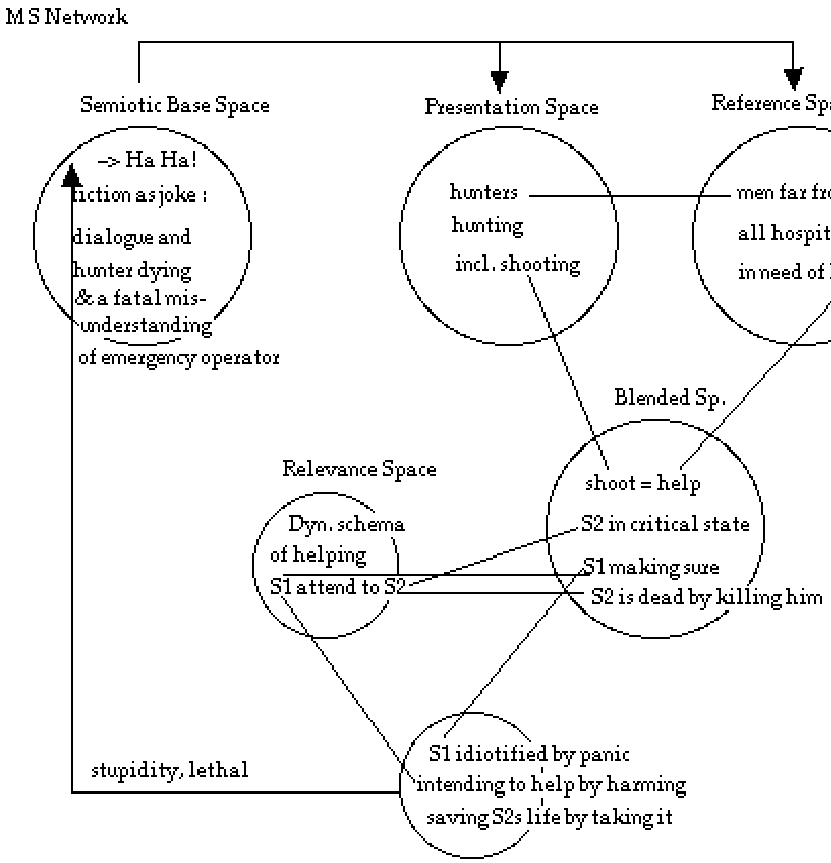
> Two Hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses.
> He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed over.

---

[5] *Nature*. ScienceUpdate, 4 October 2002.

> The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, ″My friend is dead! What can I do?″
>
> The operator says: ″Calm down. I can help. First, let’s make sure he’s dead.″ There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says: ″Ok, now what?″

A similar network could spell out the decisive ambivalence of the *epistemic/causal* expression: "make sure he's dead" by separating the two aspects of the characters. The two men have to be hunters – in order to interpret the operator's suggestion in this lethal way – and they nevertheless have to be helpless urban high-tech persons without much practical medical knowledge. The only verb we get from the former, rather generic aspect of the protagonists is the *shooting*; the irrelevance of /killing/ as an instance of /helping/ drives the humor of the story. Therefore, the blend of the two situational aspects – the medical assistance seen as a scene of hunting – has to be coded by an ethical schema (unfolding the dynamics of helping versus harming) that lets us understand the irrelevance of the causal reading which tragically overrules the epistemic reading of the telephonic advice.


M S Network
Semiotic Base Space
Presentation Space
Reference Space
-> Ha Ha!
fiction as joke :
dialogue and
hunter dying
& a fatal mis-
understanding
of emergency operator
hunters
hunting
incl. shooting
men far from
all hospitals
in need of help
Blended Sp.
shoot = help
S2 in critical state
S1 making sure
S2 is dead by killing him
Relevance Space
Dyn. schema
of helping
S1 attend to S2
S1 idiotified by panic
intending to help by harming
saving S2s life by taking it
stupidity, lethal

And third, a literary short story by the German – utterly German – writer Reinhard Lettau:[6]

> **Games**
>
> Two gentlemen make an appointment, but in addition to that each sends a friend to a given place. These friends of the friends also walk up to each other at the proper time at the given place, peel off their gloves, rejoice in meeting. Immediately afterwards they make a new appointment at a different place, immediately walk off in opposite directions, visit friends and send them also to a given place, where these friends greet each other, in turn make an appointment, walk away, find friends whom they send to a place they have thought up. On their separate ways these two will see gentlemen standing here and there throughout the town, shaking hands, making appointments, walking away from each other, soon many gentlemen know each other, the town is humming, a stranger who is driving through it says: "This is a friendly town."

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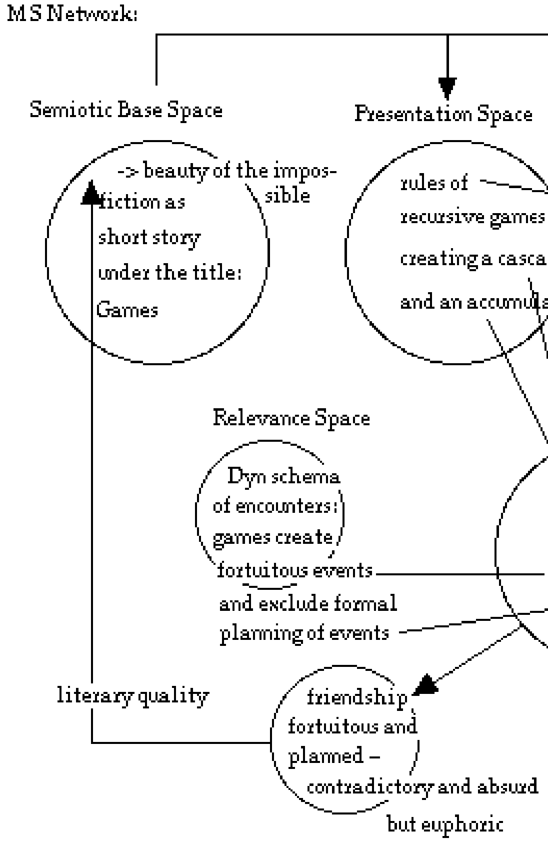
[6] Translated by Ursula Molinaro, from *Obstacles*, 1965, reprinted in (ed.) Philip Stevick 1971, *Anti-Story: an anthology of experimental fiction*, New York: The Free Press.

Here, the analysis may start with the observation that the crowded and sympathetically humming town is the result of applying the rules of a recursive game to the script of 'making an appointment'. The blend is – as most often, when independent scenarios are activated and implied in an imaginary act of immediate identification – slightly surrealistic. Again, this semantic construction seems coded by a schema: friendship is motivated, whereas fortuitous encounters are arbitrary, but recursivity here makes motivation and arbitrariness equivalent. In a formal sense, this is contradictory and absurd, but there are aspects of real relations that correspond to the feeling of chance in friendship; so in this sense, the final meaning is perhaps interrogative here: is destiny, chance, contingence... implied in deep human feelings like friendship, love, sympathy...?


M S Network:
Semiotic Base Space
Presentation Space
Reference Space
-> beauty of the impos-sible
fiction as short story under the title: Games
rules of recursive games creating a cascade and an accumulation
two gentlemen making a formal appointment
Relevance Space
Dyn schema of encounters: games create fortuitous events and exclude formal planning of events
Blended Space
cascade and accumulation of fortuitous appointments
literary quality
friendship fortuitous and planned – contradictory and absurd but euphoric

A minimal forth example is the sort of almost-no-story that cognitive semantic theory sometimes prefers to offer for the sake of illustration. This one is by the great Canadian neuropsychologist and philosopher Merlin Donald:[7]

> Binding theories try to explain how we experience the world as a series of integrated objects and events, rather than as a set of disconnected sensations. Explaining the existence of integrated percepts in terms of their material origins is a formidable challenge, since we really have no idea how mere neurons can piece together the bits and pieces of a scene or episode, to create a subjective experience that is seamless and unified. *For instance, if I see someone run across the street and fall into a manhole*, I will tend to remember the whole incident as a coherent, beautifully organized, unitary event, rather than as a series of disconnected

---

[7] Merlin Donald, review of Edelman & Tononi, *A Universe of Consciousness: how matter becomes imagination,* for the journal *Artificial Life*, 2002.

> sensory frames, or a jumble of sounds, sights, and other sensations. This reveals the existence, deep in the brain, of a binding mechanism that gives conscious experience its coherent form [emphasis added].

It is indeed extremely difficult to explain how the brain does conceptual integration; what we can do is to start by finding out which conceptual integrations in fact do occur, and the blending analysis seems to help us do so. It is probably the case that precisely and specifically the *narrative* forms of integration are primordial in the human mind. Donald's example is rather trivial but well chosen; for it is already minimally fictional and generic (of the genre: *philosophical examples*) and it has a dynamic schematic motor: this man runs either away from something or towards something, in both cases intentionally, whereas the falling into the manhole is of course unintentional and physically causal; the man intentionally acts as motivated by a search for a continuing *life,* we may suppose, since that is what volition is generically bound to prefer, but precisely by running for this goal he finds something close to *death.* The intensity of the desire-driven activity reverses the meaning of its goal. Fatal irony is what makes this micro-episode 'tellible', 'narrable' at all. Otherwise we might not even be attending to it or able to produce it as an example of conceptual integration. The core function of human consciousness, namely attention, is possibly driven by a *narrative aesthetics* built into our mind.

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The Invention of Meaning

Keith Raskin

For the same reason we cannot live in each other's dreams, nor even in our own while conscious, no deeply meaningful story can be told precisely. Yet we try, creator and chronicler alike, to be precise, perhaps more than anything else, when we tell a story. And, as we approach the highest peaks, enter the thinnest air, and climb toward the vanishing point of precision, art and form, style and content merge. As we become increasingly precise, choices and opportunities become more and more limited, and as they disappear methods are not only forced upon us but often forged out of necessity; and finally the face of meaning emerges, reified as it were, in tone, mood, resonance and impression. The meaning of a story, and thus also its essence, is, associated with and thought of as defining the very character of story. It is not necessarily in the arc or progression, characterological transformation or metaphysical journey, portrayal of a state of mind or statement of a worldly condition, conflict or dialectic, underlying question or cumulative resonance of textures, layers, or juxtapositions. In fact, a story need not contain any of the above, and if it were told precisely its meaning would be in how it turns on or passes over each detail, in the grain of the work, in how it focuses and communicates at every moment, in its every gesture and choice, giving away all of its voice, its attitude, its process, its way of thinking and its particular brew of reason. However, sadly, as I have said and as I will explain, we cannot attain true precision when it comes to story, though we can be careful and conscientious, and we can follow and tug at delicate threads and intuit forthcoming ripples of play and tension. With integrity we may approach precision, but so much works against us, from without as well as from within.

Probably most profoundly what thwarts us is our education, our baggage of extended knowledge in subjects unnatural to us, our learned practices of analysis that often cause us to suspect, ignore or deny our intuition and expect the counterintuitive. Our education includes also our absorption of critics' and commentators' opinions rising from their own overly developed and obsessively honed educations. Now, rather than retreat from such an encroachment, we emulate it; we exemplify our educators and become what we absorb and see communicated. It appears to us as civilized, polite, conventional, erudite expression. But we must remember that it is not the aim of critics or commentators to discover meaning and announce it but to emphasize conscious, memorable, and identifiable resonances, flaws, mismatches, missed opportunities, limitations, comparisons, occasionally masterstrokes and, more frequently, remarkable, definitive competence and aspects in line with current thought and trends. Their job descriptions do not include revealing subtle, abstruse meaning that is virtually ineffable, not even approachable by either word or parable. And why should they be expected to create a story and forge a way of thinking just to explain a momentary reversal or meaningful detail? Why should we, especially when we cannot be sure that that reversal or detail belies the meaning of the entirety, for how humanly precise could the author have been; especially when we do not trust our instincts, must discount our excess baggage and idiosyncrasies and have learned to await proper confirmation of our inferences from repetitions and restatements and re-establishments of fact, theme and style? This amounts to a rigorous and insidious training in how not to probe too deeply, how to accept certain givens and how not to worry much about any of it.

Now, in our inmost heart of hearts we are both thwarted from and impelled toward the discovery of the true meaning of a story. This is because our lives – daily, entire and collective – are composed of stories and metaphors. In everyday life we live through a haze of very realistic, sometimes vividly cartoonish or overly melodramatic, daily metaphors that calm and orient us, or just churn up our emotions. Brief stories begin and end and mimic the larger stories of our lives in ways that resonate poignantly and call back memories. Our days abound in first things and last things, chance meetings, that first cup of coffee, settling in, getting to work as if at some universal generic toil, people rushing, people taking their time, people in all sorts of roles and pedestrian costumes behaving much like various anthropomorphized animals and mythologized characters, coming to intersections, crossroads, stormy weather, ominous clouds, bent street signs, roman numerals etched into a dilapidated public library facade, and finally our own sense of who and what we are. At every moment we are immersed in movie posters and ads, building signs, and headlines all providing overwhelming subtexts for ludicrously encompassing metaphors. We live within the story of our day, of our current and past times – our collections of superimposed fairy tales, dreams, and bits of relevant and irrelevant memories of film and novel narratives – and of all life on Earth, our condition of existence in a universe with an unknown and most likely unfathomable beginning and end. Thus, literally buried, enclosed like a great onion heart, in juxtaposed realities and fictions, titles and mottos, poses and frames, and literal eternities, how can we assess stories? We experience them through layers of stories much closer to ourselves, that begin and end in ourselves. By the same token, how can we resist immersing ourselves in a new story, if only to gain distance from ourselves for perspective and comparison and relief? And of course we are adept at getting to the core of it; it is as natural as seeking the source of our own motivations, our character, our center.

The formation of story exposes another rung of removal that exists between ourselves and story: our consciousness. Whether a story emerges and evolves from a complex sort of crystallization of accumulating ideas, patterns in an intricate and gradually spun web, or carefully followed threads that run along loose subconscious seams, a strict procedure must be followed, a very conscious procedure that must not agitate the crystallizing tincture, snap the webbing, or tug the thread from its seam. The introduction of unyielding and constrictive and conclusive logic is most dangerous yet necessary in the early stages of development. It is necessary in the formation of certain bridges; making connections to related threads, webs or tinctures; in the fleshing out or reification of spare outlines of notions, ambiguous abstractions, and lifeless, inert symmetries that lack emotional heart or human facets; and for purification, elaboration, proper presentation, and the reduction of vagueness or distraction. But the rhythms and ripples of resonance must not be interrupted too soon, for the puzzle pieces and open structures must yet remain soft, open and submerged in the liquidities of creation, imagination and intuition; rigidity and precision do not enter consciously until the meaning is known or formed. Perhaps the greatest danger, though, is the temptation to manipulate, to create emotional reactions that depart from the original meaning, or simply to follow overly logical patterns, or to anticipate and judge prematurely – to do anything but follow the original threads that were found and pursued unconsciously and semi-consciously.

