

AXES OF APPROACH TO A NARRATIVE ART

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## AXES OF APPROACH TO A NARRATIVE ART

Well, I've set myself a difficult job for today which is to try to touch down on a number of different thoughts and subjects concerning narrative, and crossing a span of time that's quite considerable, but I thought it might be helpful to do that in this context.\*

I'm going to have to try to cope with this in a rather fragmentary way, in order to get through as much as I can of these ruminations for you. I think it's a good time to start with a little bit of a narrative, a narrative in which you wake up. It's morning, and you have something important to do. You have been asleep, and you climb out of bed, you think about what it is you can accomplish for yourself. Maybe you can have a bite of breakfast. But there is something very important for you to do; something that's so important that it carries you on a journey. And that journey eventuates in your sitting quietly in a seat at Media Study/Buffalo. And now you're sitting there in your seat, looking into another part of the room, and having some thoughts of your own; some thoughts in which you find that I'm there too, with you; and some thoughts that are a little more personal than that, which involve the way that you are experiencing the space you're in. Like things having to do with the way that plastic chair feels, and whether you choose to take notes, and what it is you expect to gain from all of this.

I think that one thing that's very particular and probably very present on your mind in this process is that as you get up, as you make this little trip, you experience a kind of odd conflict of values and

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\* Presented at the Electronic Narrative conference, Media Study/Buffalo, February 11, 1984.

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in fact this little story that I've presented doesn't have the necessary underpinnings that Brian (Henderson)\* outlined for a narrative, because there doesn't seem to be any conflict in it, it doesn't seem to need a resolution, it doesn't seem to get anywhere. But you know very well that there's a conflict, and in fact there's a very important conflict involved in any operation of this type: getting up in the morning and making this kind of trip. And it's a kind of conflict you probably experience right now, in fact, which has to do with your sense of present and future values, and the way that you measure those against one another. I suspect that you would look at your motives, now or earlier, and you would find that it might be nice to sit at home in bed and have breakfast, or it might be nice to go to Media Study and sit in a plastic chair and listen to a lot of people talk. Or, (possibly you would find a way to think about these decisions in light of the)\*\* values that have motivated your trip across town or whatever, your extraction from a comfortable environment and your arrival here. If you threw over some of those values you'd probably find that in fact your own present and immediate values are much different from those which you had imposed on yourself; that your own immediate values have to do with your feelings right now, a kind of sense of comfort and relaxation from just sitting here, someone talking, you don't have any particular pressure on you to perform or do anything, you can be accomodating to those on either side of you very easily, you can be aware of them; you don't have to do much except listen to what I'm saying; in fact, you don't even have to do that. That's a completely different kind of setting from the ordinary expectational modalities of narrative, and these stories, that we are ensnared by, which come to us from the outside; stories, in fact, are the functions of the imposition of some future value upon us. All

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\* Henderson, Brian. "Narrative Theory and the Electronic Image." Presented at the Electronic Narrative conference immediately prior to the present paper.

\*\* Interpolation to cover gap in the audiotape recording

graphy exhibit and a book publication that's presently available for your delightful enjoyment at CEPA Gallery\*, so if you'd like to stop over there, you can pick up another side of this story, one that deals more with these functions of illustration, image, story, and rhetoric, and there will be a talk over there that Barbara Eroughel and I will do on the 16th, which is in this coming week, if you'd like to get over there.\*\*

So, balancing that factor out, let's go back to the beginning again. Someone tells a story. So someone tells a story. You're all familiar with what it's like when someone tells a story; something happens to you. Someone tells you a story, and a good story has something really nifty about it, and there's a question which naturally flows out of the absence that that story leaves behind it, whether it's a joke, or good story of more dramatic type, whatever it is, there's a kind of question which is a little unsettling to us, and that is, how did they do that? How did that happen? How did somebody get you, like that? What happened to make that a story? It seems pretty amazing, because you experience a kind of participation in the story, which is not a real participation; you're completely aware of that; and yet there is a kind of participation in that story. What happened? How did they do that? This kind of question tends to overwhelm our own immediate observation of the kind of magic that we're experiencing inside ourselves when we participate in the construction of the understanding of a story. After all, that story happened inside of us. And yet we tend to look upon the story as a thing, which is external to us, and rather than looking for the answers inside of ourselves, like how did our thought move to control such an odd sequence of events, we tend to look at the story as some kind of external object or situation which

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\* Conrad, Tony, and Eroughel, Barbara. The Animal. CEPA Gallery, 700 Main Street, Buffalo, NY 14202. 1984. 30 Pages.

Photography exhibit at CEPA, "If the Tail Fits", Feb. 3-25, 1984.

\*\*Discussion of book and show by Tony Conrad, CEPA, February 16, 1984.

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invites our analytic attention. So, do we create what we understand, or was it there in the outside world in some very special and privileged sense?

