THE NARRATED LIFE

Byung-Chul Han, **The Crisis of Narration** (Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2024)

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In The **Arcades Project**, Benjamin remarks:

> Happiness for us is thinkable only in the air that we have breathed, among the people who have lived with us. In other words, there vibrates in the idea of happiness … the idea of salvation…. Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time. Or, to put it differently, the genuine conception of historical time rests entirely upon the image of redemption.[1]

Happiness is not a momentary event. It has a long tail that reaches back into the past. Happiness feeds off all that has been part of a life. It does not have a shiny appearance; its appearance is an afterglow. We owe our happiness to the salvation of the past. This salvation requires a narrative tension in which the present integrates the past, thereby making the past a continuing influence, even resurrecting the past. In the state of happiness, salvation reverberates. When everything becomes part of a maelstrom of actuality, a storm of contingency, there can be no happiness for us.

Life, conceived as a muscle, would have to be enormously strong if men are, as Marcel Proust imagines, temporal beings who 'spend their lives perched upon living stilts which never cease to grow until sometimes they become taller than church steeples'.[2] The end of **In Search of Lost Time** is anything but triumphant:

> And I was terrified by the thought that the stilts beneath my own feet might already have reached that height; it seemed to me that quite soon now I might be too weak to maintain my hold upon a past which already went down so far.[3]

For Proust, the task of the narrator is to salvage the past:

> So if I were given long enough to accomplish my work, I should not fail, even if the effect were to make them resemble monsters, to describe men as occupying so considerable a place, compared with the restricted place which is reserved for them in space, a place on the contrary prolonged past measure … in Time.[4]

In modernity, life atrophies. The decay of time is a threat to life. In his **In Search of Lost Time**, Proust is fighting against temporal atrophy, the disappearance of time as a kind of muscular atrophy. Time Regained appeared in 1927, the same year that saw the publication of Heidegger's Being and Time. Heidegger was also determined to use his writing to fight the temporal atrophy of modernity, the destabilization and fragmentation of life. To the fragmentation and withering of life in modernity he juxtaposes 'the whole of existence

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[1] Benjamin, **The Arcades Project**, p. 479.
[2] Marcel Proust, **In Search of Lost Time**, Vol. VI: **Time Regained**, London: Vintage, 1996, p. 451.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

stretched along' in 'which **Dasein** [Heidegger's ontological term for human beings] as fate "incorporates" into its existence birth and death and their "between" '.[5] Human beings do not exist from one moment to the next. They are not momentary beings. Their existence comprises the whole temporal range that opens up between birth and death. In the absence of external orientation and a narrative anchoring in being, the energy to contract the time between birth and death into a living unity that encapsulates all events and occurrences must come from the self. The continuity of being is guaranteed by the continuity of the self. The 'constancy of the self' represents the central temporal axis that must protect us against the fragmentation of time.[6]

Heidegger claims that Being and Time is an ahistorical analysis of human existence, but it is in fact a reflection of the temporal crisis of modernity. Anxiety, which plays such a prominent role in Being and Time, is part of the pathology of modern man, who no longer has a firm footing in the world. Death itself is no longer integrated into a meaningful narrative of salvation. Rather, it is my death, and I have to deal with it by myself. As death puts an end to my self once and for all, **Dasein** – in the face of death – contracts into itself. From the constant presence of death comes the pre-eminence of the self. The existential paroxysm of a Dasein that is determined to realize its self generates the necessary tension, the muscular power that protects Dasein against the impending temporal atrophy and provides it with temporal continuity.

Heidegger's 'Being-one's-Self' precedes narrative biographical context, which is constructed only later. Dasein assures itself of itself before it creates a coherent worldly story of itself. The self is not constructed out of worldly occurrences that were already connected with each other. 'Authentic historicality' is founded only by the pre-narrative 'whole of existence stretched along'. Against temporal atrophy, Heidegger seeks a temporal framing of existence, the 'whole of existence stretched along in this historicality in a way which is primordial and not lost, and which has no need of connectedness'.[7] This frame has to ensure that Dasein's pre-narrative unity does not disintegrate into 'momentary actualities of Experiences which come along successively and disappear'.[8] It pulls **Dasein** out of 'the endless multiplicity of possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one – those of comfortableness, shirking, and taking things lightly' – and anchors it in 'the simplicity of its fate [*Schicksals*]'.[9] Having a fate means properly taking charge of one's self. Someone who surrenders to the 'momentary actualities' has no fate, no 'authentic historicality'.

Digitalization intensifies the atrophy of time. Reality disintegrates into information that is relevant only briefly. Information lives on the allure of surprise. It thus fragments time. Our attention also becomes fragmented. Information does not permit any lingering. In the accelerated exchange of information, bits of information quickly replace each other. Snapchat is the embodiment of instant digital communication. This service is the purest expression of digital temporality. Only the moment counts. Snaps are a synonym for 'momentary actualities', and accordingly they disappear after a short while. Reality disintegrates into snaps. This removes the temporal anchors that stabilize us. 'Stories' on digital platforms such as Instagram or Facebook are not genuine stories. They have no narrative duration. Rather, they are just sequences of momentary impressions that do not tell us anything. They are in fact no more than bits of visual information that quickly disappear. Nothing stays. An Instagram advertisement says: 'Post moments from your everyday life in your Stories. These are fun, casual, and only last 24 hours.' This temporal limitation creates

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[5] Martin Heidegger, **Being and Time**, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, p. 442.
[6] Ibid., p. 427.
[7] Ibid., p. 442.
[8] Ibid., p. 426.
[9] Ibid., p. 435.

a peculiar psychological effect. It evokes a feeling of fleetingness, which produces a subtle compulsion to communicate even more.