Many formations, beyond this initial developmental phase, may still collapse or dissolve in the unfiltered light of conscious day, for too much that was as yet meant to remain unconscious and maintain a subconscious resonance may be exposed too soon. Once exposed, it is too late; it has now transformed, and has now crossed over to consciousness and will be held to different rules, demands and interpretations in the creator's mind.

The entirely conscious creation of story for commercial purposes, say, or for some personal agenda, is not true story formation but manipulation, formulations of well-known elements that provoke reactions and obvious, predictable conclusions or inferences. There may at times even be subconscious echoes that, accidentally, match the intentions of such creations. This formulation of course serves its purpose but has no deeper meaning than a predicted, expected and intended message, more of a hidden instruction or directive than a meaning or essence, and certainly not revealing of a way of thinking or a way to express experience, far from anything like Ibsen's metaphysical logic and hypersymbolism or Dostoyevsky's oceanic torrents of faith and faithlessness and ideological oneness. More like a message of luck or prosperity found inside a fortune cookie.

As a grand metaphor, story is our life. Consciousness is what we do every day, our jobs, our errands, purchases, filling out forms, etc. Precision is maintaining integrity and meaning in our lives, through focus, self-examination and pangs of conscience. Manipulation is the unethical wielding of power, people taking advantage of each other, ugly personal or professional politics, opportunism, and the rationalizations we use that lead us to poor decisions or support our mistakes. Story formation is the collection of painfully informed decisions that have gotten us where we are and allow us to do what we do, our invention of ourselves and of meaning in our lives; the most important, least spoken of, most investigated, least understood, most avoided, most obsessed over, most subjective and most universal aspect of our lives! And finally, alas, meaning is meaning, how it is found or invented is the key. If it cannot be found cosmologically, spiritually or philosophically, then invention becomes a necessity and at the same time a discovery of our interpretation of ourselves and our condition.

And so the story begins... An analysis of selected opening shots and scenes

Nikolaj Feifer

The first seconds, the first image, the first scene. The way we enter a story is one of the most important elements in any great movie, and the signature of a gifted storyteller.

In this article, we are going to look closely at three different opening shots, and at the opening scenes they are part of, each derived from a masterpiece in its respective genre. These are openings that access their material in three very different ways. When considered together, they can provide some insight into what makes the start of a film seem truly magnificent.

The selected films are *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick,1980).

Sunset Boulevard

> That opening would be enough to establish *Sunset Boulevard* as one of the great movies. It's one of the most striking, stirring openings I've ever seen in a movie.
>
> Andrew Sarris[1]

Billy Wilder directed this 1950 film noir classic, which tells the story of Hollywood B-writer Joe Willis (William Holden) and his fatal encounter with one of the silent era's forgotten stars; Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson). In her desperate attempt to keep the young writer in her home, and ensure a return to the big screen, she ends up shooting him, and shortly after, as he lays dead in her pool, he starts telling the story of how things got that far.

The start is extraordinarily fast, with the Paramount logo quickly dissolving to a pan down to a curbstone, where we immediately realize that Sunset Boulevard is both the name of the film, and also the name of the street, stenciled as it as on the curbstone itself. Without a cut, the camera begins to move back, the grey asphalt filling the screen, and superimposed over this are the credits, in the same stenciled style as we just saw on the street sign.

SUNSET BLVD.

As the camera continues to move back, it still shoots down into the asphalt, until the credits are over. Then, 72 seconds into the shot, the camera slowly and still without a cut, pans up to show the entire street. Still moving backwards, we now see headlights down the road. The first lines of narration are spoken, by a voice the audience has yet to realize belongs to Joe Gillis.

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[1] Andrew Sarris in *Sunset Boulevard: A Look Back*, a 25 min. short that is also known as *The*

> Yes, this is Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, California. It's about five o'clock in the morning. That's the homicide squad; complete with detectives and newspaperman. A murder has been reported from one of those great big houses on the 10.000 block.

The squad consists of two police motorcycles, followed by two police cars and an unmarked car. Just as the narrator gets to "the homicide squad", the second police car moves by, and the camera follows it with a swift pan to the left. The rest of the cars speed by, and the narrator continues to speak in his completely relaxed tone. He talks about the news hitting the street, and then he has a surprising line for a narrator: "…maybe you'll like to hear the facts, the whole truth. If so, you've come to the right party". By now we know that the narrator himself must be involved in the action, but we don't realize at this point that it's the man in the pool. Although we see the body in the pool, we can't clearly see the face.

And to trick the audience even more, the narrator speaks of the body in the third person, in the same cynical fashion, as the

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Making of "Sunset Boulevard." Paramount Pictures, 2002.

whole movie describes Hollywood: “Nobody important really, just a movie writer with a couple of B-pictures to his credit”. The fact that the narrator is laying in the pool when he speaks, is kept from the audience until the final scenes, where we see Norma Desmond shoot Joe Willis.

The whole backward movement of the first shot is rather slow, but we instantly get a sense of immediacy when Franz Waxman´s score starts the second the paramount logo appears on screen. Clearly music for a chase sequence, though we don’t understand what or who is being chased, or indeed who is trying to get away. As we quickly discover, for the man in the pool, it’s too late to escape from anything, and instead the scene takes on an almost symbolic character. The man who spends the entire movie trying to escape his fate is Joe Willis, just as Norma Desmond is trying to escape her fate of being forgotten. Both characters are desperately trying to escape their fate, while chasing something else.

The very first thing we see, the title: *Sunset Boulevard*, refers to the dream Joe Gillis is chasing, and the dreamlike life Norma Desmond once used to live. The sun is setting for Norma Desmond, and also for Joe Gillis, whose days as a Hollywood writer have just come to a sudden end, when the film starts. A film about a doomed escape, told backwards, and a first shot to mirror this structure; moving backwards also, because the past is the only thing that dead people can talk about.

The Godfather

The Godfather is based on Mario Puzo´s novel about organized crime in America's 1940s, and was first published in 1969. Since the book filled over 400 pages, Coppola had to make drastic structural changes when he transformed the novel into a script, and thus the start in the movie differs from the start of the novel.

The novel starts out with the undertaker, Amerigo Bonasera, in court, listening to a judge reading the sentences of the two boys who molested his daughter. The sentences are suspended, and this promptly triggers the already outraged Bonasera into making a crucial decision: "For justice, we must go on our knees to Don Corleone."[2]

This is where the film starts: with Bonasera´s plea for justice, but the novel waits another 17 pages. These are used to introduce characters and subplots, almost entirely deleted in the movie. Coppola keeps the focus, and the subplots from the novel are mainly used to emphasize the power of the Corleone family. The whole movie revolves around the acquisition and maintaining of power, and therefore it makes perfect sense that the first shot visualizes this power. It does so in a subtle way, showing, not Don Corleone (Marlon Brando), the head of the family, but rather his power over other people.

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[2] Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* (Mandarin Books, 1991), p. 12.

The opening shot is a very slow zoom out, from a close-up of Amerigo Bonasera, to a framing in which he now only fills a small part of the screen, while the back of Don Corleone fills the entire left side of our visual field. This whole first shot takes the first 2 minutes and 44 seconds of a scene that runs in all just under 6 minutes.

While Bonasera tell his story, the camera shows his relation to the man to whom he is talking. As the seconds go by, we feel the power of Bonasera diminishing and the power of the person whom we have so far seen only from behind, steadily growing.

According to Walter Murch, post-production consultant and sound editor on the film, starting with the slow, zoom back was something Coppola had decided already in the writing of the screenplay:

> That particular technique of starting with a slow zoom back, while a character has a kind of aria in which he states his position... this is very similar to what Francis did in the beginning of *Patton* (...)
>
> Francis starts him (Bonasera) out in limbo - just a head, in darkness, saying: "I believe in America"... and yet there's a problem. What you want is the audience to say, Yes, I too believe in America, and I too am frustrated by this problem, either I have experienced it or I know people who have experienced it. As we're

> feeling this, the context in which this speech is being given is revealed, and eventually the shoulder of the man who will solve the problem comes into frame.”[3]

Coppola makes the audience wait. When Don Corleone speaks his first line: ”Why did you go to the police, why didn’t you come to me first?” considering how long the shot has already been held, it would have been natural to cut to Don Corleone as soon as the line began. But instead, the camera stays on Bonasera, who says “What do you want of me? Tell me anything, but do what I beg you to do.” And The Don replies dryly: “What is that?” Bonasera, too shy and insecure to speak his request out loud, gets up from his chair and walks over to Don Corleone, whispering: “For them to die” in his ear. As Bonasera starts moving away again, the long anticipated cut finally comes, and we see the face of The Don for the first time.

The power of the Don is established in several ways throughout the first shot, one of the most subtle of which is seen when Bonasera breaks down from telling the story of his daughter, and Don

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[3] Michael Ondaatje, *The Conversations* (Knopf, 2002), p. 259.

Corleone moves his hand very slightly, and immediately a drink is served to the nervous undertaker.

The space and the lighting are beautifully controlled elements in the portrayal of Bonasera and his desperate situation. He is completely surrounded by darkness, with only a small amount of light shining on his head, in a room that stands in extreme contrast to the festivities of the wedding party going on just outside. As the films set-designer Dean Tavoularis noted: "Here was this place which was beyond just a room, but a symbolic thing, kind of sticky pink, with sticky flowers and dark paneling. Kind of like a church. When you come out of a church you feel a bit more alive."[4]

Coppolas first shot has managed to encompass the genre, the environment in which the film takes place, and one of the main themes in the story: power. It's an extremely slow shot, carefully planned and executed. A shot that itself embodies the qualities of the man it indirectly tries to describe.

The Shining

Stanley Kubrick adapted Stephen King´s novel *The Shining*, in which Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) gets a job as the winter caretaker at the giant "Overlook Hotel", otherwise left empty until spring. In the company of only his wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall) and son Danny (Danny Lloyd), he slowly loses is mind, and ends up franticly trying to kill them both.

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[4] Peter Cowie, *The Godfather Book* (Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 54.

The film opens with a sequence of aerial shots lasting 2 minutes and 40 seconds, following a yellow car on it's way up an almost desolate mountain road. It ends with a cut to a title card that reads: "The interview".

The first of the sequence's eight helicopter shots runs for 19 seconds, and starts above a mountain lake, then flying very close to a tiny island in the middle of it, and ends while still moving toward the mountain ahead. As with the other helicopter shots, this is shot in daylight, but nevertheless seems just as threatening as the start of any other horror movie. This is due largely to Wendy Carlos´ chilling gothic-like music, *Dies Irae*, which sets in as soon as the first shot begins, and continues throughout the rest of the opening sequence. It immediately makes the audience aware that evil is waiting at the end of the road, and after a minute and a half, several slow, aching screams are even beginning to be heard over the deep horns that have otherwise dominated from the start.

The first shot is preceded by only the Warner Brothers logo, and so the opening montage also functions as the title sequence of the film.

The Shining has Stanley Kubrick's first ever use of computerized credits, and they start in the fourth shot, scrolling up from the bottom, at a constant speed and with the text in light blue letters. Kubrick could obviously have started with a classical white on black credit sequence, distinct from the opening montage, but by having only the Warner Brothers logo and then immediately cutting to the fast-moving helicopter shot, he instantly creates the feeling of being drawn toward something. That something remains unknown for the first seven shots in the sequence, until the eighth and final shot, where the Overlook Hotel is finally shown. This shot also has the camera stopping its rapid forward motion, and instead of just flying over the hotel, it now slows down and moves sideways, observing the hotel from a distance, almost as if it feared coming closer.

In the fourth shot, there is a notable change of the camera's position. After filming from about a hundred meters above the road in the second shot, and staying far behind the car in the third shot, the camera now suddenly descends and catches up with the car. It almost touches down on the mountain road behind it, but instead moves extremely close to the car, and continues over the cliff. The camera calls more attention to itself then it has in any of the previous shots, and thus suddenly changes from an almost neutral observer to an independent character in the film. Jack Torrance is being watched – by something that seems to be above and beyond his own awareness… something that knows where he is going. Either because this "something" has the gift of foresight, or because what Jack Torrance is about to do, is something he has done many times before. (As we later discover, foresight is one the meanings of the word "shining".) He is entering a maze, from which death inevitably becomes his sole escape, and as later suggested, he has probably done so before. This is a story of ghosts, and that fact is visually supported throughout the film. From the very first shot, the film is weightless, the camera flying through the air, as the steadycam camera later “flies” through the endless hallways of the hotel, always right behind Danny and his tricycle.

The final shot of the film has the camera moving slowly toward a wall covered with pictures, and stops on an old black and white photo, dated July 4, 1921. In the middle of a crowd, is Jack Torrance, appearing to be the same age as when the movie takes place, around 1980. This eerie ending connects not only with the start, but also with a line spoken earlier in the film by the ghost of Delbert Grady, whom Jack presumes to be the former caretaker. Grady corrects him, saying “…but you’re the caretaker, you’ve always been the caretaker. I should know; I’ve always been here”.

Kubrick uses the mazes in the movie as an allegory of the story’s structure and the state of mind into which Jack Torrance is slowly drifting. The yellow car of the opening shots is being drawn closer to the magnet of evil, and to a predestined fate. Kubrick has done as Wilder did in *Sunset Boulevard*, and embodied the film’s story in the opening shots.

Story and…. “story”
Reflections on an over-hyped concept

Mark Le Fanu

Storytelling seems to be an innate human activity. The capacity to speak carries with it an invisible shaping power, even at the level of sentence construction, and there is no human being alive who is not impelled to tell stories (even if they are only to himself) several times a day – it is as native to the way we function as breathing is. Granted, then, that “storytelling animal” is one of the definitions of being human, the interesting distinction arises not between those who tell stories and those who don’t (because we all do), but between the out-and-out professionals (writers, filmmakers, dramatists) and the rest of us, who may be characterized as mere amateurs of anecdote. Whereas the story-telling ability of most human adults subsists merely at a conversational level, a percentage of the populace in every generation attempts more ambitious shapings. So literature – in its multifarious branches – is born. People endeavour to tell stories for a living, and here, it seems to me, certain skills and enthusiasms are required that are precisely *not* innate or universal: 1. The writer in question must be able to invent interesting characters; 2. what they say is important: they have to be furnished with interesting dialogue, or dialogues; lastly, 3. a framework of incident has to be devised in which these fictional characters may be drawn out, “incarnated” and in other ways turned into live human beings.