It's much easier in the world of language, in the world of shared experience, for us to look at the kind of question: "How did they do that?" than it is to look at the kind of question of whether we create those things which we understand. In fact, one might say that the product of this question, "How did they do that?," is the body of investigation we know as literary criticism, or film criticism. Criticism in general is a body of investigation which is devoted to the question, "How did they do that?"

Now there are a number of different approaches to criticism available to us today, and they take different strategies of approach. And generally, in looking at this topic John (Minkowski)\* announced for me, "Axes of Approach to a Narrative Art," it's important to know what different kinds of critical and methodological approaches there are in understanding what we are looking at when we are trying to define and consider a kind of object like electronic narrative. The "continental school," which is my succinct way of characterizing the school that Brian (Henderson) was referring to, perhaps considers the type of questions like, "What is it?" and "How does this function?" It looks at a body of objects. It's very flexible in dealing with that. It takes a pre-existing body of circumstances and objects and events, and tries to deal with those artifacts by saying, "What is this? How does it function?" And that's important, even though it sounds very general, because it does define a sort of limitation on that discourse, which is that if you don't have those objects already, then you are not addressing a question that really covers those objects. You look at a thing that's already there, and you say, "How does this function?" Fine, but we're not addressing the

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\* Moderator of the conference

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question of "How would something function if I made it another way?" And in a sense that kind of question is left in abeyance. Now there's a more abstract school of inquiry, which philosophically associates itself to a kind of English school of investigation, which tends to deal more with this kind of questions, like, "Is there such-and-such?" Not "What is this?" but "Is there one of these?" And in a sense here we're looking at another kind of question. We don't even need the object. "Is there a unicorn?" We look at these kinds of questions. We also say, "Why should something be the way it is? Why is there? Why? Can there be such-and-such a body of objects?" Now this is a kind of more abstract type of investigation, but it doesn't lead us any clearer than the other to identifying the type of objects that we might be interested in if we're looking at a kind of theoretical school of work like electronic narrative.

Electronic narrative is an area that's not really defined, so we can't ask, really, "What is it? How does it function?" It's not a filled collection. On the other hand, the English school of saying, "Is there electronic narrative? and why should there be electronic narrative?" may throw us onto the horns of another dilemma, which is that we're dealing in such abstract terms that we really can't extract much out of our discourse.

American critics have tended to make extensions upon these roots, and to extend their discourse in a variety of directions, some of which are quite unusual by these standards. I want to give you one example. I'm referring to critical work by two people here, Bleich and Fisch, and I'll just read you a quick segment from Jane Tompkins' introduction to a book called Reader-Response Criticism:

Bleich defines knowledge as the product of negotiation among members of an interpretive community, as the product of a collective decision about what it is desirable to know, rather than something that is truly independent of human purposes. He concludes from this that "when knowledge

is no longer conceived as objective, the purpose of pedagogical institutions from the nursery through the university is to synthesize knowledge rather than to pass it along..." He substitutes for the paradigm of teaching and learning the paradigm of "developing knowledge," replacing the idea of education as an activity in which there are agents and patients (teachers and learners) with the idea of education as a communal pursuit in which all parties are engaged on an equal footing in deciding what counts as true. He wants to take responsibility for the production of knowledge away from traditional sources of authority--texts, teachers, institutions--and place it in the hands of all who are engaged in seeking it. What sets Bleich apart from the other critics represented in this collection is his perception of the effects a theory of reading can have on the way students respond to literature, on classroom procedures, and on the authorization of interpretations.

The phrase "community of interpreters" or "interpretive community" plays a crucial role in the more recent theories of reading advanced by Bleich, Fisch, Culler, and Walter Michaels. First developed by Fisch in "Interpreting the Variorum," it is shorthand for the notion that since all sign systems are social constructs that individuals assimilate more or less automatically (or, more accurately, that pervade and constitute individual consciousness), an individual's perceptions and judgements are a function of the assumptions shared by the groups he belongs to...

Now the question here is how we're looking at a text, and how we're relating to the question of "How did they do that?", and what form the answers take. And where Fisch is heading is very close to a situation in which we look at the reader as the authority on what is happening in a particular text. The question is how do we know about a text, ultimately, in a critical context; how do we define our knowledge about that; and basically we're turning this question slowly around through this body of reader-response criticism, so we get closer and closer to a very very dangerous position, which is the position that, basically, the text, the story, is completely arbitrary, and basically that the reader, or viewer in the case of the media, is making up whatever they want. Fisch comes close, but doesn't quite go to that extreme.

When Fisch made (his argument that ambiguous meaning in a text is to be defined in the experiential terms of the reader's decision-making process) in 1970, and in Part I of "Interpreting the Variorum," the reader's experience was described as a response to authorial intentions realized in the formal features of the text. Although the locus of meaning was held to be in the reader's mind and not between the pages of a book, the mental events that constituted literary meaning were assumed to be the effects of specifiable properties of the text, particularly line-endings. In Part II of "Interpreting the Variorum," those specifiable properties "disappear"; they are no longer seen as autonomous but as constituted in the act of criticism. There is no preexistent text to which the reader responds, nor is there "reading" in the traditional sense. Texts are written by readers, not read, since, the argument now states, the formal features of the text, the authorial intentions they are normally taken to represent, and the reader's interpretive strategies are mutually interdependent...

