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Commentary

And then an elephant came along

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In the Netherlands, after telling a bedside story to their children, parents will say, as a signal that storytime is now finished and the time for sleep has come: 'And then an elephant with a long snout came along, and it blew out the story' (it rhymes in Dutch). This is, admittedly, a rather Monty Python-esque way of putting an end to a narrative (generations of Dutch children will probably have gone to sleep wondering who this elephant was, where it came from – and why it went about blowing out stories like some absurdist jack-in-the-box), but at the end of this special issue, we, the editors, will be the elephant in the room. We certainly do not mean to lull anyone to sleep, but here are some final thoughts to 'blow out' the story of our special issue.

SJOERD-JEROEN:

At the end of this special issue on narrative resistance/resistance to narrative, let me start with looking back to its genesis. Two years ago Hart, you brought up the possibility of doing this special issue together during a conference in Turku, Finland, called *The Ethics of Storytelling*. And I think we owe the organisers of that conference a big 'thank you'. If you remember, Hart, they had picked the title of my presentation and turned it into the title of the session in which I presented it: *Narrative Resistance, Resistance to Narrative*. And I felt sort of vindicated by that decision, it gave me a sense of being onto something. Because in the years before that conference, I had a growing sense that the ubiquity of narrative, which at first I felt was a good thing since I saw it as empowering – now everybody's story mattered! – had a darker side as well: if you don't have a story, or more poignantly, if your story doesn't fit our idea of a (good) story, then you don't matter. So then, it's not enough to have narrative resistance – the resistance of, say, counter-narratives, alternative stories that can replace the dominant narrative – one must challenge the notion of narrative itself as somehow inherently oppressive.

There is no getting away from it: the rise of neoliberalism coincided with the rise of narrative and storytelling, the 'narrative turn' in culture happened around the same time as the neoliberal turn in

politics and economics. As I try to explain in my own contribution to this special issue, this is not a mere coincidence, but the result of a perfect fit between the two: they are bound in a reciprocal relationship. With storytelling and neoliberalism both constituting and vindicating each other, I am left with the question: where is the emergency exit to be found?

The title of that special session in Turku offers two options. First, there is resistance to narrative. In a beautiful piece on how trees can interrupt urban landscapes, ecological performance artists Robert Steijn and Frans Poelstra describe how a tree's 'wild desire to exist' awakens them to 'other ways of perceiving reality as we know it'. The trees' message is clear to them: 'We must leave the narrative way of thinking behind if we wish to find solutions to fight against the current power structures' (Steijn & Poelstra, 2013, p. 188). Alternatively, there is narrative resistance. If, to put it in economic terms, storytelling is the neoliberal form of production *par excellence*, then one could argue that resistance would be most effective if it would take on that form itself.

What I find interesting, looking at the five papers that make up this special issue, is that they can all be read as explorations of that particular question. They all take as their starting point that narrative is everywhere and then look at instances where this narrative hegemony seems to be challenged. Kiss and Willemsen, for instance, ask themselves to what 'degree [...] complex storytelling in contemporary narrative film can be characterised as "resisting" narrativity and narrative "from the inside"'. And although for them, this is first and foremost an aesthetic matter, they do acknowledge that there may be an ideological dimension as well when they write (albeit between brackets) that the resistance to narrative they find in the film *Realité*, can be seen as a 'critique [of] the dominant objectifying logic implied in the modern, Western worldview'.

I would concur, as becomes clear from my own paper. I think the notion of subtraction that Barkat discusses in his paper is mostly an example of an attempt to find something beyond (or anti) narrative, to 'leave the narrative way of thinking behind us', while Matthews provides clear examples of people using the dominant narrative form of production to create spaces of resistance *within* the neoliberal realm. Meneghelli, finally, poses the question on a more abstract level, when she asks whether there could be something that is *not* narrative. And if there is, I would add, could that something automatically offer an opportunity for resistance to narrative? Meneghelli locates it in the database and she very clearly states, at the end of her paper, that she doesn't know if its triumph over narrative would be a good or a bad thing. And it's interesting, I think, to note here that although I would intuitively frame – as we did in our introduction – the rise of Donald Trump and similar political movements in Europe as yet another example of how seductive and dangerous storytelling is, one could just as well see Trump and his 'alternative facts' as an impossible puzzle narrative of the type that Kiss and Willemsen discuss in their paper, full of 'narrative paradoxes, contradictions and impossibilities' – and therefore as an instance of resistance to narrative.

So, what do you think? Hart, you clearly linked our special issue to the current political climate when you wrote the first draft of our introduction and decided to focus on how Trump's ascendance to power highlights a need for resistance. Would that be a narrative resistance? Or a resistance to narrative? Or would you say that dichotomy is a false one?