I list these three skills separately, but of course they are all intertwined: in the cauldron of creation, they are operating simultaneously and invisibly. I would like to repeat my speculation that the aptitude to engage successfully in this sort of activity is - if not exactly rare - then at least a gift that is not given to everyone. Alas, for most of us, the desire to invent stories and to elaborate them systematically in writing, dries up around adolescence – along with those other ludic past-times of childhood such as drawing and colouring and dressing up in theatrical costume. Yet storytelling is profoundly congruent as an activity with the state of childhood. The phrase itself, "storytelling", can never slough off its primary allegiance to entertainment, and to wonder. A primitive taxonomy of story suggests itself. First, there are the bed-time tales told by parents to children - fairy tales and ghost stories that mingle with and interpenetrate the child's dreams. Further on in life, a central branch of the childish imagination is the adventure story, the ingredients of which we may attempt to list schematically: a simple robust plot, a hero or heroine who can be identified with, a quest successfully undertaken and a morally unambiguous outcome. With variations, this (or something like it) is still the template that powers the huge entertainment machine known as Hollywood. The satisfactions of the standard blockbuster, and even the ordinary comedy, are essentially "childish" in the context I am suggesting here – which doesn't mean that they aren't interesting, and genuine, and backed up by vast reserves of talent. There is no need to deny the fact that the people who provide these stories (the industry professionals – the "developers", the screen-writers, the script-doctors, the hordes of re-write specialists) are skilled craftsmen to the tips of their fingernails.

But there is another kind of story that is closer to the core of literature. In any case, it is interesting that in the context of literature one doesn't use the word "story" so often. Story has got to be there, of course – something is being *told*, and what that thing is, will usually be summarisable. Yet the deepest satisfactions of literature are not plot-confined: in some of literature's greatest works (I include plays – for example, Chekhov's plays – as well as novels) it is as if plot itself has evaporated: what happens, happens (so to speak) of its own volition – without the intercession of the story-teller, and independent of the exigencies of "genre". Miraculous moment! The scaffolding disappears: you search around and can't see a sign of it. It is as if it never existed! The same "trick" can be discerned in cinema, and is absolutely the thing that makes the greatest movies so wonderful– this beguiling feeling, that the audience doesn't know at all where it's being taken, doesn't even suspect that it's *in* a story. Take a simple example: the plot of *Bicycle Thieves* is easy to recount: a man loses his bicycle. Unless he can find it he will lose, too, his job and his family. With his ten year old son, he skelters around Rome in search of the vehicle. Yet nothing at all in de Sica's film is predictable: the incidents that follow each other have their own logic, their own rhythm, their own integrity. Everywhere, the film combats and outwits the reductiveness of melodrama. It is exactly similar, in this, to a film like *Pather Panchali*: plot, as such, has been banished by Satyajit Ray, to be replaced by limpidly beautiful incidents that seem to succeed each other with all the gravity and inevitability of life itself.

The two examples here are taken from the humanist classics, but one could just as easily cite modernist or postmodernist masterpieces. Indeed, “lack of plot” might even be one of their defining characteristics. One thinks of Godard or Antonioni. What exactly is *L'Avventura*, for example? A woman from a yacht-party goes missing on an island; her friends search for her. The search continues on the mainland and is never resolved. By the end of the film we still do not know whether she has disappeared in an accident, committed suicide, or been abducted (or none of these things). None of this matters, however: in life, after all, mysteries also remain unresolved. The extraordinary suspense of the film – the suspense that is necessary in every narrative and dramatic work of art – is not the suspense of a detective thriller; it is sustained, on the contrary, by our wondering from scene to scene where Antonioni will take us next – not so much narratively, as spiritually, psychologically, erotically. The film seems, as it unfolds, to have no structure at all; yet, when it ends, we have undoubtedly *been* somewhere, and taken prizes. Its cadences, in the musical sense, are beautiful and just.

Other examples suggest themselves. A good proportion, perhaps, of all the movies that count in film history are like this. One thinks of the Czech school of the 1960s: minimalist masterpieces like *Intimate Lighting* (Ivan Passer, 1965) or *Capricious Summer* (Jiri Menzel, 1967) in which nothing happens at all – on the surface, at least; though beneath the surface the currents of life flow impellingly. And there is the whole strand of French film-making that stretches from Renoir to Rohmer, predicated on tiny, almost invisible incidents, faultlessly evoked and elaborated. We are far here, indeed, from the broad brush strokes of populist Hollywood dramaturgy. Hollywood and the kind of films I have been describing are really two different forms of art, two different creatures In a way it is pointless to compare them. So it strange, I think, that efforts to place them in the same basket are very much the style of the age.

The trend first started ten or so years ago. At the time I am thinking of, one couldn't open a magazine or a newspaper without coming upon an article complaining that "European cinema [alternatively: "art-house cinema"] has forgotten how to tell stories." (The real meaning of this is: it is not enough like Hollywood.) Seminars and study-courses started up everywhere explaining to us, or purporting to explain, how this deficiency of imagination might be rectified. One was struck by the condescension – or else (is it the same thing?) – the ignorance of some of these initiatives. How openly they disdained what *had* been achieved in European cinema, in their eagerness to replace it with new formulas! What started out as a mild corrective (a plea for a return from the wilder shores of the avant-garde to the pleasures of orthodox story-telling) became, soon enough, a constricting ideology which begged more questions than it answered. "Films must be popular." But what do you *mean* by popular? (And actually, why *must* they be popular? A good film will find its own level.) And then this key mantra we have been considering. "*A film must tell a story*." Yes: but there are many stories, and many different ways of *telling* a story. The phrase itself, when overused like this, infantilises the subject, dragging art down to the lowest common level, and anchoring it there in the public's so-called "need for entertainment". So the plea here (in this special issue of POV) is for a cautious and scrupulous consideration of the topic, and a sensitivity to its ideological deceptiveness. There are films, to repeat, where story is everything (Almodovar's *Bad Education* seems to me to be a good recent example); and there are films that have no story at all – none, at least, that is discernible to the naked eye. Neither type of film, I would think, is *necessarily better* than the other. Power, beauty, depth and coherence in a work of art are surely what ultimately matter – these are the qualities that we should be looking for. Story is only the starting-point.

Where's the story?

Notes on telling stories cinematically

Edvin Vestergaard Kau

> The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture.
>
> Maurice Merleau-Ponty

> Cinema is a temporal art – its elements appear sequentially in time.
>
> Gerald Mast

39 steps – and back again

Viewing two very special films crystallized the following reflections on certain elements of cinematic storytelling. Although *The 39 Steps* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1935; 87 min.) is a feature film, and *Remembrance* (Stephanie Morgenstern, 2001; 19 min., see articles and facts in *POV* 15) is a short fiction film, they have some things in common in the way they present their story as a kind of journey that circles back upon itself to connect ending and beginning. What I am interested in is how they are tell portions of their story through their use of time. Or, as I prefer to put it, how they orchestrate time.

In *The 39 Steps,* the character Mr. Memory has memorized information about a new weapon to be used by the RAF, and enemy spies are about to take this memory artist out of the country. However, this plan is not disclosed until a point near the end of the film, even though Mr. Memory is presented in the very first scene, at a moment when the hero, Robert Hannay, is in the audience of a music hall performance. In this way, Hitchcock opens a string of events leading towards the end without giving the viewer much information: Hannah is watching the "memory show", quarrel and fighting breaks out among the audience, and trying to get out he is contacted by a woman, "Miss Anabella Smith" (who in fact is an agent working for the British intelligence service). Next, she fires a gun to "create a diversion", invites herself home with Hannay, tells him a few details about her activities, a spy cell in Scotland – and is murdered by foreign agents. Hannay finds himself chased by both the police (for the murder) and the spies (he knows too much). But in a way, his reason for setting out on the journey through Hitchcock's diversions is that he *knows too little*. So do we, the viewers; with almost every scene and every incident Hitchcock leaves the audience mystified as to story solutions and with few or no clues as to how incidents may contribute to the understanding of the story's logic, or what may or may not happen next during any given scene. For example, many times Hannay thinks that other people (even the heroine, Pamela) will help him, just to find out that they won't, or he thinks he is safe with the police who then turn him over to Scotland Yard as a man wanted for murder.

This puzzle is greatly entertaining to follow. Scene after scene offers little surprises; Hannay is trapped or caught by the police, but no he's not. He is free, and then he's not. The story and solutions in the end almost lose their importance. What is interesting here is a special mechanism in Hitchcock's storytelling practice: steps in the final explanations are continually postponed, and developments in so-called plot logic are turned upside down. Constantly we find that *hesitation and delay are major principles* in Hitchcock's storytelling practice. Every scene in every new environment during Hannay's hunt for explanations and solutions in Scotland, is used as a means for orchestrating a hesitation and a certain slowness – keeping the audience waiting for the ending in an entertaining way. *The 39 Steps* literally uses cinematic time-space patterns to keep the viewer suspended between the opening and closing of the film.

Finally, in the end we return to the London Palladium, where Mr. Memory is giving his usual performance. On stage he is provoked by Hannay to disclose that The 39 Steps is an organisation of spies working for a foreign power. The circle is complete, and in a way – between beginning and end there is nothing. That is, nothing but time – in which the viewer has had the opportunity to experience the pleasure and excitement of being led back to the starting point of the story. Thus the key elements amount to the very mechanism of change (rather than precise events or things actually shown), the inventive fantasy making us "believe" in this unreal tale.

Remembering in *Remembrance*

Returning to the same, or staying in the same moment actually is done more radically in the short fiction film *Remembrance*. Like *The 39 Steps* it is about a memory artist, Alfred. In a way his story might be seen as a chance to get a glimpse of the possible fate of a person like Mr. Memory. But unlike Mr. Memory, Alfred has not trained himself to remember things. On the contrary, he is unable to forget, and the reason he remembers literally everything, is because he is a synesthete. This means that he hears the sounds of colours, sees the colours of music, he can't hear anything without seeing it, and so on. All his senses are actually a single sense. In this way he combines and remembers everything. As he says: "I can't imagine forgetting. I've tried everything. How do you… how do you stop knowing something you know?" A person like Alfred could be of great importance to the intelligence service of the Allied countries, and the woman, Aurora, who contacts him after the show is working for one such service. Alfred and Aurora are falling in love, and in fact this apparently is the only thing that can "save" him from the chaos of sensations (shown through fading sounds when they have locked eyes or dance together), but it also leaves him in a dilemma: is she just working, or are her feelings genuine, and is he able to balance his growing feelings for her with the commitment to the cause and the intelligence work?

The very first shot shows Alfred on a train station platform, remembering flashes of what the film is going to show. And the last scene shows the same situation, with Alfred also this time closing his eyes and thinking back, deciding what to do. Turning around he, and we, see himself and Aurora entering the platform in the background of the picture. Past and present are on the screen at the same time. They sit down, and she tells him about her job and *her* dilemma between duty and personal feelings. Then, after this, their last talk, Aurora, the intelligence woman, leaves him; he closes his eyes and is back remembering their quiet dance. Making his decision he turns and starts walking back along the platform toward the background of the picture, where Aurora disappeared, when she left to go to her hotel.

The result is that everything we see and hear in the film is Alfred's memory. Once it is in there, it can't disappear. He is standing on the platform, while he is memorizing, reflecting, and making his decision. Then he turns around and walks into the depth of the picture. Everything is a presentation of his state of mind, and this means that he is in a condition (as a synesthete and mnemonist) where everything is accumulated in his mind, in a permanent *now*. Interestingly, it follows from this that cuts to earlier situations are not really traditional flashbacks, but presentations of elements always remaining in his present consciousness. Changes along the narrative succession of scenes aren't so much changing things as presenting elements in Alfred's state of mind. The narrator is constructing a picture of Alfred's story, and this story is a vision of one (and every) moment in Alfred's life and mind.

Changing nothing says a lot

The narrative structure with a final return to key elements of the beginning becomes more radical in *Remembrance* than in *The 39 Steps*, because the former literally stays in one and the same moment, in Alfred's mind; his all-encompassing *now*. In both films' endings we return to the starting point. Of course, Hitchcock has transported Hannay from London to the Scottish Highlands and back again and taken him and the heroine Pamela through a number of dramatic events, but the solution has remained on stage with Mr. Memory all the time. *Remembrance* tells the viewer about a series of experiences during an evening in Alfred's life, but in fact it never moves of out of his head. In this way both films have stayed in the same place; nothing has happened, and this nothing has been turned into good stories! In different ways this non-movement is the result of very interesting storytelling practices. I shall maintain this as a point in relation to a cinematic poetics: What has happened in both cases really is: the *telling* of cinematic stories. Often, the patterns and mechanisms of cinematic story*telling* are more important for the experience and the viewer's attention than the story itself as anecdote.

In the Hitchcock film, the presentation of characters and events catches the viewer's attention, mainly because it opens the door to: mystery. What is promised is that an exiting game of cinematic construction is in play. What counts is not information and facts, or specific events and connections as much as the very *dynamics of change*: uncertainties and accidental relations between things are more important. The narrative authority (sometimes called the narrator), with a clear distance to both story and characters, can play with a lot of "as ifs" and concentrate on ways to keep changes coming. (As the master of ceremonies at Club Silencio in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) comments, when the connections between sound and movement are shown to be illusions: "It's all recorded".) Once Hannay is introduced and sent on his way through the maze of mystery, we have at the center of interest: modification, development, diversion – of (almost) nothing. The pure change and movement over time rather than facts and logic becomes essential to the storytelling as a mechanism of cinematic poetics.

The importance of a clear *narrative authority*, the definition of the *cinematic meaning structure as an "as if"*, and *change as orchestrated time patterns* in relation to traditional cinematic poesis, self-reflexive films, and meta-cinema, can be detected in films such as *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958), *Vampyr* (Dreyer, 1932), and *Lost Highway* (Lynch, 1997). Other examples come to mind as well: *Funny Games* (Haneken, 1998), *Memento* (Nolan, 2001), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994), *One Hour Photo* (Romanek, 2002), *Magnolia* (Anderson, 2000). *Fargo* (Coen Bros., 1996) makes an almost demonstrative point of this "as if-strategy": "This is a true story". Perhaps more story than true? In films such as these the viewer's experience is deeply dependent upon not just plot logic and story material as such, but more particularly on patterns creating meaning in time and space.

Seeing changing time and space at a distance

The examples analysed above may provoke reflections in other directions than traditional descriptions of narration in fiction films, plot structure, and the like. The three following characteristics are worth considering in this perspective:

1) Pure change. Telling a story is basically *changing* things/elements and phases/stages of development. It is also focusing the viewer's attention, and re-focusing this focus on new elements; not necessarily on certain things or specific facts – but on the very mechanism or dynamic of change. The

challenge and attractive quality in story building is its element of time and the viewer's experience of emerging and shifting (patterns of) meaning.