The question that arises at the end of his essay is: If texts have no specifiable properties, then what is reader-response a response to? Or, as he puts it, What is interpretation an interpretation of?...

And:

In explaining why his theory is preferable to the formalist position, Fisch makes a familiar appeal to moral values.

(Tompkins, Jane P., ed. Reader-Response Criticism/ From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1980. Pp. xxi-xxiii.

I'm including that last sentence as a fairly significant opening onto another kind of question, which seems to represent a kind of odd diagrammatic concern; that is; if we begin to look at this question, namely, "How did they do that?", and we turn increasingly in the direction of the reader as a source of the answer, ultimately we have to deal with the moral implications of the values that are transacted between the reader and the text, internal to the reader and in an interaction with the culture.

Now there are other ways of characterizing these circumstances, that is the relationships between the reader and the text. All along here we've been pursuing a path, in other words I've kind of quickly traced a



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kind of very very odd and diverse group of investigations which amount to literary criticism, approaching a very extreme case in which the reader is basically taking responsibility for the narrative, the creation of the narrative, and the creation of the text themselves. But there is a completely different way of approaching this whole area, aside from viewing it as the property of literary criticism, as literary criticism has evolved. What I'm referring to is a direct examination of the kind of transaction that exists between the text and the reader, and this puts us in another area, namely an area which we might characterize as more psychological in its character.

Jay Haley, who is a person involved in psychology, has devised a characterization of a kind of interpersonal relationship which is very important, I think, in trying to reach an alternative description of the condition of interaction between us and a narrative. Where we think of the narrative as the embodiment of another person, as our reaction, interaction, and response to another external person, where it's a kind of interpersonal communication, in short, we can look at this relationship as one that corresponds to the kind of transactions that occur in any kind of communication, and Haley introduces the idea of complementary and symmetric relationships, and I'd like to discharge his definition into this crowd, if I can, by quoting from Haley's book, Strategies of Psychotherapy, where he says:

If one took all the possible kinds of communicative behavior which two people might interchange,...

which is a rather sweeping assumption right there,

...it could be roughly classified into behavior which defines a relationship as symmetrical and behavior which defines a relationship as complementary. A symmetrical relationship is one where two people exchange the same type of behavior. Each person will initiate action, criticize the other, offer advice, and so on. This type of relationship tends to be competitive; if one person mentions that he has succeeded in some endeavor, the other person points out that he has succeeded in some equally

important endeavor. The people in such a relationship emphasize their symmetry with each other.

A complementary relationship is one where the two people are exchanging different types of behaviors. One gives and the other receives, one teaches and the other learns. The two people exchange behavior which complements, or fits together. One is in a "superior" position and the other in a "secondary" in that one offers criticism and the other accepts it, one offers advice, and the other follows it, and so on.

This simple division of relationships into two types is useful for classifying different relationships or different sequences within a particular relationship. No two people will consistently have one of the types in all circumstances; usually there are areas of a relationship worked out as one type or another. Relationships shift in nature either rapidly, as when people take turns teaching each other, or more slowly over time. When a child grows up he progressively shifts from a complementary relationship with his parents toward more symmetry as he becomes an adult.

There are certain kinds of messages which make more of an issue of the type of relationship than other kinds. A professor may lecture and one of his students may ask questions to clarify various points and so they continue in a mutual definition of a complementary relationship. But when the student asks a question in such a way that he implies, "I know as much about this as you do," the nature of the relationship is placed in question. The professor must either respond in such a way that he redefines the relationship as complementary again, or he must accept the student's move toward symmetry. The kind of message that places a relationship in question will be termed here a "maneuver." In the example cited, the student made a symmetrical maneuver, defining the relationship as one between two equals. Such maneuvers are constantly being interchanged in any relationship and tend to be characteristic of unstable relationships where the two people are groping towards a common definition of their relationship.

(Haley, Jay. Strategies of Psychotherapy. Grune and Stratton, New York. 1963. P. 11.)

Oddly, there are a number of very interesting types of relationships which seem to be characterizable as complementary relationships, and they tend to involve reliance on some sort of authority, in the interaction, and they include this teacher/student relationship, the parent/child relationship; they also include the relationship of narrativity, of being told. And the repeated definition <sup>(by the "superior")</sup> of the relationship of complementarity also characterizes the hypnotic relationship, which is the subject of Jay Haley's book. So here is a direct link between very powerful psychological tools and interactions and functions which as Haley mentioned, you must have noticed, have to do with

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criticism as well as with telling-about. Now narrativity can be approached as the supposed object of an enquiry, or it can be approached as a transaction between a receiver and a work which is characterized by the values and boundaries of interpretation. In the transactions of narrativity the reader constructs an interpretation or version of the events that embody the work. How is this different from the more general situation of our interpreting reality? In other words, you may look at your phenomenological status as being one in which you experience things, and you construct some relationship to those things. Maybe you experience things on TV. Maybe you experience things in the real world. Maybe you experience story telling. What's the difference?