Selfies are momentary photographs. Their only concern is the moment. As a medium of remembrance, a selfie is fleeting visual information. Unlike an analogue photo, it is registered only briefly and then disappears for good. Selfies aim not at remembrance but at communication. Ultimately, they announce the end of the human being as someone with a fate and a history.

Phono sapiens surrenders to the 'momentary actualities of Experiences which come along successively and disappear'. The 'whole of existence stretched along' – which connects birth and death and gives a life its emphasis on the self – is alien to Phono sapiens, who does not exist historically. The phenomenon of the funeral selfie suggests this absence of death. Standing next to the coffin, people smile at their cameras. Likes can be elicited even from death. Apparently, Phono sapiens moves beyond Homo sapiens, who was in need of salvation.

With digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, we approach the degree zero of narration. They are media of information, not narration. They work in an additive rather than narrative fashion. The strings of information do not condense into a narrative. To the question 'How do I add or edit a life event on my Facebook profile?' the answer is: 'Scroll down to posts and tap life event.' Life events are mere bits of information. They are not woven into an extended narrative but simply added up into a syndetic arrangement. There is no narrative synthesis of events. On digital platforms, lived moments cannot be digested and condensed in a reflexive and narrative manner – and in fact this is intentional. Digital platforms' technical *dispositif* rules out time-intensive narrative practices.

Human memory is selective. This is how it differs from a database. It is narrative, whereas digital memories are additive and cumulative. A narrative depends on a selection and connection of events. It proceeds in a selective fashion. The narrative path is narrow. It comprises only selected events. The narrated or remembered life is necessarily incomplete. Digital platforms, by contrast, seek to create a complete record of a life. The less narration there is, the more data and information there are. For digital platforms, data are more valuable than narratives. They do not want narrative reflection. When digital platforms permit narrative formats, these must be designed so as to be compatible with databases. They need to produce as many data as possible. The narrative formats therefore necessarily have an additive form. 'Stories' are designed to be bearers of information; narrative, in the genuine sense, disappears. The *dispositif* of digital platforms is: the total record of a life. The aim is to translate a life into a dataset. The more data there are about a person, the better that person can be surveilled, controlled and economically exploited. Phono sapiens believe they are merely playing, but they are in fact being utterly exploited and controlled. The smartphone seems to be a playground, but it is a digital panopticon.

Creating an autobiographical narrative requires one to reflect on one's life – the conscious work of remembrance. Data and information, by contrast, are generated in a way that bypasses consciousness. They represent our activities immediately, without any reflective filtering. If data are produced in a less conscious way, they are accordingly more useful. Such data provide access to those regions that lie outside of consciousness. They allow digital platforms to screen a person and to control their behaviour at a pre-reflexive level.

Walter Benjamin suggested that, just as psychoanalysis discovers the '**instinctual unconscious**', the technical possibilities of the camera, such as slow motion, time lapses and close-ups, allow us to discover an '**optical unconscious**'.[10] In a similar way, data mining acts as a

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[10]Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', in **Selected Writings**, Vol. 3, pp. 101–33; here: p. 117.

digital magnifying glass that discloses an unconscious space behind the conscious one. We may call this space the **digital unconscious**. It allows artificial intelligence to access our unconscious desires and inclinations. This puts data-driven psychopolitics in a position to control our behaviour at a pre-reflexive level.[11]

In the case of so-called 'self-tracking', counting completely supplants narration. All that self-tracking generates are data. The motto of the Quantified Self movement is 'Self-Knowledge through Numbers'. Its adherents try to gain self-knowledge not through narration, remembrance and reflection, but by way of counting and numbers. To this end, the body is fitted with various sensors that automatically generate data on heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, movement and sleep patterns. Mental states and moods are continuously monitored. A detailed log of all everyday activities is kept. Even the day one notices one's first grey hair is recorded. Nothing must escape the total record of a life. In all this, nothing is narrated. Everything is measured. Sensors and apps provide data automatically, without any linguistic representation or narrative reflection. The collected data are then summarized in visually appealing graphics and diagrams. These, however, do not say anything about who I am. The self is not a quantity but a quality. 'Self-Knowledge through Numbers' is an illusion. Self-knowledge can be generated only through narration. I must narrate myself. But numbers do not narrate anything. The expression 'numerical narratives' is an oxymoron. A life cannot be captured through quantifiable events.

The third episode of the first series of **Black Mirror** is called 'The Entire History of You'. It depicts a transparent society in which everyone wears an implant behind the ear that records everything the wearer sees and experiences. Everything that was seen or perceived can be replayed, either directly to the wearer or on an external screen. At airport security checks, for instance, the officer asks you to replay the events of a certain time period. Nothing is secret any more. It is impossible for criminals to hide their crimes. People are, so to speak, captured in their own memories. Strictly speaking, when everything that is experienced can be repeated, remembrance is impossible.

Remembrance is not a mechanical repetition of an earlier experience but a narrative that must be recounted again and again. Memories necessarily have gaps. They presuppose closeness and distance. When all experience is present and distanceless, that is, when it is available, remembrance is impossible. The gapless repetition of past experience is not a narrative but a report or record. To be able to narrate or remember, one must be able to forget or leave out a great deal. The transparency society spells the end of narrative and remembrance. There is no such thing as a transparent narrative. Only information and data are transparent. In the final scene of 'The Entire History of You', the protagonist takes a razor blade to himself, and cuts out the implant.

References

[11]See Byung-Chul Han, **Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power**, London: Verso, 2017.