2) To tell a story, you have to operate in an *as if* mode. Story is structuring raw material; and "storying" as practice is essentially the same whether the product is fiction or documentary. If we have these elements: characters, situations, settings, etc., and if we let them do this or that, or something happens to them, what may develop and become elements of a story? To create or practice a story of something – or *about* something – you have to have a certain distance to what is told. *You don't tell a soccer match, you play it* (even though it is of course quite possible to tell about it or about one's experience of it – afterwards). The told story is not reality, but structured, mediated reality, shaped by the medium. Screen reality is always presented as an "as if". When you tell something, (either fictitious or something that actually happened to you), the events – and your story – are *in another place in time and space* than the time and space of reality.

3) Finally, it is important to keep in mind a specific variety of the above-mentioned *distance*: that between *characters* and *storyteller*. The characters are told as parts of the story, as it were, while the storyteller is in the process of doing this piece of work (telling about them). This may sound trivial, but it is nevertheless crucial to distinguish between the narrator and the characters of his or her story, between teller and tale.

This is the story?

All stories are the same, or at least all traditional narration is. You begin your story, develop complications in the initial situation, develop things further through events, create obstacles and opponents, explain and present solutions, and show the ending. From Aristotle to Hollywood, the sequence of events has traditionally been generalized into this pattern: beginning – middle – end.

Count to three, make it a little difficult to do so, and the audience is happy to reach the opportune solution in the end.

As we have seen, story*telling* involves not only the story, but also the *act of telling*: shaping the meaning-developing structure of time and space. In this game, uncertainty is an important element in *telling* as a driving or dynamic force, as demonstrated by Hitchcock (and not just in his and others' definition of suspense: possible dangers known to the viewer, but not the characters). Hesitation, and slowness (and on the part of the viewer: patience!), not speed, is of great importance. One doesn't always want to race ahead toward solutions. Just ask the expert audience: children. Excitement and suspense also means: waiting in a playful engagement between the audience and the presentational, aesthetic practice of the movie. That is, the viewer's experience of *how* the film is telling its story. Watching a (good) film also is: waiting full of attention!

The Idea

An article about idea-development problems

Gunnar Wille

It was early in the morning. He sat staring out the window when an idea suddenly entered his morning-drowsy brain:

> The idea
> ”An isolated house surrounded by a wild and untended garden. It is a bright summer evening. A woman, a very beautiful woman, opens a window on the first floor and looks down into the garden where a dwarf is standing in the high, uncut grass. She yells something at the little man and slams the window furiously. The dwarf puts on his hat and turns his back to the house…”

Perhaps the idea was not even good, but it might develop into another idea that could be used for something. That is, if it was allowed to simmer in the back of his head for a while. And if it was then allowed to pop up in his head again to have another woman added to it, sitting naked up a tree in the middle of a field a kilometer from the house.

He was wide awake. He loved ideas that just popped up in his head like that, without any effort on his part. These ideas seem to develop all by themselves, out of the blue, and suddenly they are there. You could be doing the dishes, be on your way to a metro station or just be sitting and staring out the window as he had just done, and suddenly it comes to you. In short, ideas are born when you are not making an effort to develop them. And in his opinion, these ideas were the best. They have a freshness to them that is rarely there when you have worked hard to develop an idea. He had often asked himself the question: How does one actually get an idea? And he had not succeeded in coming up with an unambiguous answer. After all it is very unlikely that you will get an idea if you just sit down and stare out the window. And then he realised that it was not the first time that this specific idea had entered his head. This was an idea that kept popping up. And consequently he would soon have to do something about it. He had to find out what it was all about. He had to find out what the woman yelled. He had to figure out the story of the little man and where he was going…

Then there was a ring at his front door. He was still sitting in his bathrobe, his hair looking as if he had slept in it. He looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. He was not expecting anyone. Oh well, he adjusted his bathrobe and shuffled through the long corridor from the kitchen to the living room and the hall. Yawning his head off, he opened the door. Outside stood the Producer. He stopped in the middle of a yawn and stared foolishly at the large, broad man who was standing on the staircase. The Producer was wearing white shoes, white trousers, a white shirt, a white jacket and a loud red tie, cutting like a bleeding wound down his pot belly. His head was round and almost bald. His spectacle frame was red and he had a white goatee on his fat chin.

– Hello there, – he said and walked uninvited into the hall. – It seems that once again my favourite director has forgotten our appointment. –

It was true. There was no disputing it. He had forgotten it. And as he was closing the door, another person appeared on the staircase. The Writer. It seemed that they were going to have one of their brainstorming sessions. That was the only time he would have a meeting with both of them at the same time. The Writer went past him, following the Producer, into the living room. He, who was as usually dressed all in black, raised his black soft hat exposing his short, blond, spiky hair while giving him one of his dry, ironic smiles that made his long thin face look like a diabolic horse. The living room looked as if it had housed a gigantic party and that was true; many people, a number of friends and other good people, had called on him the day before and they had stayed till the small hours. As far as he could remember, the Writer had been one of them and now he looked lively and fit as a fiddle as if he had slept the whole night. He was clean and pleasant-smelling. Annoying. In honour of the occasion, he was wearing a loud green tie in the middle of his narrow chest. He himself, the Director, was wearing his worn bathrobe of a nondescript dirty yellow and underneath a pair of flabby boxer shorts with a print of small dogs doing it doggy-style. He was unshaven and probably smelled of booze and bonking. His wife had left him two months ago and there had been a couple of female friends at the party as far as he remembered.

The living room was furnished with a black leather sofa and a table-top placed on two beer crates. Piles of books were placed along the walls. His wife had taken everything of value. The floor and the table-top were littered with empty bottles and filled ashtrays. With visible disgust the Producer sat down in the sofa and pushed the bottles away. The Writer sat at the other end of the sofa, primly hitching up his knife-edge trousers. He himself remained standing at the entrance to the living room.

– As I told you, we have received an enquiry from a production company seeking cooperation, – the Producer said without further commenting on the situation. – They want to hear if we have any good ideas. –

The white Producer and the black Writer looked interestedly at the Director. That is the way it used to be; they came to him, he served up some useable ideas, they would then brainstorm on them together and it would develop from there. The Director cleared his throat and made a feverish search of his empty hung-over brain. The only thing he could find was the idea that had popped up a little while ago. So he decided that maybe it was time to air it. So he dished it up.

– A beautiful woman opens a window and stares down into a garden. A dwarf is standing in the high grass. The woman furiously yells something and slams the window. The dwarf sighs and turns around… –

It became very quiet in the living room.

– Well, you see, – said the Producer. – the distributor had some rather specific requests, as you may remember from our talk five days ago? –

The Producer looked quizzically at the Director who merely looked blankly at him.

– No, you don't, – the Producer smiled patiently. – Allow me to refresh your memory. The distributor who is familiar with your films and who greatly admires you wants something related to sports. A story that takes place in a sports environment, preferably golf! You see, he is convinced that there is a market for such a film. There are no golf films these days. Perhaps there are no films about golf made in Denmark at all and he is dead certain that he will be able to sell it. There are a hell of a lot of people who love golf. –

– A young man who is a talented golfer is run over, – the Director sighed. – He is handicapped, something with one of his legs that needs to be amputated. He overcomes his problem and trains to be able to play golf again. He meets with much resistance, but there is one person who believes in him, a girl, but she is engaged to the son of the evil owner of the golf club. Complications, complications, and they get each other in the end. –

– That was much better. A little thin and predictable. – The Producer smiled and turned to the Writer. – But then, you can fix that, can't you? –

– Mm, yes… – the Writer mumbled. – There needs to be a plot point on page 17… slightly stronger motivation… lots of golf… the evil of the opponent… turning point… last decision… bam, bam, bam… –

– STOP! – the Director yelled. – This is a load of shit. It is no good. How many times must I tell you that it is risky business doing it this way? The plot becomes thin, predictable and the golf people probably won't even want to watch it. The history of art shows that it is not possible. Ideas that are new and interesting and ideas that become successes; they simply cannot be forced. They develop, and when they have developed, you must be ready to greet them. And when they have developed, then the writer can introduce his many good methods of stitching them up into well–functioning stories.

– It is kind of funny with that dwarf, – the Producer said. – Is it because you are a little squirt yourself and your wife has left you… –

– You just shut up! – the Director yelled. – Why is completely irrelevant!! Ideas need time and they need protection. They are not to be pawed by greedy producers or horny writers. They need time to grow into self-contained ideas before they meet the seductive and dangerous world. Let them have that time. And I am talking about years, sometimes even many years before you can take such an idea by the hand and present it at a meeting. Everybody is lying in wait and if you introduce the idea to the world too early, you run the risk of it not being able to stand the pressure. Ideas too can become terribly self-obsessed and selfish. Suddenly they think that they can manage by themselves and function without their creators and that may lead to rape, brainwashing and abuse and that is what kills ideas. Just like people… Now look at my little idea… –

The Director sat down on the floor, exhausted. The double door to the living room next to this one opened and a young girl walked softly in, red-haired. She was wearing very little clothing. Panties and a small T-shirt with a ruined heart logo and the text ”I F… New York”. She looked sleepy and bleary-eyed.

– Could you please be quiet, – she whispered in a soft and hoarse voice.

The Producer and the Writer followed her happily with their eyes as she walked across the room and disappeared into the darkness of the corridor.

– Well, – the Director thought. – Yes, there definitely was bonking last night. –

The door opened and another girl appeared. This one was wearing even less clothing and ran across the room giggling, covering her breasts with her arms. Even the Director had to follow this one with his eyes. He had no memory of doing anything with the first one, and this new one he had absolutely no recollection of at all. The last person who came out of the room was a little man, not a dwarf, but a man who could only be described as little. He was wearing a pair of the Director's doggy boxer shorts which flapped about his body.

– Hi, – he said to the Producer. – Could you please tell me where I am? I mean, where in Copenhagen… –

He disappeared the same way as the girls and the Director clutched his head.

– And so I imagine that, – he continued his narration. – That there is a room with very strange wallpaper. Wallpaper with a very heavy relief that keeps growing. Every time we enter the room it has changed, become thicker, the relief deeper. The woman is in despair but she cannot control it. And that is precisely what she wants, to control everything. There is this man who dominates her and out in the field, behind the house, is an old tree. Thick stem and a big crown. An oak tree. Up the tree is a naked woman, waiting. It is raining… –

– Oh well, fine with me, – said the Producer. – As long as you provide the dwarf with a golf club! –

Perpetuating Remembrance
N. Scott Momaday and Kiowa Storytelling

James Ransom

> You don’t have anything
> if you don’t have the stories.
> Silko. *Ceremony*.

Among the more notable developments in North American literary production since the revolutionary year of 1968 has been the burgeoning of a highly popular Native American literature. A significant number of today’s bestselling and most critically acclaimed North American novelists, short story writers, and poets identify with their respective indigenous tribal heritages and write from a Native American perspective and about Native American subjects. Among the best known are James Welch, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, Sherman Alexie, and, of course, N. Scott Momaday. These writers participate in a much larger movement among descendants of a diverse range of indigenous tribal peoples of North America, who, sharing a common history of defeat and dispossession as "Indians,"[1] have come together in order to pursue an agenda of political and economic redress, social reconstruction, and cultural revival. Born in the social protest and political activism of the late 1960's and early 1970's, and lead by urban Indians of mixed indigenous and European ancestry, this “Native American Renaissance”[2] has taken various forms in political action, community organizing, entrepreneurial ventures, and an entire spectrum of cultural expression, including journalism, scholarship, photography, film, poetry, fiction, painting, music, dance, crafts, clothing, hair styles, and so forth. While its impact is increasingly evident on the reservations, this movement continues to draw significantly for self-definition and leadership upon mixed-blood individuals who have lived much of their lives in urban environments and who have earned university degrees. This is especially the case with its literary wing, where most of the leading poets and novelists have advanced degrees and many are on the faculties of major universities.

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[1] "Indians" are a European and Euramerican cultural construct. There were no Indians, and still wouldn't be, except that Columbus got lost on his way to the East Indies. This is not to deny that, when Columbus ran aground on the island of Guanahaní, there were millions and millions of people living in the western hemisphere, probably more than eight million in North America. It is, however, to recognize that these people belonged to hundreds of distinct and, in many instances, vastly dissimilar (and sometimes mutually hostile) tribal cultures. "Indians" have tended to render these diverse peoples virtually invisible, covering them over with the self-serving constructions of Euramerican cultural discourse. Together with the actual deterioration

This is certainly true of Scott Momaday, whose 1968 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*, is rightly said to have initiated the Native American Renaissance as a literary phenomenon. With his Ph.D. in American Literature from Stanford University, his tenure at the University of California and now Arizona, his Pulitzer Prize in fiction, and his international recognition for his achieve-

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and even destruction of traditional cultures, the range of more or less egregious misrepresentation of indigenous tribal peoples as "Indians" has had a profound effect on native peoples themselves. What begin in the imaginations of bewildered Europeans came eventually to determine much in the actual lives of the descendants of the pre-invasion indigenous tribal populations.

[2] This designation, echoing F.O. Matthiessen’s landmark book on mid-nineteenth-century writing in the USA, was first used by Kenneth Lincoln in his pioneering study, *Native American Renaissance* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1983).

ments as a poet, novelist, painter, scholar, and teacher, Momaday has been a high achiever within the institutions, both academic and literary, of mainstream American culture. At the same time, Momaday is a registered member of the Kiowa Indian Tribe. His mastery of cultural practices within the institutions of Euramerican society has given him the capacity not only to interject an indigenous voice into the discourse of North American culture but, indeed, to help reconstruct a native culture out of which such a voice might speak. Any discussion of Momaday's writing must take into consideration his position as progenitor of the burgeoning body of writing by contemporary authors who identify with their indigenous tribal antecedents and whose writings directly address the question of Native American identity and the representation of Native American life. Momaday's work establishes definitive features of the larger story promulgated and elaborated by those who have found their own starting point as writers in a shared sense of identity and purpose at least in part fostered by Momaday's published writings.

I want in this essay to call attention especially to the roll played in Momaday's act of cultural reconstruction by his remembering of traditional Kiowa stories. In the introduction to a collection of essays, stories, and what he calls "passages," published in 1997 under the general title, *The Man Made of Words*, Momaday writes,

> My father told me stories from the Kiowa oral tradition even before I could talk. Those stories became permanent in my mind, the nourishment of my imagination for the whole of

> my life. They are among the most valuable gifts that I have ever been given.[3]

Momaday's paternal grandmother, Aho, also told him traditional stories, as did other Kiowa elders with whom he came into contact as a child visiting his grandmother's home on her allotment near Rainy Mountain on the Kiowa Reservation in north central Oklahoma. In 1963, at the time he was finishing up his work for the Ph.D. from Stanford University, Momaday was reawakened to his Kiowa heritage on the occasion of Aho's death. In order better to understand what it might mean for him that his father had been born in a tepee to parents who remembered a time when their people roamed the southern plains as a tribe of mounted hunters and warriors, Momaday once again sought out and listened to Kiowa storytellers.