Well, there are a number of realms within which we tend to interpret reality, various paradigms that we use for approaching reality, first of all; these might include but not be limited to some of the following: (1) the scientific /objectivist/empiricist/rationalist version; testing our reality, relying on an interpersonal standard, and inevitably committing ourselves, through the intra-personality of our construct, to the incorporation of theory. So that even though scientific/objectivist/empiricist/rationalist versions of reality seem to be verifiably here, concrete, and now; in fact they always entail an intrinsic reliance upon the incorporation of theoretical constructs, in the mediation and presentation of those ideas. (2) Second, there's a kind of pragmatic approach, which is... hey, you know, I want a cup of coffee! There it is over there! Let's get coffee. OK? You know? What, do you need a theory to make coffee? All we need is coffee, water, you know, get it, there it is, cups, you know; a kind of conservative pragmatism using well-meaning norms of culture, an appeal to the lowest common denominator, in which no deviant view is accepted. If I say, "I know the coffee is poisoned!" you know, then I am rejected

from this standard pragmatic conservative view, through some kind of definitional mechanism. If we can use a kind of conservative pragmatic definitional mechanism we don't even need science any more. That's handy about that. (3) OK, then there's a psychological or realist version, which is a dialectical version of reality that involves a stabilization of dynamic elements such as belief and individual variability. So you may say, "Well, I feel this way, you feel that way," I mean, we all have different feelings. Sometimes I feel one way, sometimes I feel another; and these are elements which are brought together in a kind of dialectic balance, where sometimes this, sometimes that, there's a balance which adds up to a totality. (4) Finally, I think the last thing I can think of as a framework for looking at the way people organize their realities generally, and this is just off the top of my head so it's not obviously going to include everything that you can think of, but that's why we're different people, there's the individualist/solipsist version, which is a rejected alternative to the modernist chiasmus.

Now, talking about the "modernist chiasmus" here, I'm dropping of that phrase because I want to describe a little more <sup>of</sup> something dealing with narrativity, and I want to set this in context of a vision of what the modernist undertaking has been. That's important, especially when we're dealing with electronic narrative. So, looking at that, and looking at my time, I'm going to rush through this very rapidly, but I think we have to look at the historical roots of our current modernist undertaking if we hope to try to define what it is that's essentially interesting in the electronic means available to us, and how to proceed to capitalize on those means. In terms of the artistic traditions that we're finding ourselves coping with in the late twentieth century, the foundation of those terms goes back to the late nineteenth century, when romanticism and realism repre-

sented axes of approach to art. And romanticism and realism represented the old and the new, in that time; realism was in some ways one of the first intellectual revolutions in the world of art. And as romanticism and realism were inflected in a process of development that encountered impressionism, which was after all a kind of distorted realism, and symbolism, which was a kind of even more distorted realism, the axes of analysis of what art was, and what the creative adventure amounted to, shifted. And in the twentieth century there was a new breakdown of this function. Two new axes appeared, which one might say amounted to the revised realism of a subjective psychological realism, or surrealism; the surrealist paradigm involves a kind of appeal to a transparent psychological reality, so it deals with associational contexts, with atmosphere, and it incorporates problems of question and resolution; in opposition to this axis of the surrealist paradigm, the paradigm which asks you to confront different images with one another in accordance with what their meaning might be on a plane of realism defined by the realism of the psyche, there's the constructivist/formalist paradigm, which is a more absolutist paradigm, tends to be more structural and more absolutist (as I'm saying). It involves more attention to object and to process, to building from within. I think this is a very important structure to define in looking at what the bases are for a narrative electronic art. But since we're looking at electronic narrative, it's also important to look at the relationship between these terms, these art terms, and the terms of a more technological character which also split along other axes, slightly; which split our engagement with the technological artform: interlocking dichotomies which are the foundation for a kind of dialectical analysis of the narrative technology. Now I would say that maybe what we have to deal with in terms of the technology is the question of information and communications, because after all we're looking at narrative which is

displaced from storytelling into the electronic idiom, and the electronic idiom seems to be different from the storytelling situation in a way which has to do with the encoding of ideas and the contextualization of those ideas in communications terms. When we look at movies, we may want to know: what's the difference between a movie and a reality? I alluded to that problem earlier, and I think it's a very important problem, and I think that the analysis of this in terms of what its implications are for narrativity has to go back to a certain examination of information and communications ideas. Information theory, as evolved by Shannon in the late '40's, is a technology for analyzing data transmission. It doesn't quite deal with the problems of a generality that we'd hoped for, which has to do more with the complication of mapping-structures entailed in information transfer systems. He begins to approach the fundamentals of mapping structures of information, but he doesn't quite reach the level of generality that we'd like to achieve in dealing with narrative. Basically, when we look at the mapping structures involved in information transfer, in media we discover that what's odd about them in comparison with reality is that the mapping structures that are used in the media are discontinuous. That is, in our real experience we don't seem to have anything that we can identify with that's discontinuous, as for example would be the case if, one second from now, whenever that is, suddenly we were all at lunch. You know, it just isn't like that, and that happens all the time in movies and TV. That's a very very interesting and odd kind of experience that's quite different from regular day-to-day perceived experience. Now in spite of the fact that this experience of media is discontinuous, it's mapped onto continuous domains in the function of narrativity. In other words, we may see people sitting there, and then we may see them eating lunch, and in some way we extrapolate a continuous domain in that information transfer. And this transfer,

