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A CRITICAL READER OF “NEW” MEDIA

04. narrativity, possibility, existence

IN THIS CLASS

- Narrativity an cultural texts
- Narration and mental models
- Words and objects
- Worldbuilding
- Logical modality



POLL TIME!

- We asked the two following questions:
- Is narrativity ever avoidable in media?
- Is a cultural object defined by a narrative axis?

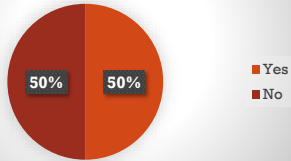
QUESTION TIME

**1. Can we avoid
narrativity in media?**

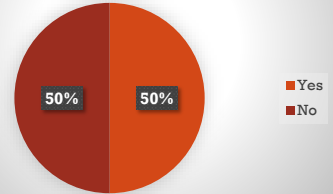
**2. Are all cultural objects
narrative to some degree?**



**Is narrativity ever
avoidable in media?**

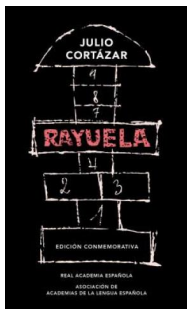


**Is a cultural object
defined by a narrative
axis?**



RESULTS





SEINFELD, TANIGUCHI, CORTÁZAR

- What was the point of the different pieces we checked?
- Seinfeld
- The Walking Man
- Hopscotch (Nebe, peklo, ráj)

WHAT DO WE NARRATE

- How do we define narration?
- Do we identify narration with *plot*? This seems to reduce presentation to story
- Intuitively, narration is simply the expression or description of events in a certain manner
- More formally, we could talk of the terms that work within narration such as *action*, *character* and *recognition* per Todorov (1969: 73). We could go with Uspensky and qualify it as *description* on the *semantic* level (1976)



HOW DO WE NARRATE

- Todorov puts it this way:

The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. This term "equilibrium," which I am borrowing from genetic psychology, means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement

- This equilibrium theory is essential to his brand of *narratology*, which studies the structure and inner workings of narration and plot
- But *plot* is not exactly what we're after



CULTURAL OBJECTS


- We seem to be limited in scope to a bidimensional sign construction. The *plot* and its *expression*
- Are cultural objects all *plots* formed in one way or another?
- We have to avoid confusion here! What do we actually mean by *cultural object*?
- This is where Lotman's concept of *text* becomes useful again!



THE CONCEPT OF TEXT

- Remember the idea of a *cultural text*?
- A text is *not* the integrality of a work of art
- A text is defined in three different planes:
- *Expression*: It is set down through the usage of signs
- *Demarcation*: There are tangible boundaries to the expression of signs
- *Structure*: There is a certain organization in the signs used



- 
- What we have here is a *crowbar*
 - How do we characterize the *narration* of this crowbar?
 - Does this crowbar have a *plot*?
 - Can this *crowbar* be construed as a *text*?

THE NARRATIVE MIND

- Thought is very often given to us in the form of narration. Who has never been caught in a train of thought that “sounds” exactly like whatever book you’re reading?
- It would seem that at the surface level, narration is natural to the way we think. There may be some rudimentary neurological reasons to think that thoughts are formed narratively
- Narration could explicate outcome inference and memory retrieval—it’s both past-accessible and future oriented
- But is all thought narrative or is it *temporal*?





- Take the following object
- When you approach it, do you *narrate* it?
- Can you identify a narrative structure in it?
- On the other hand, can you identify your *thoughts* as you approach the object?
- Can this be a *text*, beyond our cognitive intuition of narration?



