



The Destiny of
Narrative at
the End of the
Millennium



NARRATIVES:

A N I N T R O D U C T I O N

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In 1989, a book called *Electronic Narrative*¹ was published in Spain. It did not appear in any widely-read publication or in any other distributed issues, but rather by merit of a daring institution. Its main aim was to put some thought into the state of affairs of narratives, with the help of several different contributions, once these had abandoned their traditional format (spoken narrative, novels, tales and even cinema) and had become embedded in modern mass communication media like television. It would be fair to say that, as respects the international scenario, we are a little late in dealing with this subject. It is felt, however, that it should be taken as a warning and that in Spain we should become aware of something which is widely commented on outside our frontiers.² The abovementioned book covers soap operas along with and also the effects which the new technologies could have on the narratives. It also deals with the important genealogical influences which these modern forms of mass narrative communication (serial stories, TV serials, radio serials, illustrated romances) stemmed from. The points of view are heterogenous but the closeness of the texts (that is to say, the insistence on analysis) in part unified the dispersion and paved the way for future work.

However, time flew by in a paradoxical fashion: on one hand, books unfailingly aged, as so often happens with texts which are dedicated to modern phenomena (the specific subject matter soon became history, and was substituted by new themes); on the other hand, specific analyses were not enough to answer the flood of debates which were provoked by the narrative. It was necessary to broaden the fields of the applications, and to multiply the perspectives. The reasons for this were

not quantitative but rather qualitative, because the new fields which were to open up presented problems which were also different, perhaps complementary, and maybe even contradictory. It is precisely from the awareness of these insufficiencies, that is to say the restrictions of the book and the effect that time had had on it, that a new plan of action appeared which has culminated in this jointly written text. In any case, what is said here is not to be taken merely as a collection of stories or as a brief history of a personal, intellectual genesis. It is, we feel, the proof of an intellectual trajectory which has been developed in the company of many authors and, at the same time, a very brief history of the bibliographical contributions which, on the subject of audiovisual narratives, have been written in our country.

In any case, the reader does not necessarily need to know about this itinerary or about the previously mentioned book. This book (this is an idealistic aspiration and will, no doubt, always be unsuccessful) wishes to be independent, and still being idealistic, we wish to be up to the times and to the current debates on this subject at an international scale.

II

Periods of history and thought have often established important topics to be reflected on. Their importance is lasting and their theoretical dimension beyond any doubt. But sometimes, fate also has an odd surprise in store: concepts, or even terms, that spring suddenly from a more or less fortunate metaphorical usage and that quickly spread among the academics. They even achieve results which the most rigorous interdisciplinary work fails to come up with and, we dare to say, even

concepts which are much more solid from a theoretical point of view. This is the case of narratives. The term is in no way new, either in its narrative or literary theory (particularly, in the literary genres), or in its philosophical or scientific usage. But whatever its previous history may have been, during the last twenty years it has spread indiscriminately, to such an extent that it is now considered as the best way to explain some of the main features of contemporary society and, consequently, of our relation with the past. It is a brilliant discovery on the part of Lyotard, for example, when he refers to, probably without the slightest intention of giving a solid binding value to the term, the crisis of metanarratives. However, a few decades ago, when Adorno and Horkheimer read the illustrated narrative resorting to some of the episodes of Ulysses's travels in *The Odyssey*, nobody seemed willing to accept this rhetorical discovery as essential. Subsequently, when cinema had made its impact on other artistic forms, critics studied it by emphasising its linguistic aspects, by looking at its signs, by defending its artistic nature, or by describing the rules which governed the way it was edited. However, after the first recession of semiology, the issue of film and television narratives invaded the theoretical scenario with the help of both narratologists and phenomenologists.

This issue also reached other areas of knowledge, even though these had a different temporality: it is said that medievalists such as Georges Duby have had tremendous success with their personalised narrative style when writing about history, and which is very different to the marxist historiography dominant until the sixties. Moreover, both autobiographies and biographies have become fashionable literary genres, insofar as the subject turns his life and experiences into a narrative, and in as much as he gives this narrative a public dimension (he superimposes it over the evolution of his time and of humanity). And, just to give one more example, science also illustrates and disseminates its theories—which are based on

increasingly complicated computer models that are rigourously incomprehensible to the layman in the street—in narrative form.

It is not just the way in which the narrative spreads and proliferates which is noteworthy, but rather it is the surprising fact that in all of these cases the term **narrative** is meant to describe a state of precariousness. It is as if the idea had conquered its success only as a revealing symptom of something which is lacking or which tends to be deficient. In other words, the term has become fashionable because in many of its uses it seeks to define something which has been mislaid, that is to say, a former value which has been lost. We will, therefore, not deal any longer with narrative, but rather with its crisis, decadence, and decline. It is worth questioning this opposite nature, because we have to come to terms with it, not just as a degree of certainty, but as an agonising doubt which weighs heavily upon us and which seems to deeply worry our contemporaries in many ways. Even if it were only for this reason, it would be worth delving into the archaeology of the use which has been made of this term in the last twenty years, not only in academic and abstract speeches, but also in the press and in the street. But this is an enormous task which is not proper of a joint-collaboration effort like this.