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I would contend, has something to do with the way that language functions. Because language also does this. We have discontinuities in language; as Brian (Henderson) mentioned there are techniques, rhetorical mechanisms, such as ellipsis, which allow for discontinuous mapping; functions of linguistic structures onto real continuous domains. And in order to understand whether the kinds of things that we're dealing with in terms of image have to do with the same kind of discontinuous mapping functions we're dealing with in ordinary language, we would have to go back to examine the ordinary functions of language; and there are people like Kaplan\* and Jerison\*\* who have analyzed the possible ordinary functions of language in human species, and who have linked what might be called the evolutionary impulses in the direction of language to mapping functions. This is a little deep for us to get into right here, but if we find that the original need for mapping functions on the part of early human beings was one that led to the evolution of language, and we find that that need is exercised in such a way that mapping functions onto continuous domains of the parallel real existence can incorporate structures such as narrativity much in the same way that these can be dealt with in terms of information/communications theory, then in a sense what we can say is that the kinds of potentiality for narrativity in dealing with this sort of disjunct imagery, that we find in movies and TV, is vaguely parallel to what we've been experiencing for some millions of years in narrativity... or at least thousands. The boundaries of this study, this general study, are defined by the psychology of perception, and by psycholinguistics. These are the larger areas which tend to put a perimeter on this. And that's important too, because it makes us think

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\*Kaplan, Stephen. Cognitive Maps in Perception and Thought. In Downs, Roger M. and David Stea, eds. Cognitive Mapping: Images of Spatial Environments. Aldine, Chicago. 1971.

\*\*Jerison, Harry J. Discussion Paper: The Paleoneurology of Language. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, Vol.280. Oct 28, 1976. Pp.370-82.

that psycholinguistics and the psychology of perception will be areas that will afford us an opportunity to define what the subject amounts to.

In communications -- the communications side of this axis of division of electronic narrative -- we do have to look at social structures -- this means diachronic and synchronic social structures; that is, traditions and social contexts -- and how they interface with rhetorical modalities.

I was just going to add that in terms of this disjunctive linguistic extension in relation to movie images, that it's very important for us to look at these images, disjunctive as they are, in the context of a dependence on belief: in other words, that we accept <sup>these</sup> images as a surrogate reality, even though they are a discontinuous mapping of that reality, and I think that it's this belief, that is a function of narrative mapping, that corresponds to the famous "suspension of disbelief" of Artaud, in theatrical theory.

So here are a number of axes of analysis, and I wanted to give a brief dialectical overview, because I want to contextualize this in terms of looking ahead to some future orientation. These mechanisms that I've been defining, these kind of breakdowns of the approach to the current circumstances, these persist in defining a condition of linguistic tension against the balance of belief, which derives from the resilient surface of the culture. In other words, we're always in a situation where we're forced into belief, in relation to what we perceive; and this belief is received at the surface of the culture. This is the context of a dialectical stasis which halts our move toward the position of radical authority of the reader/viewer. If we were to say, as a reader/viewer, "I want to take complete authority for everything I encounter; my interpretation is completely, freely my own," we would have to dissolve the dialectical stasis established in the culture which sustains the condition of believability that we invest



in these images. This overview, then, that I'm presenting here, where we see a relationship between the resilience of the culture in sustaining a belief in the image on the part of the reader/viewer, and thereby keeping the reader/viewer out of this radical trouble - which I consider<sup>a</sup> kind of attractively interesting possibility, where the reader or viewer takes control of the project -- this overview sees this chiasmatic status of contemporary culture as the inheritance of a deep-rooted philosophical problem. This goes all the way back to Hume's skepticism, which after all affords us some entry into the condition of a reader/viewer who takes control, and of course then the question is, whatever happened? What went wrong with Hume's program? Well, Kant, first of all, jumped in and reaffirmed rationality, and Hegel followed up with his obliteration of the individual through the institution of a dialectic. So that it is the dialectic which is in a sense the obstacle here. Contrariwise, looking inside oneself for control, we can imagine a control of our own perceptions; we can imagine viewer command of the transactions of narrativity.

What kind of stories arise within an overwhelming systematology like this... electronic narrative? What about tools as formal instruments? To belie the character of tools as narrative generators;... I developed a commentary on that myself in 1977,<sup>6</sup> which I have a brief excerpt from here; I'm not going to take the two minutes to show that now, but perhaps I can a little later in the day; it's a tape called Cycles of 3's and 7's, which is looking at the calculator as a surrogate for the computer, and suggests a metaphor for taking control of these structures.