When Momaday then devoted much of his time during the 1966-67 academic year to finishing *House Made of Dawn*, he was, in a sense, playing hooky, taking time to write his novel away from work on a very different kind of book, for which he was under contract with Oxford University Press. This was a study of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman and his fellow nineteenth-century Connecticut Valley poets, Jones Very and Emily Dickinson, tentatively titled *The Furrow and the Glow: Science and the Landscape in American Poetry, 1836-66.* Momaday's intention with this book was to trace an anti-transcendentalist, rationalist strain within 19th-century American poetry. The influence of his Stanford mentor, the renowned modernist poet and scholar-critic, Ivor Winters, who had himself first promoted Tuckerman as a rationalist alternative to the romanticism of Emerson and Whitman, is apparent in this project; and, indeed, it had been under Winters' direction that Momaday prepared a critical edition of Tuckerman's poetry as his dissertation for the Ph.D. at Stanford. Oxford University Press brought out Momaday's scholarly edition of *The Complete Poems of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman* in 1965 and Momaday was subsequently awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship for the 1966-67 academic year, so that he might take up residence in Amherst, Massachusetts for the research and writing of *The Furrow and the Glow*. This book never materialized. Instead, in 1968, Momaday published *House Made of Dawn*.

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[3] N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made Out of Words* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1997), p. 8.

Crucial to this momentous turning away from the mainstream of a modernist Anglo-American literary tradition into which he had been educated at Stanford in order to take up the story a young Towan pueblo man's struggle to survive in post-WWII America was a process of self-fashioning as a Kiowa that Momaday had begun in the spring of 1963. What Momaday himself has called his act of imagining for himself an identity as an American Indian[4] is narrated in his mixed-genre masterpiece, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. This text, upon which Momaday had begun work before taking up *House Made of Dawn* and upon which he continued to work throughout the period of the novel's composition, performs a process of self-construction in which Momaday reclaims for his thoroughly assimilated American self an identity as a member of a hunter-warrior tribe that, along with the Comanche and despite its relatively small numbers, dominated the southern plains for more than a century before its defeat in the 1870's by the United States Army.

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[4] Momaday, *The Names* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976), 25.

The Way to Rainy Mountain may be said to be the culmination of what began in 1963 as a folklore project. In the summer following his grandmother's death, Momaday, who does not himself speak the Kiowa language, set out with the help of his Kiowa-speaking father (the artist, Al Momaday) to collect what he could of the fragmentary remains of the oral culture that had once belonged to his grandmother's people. This project was prompted by Momaday's realization that he really knew very little about the people from whom he was patrilineally descended. Beginning with stories he and his father remembered having heard from Aho, they went on to interview tribal elders still living on the reservation in and around his recently deceased grandmother's house at Mountain View, Oklahoma—elders whose living memories reached back into the time before traditional Kiowa culture was fragmented and deformed in its defeat and subjugation at the hands of the US Army. This original fieldwork, supplemented by material found through research into the work of ethnographers and folklorists (James Mooney, Mildred Mayhall, Alice Marriot, and Wilbur S. Nye) first resulted in a collection of Kiowa myths, tales, legends, and family stories, each artfully rendered in Momaday's own carefully crafted English, and published by the University of California Press at Santa Barbara in a beautifully hand-printed limited edition of 100 copies in 1967, under the title *The Journey of Tai-me*.[5] This collection then became the core of stories that make up the first of each of the tripartite sections in the main body of what is today Momaday's most widely read book, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, published in 1969 and including eleven pen and ink drawings by Momaday's father.

This remembering and, indeed, honoring of Kiowa oral tradition is the first step in what became for Momaday a journey into deepening levels of human time. As recorded in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, this journey leads from the construction of time as a series of discreet moments experienced as loss and isolation, through a recovery of time in the form of historical design or pattern (what Momaday calls "destiny"), and on into a deepened awareness of time similar to what Paul Ricoeur, in his Heideggerian analysis of narrative time, names "temporality" and describes as "the deep *unity* of future, past, and present [,] . . . of expectation, memory, and attention[,] . . . [and] of communication . . . between contemporaries, predecessors, and successors."[6]

One of the poems from *Rainy Mountain*, "Rainy Mountain Cemetery," marks Momaday's starting point in its expression of a stymied and, indeed, "deranged" subjectivity bound within the discrete present moment of loss and isolation. This is the condition away from which Momaday's research into the past of his own family and the indigenous tribe to which they belong leads him toward a sense of time much like what Ricoeur calls "historicality," where discreet events are configured in a pattern characterized by a beginning, middle, and end (Momaday's "The Setting Out," "The Going On," "The Closing In"), and are capable of being translated into "theme" or "point"– that is to say, become open to interpretation as to the ways in which the various aspects of what is recorded fit together so as to define a form of life. This is what Momaday calls the Kiowa's "good idea of themselves . . . [in which] they . . . dared to imagine and determine who they were,"[7] thus transforming what Momaday calls in his Preface "the mean and ordinary agonies of human history" into the journey of "a lordly and dangerous society of fighters and thieves, hunters and priests of the sun."[8] This is the journey that results in "many things to remember, to dwell upon and talk about"[9] – that is to say, the stories of the Kiowa oral tradition. The tripartite structure of the individual sections of "The Setting Out," "The Going On," and "The Closing In" work sequentially to deepen historicality into the assumption and affirmation of cultural or tribal identity of the Epilogue, centered upon the figure of Ko-sahn, whom I read as Momaday's troping of what Ricoeur calls "temporaltity." Thus it is that the multi-layered and complex temporal journeys of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* arrive at that Native American identity in which Momaday has grounded himself and his work for three decades now.

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[5] Momaday, *The Journey of Tai-Me* (Santa Barbara: Hand Printed at the University of California, 1967). Unpaged. Illustrated with 7 woodblock prints by Bruce McCurdy. Typography by D.E. Carlsen. Printed on handmade German paper (Nideggen). Bound in leather. I have examined copy no. 63, which is in the Rare Book Collection of the Magill Library at Haverford College, Haverford, PA. *The Journey of Tai-Me* contains all of the stories subsequently published in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. There are six additional stories not used in *Rainy Mountain*.

[6] Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. By W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 176-77,184.

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[7] *Rainy Mountain, op. cit.*, 4.
[8] *Ibid.*, 7.
[9] *Ibid.*

Momaday tells us in the Preface that the journey to Rainy Mountain is made so that he might rescue "the spirit" of the Kiowa people from the oblivion of "history"– and that the way to Rainy Mountain is "many journeys in one." The text of this multiplicitous journey records, in each of twenty-four tripartite sections, (1) Momaday's skillfully rendered English translation of a traditional oral story, (2) excerpts and paraphrases from the historical and anthropological record of the Kiowa, and (3) Momaday's own personal reminiscences—"many journeys in one," which together trace the crossing over of a Kiowa identity from the oral culture of his tribal ancestors into the self-representation inscribed into the text of Momaday's own contemporary American print culture. This many-layered odyssey is thus an act of what Walter Benjamin, in his essay on "The Storyteller," has called "perpetuating remembrance." To be distinguished from "short-lived reminiscence," "perpetuating remembrance" is that form of memory which "creates the chain of tradition, which passes a happening on from generation to generation," discovering the "*one* hero" and "*one* odyssey" in the "many diffuse occurrences" within "the web which all stories together form in the end."[10]

Quite specifically, Momaday remembers a tradition of storytelling peculiar to a relatively small and largely self-contained tribe of indigenous North American people who migrated down out of the northern Rockies and onto the plains around the time that the English begin to settle the Atlantic Seaboard. The Kiowa gradually worked their way southward until, by the middle of the 18th Century, they enjoyed the freedom of the southern plains, sharing control only with the Comanche of a vast area stretching from what is now the southern half of Kansas on down to the present border between the United States and Mexico – an area that comprises today a good deal of Kansas, the western more than halves of Oklahoma and Texas, and all of Colorado and New Mexico east of the Rockies. By the 1830's, the Kiowa had begun to encounter the advance parties of Euramerican expansion and conquest, with the usual results. "The culture would persist for a while in decline," writes Momaday in his Epilogue,

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[10] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," from *Illuminations*, Harry Zorn, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 98.

> but then it would be gone, and there would be very little material evidence that it had ever been. Yet . . . it is defined in a remarkably rich and living verbal tradition [.][11]

The essential features of Momaday's remembrance of this tradition may be adumbrated in a reading of section XXIV, the final triptych, where the most frequently quoted phrase from Momaday's text, "the remembered earth,"[12] is juxtaposed with the memory of a woman buried in a beautiful dress, somewhere east of Aho's house and south of "the" pecan grove:

> Mammedaty [Momaday's grandfather] used to know where she Is buried, but now no one knows. If you stand on the front porch of the house and look eastward towards Carnegie, you know that the woman is buried somewhere within the range of your vision. But her grave is unmarked. She was buried in a cabinet, and she wore a beautiful buckskin dress. How beautiful it was! It was one of those

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[11] Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 85-86.

[12] *Ibid.*, 83.

> fine buckskin dresses, and it was decorated with elk's teeth and beadwork. That dress is still there, under the ground.[13]

Here, what has vanished from the visible world is nevertheless present in an act of remembrance grounded in a specific landscape made luminous by a family story; and the cultural tradition epitomized in the fine workmanship of this dress is echoed in

> Aho's high moccasins . . . made of softest, cream-colored skins. On each instep is a bright disc of beadwork – an eight-pointed star, red and pale blue on a white field – and there are bands of beadwork at the soles and ankles. The flaps of the leggings are wide and richly ornamented with blue and red and green and white and lavender beads.[14]

Here, then, are definitive features of a representation of Native American culture familiar to readers of contemporary Native American novelists, short story writers, and poets: (1) a sense of place grounded in a specific and particularized North American landscape; (2) kinship ties that extend across many generations; and (3) a tradition of fine craftsmanship celebrated both as referential object and in the writer's own skill as an artisan working in the medium of the printed word. This representation provides a native ground upon which Momaday and such younger Native American writers as Leslie Silko and Sherman Alexie position themselves authoritatively within contemporary public discourse on issues having to do with social justice, environmental responsibility, race relations, and the politics of gender. At the very least, the Native American cultural construction undertaken by such writers memorializes alternatives to the rootlessness, atomization, and kitsch so pervasive in contemporary American life.

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[13] *Ibid.*, 82.

[14] *Ibid.*, 83.

Narrative Power in Native American Fiction

Reflections on Leslie Marmon Silko's "Storyteller" (1981)

Ib Johansen

In the Western world we frequently come across the misconception that what makes Western civilization superior vis-à-vis other (non-European) cultures – and in particular vis-à-vis Native *American* culture – has to do with the importance of *writing* in our part of the world, i.e. with the fact that we are (or regard ourselves as) *masters of the written word*. The ethnocentric – and Eurocentric – bias of Western anthropology (and other arts and sciences), when it comes to assessing the cultural heritage and traditions of Native Americans, is summed up by Gordon Brotherston in a thought-provoking article entitled "Towards a grammatology of America: Lévi-Strauss, Derrida and the native New World text":

> All told, we seem not to have moved very far from that highly interested account of the New World given, shortly after its 'discovery' by Montaigne, who spoke of its typical inhabitant as 'so new and infantine, that he is yet to learn his A.B.C.'[1]

As it is pointed out by Brotherston in this article and elsewhere,[2] this is a thoroughly misleading account of Native American cultures and their degree of "literacy", but in the present context I shall leave out further reflections on the historical dimension(s) of this misapprehension as well as on the vast body of *sacred literature* that demonstrates the falsity of such a view. This cultural cliché is likewise proven wrong, if we take a look at the new Native American (literary) *Renaissance*, characteristic of the last three or four decades, and represented by important writers such as Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and N. Scott Momaday. These writers use the English language in their poems, stories, and novels, but at the same time they are very much concerned with their indigenous or tribal roots and cultural heritage. In the present context I shall narrow down my focus to *one* short story written by Leslie Marmon Silko, i.e. her "Storyteller" (1981).

Leslie Marmon Silko was raised in a Laguna village in the American Southwest, but she also has "white" ancestors. If we compare this story to earlier attempts – on the part of white settlers and others – to come to terms with the Native American Other, we notice to what extent Silko has left behind cultural stereotypes and clichés. We are also reminded explicitly of the Puritan witch-hunter Cotton Mather's (in)famous treatise *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692), when the critic Kate Shanley Vangen entitles an article she wrote on Silko's story: "The Devil's Domain: Leslie Silko's 'Storyteller'".[3] The demonization of the American Other (in this case the Native American) is a strategy pointing in the direction of the very core (and the *deep structure*) of the predominant ideology. As it is formulated by Vangen:

> Women and Indians share a vital connection to natural cycles that is devalued by the Gussucks [i.e. the whites]; thus, the Gussuck must degrade himself (by picturing himself as [a] dog copulating with [a] woman in [a] pinned-up image) in order to interact with women or Native peoples. He must enter the devil's domain, the heart of darkness, the "illegitimate" system of values, if he desires intercourse with "illegitimate" epistemologies. Clearly, he suppresses or denies a sense of responsibility toward the object of his pleasure; instead, the victim is blamed, hated...[4]

In traditional societies the *storyteller* plays an important role; he/she is placed at the very centre of the community, and his/her activities are considered as essential to the very self-awareness or sense of identity of the community. At the same time storytelling can become a strategic weapon in the struggle for cultural and physical survival on the part of indigenous peoples, endangered as they are in the modern world, on a very fundamental level, by the cultural *imperialism* of the white power élite – or by what Vangen calls "a system, in other words, that seeks to rob a people of the power of words".[5] What Silko's "Storyteller" is about is precisely the power of words – or *narrative power*.

In this connection we are reminded of Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Storyteller" ["*Der Erzähler*"] (1936). In his essay the German Marxist critic comments on the contemporary decline of storytelling as a living tradition:

> [A]n experience which we may have almost every day] teaches us that the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a story properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest thing among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experience.[6]

Of course, more than sixty years after Benjamin wrote this, oral culture as such – and the art of storytelling – seem to be even more endangered by the process of modernization than they were in the 1930's, i.e. the new media and their technologies (e.g., a Hollywood that more or less totally dominates the Western film market, television, "pop" culture, the computer industry, etc., etc.) have, to a very large extent, marginalized not only classic book culture (McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy), but also the premodern precursors of book culture, i.e. the culture of the spoken word, communal storytelling, etc. However, just as the *death of the novel* has been announced several times during the last one hundred years without being brought into effect, it looks as if both the book (in spite of "book droppers") and oral traditions – cultivated for instance at narrative *festivals* and on other occasions – have managed to survive and even thrive in the teeth of all these threats to their continued existence and well-being.