III

It is just as surprising to look at the way narrative has developed in yet another context: its generation within modern day artistic procedures and the mass media. It is in this framework, that the enormous capacity for the industrial production of narratives seems to grow and multiply unaware of the loss in legitimacy and the decline of the metanarratives which are developed from a theoretical point of view. We could say that all of this productive thought process has been brought to an end by the unending echo of countless narratives which are lavished upon us, repeated and taken up again in the media every day. And it is here that the analyst comes up against his first problem: the impossibility of being

able to trace the way that narratives have become deactivated, to what extent and with what manifestations. This is mainly due to the profusion of the different types of discourses which we have already made reference to. But, it would also be fair to say, it also has a great deal to do with the persistence of the ethnocentric idea that confers upon western thought the exclusive capacity to suggest new trends and to create discourses which are "auto-referencial".

We would also have to add another factor of a complex genesis to the ones we have already mentioned: the constant flux between different media, genres and formats which give way to phenomena such as parodies, pastiches, and remakes. These phenomena openly postulate their ingenuity within the text in which they have been introduced and maintain a precarious balance with the more classical structures of audiovisual narratives.

Another no less important consideration in the current development of narrative stems from the type of interpellation that the media establishes with its public. Mass media discourses (especially television) are outlining a complex, ever-changing relation with the statute of narrative with the following consequences: on one hand, the consolidation of television narratives in every day life through a programmatic logic (a division into chapters or episodes or, in other words, a serialised fragmentation) and by means of a contaminating effect on popular narrative and daily communicative interaction. This influence seems to legitimise its alleged belonging to the social body and to validate its function as an intertext of small, every day narratives. On the other hand, and related to what has just preceded, the breakdown of the timespan of the narrative, fragmented not only due to the different demands of programming, but also because of the new interactive powers bestowed upon the user/viewer. This alleged "democratisation" of the narrative, open to permanent feedback, could only mean its death sentence. Both interactive television and the services offered by computer networks base all their appeal on the power they give the user to "explore" and therefore create a made-to-

measure narrative, which basically means being able to add their own voice to the discourse. Here, however, there is no leeway since everything must be previously pre-established (programmed).

However, at the same time as the exciting technology of multimedia offers a comfortable encounter with the narrative, the tell-tale signs of exhaustion are patent. Burdensome structures, stale plots, and worn genres follow one after another in cinema and in television. Repetition seems to be the big thing at the moment—repetition in the guise of periodic visitations to programmes and plays which television, like an "electronic museum", incorporates in its programme planing. Repetition also as the basis of the commercial exploitation³ in a useless gesture of what has already become outmoded (a genuine manifestation of an exaggerated postmodernism). From this same perspective we should keep an eye on the growing invasion of the serial factor in audiovisual media. The model that is repeated basically mentions the impossibility (perhaps an anthropological inability) of bringing the narrative to an end and of a conservative trend as refers to the structures and contents. It does not seem to be just by chance, to give an example, that telefilms have blurred their episodic nature in order to gradually introduce serialised elements, or that second parts or continuations should make their appearance at the end of the seventies, as a normal procedure of film production.

The paradoxes do not end here. A process of expansion of the narrative towards new formats superimposes its state of decadence and saturation. The invasion of video games has depended on the application of a narrative pattern which is both lax and primitive. A video game is a story that "is written" in a way which, invariably, leads to a dichotomy: eliminate/be eliminated. The influence this has exerted on comics and animated cartoons on television is evident: the narrative evolves in a vibrating explosion of nuclear moments which only owe their logic to a principle of action for the sake of action.

Diametrically opposite, we find that the narrative has formed part of a trend (defended by the press) towards the "spectacularisation" of reality. Docudramas, reality shows, fictitious remakes are the latest attempt at trying to (con)fuse information and reality. In this case, the narrative appears as a potential victim and its structure may be used for openly heterogeneous elements: declarations, brutal interpretations of reality, dramatisations, elaborate *mise en scène* with doubles who stand in for the real protagonists, artificial provocations through the melodramatic effects of live shows... The narrative adds, in this way, that extra fictitious touch that is found lacking in informative programmes when supplanting the incidents. As proof of its efficiency, this curious "informative fiction" formula is spreading quickly into all types of television genres.

Our research could continue into other fields but we do not feel that we should exhaust the casuistry or reach a final diagnosis. We merely offer these extremes in order to give an account of a prolonged debate that such a vibrant phenomenon provokes, and which will indeed continue to provoke in the near future.

IV

This article is, therefore, the product of a question which is spread out and repeated by and in different areas. Since supposedly no previous light has been shed on the question, it is then left in brackets. Instead of trying to throw some light on it, we tend to spread it out in articles which are written by experts in different fields. The variety of methodologies which have been used is a reliable testimony of a puzzle which affects the vagueness of the word and of the concept in itself. This article does not, and indeed must not, try to make things easy for the reader: in all articles which follow a personal line of thought it is necessary to decode the idea of the narrative being outlined or presupposed by reading between the lines. In fact, any archaeological work should, also deal above all with presuppositions.