In applying a split concept of structure, deriving from the hope that the ability of formal concerns to intersect the psychology of perception, with a compromise of the point of view, I undertook a project which is maybe in some respects parallel to the project that Woody (Vasulka) has put out here.\* In

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\*Vasulka, Woody. The Commission. Videotape presented at the Electronic Narrative Conference.

1968 I started work on a project called Coming Attractions, which I will be showing in fact at Hallwalls on the 21st (of February, 1984), some excerpts from that project. It was set in the late 60's and 70's, and since it was anti-reductivist and very much attuned to a kind of esthetic context that we're considering now, it was a much-ignored work at that time, but it dealt with the poetics of high art, and a number of other themes that we're encountering here. Like the technology of image, the use of music as a mechanism, along with allegory, for the restraint of narrative, in the interest of a reduction of affect, so that narrative could be put in a position of dynamic confrontation with processes of attention. The division of attentiveness through layering of image, and options for tracking various aspects of the image. So that I think it's very wise to be careful in looking at some of these video images and trying to conclude that there isn't a precursive type of work available in film, as a different technology. Much of the work in Coming Attractions could have been executed more effectively and efficiently in video, and in fact some of this work\* is far, far more eloquent than that work, which bears a hallmark of late '60's in many respects.

In newer work, the structures of modernism will need review, (but this review must be interactive with a transcendence of dialectical logical patterns. Perhaps the mechanisms of production of work can be linked, at least indirectly, with signs that dialectical logical patterns are being disrupted. In looking for clues to the appearance of these newer outlooks, we might find that some mechanisms within the area of electronic imaging suggest more promise than others. Perhaps such-developments should be anticipated in work with)\* non-linear presentational systems such as disk, which might offer some clue for us. In a non-programmatic relationship, where we have what might be considered a symmetrical relationship on the part of the viewer with a "program," there's the

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\* Work in video exhibited in the context of the Electronic Narrative Conference  
 \*\*Blank space on tape recording; interpolated from lecture notes

start of another kind of relationship on the part of the viewer, which is quite different from what we've seen before. (A relationship that is symmetrical with respect to the viewer, but complementary in implication:)\* a composite which could remap narrativity. At least, the implications of the possibility are there, since it excludes this whole framework. Then, in that case language could function as an instrument for our own control of our own beliefs. I have more to say on that approach to narrativity, but I'll have to leave that for a third show, which is this Hallwalls show on the 21st (of February, 1984,) when I'll be showing some more recent work.

I think I'll stop there; if there are questions, I'll be happy to look at them.

(Brian Henderson): I didn't understand that last point about disks. Could you elaborate on that a little more?

(Tony Conrad): Yeah, there's a... I'm sort of just skimming over the surface of that without really defining it. But there's a new technology that's coming into view, ironically not through entertainment as program, in a program context, but entertainment as an interactive, game-type situation. It's a little different from what Barbara (Buckner) has installed in the back\*\* there, but related, in many respects, in terms of the systems approach. We have... now her installation doesn't rely inherently on a branch structure for its interaction with the viewer. But some of the video games that are currently being worked on, at least in a research context, and I think there's one that's out on the market, called "Dragon's Lair", which actually uses this strategy. These are games which offer the viewer... (laugh) ...the player, now, the player an opportunity to interact with the game in such a way as to define which of two

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\* Interpolation from lecture notes

\*\* Buckner, Barbara. Analogs. Computer/video interactive installation piece, exhibited in the lecture room as an aspect of the Conference.

ways, or maybe potentially more than two ways, things will happen. In a sense, this is the beginning. You know, where you have the opportunity to define one of two ways to go, you have little more than is actually available through a series of popular children's books. I don't know if any of you have kids, but there's a phenomenal series of books called "Choose Your Own Adventure"<sup>TM</sup>\*, where you read these things and you decide at the bottom of the page which way you want to go in the next, you know...what happens next in the story. It's the same kind of thing, it's a branch-structured story, a new kind of narrativity altogether, because actually the reader can go through and decide what they want to have happen. It's just the beginning. A branch structure is a discontinuous and discrete structure, but where we imagine the actual outcome of this carrying us in a number of years will be to a kind of program structure that's much, much more fluid and interactive than anything that's been imagined so far. The tools are there. It's going to be very very interesting to see who has, for example, the imagination to extract the potential of this structure from what has been so unendingly defined through film and TV as a linear programming structure. And to sort of start from the ground on a new project, which is to take a symmetric structure as a basis for editing. I mean that's sort of what it stands for, as a promise, to me. Having a symmetric structure as a foundation for editing instead of a complementary relationship should be an extraordinary break with everything that we've seen in the past. I think it will basically sweep aside most of our novelistic thinking. Yeah.