HART

Thank you S. J. for this foray and initiation of our 'trialogue', and for also recalling the moment in Turku where our accidental meeting forms now a narrative of sorts – the story of the genesis of this issue of papers on 'narrative resistance' and 'resistance to narrative'. I think the first clarification is an important one – how to distinguish these terms. I sense we agree on the differing emphasis where 'narrative resistance' seems to be located within narratives that seek to reverse or inhibit narrative conventions. These seem to me genre-defying categories and we have a long tradition in the avant-gardes of literature and film that we can point to from Artaud to Godard, to name two of my favourites. But I also wanted to remind you of one of the many of our points of contact as we got to know one another. You are one of the few people I know who had an intimate knowledge of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the great Indonesian novelist. Pramoedya wrote out of an almost impossible situation – exiled on Buru Island in the South Moluccas with few resources. With a number of other intellectuals and artists, they had to eke out a way to survive in a manner and

context that they were not suited to. Many died. But Pramoedya decided to resist the laws of this totalising situation. He commenced to tell his epic story beginning with what was later published as *Bumi Manusia (This Earth of Mankind)*. Acting within the Indonesian oral tradition of the *Dalang* or storyteller, Pramoedya crafted and told this story wherever and whenever he could. His notoriety grew across the island and the exiles regained a sense of purpose – which was to hear the next chapter of Pramoedya’s tale. This story was eventually published as a tetralogy and on every occasion a book in the series appeared in Jakarta, Suharto banned it. Those caught with it could be jailed for up to eight years. As Pramoedya’s reputation grew on Buru and beyond with the morale of the exiles being raised by his storytelling feats, even Jean-Paul Sartre was moved to send Pram a typewriter so that he might write down his epic story.

I remind you of this anecdote because it seems to me that it throws into relief the idea of narrative resistance and collapses the binary into a single moment of narrative struggle and narrative power. It may be that the power of the story was not so much inherent in Pram’s work as much as the work inhabited exactly the right moment in time and space. To be sure, Pram’s language (his use of Javanese idioms) and politics created the perfect pre-text (literally) for his tale to have its maximum impact on a bereft and greatly diminished audience, and reminds us of the power the powerless can both wield and then find within its own forms of resilience.

To the challenge of the coupling of neo-conservatism and narrative with Trump as the storymaster (all hucksters are great storytellers), I think of him as the antithesis to Pramoedya. Trump’s stories are ‘trumped-up’ self-serving manipulations of whatever truths we may think lie out there in the ‘reel’ world. Pramoedya took his story to those who had nothing – Trump’s millions are on show for all to see (except the story of his unpaid taxes). Where Trump meets Pramoedya is his understanding of the power of orality – his best communicative moments are his tweets – which are closer to an orality than a literacy. The distributive power of Twitter makes it similar to electronic gossip. Just as Pramoedya’s story was re-told by improvising Dalangs across the island, Trump’s re-tweets and followers maintain his communicative presence in all its false and fake debasing of his opponents – real or imagined.

To conclude, when in 1998, Richard Rorty predicted the coming of a political operative like Trump, he did so as a not so veiled attack on the new ‘cultural’ left whose embrace of a ‘light’ leftism opened the way for an alt-right strongman when the mainstream of America saw its own job and income standards deplete and then disappear. In 1998, Rorty was accused of dystopic extremism offering no fix to this problem, save for some pointing at an earlier tradition of American pragmatism and democratic pluralism. Now the nightmare has turned into the real and the alt-right’s ascendancy is the inverse of the ‘new left’ dominance of the late 90s. For this reason, I am not that certain that the confluence you point to of neoliberalism and the rise of narrative (or the ‘right’ narrative) is the whole story. It would seem that each époque carries its own blind spots – and those that see beyond it, do so **despite** not because of the cultural formations that surround them. If we learn anything from Pramoedya it is that when narrative suits its surroundings, there is no left or right – only space, time and the magic of a good story.

RACHEL

It’s a compelling point, Hart. It’s in the electricity of that magic that literature endures, and potent narratives such as Pramoedya’s cannot be denied. And yet there are, as you say, the “blind spots” that come with every age, and so I think we are right to align ourselves both historically, and more recently, with movements that encourage communities and publics to be suspicious of totalising stories. As Žižek said in an interview once, ‘[w]ithin each epoch, you have a certain dramatic point around which this epoch turns’ (*Žižek, cited in Homer, 2006, p. 84*). It seems to me that we three are each variously interested in addressing and interrogating the ‘dramatic point’ of our times, and perhaps as the literary scholar Joshua Landy puts it, in the way ‘narrative has overstepped its bounds in recent years, infiltrating domains in which it has no business.’

Certainly, I think it’s fair to say we live in a period of narrative fetishisation, and one of the ‘dramatic points’ of this epoch is that it is inherently bound up in a preoccupation with coherence and completion. S.J, you’ve characterised this as narratives where the casual links are “geared

towards an endpoint where everything that happens is retrospectively rendered necessary and purposeful". Going back to our editorial, you pointed to the way this is reflected in Hollywood films. That reminded me of something else Landy wrote some six or seven years ago when he said, 'the programs we like most are the ones that feature transformation, metamorphosis, *Bildung*, whether spiritual growth or just physical improvement' (2011, pp. 497-98). What Landy and others have argued, in a fashion that resonates with me now, is that narrative has become not just a way of thinking about and organising life, but a dictum for how to experience it.