In Mario Vargas Llosa's remarkable novel *The Storyteller* [*El hablador*] (1989) – where a young Peruvian Jew gives up Western civilization altogether to become a storyteller among the Machiguenga in the Amazonian rain forest – the power of storytelling is foregrounded in a striking manner:

> Talking the way a storyteller talks means being able to feel and live in the very heart of that culture, means having penetrated its essence, reached the marrow of its history and mythology, given body to its taboos, images, ancestral desires, and terrors...That my friend Saúl gave up being all that he was and might have become so as to roam through the Amazonian jungle, for more than twenty years now, perpetuating against wind and tide – and above all, against the very concepts of modernity and progress – the tradition of that invisible line of storytellers, is something that memory now and again brings back to me, and, as on that day when I first heard of it, in the starlit village of New Light, it opens my heart more forcefully than fear or love has ever done.[7]

Similarly, according to Gloria Feman Orenstein, "...many indigenous peoples all over the globe believe that to retell the story of Creation is to re-create the world"![8] Furthermore, according to Orenstein, "feminist matristic artists and writers believe, along with native Americans, that through the power of the word, originally the spoken word, now transmitted via the print media, they can bring humans into balance with nature and the cosmos".[9] On the other hand, what is focused on in Leslie Marmon Silko's "Storyteller" is rather the inherent power of storytelling – and the capabilities of the storyteller – with regard to *reclaiming* something that has been lost in the perpetual struggle of indigenous peoples *against* the political and cultural hegemony of the whites (in this story called "the Gussucks").

When she was a young woman, Leslie Marmon Silko was a school teacher in Alaska, and this faraway Northern country provides the setting for "Storyteller": An Eskimo woman is sent to jail, after having confessed to having killed a white man (a storeman). But her lawyer tries to persuade her to give up this position (her confession), for in the eyes of white society the storeman's death was simply an "accident". She, however, sticks to *her* version, *her* story: "'I will not change the story, not even to escape this place and go home. I intended that he die. The story must be told as it is".[10] Her account is, as a matter of fact, a *revenge story*, a chronicle of an announced (or planned) death, for another storeman poisoned wine which he sold to her parents, causing their death. But insofar as she is obliged to get the story right, what is underscored here is the existential dimension of storytelling – it is never cost-free to tell a story.

Another, in this case a *mythical* story is simultaneously presented to us – and to begin with also to the main character – by an old man (her deceased grandmother's former husband or common law husband): a man with whom she has what is regarded by her surroundings as an "illicit" sexual liaison. The old man's story is about a huge polar bear pursuing an Eskimo hunter, and in the end this hunter is left defenseless in the middle of the frozen Bering Sea with his powerful opponent: "...the jade knife fell; it shattered on the ice, and the blue glacier bear turned slowly to face".[11] This is how "Storyteller" *ends*, and apparently the last paragraph of Silko's text is a flashback, describing (what appears to be) the old man's (the storyteller's) death throes and his obstinate refusal to stop narrating his story to the very end – for in the preceding paragraph we have been told about precisely the old man's struggle with death, and in that paragraph we are also told about the woman's *takeover of the old man's position as a storyteller*: "...she went on with the story, and she never stopped, not even when the woman [i.e. the jailer] got up to close the door behind the village men [i.e. her listeners]".[12] At this point we might ask *what* story – or *which* story? Is she going on with (1) the old man's story about the hunter and the polar bear, or is she presenting (2) her *own* story to her audience (i.e. possibly (a) a murder story [where her parents are murdered], (b) a revenge story [where she kills the storeman], or (c) a story about the end of the world [the sun frozen in the middle of the sky])? We do not know for certain – in a certain sense these two [or should we rather say *five* (?)] narratives *merge*. Maybe the final paragraph belongs to the story itself, i.e. to the story that she cannot or will not stop, and in that case she is telling the villagers about (1) her grandfather's death throes as well as recapitulating in their presence (2) his final words about the polar bear and the hunter.

The Eskimo woman is, as a matter of fact, trying to *read the signs of the times*, and in her view what is about to happen very soon amounts to the end of the world, where everything is going to come to a *standstill*:

> ...Look at the sun. It wasn't moving; it was frozen, caught in the middle of the sky. Look at the sky, solid as the river with ice which had trapped the sun. It had not moved for a long time; in a few more hours it would be weak, and heavy frost would begin to appear on the edges and spread across the face of the sun like a mask. Its light was pale yellow, worn thin by the winter.[13]

The *apocalyptic* theme of the story – and the way it is presented to the reader – definitely points in the direction of the fantastic, for what is portrayed in the passage quoted above appears to be a *supernatural* event. Already at an earlier point in the plot the protagonist has foreseen what is going to take place, what is happening to the *cosmos* (in this case the main character's foreknowledge is thematized in another, compositionally later but chronologically earlier passage that uses *her* point-of-view to underscore the ominous character of the event): "She wanted to laugh again because [the storeman] did not know about the ice. He did not know that it was prowling the earth, or that it had already pushed its way into the sky to seize the sun..."[14] Eventually, after the storeman has drowned and other decisive events have taken place, the sun is (apparently) set free, but the power of the ice over the universe is still unmistakable and *lethal*:

> She looked out the window at the frozen white sky. The sun had finally broken loose from the ice but it moved like a wounded caribou running on strength which only dying animals find, leaping and running on bullet-shattered lungs. Its light was weak and pale; it pushed dimly through the clouds.[15]

Another element pointing in the direction of the fantastic is the appearance of the protagonist's dead grandmother as a *ghost*:

> Her grandmother was there suddenly, a shadow around the stove. She spoke in her low wind voice and the girl was afraid to sit up to hear more clearly...But the last words she heard clearly: 'It will take a long time, but the story must be told. There must not be any lies'...She thought her grandmother was talking about the old man's bear story; she did not know about the other story then [i.e. the story of her parents' death].[16]

Thus her own grandmother reminds her, once more, of the power of storytelling! But this soul-shattering reminder is transmitted to her *by a voice from the past*, a ghostly inhabitant of the realm between this world and the Otherworld. To the extent that we attempt to situate "Storyteller" within the category of the fantastic, we notice that there is also a kind of *loophole* in the narrative, offering an alternative perspective on the events of the story – or at least on *some* of them. For according to her own attorney, what she presents to him as *her* version of the story (the "murder" of the storeman which is regarded as an "accident" by the lawyer) could also be considered an exemplification of her *madness*: "'Tell her I will do all I can for her [addressed to the jailer who functions as interpreter]. I will explain to the judge that her mind is confused'".[17] Thus the notion of madness makes it possible to explain what looks like supernatural events on the basis of a purely *natural code*. The double encoding of the fantastic – where it is virtually impossible to choose between a natural and a supernatural interpretation of certain decisive events – is thus in place; but at the same time the *power of storytelling* itself seems to transcend or disrupt all the rules and regulations of the so-called "normal" world![18]

In a manner which is difficult to come to terms with, the story narrated by the old man about the polar bear and the hunter appears to influence what is going on in the village, i.e. the power of story-telling displaces the overall drift or *telos* or intentionality of Silko's narrative, its representation of reality, adding a new dimension to everything. Whereas the old man's extremely slow-paced manner of telling his story takes on an almost obsessive character – where he is "describing each crystal of ice and the slightly different sounds they made under each paw [of the gigantic polar bear]"[19] – the cosmic significance of this infinitely prolonged pursuit (where the hunter himself is hunted) is likewise foregrounded. And what, from one point-of-view, looks like a kind of *extreme realism* is thus, from another viewpoint, turned into an *allegorical* narrative, where the bear represents not only *the call of the wild*, but on a larger scale simultaneously all the uncontrollable forces of the natural world and, ultimately, death itself as the last destination of the mental traveller through the wilderness of this world.

According to Kate Shanley Vangen, "[w]omen and Indians [and presumably also Eskimos] share a vital connection to natural cycles that is devalued by the Gussuck" (cf. note 4); the gigantic polar bear and the wounded caribou in the sky (*alias* the sun, cf. note 14) take on a cosmic significance, where *both* human beings and animals are embedded in the same mythical narrative (and human beings are acutely aware of their links to the animal world, a kind of *participation mystique* or *unio mystica*). Thus the wounded caribou can be related to an earlier episode in the story where the colour red is focused ("the red tin [a waste product of Gussuck culture or anti-culture] nailed to the log-house"),[20] but this piece of tin is *also* related to the mysterious death of the protagonist's parents (it is left as a "trace", revealing the *crime* committed by the storeowner, when her parents were poisoned) – thus Gussuck culture constitutes, as it were, *an open wound in the cosmos*, i.e. the world inhabited by the Eskimos from time immemorial. The second storeman's death cannot undo this crime, but to the extent that the *story* is told, i.e. offered to an audience (by the old man and afterwards by the protagonist), the narrative process itself appears to be capable of recuperating what has been lost – even if it is a never-ending story, even if "[i]t will take a long time"[21] to tell it, and you will never be able to *finish* it. The old man tells his story *to the death*, but when he passes away, someone else is (always already) prepared to take over (the protagonist). Thus we are once more reminded of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller", where it is stated that "[d]eath is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death..."[22] The borrowed time of the storyteller is borrowed from death. And the archetypal *agon* between hunter and polar bear in Leslie Marmon Silko's "Storyteller" – a struggle to the death – illustrates this point in a striking manner. Even if it is likewise true that human (Native Alaskan, Native American) *survival* depends on the gifts of the storyteller – on an unstoppable narrative, adjusted to the rhythms and seasons of the cosmos itself.

Notes

1. Cf. Gordon Brotherston: "Towards a grammatology of America: Lévi-Strauss, Derrida and the native New World text", in: *Literature, Politics and Theory. Papers from the Essex Conference 1978-84*. Edited by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen, [and] Diana Loxley (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), pp. 195-96.

2. Cf. also Gordon Brotherston: *Book of the Fourth World. Reading the Native Americas Through Their Literature* (Cambridge, New York, and Oakleigh, Victoria, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

3. Cf. Kate Shanley Vangen: "The Devil's Domain: Leslie Silko's 'Storyteller'", in: *Coyote Was Here. Essays on Contemporary Native American Literary and Political Mobilization*. Edited by Bo Schöler (Århus: *The Dolphin No. 9*, April 1984), pp. 116-23. In Cotton Mather's *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692) the clergyman comments as follows on the metaphysical characteristics of the colony he inhabits: "The *New-Englanders* are a People of God settled in those, which were once the *Devil's* Territories...", Cotton Mather: *On Witchcraft. Being the Wonders of the Invisible World* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 14 (Mather's italics, my ellipsis). Allegedly, the community of the native inhabitants of the New World is altogether in the grip of His Infernal Majesty!

4. *Ibid.*, p. 122 (my ellipsis).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

6. Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn (London: Collins/Fontana Books, 1973), p. 83. Cf. Walter Benjamin: "Der Erzähler", in: *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, Erste Auflage 1977), p. 385 (my ellipsis): "*Sie [i.e. eine Erfahrung,...zu der wir fast täglich Gelegenheit haben] sagt uns, dass est mit der Kunst des Erzählens zu Ende geht. Immer seltener wird die Begegnung mit Leuten, welche rechtschaffen etwas erzählen können. Immer häufiger verbreitet sich Verlegenheit in der Runde, wenn der Wunsch nach einer Geschichte laut wird. Es ist, als wenn ein Vermögen, das uns unveräusserlich schien, das Gesichertste unter dem Sicheren, von uns genommen würde. Nämlich das Vermögen, Erfahrungen auszutauschen*".

7. Mario Vargas Llosa: *The Storyteller*. Translated by Helen Lane (New York, etc.: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 244-45 (my ellipsis). Cf. Mario Vargas Llosa: *El hablador* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1987), p. 234: "*Porque hablar como habla un hablador es haber llegado a sentir y vivir lo más íntimo de esa cultura, haber calado en sus entresijos, llegado al tuétano de su historia y su mitología, somatizado sus tabúes, reflejos, apetitos y terrores ancestrales...Que mi amigo Saúl Zuratas renunciara a ser*

todo lo que era y hubiera podido llegar a ser, para, desde hace más de veinte años, trajinar por las selvas de la Amazonía, prolongando, contra viento y marea – y, sobre todo, contra las nociones mismas de modernidad y progreso – la tradición de ese invisible linaje de contadores ambulantes de historias, es algo que, de tiempo en tiempo, me vuelve a la memoria y, como aquel día en lo quel supe, en la oscuridad con estrellas de poblado de Nueva Luz, desboca mi corazón con más fuerza que lo hayan hecho nunca el miedo o el amor" (my ellipsis). Cf. also the many references to the power of storytelling in Leslie Marmon Silko's own novel *Ceremony* (1977), describing the attempts of a war veteran (a young Native American) to claim the cultural heritage of his own people and thereby to put behind him the traumatic experiences undergone by himself in World War II, cf. Leslie Marmon Silko: *Ceremony* (New York: New American Library, 1977), p. 273, where Old Grandma summarizes the prevailing view concerning the stories circulating in her community (or rather: the view that prevailed in the old days): "She sighed, and laid her head back on the chair. 'It seems like I already heard these stories before...only thing is, the names sound different'" (Silko's ellipsis).

8. Cf. Gloria Feman Orenstein: *The Reflowering of the Goddess* (New York, etc.: Pergamon Press, 1990), p. 18 (my ellipsis), where the critic discusses the surrealist artist Remedios Varo's painting *La Creación de las Aves* [*The Creation of Birds*] (1958).

9. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

10. Leslie Marmon Silko: *Storyteller* [stories and poems] (New York: Seaver Books, 1981), p. 31.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 32 (my ellipsis)..

13. *Ibid.*, p. 18 (my ellipsis).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 29 (my ellipsis).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 26 (my ellipses). Incidentally, we notice how the *shadow metaphor* is introduced here to signalize the "spectral" presence of her grandmother in the household: "Her grandmother was there suddenly, a *shadow* around the stove" (my italics). As a matter of fact, shadow imagery tends to dominate the American fantastic, and it also plays an important role in Leslie Marmon Silko's fiction, cf. her *Gardens in the Dunes. A Novel* (New York, etc.: Simon & Schuster / Scribner Paperback Fiction, 2000 (first published in 1999)), p. 31, where an episode in the history of the *ghost dance* is described at the beginning of the narrative: "Although scattered snow flurries remained, the mass of storm clouds drifted east; the buffalo horn moon was still visible as the morning star appeared on the horizon. While others danced with eyes focused on the fire, Indigo [the main character of the novel] watched the weird shadows play on the hillsides, so she was one of the first to see the Messiah and his family as they stepped out of the darkness into the glow of the swirling snowflakes. How their white robes shined! Indigo glanced around quickly to see if others had noticed. She watched the Messiah and the others, who seemed almost to float as they

descended the high sandy hill to the riverbank. How beautiful he was, just as the Paiute woman said. No wonder he called himself the morning star!" We notice how the play of weird shadows appears to call forth or provoke the *epiphany* portrayed above – an epiphany dominated by an all-enveloping atmosphere of *transcendental weightlessness*, as it were!

17. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

18. Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard (Cleveland/London: The Press of Case Western University, 1973), p. 25: "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event". Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), p. 29: "*Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connait que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel*".

19. Leslie Marmon Silko: *Storyteller*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 26. Cf. note 16.

22. Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations*, *op. cit.*, p. 94 (my ellipsis). Cf. Walter Benjamin: *Illuminationen*, *op. cit.*, p. 396: "*Der Tod ist die Sanktion von allem, was der Erzähler berichten kann. Vom Tode hat er seine Autorität geliehen...*" (my ellipsis).

On editing and storytelling

An interview with Anders Refn

Rasmus Stampe-Hjorth

> Rasmus Stampe-Hjorth has been working as an editor with Anders Refn on an episode of the Danish Broadcasting Company's TV series *Magtens Billeder*. This interview concerns mainly Anders Refn´s work as an editor, rather than his role as a director, for which he is also widely known.
>
> Anders Refn's recent editing credits include *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *P.O.V.* (2001), *Baby* (2003) and *Tid til forandring* (2004). He also wrote and directed *Strømer* (1976), *Slægten* (1978), *The Flying Devils* (1985), *Sort høst* (1994), and *Seth* (1998). TV series: *En gang strømer* (1987), *Taxa* (1996). He has won a number of prestigious prizes.

First of all Anders I would like to congratulate you on winning the Bodil Award given to you for your enormous contribution to Danish film throughout the years. What does the prize mean to you?

I was of course very happy to receive the prize, but you don't make films to win prices. Roberto Benigni said: "Getting a prize is like a kiss and a kiss is always nice".

You work as a" lifesaver" for many national and international films. As an editor what is it you do to make a film's storytelling work?

It is very difficult to explain what film editing is about because very few people know what our work really involves. Often it is not a question of choosing but of removing parts that don't work.

Basically the biggest problem in movies is that many directors are afraid that the audience won't understand the message of the film, and therefore they tell the same things over and over. There is a rule of thumb that if you say something one time at the right place and with the right timing, you don't have to say it again. Film editing is dramaturgy in practise, and it isn't always a question of making beautiful cuts. What counts is bringing the story to life and boosting the scenes. And one purpose of editing is to protect the audience from bad acting. As soon as you can feel that the actor is not reliable or low on energy, you should cut it out. Improving the acting in a film is of vital importance.

When you give first aid to a film you sit down, watch the movie, and figure out why it doesn't work. Is it because the film does not start the right way, or still has elements from old ideas that never worked and should be removed? Or are the actors not moving smoothly because the movie has been cut to hard, or do the actors almost seem to stand still because the film has been edited too slow?

A very important principle I always use is: "Get in late and get out early". In other words, enter the scene as late as you dare and get out again as soon as possible. An example is a man who enters the scene; cut to where he says: "I want a divorce", and cut again to where the wife picks up the gun and shoots him.

I look for the good qualities in a film and also try to cut to the bone, and the most difficult thing of all is to take out a very good scene because it detracts from the energy of the next scene and ruins the core of the film. It can be very difficult to do this because the scene was sometimes very expensive to make and therefore it can be hard for the director to understand why it should be sacrificed. Many directors are, at that point of the project, very sensitive about the film and that's why it's important that you get along with the director. In the end it's the director's decision as to whether or not the scene should be cut. Of course there are times when you as the editor should challenge the director; and he should fight for every inch of the movie. But in the end he is the movie's advocate, and you kill directors, not editors. If the movie fails the director takes all the beating, the producer makes another company, the editor edits another movie, and the director is left with the pain. That's why it's very important that you as the editor be engaged and agree on the message of the film.

I have noticed that you often cut films very brutally; taking out word and spaces, and that you like it when people can see there's a cut, a jump cut, a cut in sound, etc. – That you like it when it's a bit rough. Just now, in "Tid til forandring", where you combined images in focus with images that weren't. Why do you tell stories in that way?

I have edited many films and I can say that good films have good actors and bad films have bad actors… (*laughter*). So whatever you can do to improve the acting you should do, and I prefer to make an ugly cut if I can improve the acting instead of making a nice, smooth cut that you won't notice. The authenticity in the acting is so important and a good editor is an editor who can make the acting stand out.

So much has happened to film editing over the years. I remember when I started as an editor and was faithful to the principles of visual continuity which were established in the 40´s, requiring that you observe the 180 degree rule, ensure eye-scanning points when crosscutting, etc. Today all those rules are discarded. Today you edit with a different energy and intensity. You can make jump cuts, rush pan, all kinds of cuts in the editing.

In *Breaking the Waves*, Lars and I had decided that in the first sequence we wanted to break all possible rules of editing and continuity. Wrong point of view, no establishing shots, blurred images. We also found a scratch on one of the negatives that we put in the scene; we put in a take where they were looking into the lens, backlight that was edited with front light. We wanted to see what it did to the film when we broke the classical rules of editing. We found that the editing was more relaxed and a more dynamic way of telling the story. Our main rule was that we were looking for the emotion of the scene and as soon as the emotion lost its intensity, we made a cut. Even if the actors were in the middle of the shot, or we had to make a jump-cut, in order to maintain the emotional energy in the scene and the acting.

We also made another rule: that we didn't want to transport people in and out of the picture. We did not want people to leave one scene and enter the next one. As soon as we thought that the scene had culminated emotionally, then we made a cut no matter where the person was in the picture. This resulted in a rough, chaotic style which had a bigger impact on the persons who saw the film. If we had cut it the classical way with nice dolly movements and beautiful backlight combined with the sensitive and emotional film, I think that the audience would have puked. In many ways *Breaking the Waves* is one of the most radical films I have made till now. It was a new editing style. Lars had tried it a bit – in *Riget* (*The Kingdom*) - and I had tried it a bit in *En gang strømer*.

Sometimes you make the best cuts by an accident. You put two images together which weren't meant to be joined, and suddenly something happens and it works! James Joyce said "Error is a portal of innovation". Like if you intend to include some transport sequence as you learned to use in order not to confuse the audience, and then you forget to put it in, and the scene turns out to be much better. That's why you always end up with a product that's different from the script. If a word or a sentence doesn't work, I cut it out. If a person is unhappy and you can see it, I don't want him to explain to me that he is unhappy, it's enough that you can detect his emotions just by looking at him.

When you enter the final phase in editing a movie, you cut to the bone and take out parts that are superfluous. I have been working on several projects this summer: one in Reykjavik, one in Oslo, and the latest – *Populärmusic från Vittula* – in Stockholm, and when I start working with films – where the editor and the director have been sitting for a long time – I come with "fresh eyes" and I know just what to delete in the movie to make it work. Of course I can be mistaken in my judgment, but it often helps to see the film with fresh eyes and not to have read the script in advance when you give first aid to a film.

If you make a movie longer than necessary, you also tire the audience and it's important to maintain the audience's attention on the film and let the film surprise them, instead of letting them sit and wait for the next thing to happen. The film needs to be dynamic and should be able to astonish the audience.

When I edit, I choose the scenes that are the most dynamic, and then I can live with the fact that the images or the editing may not be perfect, because actually I think it gives more energy to the scenes if they're a bit rough; better that than making them too perfect. (*laughter*)

In the beginning, my films were made with perfect, smooth cuts – like in *Strømer* and *Slægten*. And that's a style I have tried to rebel against ever since.

Being a film editor means seducing the audience; making them cry or laugh. Editors are often mentioned as the nameless heroes because nobody knows what we're doing. Who can tell the difference between good and bad editing? It's difficult even for professionals, and basically editing is just trying to make the actors come alive and move the audience. To pull the actors out of the screen and let them sit on our lap.

You have been working for Lars von Trier for a number of years now, both as a co-director and as an editor (Refn received a Robert award for his editing of Breaking the Waves*). And recently you worked as an assisting* *director on* Dogville. *What is it that makes you and Lars such a good team?*

During a project many directors have great doubts, because one thinks one thing and another person thinks something else. But Lars is very consistent and puts a great will behind the project and that's why working with Lars is so extremely stimulating and interesting. Besides that, he is also a very talented editor and has a great sense of editing. He is also very good at following his own rules of editing no matter what. And if we have decided that some scene doesn't work, then Lars is very unsentimental with his own work and has no problem leaving it out. A lot of other directors fight till the end for scenes that don't work, hoping that they can be salvaged in some way or other. Lars is always ultra concentrated. In *Breaking the Waves* we shot 75,000 meters of 35 mm. film stock, edited in 8 weeks, and then had some test screenings which only resulted in very few corrections being made. That was the first time I worked with AVID and I don't think we could have done it without the digital editing. It made it possible to work with the material in a completely different way: much wilder than we used to, because we could now try everything by just making a copy. Before that we didn't dare to take any chances, because it was so difficult to return to our starting point. That's also the reason why today, we can make a pre-cut of a movie in just one week and that makes it possible to experiment with the editing.

Poetry on screen or visualised jokes?

An approach to the genres of short fiction films

Saara Cantell

One of the main problems in today's short films is, as I see it, the incapacity to see short film storytelling as an art form in its own right. All too often short films are considered only as the obligatory phase before the real goal; directing short films is just something one has to do in order to learn to make the "real" feature films. As very few established film directors continue to direct short films, most of the short fictions are made by film students. The uneven quality of these films can be only partly explained by the inexperience of the filmmakers. Much is also due to the ways in which short film storytelling is generally taught in film schools and universities. A quick glance through scriptwriting books on short films gives quite a clear picture as to what it is all about:

> [T]here are some things you can't hope to achieve in short form that you might well hope to achieve in feature-length form. You can't hope to properly develop a multitude of major characters in a short script, for example, or to construct four separate and complete plot lines." (Ric Beairsto: *The Tyranny of Story*, 1998)
>
> Feature scripts are so complicated that most scriptwriters should model their first scripts on effective short scripts and short films. As it is better to write short stories before writing a novel, so it is better to write short scripts before tackling a feature-length script." (William H. Phillips: *Writing Short Scripts*, 1991)
>
> Today in Hollywood it is far easier to get an agent, producer or production executive to view a short film than it is to read a feature length screenplay. (…) The short film, whether made on a university campus or independently financed, continues to be a well-travelled road into the film business." (Linda J. Cowgill: *Writing Short Films*, 1994)

Mainstream feature films are based on an Aristotelian-Hollywoodian dramaturgy, where plot points and character development are crucial. Trying to apply this to films shorter than fifteen minutes leads unavoidably to a situation where short film storytelling is seen only through what it *cannot* be. In a film lasting only a few minutes, there is no time to build up a three-scene structure with plot point one and two, nor is there time to introduce the characters by telling about their social and psychological backgrounds.

Still, as all of us who have seen splendid short films know, the masterpieces of short cinema manage to touch our soul and mind without even having tried to follow these ″rules″. The best shorts are everything else than scaled down feature films. They have a language of their own. To try to see (or make) short films using the tools created for feature films seems as meaningless as to read and interpret poetry with the same criteria as novels. Or to look at a painting as though it were a sculpture.

How should short films then be approached? If they have an entirely unique way of telling their stories, how should this form be understood?

In my attempt to understand how and why some of the shortest films have succeeded in making a much deeper effect on me than many of the feature films I have seen, I have started to develop some classifications for the different “genres” of short films.

My point is, however, not to squeeze short films into tight categories, but rather to seek for new ways to approach the different structures and means of storytelling that can be found in short fiction films.

I have labelled the categories as follows:

1. Short film as poem
2. The metaphoric short film
3. Short film as joke
4. Short film as commercial
5. The Zen of short filmmaking

I will describe each of these briefly. But to begin with, it may be necessary to underline that the chosen terms are meant to deal with the dramaturgy and structure of a short film. So a "short film as poem" does not actually have to be poetic. Similarly, "short film as joke" does not necessarily mean that the film is funny.

1

The connection between short films and poetry is well known; the short fiction is quite often referred to as "the poetry of cinema" (whereas feature films would be novels and films running 30 to 60 minutes would be *novellefilms,* corresponding to short novels).

As early as the 1920's, Sergei Eisenstein was fascinated by the cinematic aspect of Japanese poems, *haiku* and *tanka*. He quoted the following haiku by Buson:

> An evening breeze blows.
> The water ripples
> Against the blue heron's legs.

and commented: "From our point of view, these are montage phrases."

On reading Japanese poems, one can indeed easily get the feeling that the lines of the poem could be used for storyboarding a scene – or as a manuscript for a whole short film.

One can have a similar kind of experience with more recent poetry as well. Jacques Prévert's poem *Le Message* can also be read as a film. The poem begins as follows:

> La porte que quelqu'un a ouverte
> La porte que quelqu'un a refermée
> La chaise où quelqu'un s'est assis
> Le chat que quelqu'un a caressé

and continues in this way, finally concluding with the lines

> La rivière où quelqu'un se jette
> L'hôpital où quelqu'un est mort.[1]

Interestingly enough, post-modern research on poetry widely uses the terminology of cinema. In both the interpretations and close readings of poems, one often finds such expressions as "sudden cuts" and "close-ups".

So if poetry can be read as films, would the opposite not work as well? In my opinion, for some short films at least, this possibility offers a very functional way of understanding their structure.

The similarities between poems and short films are numerous. Lifting one intense moment into the light, using seemingly meaningless common pictures to tell about deeper themes, and eventually revealing a new, unexpected aspect to give a new level of meaning to everything that was shown before. These are all typical properties of storytelling for both poetry and short films. In this, sense the short masterpiece *Wind* (1996) by Marcell Iványi can be seen as a poem.

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[1] *Paroles* © Éditions Gallimard, 1949. The entire poem can be found on the web at: http://www.terrazared.com.ar/web_es/pires/html/1/prevert2.html

2

The use of metaphor is an organic part of all cinematic language. But in my opinion, apart from feature films, only short films have the power and possibility to be metaphoric, not only in specific scenes and details, but as a film as a whole. The early classic by Roman Polanski, *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958), is probably the best-known of such metaphoric films. In Finnish short film we have an even more striking example, *A Journey (Matka)* by Pirjo Hokkanen (1983). Following the film's main character's efforts as he drags a heavy piece of luggage across the snowy landscape, we understand immediately and intuitively something valuable about life and about ourselves. The power of this film also lies in its undeniable cinematic quality: it succeeds in telling its story by purely audio-visual means, with no dialogue. Any attempt to translate the metaphoric message of *A Journey* ("Life is a heavy suitcase" or "A man is just a scream lodged in a piece of luggage") would remain desperately banal.