(Tony Billoni): Do you say an example of that would be the maker say presenting... the technology would come up to this position... the maker presenting every piece of information that he made to put this piece together, and then leaving it open to the viewer to go through the piece and select it as they

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\* Bantam Books, ca. 1979-1981.

were watching or viewing, to make the piece.

(TC): Yeah, of course, that's part of it, and in fact that's already been implemented in these branch-type stories, where we see that... the laser disk version of this entertainment is actually just one... is sort of the surface of this phenomenon that's closest to the entertainment functions of film and video. But in fact, the heart of it right now is in these games that kids play on their computer, where they have different choices to make, and it's a kind of entertainment that you go into that has, maybe, a narrative context, in fact, often based on historical or fantasy situations. And then the kid can make any choices they want. Now what you're describing is a situation which we'll see increasingly in <sup>the</sup> coming time, where fundamentally what'll happen is that these programs will be invadable by the user, so that, you know, it'll just flash up and say, like, this is a great sort of start, and if you want to program it your own way, go ahead and program it your own way, and you can get it started so it'll do your kind of interactive fave thing, you know, if you'd like. And I see no obstacle to that; I mean, in a sense that then makes the resources of the programmer much more sort of objective and available as a resource to the user, or player. I don't know, it begins to change, everything, here. The viewer/reader becomes a player, in an interactive sense, and this leads to a kind of narrativity which is completely different from what we've experienced in the past.

(Chris Nygren): Well what it makes me think of is the question of strategies for performing this piece; you know, because you have all of these options it's something like a labyrinth or a garden with forking paths, or what not. And then it seems to me that the choices you make can produce either a work that's dull or brilliant, depending upon how you play this, or perform it. The thing that it brings to mind for me is the performance of I don't know, say of a work by Cage, Atlas Eclipticalis or something where you have this

structure; there's the... what do you call it; it's like the underlying structure. You have the discourse, and then you have... I was interested in the difference, the definition of these two things. Then it becomes always a different piece, every time you do it; and then so what you look at for, I mean, it changes the whole game, you look instead toward individual accomplishment of quality. It changes what you look at, and it changes how you help your dialectical system.

(TC): I think what we're looking at here is eventually a systematic reassignment of the role of value in these transactions. So that people perhaps in the context of a new kind of cultural configuration will perhaps experience less of the kind of distancing of personal values that you experienced this morning when you got up, thought, "Oh, I have to go to this narrative conference, because I'm going to get some value in the future from this, even though I have to go sit on these plastic chairs, miss breakfast, travel early in the morning, get out of bed on Saturday, and so forth; and I think that we, in Western civilization, have learned to displace our present values in the interests of future values. I think we did that as a direct result of our engagement with agriculture early in the history of the Middle East. And the tradition has sustained through the tradition of writing, which derives directly from the economics of the transactions of the agricultural community in that area. So that this habit we have of valuing delayed values more highly than present values is something that is now in a position of dynamic dis-balance, on account of the fact that the media culture has emphasized here-and-now values, on one side, but at the same time seems to inherit a lot of the presumptions and resilience of the older literary culture. But as we move into a definitively populist era, the idea of things being exceptional is going to... I mean, now it's presumed that things are exceptional because they are conveyed in a way which has to do with a displacement of present value in the direction of poten-

tial future accrual of value. In the future maybe this won't necessarily be the case. In other words, what is highly valued may be just what's available on a different kind of station or channel. So that it's always there, everything is in the present. The idea of there being a displacement of value through a transaction may be an increasingly odd kind of unstable way of characterizing the transaction we have with our culture. In that situation, my sense is that being a great player, trying to define what is a great work, may have to be something that's really redefined radically, because that's interactive with what value is. So a great work may be the great encounter between you and a really great game, for example. In which case, what's so different about your encounter with a really great game, and someone else's encounter with a really great game? I mean, we may see that now it begins to be more obvious that it was all sort of like everybody fooling themselves all along, you know, with this stuff that like for example, "my movies are better than your movies," or something like that, you know, and I mean basically we can have our own relationships to our own entertainment in a way which is much more frank, and doesn't actually displace values in a direction which is dominated by this transaction with some complex of synchronic/diachronic cultural precedents and contexts. That's a sort of sketch of the best answer that I could give, speculatively, to the kind of question that you're opening up there. I think that's a very fascinating area. We really can't know very much about this, not for a couple of years, anyway, you know. Until the kids keep playing those games for a while. Is there anybody here who plays those games on their computers? Yes, see, only, obviously one, yeah.