Which brings us to 2017, to a changed world, one it seems Rorty foresaw. It seems more pertinent than ever to find ways in which to prise open (and apart) that 'grip'. We live in a time where the contemporary political arena trades more in the art of fiction than in the language of the real. As you say Hart, much of what comes out of the illuminated screen that mediates so much of the White House these days appears in the form of 'self-serving manipulations'. Politics has always been about control, of course, but what seems particular to our times is the speed at which that control, and the narratives that underpin it, find their momentum. Networked digital technologies have fundamentally changed the way narrative is expressed and disseminated. Political narratives today find and affirm their publics through networks of contagion, which can be both exhilarating and dangerous, especially when it comes to narratives of national identity, which is so very much the theme of the day.

The recent Yassmin Abdel-Magied case struck me as a key example of why Landy's call remains pertinent. As Australian readers will know, Abdel-Magied – a 26-year old Sudanese-Australian activist, author and part-time ABC employee – disrupted a revered national narrative on ANZAC Day, 25 April 2017, when she posted on her personal Facebook page: 'Lest. We. Forget. (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine)'. The first part of the post, 'Lest we forget', referenced the traditional phrase used for ANZAC commemorations while the second part over-turned the temporality of the past to shine light on the continuing, yet oft-forgotten present; namely, Australia's wicked treatment of refugees in off-shore detention centres.

As with many countries that commemorate military action, ANZAC Day in Australia is marked by socially and politically coded rules of discourse that are bound up in collective national memory. Abdel-Magied's use of the phrase, 'Lest we forget', disrupted that memory, and despite removing it with apology some hours later, a veritable army of conservative politicians, commentators, journalists and social media warriors had no reservations in telling her so. For several days, she was *the* trending subject in the Australian media (print and online dailies, opinion pieces, television broadcast and social media); the network was rife with opinion and calls for retribution. Abdel-Magied was abused, threatened and trolled by politicians and commentators (some of whom said she should be deported) in news articles and editorials that called and petitioned for her resignation from the ABC, and across social media platforms. The response pointed to an insidious hypocrisy on the part of some of the country's staunchest defenders of free speech who have long argued that freedom of expression is key to democratic Australia – so long, it would seem, as that expression supports the dominant (white, Christian) national narrative. We only need turn to Tony Abbott, the country's former prime minister, for his bald affirmation of the situation at hand: 'You've got to join Team Australia, you've got to accept our core culture, you've got to accept our fundamental values, and this idea that Anzac Day should be turned into some kind of crass political stunt is just appalling.'

The histories and complications underscored by Abdel-Magied's relatively minor act of what I would call a form of narrative resistance are too great to detail here. It will suffice to say that for some decades now, and in particular the years including and following the Howard Government (1996-2007), one of the dominant political narratives of Australia has been the vilification of refugees. There is now a long history of successive governments who have tied their political success to blaming the victim. As with America, France, England and other nations, elections are now being fought and won on these grounds.

So how do we 'release the grip'? Perhaps, as you said S.J, we need to revisit our tools and the framework of our thinking. Or perhaps resistance is sometimes not enough; perhaps, to quote you, 'one must challenge the notion of narrative itself [to see it] as somehow inherently oppressive'.

Certainly there is value, I would suggest, in interrogating the role of teleological narratives, and how they contribute to our understanding of ourselves in that world, as well as the idea that we *need* or are even able to acquire a narrative that will give our lives meaning, continuity and coherence.

Like so many of our contributors, I can't help but turn back to literature, cinema, and the arts more broadly, for possible strategies. In 'Regular regularly in narrative' Gertrude Stein (1925) – a writer who was ahead of her time – traded on the idea that teleological and chronological narratives are acts of trickery. She challenged the illusion, prolonged by the structures of narrative, that the world addresses us unequivocally, as well as the illusion of a shared reality made possible by acts of identification between one consciousness and another. This offers exciting opportunities.

In many ways Barry Jenkins' film *Moonlight* is a contemporary articulation of this. The film works with the cinema goer's instinct for emplotment – that urge to draw the fragments of Chiron's life together into a meaningful whole – yet Jackson refuses to engage in teleological storytelling. The film cannot be reduced into a purposeful or teachable moment. As one commentator has said, there are too many questions that remain unanswered – about sexuality, race, family ties, masculinity. Notably the film features black actors only, yet it refuses to unify and 'share its reality' through, to recall Stein, 'the illusion of a shared reality made possible by acts of identification between one consciousness and another'. As much as an audience might want him to, Jenkins refuses to generalise sexuality, blackness and black people. The film refuses closure because, as indie jones, writes, 'how to accurately and truthfully convey black and/or queer lives via a structure that oppresses and excludes them?'

Yet, as the film reviewer rboylorn noted, there are problems with the way the film portrays black women, particularly black mothers. Her review on *The Crunk Feminist Collection* is worth reading. Ultimately the reminder is we must stay alert. Whenever representations are made, inevitably someone is left out.

There is always work to be done.

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