Mark Rothko (1944), *Hierarchical Birds*





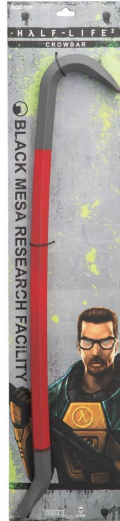
A SHOW ABOUT NOTHING

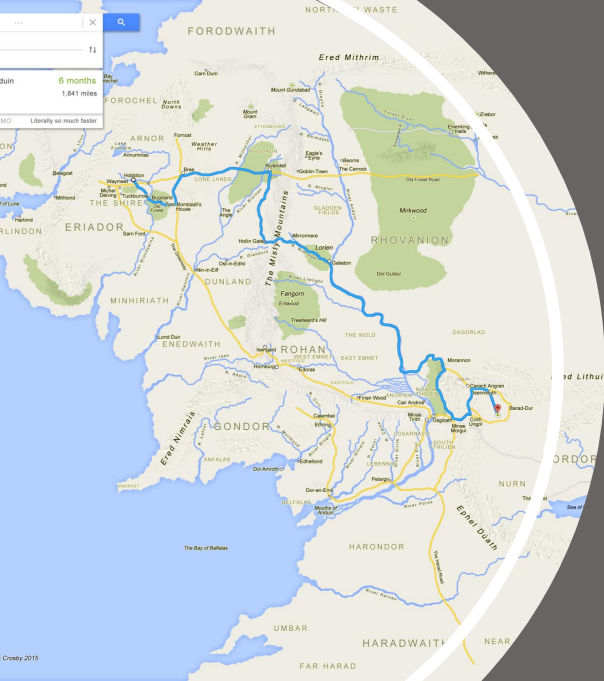
- Is narration conducive to understanding cultural objects as their content?
- Why do we ask what *something is about*?
- Can anything *be about nothing*?



WHEN WE CAN'T NARRATE

- Let's go back to the crowbar: Do non-artistic texts narrate? Under what conditions?
- A medium does not entail narration
- *Unless* we assume that all thought is inherently narrative
- But that would mean that all objects subjected to psychology would narrate, not necessarily that *objects* narrate by themselves
- In how we understand a medium or an object, we perhaps deal with something different, namely, the logic of the object





CONSTRUCTING THE WORLD

- Let's focus on fiction for a moment
- Normally we talk about fiction in terms of plot and its presentation
- But we also talk about the worlds of fiction
- We fly concepts like *worldbuilding*, *atmosphere*, *lore* or *background* to talk about the idea that certain cultural objects present us with enough information to reconstruct a sense of a world half-represented in fiction
- We can both ask questions and formalize the idea in a couple of steps

WHAT IS A WORLD

- Does all fiction worldbuild?
- Take, for example, *The Lord of the Rings*: One of its apparent features is that it builds and presents elements that can be identified as a *world*
- But at the same time think of *The Old Man and the Sea*: Does it *necessarily* build something that can be characterized as a *world*?
- What is the feature in culture that presents a built world?
- In fact, what is a *world*?
- If we rely on intuitions, we think of a *world* as a set of historical, physical, biological, social, etc. facts. Is something lacking in this definition? (not a trick question!)





WORLDS WITHOUT HISTORY

- Cultural objects undeniably pertain to the world they are a part of, not the world they are presented in
- But narrative cultural objects often rely on worldbuilding and even make it happen without much of an intention to do so
- Moreover, the effect of the *atmosphere* is tied to this worldbuilding without actually providing a specific indication of references to a world

POSSIBLE WORLDS

- We can assume a psychological mechanism interpreting objects represented as part of the world constructed, but that doesn't hold water when thinking about presentation vs. plot or fact-based world construction
- A way to limit and formalize our pondering on these elements has to do with setting the fact-based world construction as the main relevant point of *fictionality* mechanisms that *develop a specific world*
- Hold up, how do we characterize *fictionality vs. narration*? Do we have to assume intention?



- We can use the following example of a definition:
- the fictionality of literary worlds is a composite phenomenon assuming both inter-world relations (fiction cannot be defined outside a cultural system that defines also nonfictional modes of being) and intra-world organization. In the case of narrative worlds intra-world organization is determined by narrativity (Ronen 1994: 12)
- We can also assume fictional worlds to be definable as *possible* worlds in a logico-semantic way
- What is a *possible world* then? Simply speaking, the idea that the current state of affairs *could be different from what it is*, and that *were we to change some of its conditions, we could get some information about what that state of affairs would look like*



LOGIC GROUNDING CULTURE

- That gives us an idea that when we work with certain fictive accounts, we can categorize them *modally*
- If we want to understand some sense of worldbuilding and background, we can study the relations of what is *necessary* and what is *possible* in the context of that world
- Moreover, a fictional construction in the world of cultural objects does not need a specific narration to be effectively fictional and invoking a possible world
- Take for instance Sim City 2000



TERTIARY MODELING

- As tertiary modeling systems make more and more complex semiotic models, we see how these models may often have some significant construction grounded on levels of reference to primary and secondary modeling systems
- As we build on our semiotic understanding of cultural texts, we will discover how some problems that are not common in the more traditional media start cracking our understanding and descriptions of tertiary models