(Chris Hill): (This is an extended commentary, concerned with the place of imagery in the individual's relation to narrative, with the role of technology and narrative in a present or future culture, and with the differences in image analysis between the approaches of Conrad and Woody Vasulka, who

spoke earlier.)\*

(TC): I think these observations are very important, and they have to do with the fact that the technology that we're hoping to accommodate ourselves to now is a technology that really is in some important respects a payoff of a tradition of intellectual development which does go back several hundred years, and so that as we play with these functions I think that it's important to bear in mind that the inheritance that we have is a structure that can enmesh our attention in a way which can divert us from more essentially problematic new areas of engagement. And so more than ever we need something very very close to ourselves which can help us define our own authority and control over the beliefs that we choose to implement in approaching the images that we are going to be working with and on. And the problem of a kind of perceptual psychology in relation to those is one of being able to study our own control over images and the control that our bodies allow us to take. But I think that what you're saying is leading in a very important direction. I see Woody wanted to make a comment on that.

(Woody Vasulka): (This is a comment on creativity, and the relation between the individual and a systematization of understanding of work. A simplification of the creative object, in relation to the maker, is not an easy project, and lies outside the reach of a really democratic approach.)

(TC): Well, I had in mind no particular bias on my part with reference to a particularly democratic or elitist application of a technology which would abandon a dialectical frame of reference, but I think that it's very important to recognize that in some major respects, traditions of dialectical and pre-dialectical, or the ongoing traditions of a dialectical character and those of a non-dialectical character in the world today, neither of them really focuses

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\* This comment and the one following come from the back of the room; they are difficult to transcribe accurately from the recording and are summarized here by the author.



on a suitable role for the individual's engagement with the ongoing experience that confronts them, either through art or through their own immediate phenomenological circumstances. So that I would leave that completely open in my own system of choice.

(Tony Billoni): Just about this re-use of images, to create something new. You would see, in a lot of the art that's coming out today that some of the critics have termed post-modern, you see a lot of the artists deliberately re-using images, which might be considered the first phase of this project of taking images that exist to create new types of work. But what still seems to be the underlying outlook of a lot of the work, say in people like Kenny Scharf or that girl that paints over photographs is... it still seems to be a traditional mode, essentially; that it's still an artwork, it doesn't allow for the exchange that you were referring to. It's still <sup>an</sup> authoritarian presentation, and what I think needs to be understood is, before this sort of project you're talking about can be undertaken, is the value of that trade; what it actually will be worth to the individual, to cause those sorts of trades to take place. And I guess to take the responsibility that you were talking about that for <sup>to be</sup> them/ completely responsible for everything they do is a pretty large project for them to undertake, because the society that we're in now doesn't seem to speak to that. It speaks to the fact that you should take responsibility for certain things, but you should also allow other people to take responsibility for things that "seem beyond your control." So I think the values of trade need to be emphasized on the individual.

(TC): That's a welcome additional comment; I don't think I need to make any response to that. Do I? No!

(Audience member): Well I think there are precursors in the literary tradition to the use of, and to the complementary relationship.

(TC): Symmetric relationship, yeah.

(Audience member): And that's when one reads a book, if they miss a point they can turn back a couple of sentences or a couple of pages. The information is discrete. In the narrative art, there is that problem of time in that in a videotape or a film the viewer or auditor cannot turn it back to get back; it's not as user-friendly. In many ways I wonder if the way in which player media is much like that discrete information of book culture, which of course spurns the complementary narrative mode. If in fact we are really going to be going beyond any sort of literary narrative, or still maintaining its own structure. And it's only in regard to art reism, you know, which is further into the need of high, ex-high technological...

(TC): I think you're actually headed along a very interesting line of inquiry there, but maybe I should insist on redefining one aspect of what you're saying. Myself, I wouldn't characterize the relationship to a text as you described it as being one which is symmetric. In other words, it's true that when we read, we have the ability to go back and re-read. However, usually as we go back and re-read we do that in the interest of in some sense accessing the prior information of the text, and conforming more adequately to the authority of that text. So that I would say that that process in a sense is inherently one which does function to define the text and our relationship to it as a complementary relationship, rather than a symmetric relationship. And it's interesting to try to use that kind of strategy, in other words sort of like examining the process of how we engage with a particular cultural object, as a basis for defining something about the way in which we interact with that material. However, I don't look at that particular line of inquiry as optimistically as you do; that is I find that even an extremely traditional and authoritarian relationship to a film text, for example, will admit the possibility of sort of going back and re-reading. I've personally encountered film critics who really did not feel comfortable talking about a work until

they had seen it enough times that they could really say, "Listen. I've looked at Peter Kubelka's film sixty times, and it's still delivering," you know? As though in a sense this particular extreme level of authority on the part of the text had a function within it that somehow conveyed some inherent vitality to the relationship between viewer and film. I think you'd have to go beyond that. In my terms, I'd want to go beyond that, and look at actually what it is that is going on in that relationship, beyond simply the fact that a particular work in some sense, classically say "delivers" its impact over a sustained period of review, revision, re-reading, re-viewing, and so forth. Simply because of the fact that I would like to be able to look at any film, fifty or sixty times, and feel that, if I felt like it, I could see that film differently every time. If I felt like it; if I were in control of it. If I had a truly symmetric relationship to that work, then I would feel that it was a mutually-defining process of interaction; and I don't think that's what you'd really find in the case of a classic text like that.

But I see that we have to stop.

(Applause)