3

Short film as joke (or anecdote) is perhaps the most common type of short fiction film. The films I have placed under this classification share a structure based on a sudden, surprising twist at the end. At their worst, these films remain just one-dimensional tricks, one-gag pieces which will remain empty after we have seen them once. But at their best, they can be truly startling and innovative. There are plenty of good examples to name: *Surprise!* by Veit Helmer (1995), *En kväll på stan* by Per Carleson (1999) or the just one minute long *Natural glasses* by Jens Lien (2001).

4

The fourth category of short film genres is the one I labelled commercials. To this rapidly growing group I have included the short films that consciously use the style and visual language of TV commercials (or even propaganda films). Today, when enormous resources and the biggest budgets for short films is in the advertising sector, the role of independent artistic short films and their capacity to give critical comments is more and more crucial. One of my favourites among this kind of short film is the two-minute long *Out of Place* (2001) by Ellen Lundby; a skilful and hilarious masterpiece based on an apparently very simple perception.

When putting short films into different categories one quickly realises how much these categories overlap. Most of the best short films easily fill the criteria of at least two different genres. (Both *Wind* and *A Journey* as well as *Out of Place* could be, due to the surprising twist they all have at the end, also placed among short films as joke.)

My purpose is, though, by no means to create a classification system for all short films, but rather to try to find some new, useful tools for outlining the storytelling in short cinema. I am convinced that considering a short film as a poem or as a joke or as a commercial may provide a fruitful basis for new associations both for spectators and for writers and directors. And it is certainly more practical than to persist in trying to interpret short films with the traditional Aristotelian-Hollywoodian theories, invented only with feature films in mind.

5

I have chosen to call the last of the categories typical for short fiction films the Zen of short filmmaking. In a way, this is the largest of all the genres; all (good) short cinema could be taken as a Zen art form. I am fully aware that in these days when all kind of Oriental philosophies are being marketed as trendy solutions for the problems of our too busy and commercialised life ("Zen and the art of buying a lipstick”), talking about Zen and the art of short filmmaking can sound quite trivial. Still, the power of being in the present, the capacity to tell things mainly through what is left unshown, the tendency to avoid explanations, and sometimes even the use of absurd humour – these are just some of the properties shared by short films and the Zen Buddhist way of viewing the world.

The concept of emptiness, borrowed by Zen Buddhism from Taoism, might open a window also for comprehending short film:

> It is not the clay the potter throws,
> which gives the pot its usefulness,
> but the space within the shape [2]

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[2] This entire poem from the *Tao Te Ching*, in Stan Rosenthal’s translation, can be found at: http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/taoism/ttcstan3.htm

In Zen paintings, the most central element is the handling of space. There is often very little painted surface, and the ”theme” of the painting can be hard to find. In the same sense one could consider the film *Wind*, where during much of the time the screen is filled with almost empty landscape and sky, to be a Zen short film. *Wind* also tells its story not by directly showing and explaining but by only slowly revealing and hinting, giving the spectator the valuable possibility of filling the ”empty” space with one’s own emotions and associations.

Another more recent and in my opinion a thoroughly Zen short film is *All In All* (*Alt i alt,* 2003) by Norwegian film director Torbjørn Skårild. This visually excellent, meditative concentration on four minutes is pure presence and power of being in the now. In addition to this, the surrealistic and funny way with which the film plays with the laws of gravity and causality, is very close to Zen humour, in the true spirit of the classical *kung-ans*, paradoxical short Zen stories.

No dialogue – or very economical use of dialogue – is one of the common practices of short films, often for purely practical reasons stemming from the length of the films. But even there one may see a connection with Oriental aesthetics. There is a Japanese saying ”Eyes clearer than mouth” which indicates how easily words can be used for defeating and twisting the truth whereas only silence reveals the true essence of things. The same idea is expressed this way by the old Zen Master Wu-men: ”If someone hangs onto the words and tries to understand through explanations, he is like a fool who thinks he can hit the moon with a stick or scratch an itching foot through his shoe.″

The difference between an Oriental and a Western way of understanding art has been described by saying that Western tradition favours explanations, regularity, diversity and monumentalism, just as the four central concepts of Oriental aesthetics are suggestiveness, irregularity, simplicity and vanishing. When discussing cinema, I have sometimes been tempted to use the preceding sentence by just replacing the word ″Western″ with the words ″feature film″ and the word ″Oriental″ with words ″short films.″

I would like to conclude by quoting Rikyû, an old Tea Master from the 16th Century:

> To those who only long for flowers, in vain would I show the fully blossoming spring which is awaiting inside the toiling buds on the snow-covered hills.

Perhaps this is after all what short film is all about: the art form for those who see the beauty of buds, not only of the flowers.

Italo Calvino and inevitability in storytelling

Richard Raskin

NB. This article is based on Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*[1]– a series of lectures he was to have given at Harvard University in 1985-1986 but didn't live to deliver. Though he had intended to give six lectures, as indicated in the title of this work, he had written only five of them at the time of his death in 1985. They were entitled: "Lightness," "Quickness," "Exactitude," "Visibility" and "Multiplicity." The sixth was to have been written at a later point in Cambridge, and would have been called "Consistency."

The reader is asked to bear in mind that I am taking considerable liberties in using Calvino's thoughts selectively and for my own purposes, thereby doing what Calvino himself described in another context when he stated: "everyone mines every book for the things that are useful to him."[2]

Introductory note

It is sometimes claimed that events in any given story should follow one another in such a way that the trajectory they trace appears to be necessary, so that the listener, reader or viewer is left with a feeling that things *had* to turn out the way they did, that no other outcome was possible.

This sense of inevitability is pushed to its outer limit in Greek tragedy, in which an error or failing on the part of the central character is generally what sets in motion a chain of causes and effects leading inexorably to his downfall.[3] And any attempt on his or anyone else's part to alter the course of events, only brings the tragic outcome even closer. Thus in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, nothing and no one can prevent Oedipus from fulfilling his fate of slaying his father and marrying his mother.

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[1] London: Vintage, 1996. Translated by Patrick Creagh. I am indebted to Brian Dunnigan at the London Film School for calling this inspiring book to my attention.

[2] "Literature as projection of desire" (1969) in Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986; trans. Patrick Creagh), p. 50.

[3] Actually Aristotle allowed for probability as well as necessity, writing for example: "The right thing, however, is in the Characters just as in the incidents of the play to endeavour always after

This sense of inevitability takes an equally radical form in Emile Zola's naturalist or "experimental" novel, based on the view that "the same determinism must govern the stone in the road and the brain of man,"[4] and that it is the job of the novelist to show how certain social conditions, in combination with specific hereditary dispositions, lead inexorably to a given outcome (ibid.). For example, in the novel *L'Assommoir* (1877), Gervaise Macquart inevitably ends up in the most abject and pitiful state at the end of the story, as a result of the harsh conditions of her working-class life and the hereditary burdens with which she, and those whose lives affect hers, were born.[5]

For the purposes of this article, these examples will serve to illustrate what might be called "outcome inevitability."

Calvino's conception of lightness

As already mentioned, the first of the essays in *Six Memos* is devoted to "lightness," which Calvino sees as an antidote to "the weight, the

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the necessary or the probable; so that whenever such-and-such a personage says or does such-and-such a thing, it shall be the probable or necessary outcome of his character; and whenever this incident follows on that, it shall be either the necessary or the probable consequence of it." *On the Art of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; trans. Ingram Bywater), Section 15, pp. 56-57.

[4] "Un même déterminisme doit régir la pierre des chemins et le cerveau de l'homme." *Le roman experimental (1880)*, section II. The entire text of this essay can be found at http://membres.lycos.fr/jccau/ressourc/romnatu/zola/romexper.htm

inertia, the opacity of the world" (p. 4). He describes *De Rerum Natura* as "the first great work of poetry in which knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinitely minute, light and mobile" (p. 8). Calvino finds that "Lucretius' chief concern is to prevent the weight of matter from crushing us" (pp. 8-9) and he continues his praise of the Latin poet in these terms:

> Even while laying down the rigorous mechanical laws that determine every event, [Lucretius] feels the need *to allow atoms to make unpredictable deviations from the straight line, thereby ensuring freedom both to atoms and to human beings*. The poetry of the invisible, of *infinite unexpected possibilities* – even the poetry of nothingness – issues from a poet who had no doubts whatever about the physical reality of the world (p. 9, emphasis added).

Likewise, in Cyrano de Bergerac, Calvino finds another representative of lightness, describing him as "the first poet of atomism in modern literature" (p. 20).

> In pages where his irony cannot conceal a genuine cosmic excitement, Cyrano extols the unity of all things, animate or inanimate, the combinatoria of elementary figures that determine the variety of living forms; and above all he conveys his sense of *the precariousness of the processes behind them. That is, how nearly man missed being man, and life, life, and the world, the world* (p. 20, emphasis added).

On the side of lightness, Calvino places life itself, while heaviness is seen as a negation of life. Having cited Boccaccio's description of Cavalcanti as "freeing himself with a leap," Calvino writes:

> Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world,

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[5] Gervaise Macquart was memorably embodied by Maria Schell in the 1956 film *Gervaise*, directed by René Clément.

> showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness, and that what many consider to be the vitality of the times – noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring – belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars (p. 12).

Lightness for Calvino is identified with such properties as mobility, agility of spirit, knowledge of the world, subtlety, multiplicity, the precariousness of things as they are, levitation and freedom. Correspondingly, heaviness is linked to inertia, opacity, petrification, sluggishness, density, solidity and the crushing of life.

Returning now to the issue raised in the introduction – a sense that whatever happens in a story *had* to turn out that way – and given the logic with which Calvino polarizes properties in his essay on lightness, it is clear that "outcome inevitability" would belong on the side of heaviness, while characters able to shape their own destinies – to rise above the forces weighing them down, to engage in "unpredictable deviations" from the paths laid out for them, and to exploit "infinite unexpected possibilities" – would be situated on the side of lightness.

Calvino on esthetic form

If a sense of necessity with respect to events would seem to be negatively charged within the framework of his thought, Calvino attributes a highly positive value to a sense of necessity concerning another aspect of storytelling: the giving of form. And in his second and third essays in *Six Memos*, on "Quickness" and "Exactitude" respectively, giving form is a value Calvino both praises and sees as dangerously threatened by current developments.

Concerning the use of language, Calvino values "a patient search for the *mot juste*, for the sentence in which every word is unalterable" (p. 49). By the same token, he deplores the widespread use of language "in a random, approximate and careless manner" and describes as a pestilence the pervasive tendency to blunt the edge of expressiveness and to dilute the meaning of words (p. 56).

Calvino sees an equally distressing loss of form in another context as well:

> I would like to add that it is not just language that seems to have been struck by this pestilence. Consider visual images, for example. We live in an unending rainfall of images. The most powerful media transform the world into images and multiply it by means of the phantasmagoric play of mirrors. These are images *stripped of the inner inevitability* that ought to mark every image as form and as meaning, as a claim on the attention and as a source of possible meanings. […]
>
> But maybe this lack of substance is not to be found in images or in language alone, but in the world itself. This plague strikes also at the lives of people and at the history of nations. It makes all histories formless, random, confused, with neither beginning nor end. My discomfort arises from the *loss of form* that I notice in life, which I try to oppose with the only weapon I can think of – an idea of literature (p. 57, emphasis added).

Conclusion

Inevitability in storytelling can be seen in two very different ways.

It is generally understood in relation to outcomes, as a sense that things *had* to end as they do in any given story. When this applies, as in Greek tragedy or a Zola novel, a character is trapped in interlocking chains of events that cannot be broken and that carry him or her inexorably toward some predetermined fate.

When seen in the light of Calvino's lightness model, *inevitability of outcome* would belong on the side of heaviness, since it negates the character's ability to defy the gravitational pull of those forces that would weigh him or her down. Though Calvino does not explicitly mention this form of inevitability in *Six Memos*, his positive references to "unpredictable deviations" and "infinite unexpected possibilities" are reasonable indicators as to where he would stand on that issue. A partisan of lightness would favor the empowerment of characters, able to rise above obstacles and to shape their own lives.

But there is a very different form of inevitability in storytelling to which Calvino does subscribe, as a desperately needed antidote to the widespread impoverishment of language and images: namely *inevitability of form*. When this is in play, the way in which a story is told is experienced as necessary, and the language and images as endowed with an inner inevitability. In other words, the listener, reader or viewer finds that the story *had* to be told exactly as it was, and would consider it inconceivable that the story be told in any other manner. A writer striving for this form of inevitability would bring both originality and precision to the storytelling process – not as values in themselves but rather in the service of the story.

The distinction drawn in this article between *inevitability of outcome* and *inevitability of form* is not one I have encountered elsewhere, though I may of course be unaware of relevant discussions known to the reader. In any event, I believe that this distinction is well worth considering in relation to Calvino's thought, and that it could be a particularly useful one to anyone engaged in the writing of fiction, including screenwriting.

Postscript

I sent this article to my colleague Dr. Francesco Caviglia for his comments, and am grateful for his thoughtful remarks, particularly concerning my characterization of Greek tragedy. In adding this postscript with a selection of his observations, I hope to correct an oversimplification in my own discussion and to conclude on a note that re-frames the relationship between *inevitability of outcome* and *inevitability of form* in an even more interesting perspective. Dr. Caviglia wrote:

> The parallelism between Greek tragedy and Zola's naturalist novel as ruled by *inevitability of outcome* is quite convincing. At the same time I am not sure I would put Sophocles's tragedy in the field of "heaviness." *Inevitability of outcome* in Greek tragedy is not a feature of the story; it belongs to the genre, since the stories are (almost always) established beforehand in their most important details […]
>
> Maybe *inevitability of outcome* is not automatically "heavy": maybe a balance of *consistency* and *surprise* – as you suggested elsewhere[6] – may go in the direction of lightness even within the most inevitable outcome. I'm thinking for example of Louis Malle's film *Lacombe Lucien*, whose outcome is inevitably tragic and yet the story is full of surprises.
>
> After reading your article (and your last two books) I would say now that Sophocles and Louis Malle use *inevitability of form* in order to counteract *inevitability of outcome*.[7]

Contributors

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[6] *The Art of the Short Fiction Film: A Study of Nine Modern Classics* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland, 2002) and *Kortfilmen som fortælling* (Aarhus: Systime, 2001).

[7] E-mail sent from Genoa, 17 July 2004.

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