The first object that we consider —audiovisuals— should itself be enriched by other considerations from the fields of philosophy, science, literature, exhibitions of current spoken narratives. We have not included any of the conclusions which stem from the encounter between metaphorical uses and narratives of the concept at the end of this article since we have considered this endeavour to be impossible. In other words, and without wishing to be detrimental to the coherence (or even homogeneity) we usually try to attain in these articles, these are only instruments that — we hope— will allow some new research with new perspectives to be carried out in the near future.

V

The initial project which now takes shape in this article has always had the full support and enthusiasm of the Filmoteca de Andalucía, not only under José Luis Chacón, but also subsequently under Begoña Soto. It was this institution that took care of all the financial and material aspects. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them for all their help. Authors also had to bear, with silent resignation, the delays in editing which have now come to an end due to this promising collaboration between the Filmoteca de Andalucía and the Filmoteca de la Generalitat Valenciana through the *Archivos de la Filmoteca* magazine. We feel doubly indebted to the authors, not only for the effort they have made in resolving the problems which others have posed in their own field, but also for being kind enough not to make us feel the weight of their guilt for having abused of our patience ○

TRANSLATION: MARK CAMPBELL

1. ENCARNIA JIMÉNEZ LOSANTOS & VICENTE SANCHEZ-BIOSCA (EDS.): *El relato electrónico, Valencia, Filmoteca de la Generalitat, 1989.*

2. There were already some monographic studies and issues in magazines from the United States, England and Italy.

3. Without forgetting the unstoppable influence of new software (magnetic, laser-disc, CD-ROM) which reproduce, over and over again, the same cultural products.

ARCHIVOS
DE LA FILMOTECA

21

OCTUBRE 1995

THE DESTINY OF NARRATIVE AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

VICENTE SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA • RAFAEL R. TRANCHE

213

NARRATIVE: BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND DEATH

217

VICENTE JARQUE Philosophy and **N**arrative

218

VICENTE SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA To Know How to Die. An Anthropology of **D**eath and
Narratives on Psychopaths

226

IDENTITY AND "LIFE STORIES"

259

GONZALO ABRIL From the Surviving Narrator to the Mass-Oriented **C**harlatan

260

JOSÉ MIGUEL MARINAS Telling and **I**ntity

267

DARÍO VILLANUEVA The European Narrative and Colonial **C**onstruction of the
American Reality

278

ITINERARIES AND LIMITS OF NARRATIVE

287

CARMEN TORREGROSA **T**wice upon a Time...

288

VICENTE J. BENET Narrative and the **V**isible. An Essay on *Bram Stoker's Dracula*

294

A. LAFUENTE • J. VILCHIS The Staging of a **S**cenic Narrative: An Account of a
Pavilion of the Universal Exhibition at Seville

306

JAVIER GÓMEZ FERRI Science as **N**arrative. Toward a Post-Methodology of Science

318

SERIALIZED NARRATIVES ON TELEVISION

327

REYNALDO GONZÁLEZ Our Everyday **S**oap Opera

328

CARLOS REIS Fatal Attraction: On the **S**oap Opera as Illusion and Truth

336

TOMÁS A. LÓPEZ-PUMAREJO The Stripper and the **C**hief of State: About the Male Nude
in the Brazilian Soap Operas

345

ALBERTO ELENA Television and **D**evelopment. Narrative Strategies in Two Series
of India and Ivory Coast

354

wishes to be an open, flexible magazine which deals with a wide variety of issues. To combine the theory and aesthetics of cinema with the problems of historicism as generated by the new discoveries, restorations and identifications of film libraries is indeed an arduous task. If, moreover, we do not wish to omit any of the other image aids such as television and the so-called new technologies, the task becomes even more complex. It is not necessary, however, to deal with all of these different subjects in each and every one of our publications, but rather it is our aim to find a balance between them in our different issues. The main aim of this monograph is to deal in depth with a theoretical subject which is of the utmost importance in modern day audiovisual media, but which lacks a historical dimension: the statutes of narrative. Nevertheless, an empirical look at the subject matter confirms that there are several ramifications in fields which have little to do with audiovisuals which are likely to enrich, in an image format, the "internal" debates which concern today's mass media. For this reason, we have deemed it necessary, contrary to the usual policy of *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, to incorporate these ideas (in terms of philosophy, science, literature, and the spoken narrative, amongst others), as they appeared in Rafael R. Tranche and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca's joint article. The fact that the number of pages has been increased whilst the price has remained nearly the same is to be taken as a token of respect to the reader who may not wholly agree with the way we have decided to go about things.

The text that follows was entrusted to us by the Andalusian Film Library for its two editors. *Archivos de la Filmoteca* publishes this text without any type of modification whatsoever. We hope that this joint collaboration between the two film libraries may be the first of many to follow ○

