Beyond Viral Exemplarity: Critical Storytelling Practices in a Post-Truth World

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Introduction

One of the ideas emerging from recent work in narrative theory is that story is becoming ubiquitous in today's globalized and digitalized world: from science communication to business, everyone seems to need a story to project an identity, evoke a set of values, or get a certain message across (see Fernandes 2017). But this proliferation of story, and of story talk in a loose sense, can be uncritical and even dangerous. The foregrounding of personal experience and embodied affect is of course one of the defining dimensions of narrative in general—Monika Fludernik (1996) calls it "experientiality."

But the experientiality of narrative is also easily hijacked for manipulation or misrepresentation, for instance when an individual's experience is used—unduly and uncritically—to draw conclusions about a group or category of individuals. The anecdotal is thus turned into a norm, in large part thanks to the ideological instrumentalization of first-person experience. A Finnish researcher, Maria Mäkelä, discusses how widespread this phenomenon is on social media; she call it a "viral exemplum," noting that the success of these stories—their virality—gives "undue representative and even normative weight to one subjective experience" (2018, 183).

Particularly when faced with large-scale phenomena such as climate change or migration, the disadvantages of such stories would seem obvious: a migrant's story might be able to detail the reasons why they decided to leave their home country and the affects that surround those reasons; this might constitute a viral exemplum, but its effects might also be erased by another viral exemplum, focusing on the experiences of the survivor of a violent crime committed by a migrant. (We've seen many such stories in Europe over the last few years.) In that respect, the

ideal sample size of story—which is one protagonist, or a few characters—can actually distort realities that are complex and that, as Mäkelä acknowledges, might be best captured through statistical analysis than through narrative experientiality.

This discussion has important implications for the topic of this panel—namely, how to "rehabilitate narrative reasoning in the post-truth era." The distortions created by experiential narratives in at least some contexts need not disqualify storytelling as an epistemological tool, but they do limit and perhaps challenge its potential. How can story be deployed in responsible and critical ways? My paper approaches that question by surveying three strategies that narrative can implement to move beyond "viral exemplarity." I suggest calling these strategies "non-narrative corroboration," "spatiotemporal network," and "intersubjective confrontation." The last one will allow me to discuss some of the work I'm involved in as part of an EU-funded project on how storytelling can address some of the distortions and empathy gaps that fuel anti-migrant sentiment in European society.

In my discussion, I will be moving between fictional and nonfictional narrative, but I don't mean to suggest that these practices are fully interchangeable. Rather, the assumption is that fiction offers a rich repertoire of techniques that complicate the foregrounding of individual experience at the heart of viral exemplarity; nonfictional narrative (for example, in the media) would do well to draw inspiration from those literary strategies.

Non-narrative corroboration

As I mentioned above, narrative is geared towards individual experience, or at least the experience of a handful of characters. This individualistic bias can play directly into uncritical belief, for example—as Suzanne Keen notes in *Empathy and the Novel*—by favoring empathetic identification with characters who are like us in terms of race, age, gender, social background, and so on.

One way of addressing this bias might be to simply step outside of narrative as a discourse mode. This is what I call non-narrative corroboration. The novel is still the narrative genre par excellence, but we should not forget that it is a capacious genre that can accommodate other text types. Consider, for example, Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive*: here, a road trip

takes an American family to the Mexico-US border, where the protagonist—a sound artist—investigates the disappearance of two migrant children who attempted to cross the Arizona desert.

The titular reference to the "archive" introduces a preoccupation with collecting and cataloging that serves as an alternative to the temporal and causal organization of narrative. In fact, Luiselli's novel is rich in visual (multimodal) inserts that disrupt the sequential set-up of narrative while opening up the fictional text to extratextual realities. For example, Luiselli has drawn on an archive of deceased migrants available on the humaneborders.info website (which is maintained by the NGO of the same name).

This is the "migrant mortality report" as it appears in the novel, as part of a mini-archive of such reports (see slide). And this on the right is the entry for the same deceased girl from the website. As you can see here, Luiselli also included a bilingual map of the Arizona desert designed by the same organization, showing distances in days of walking, the location of water tanks, and where migrants' bodies have been recovered. The blurring of the fiction-nonfictional boundary both authenticates and contextualizes the (fictional or perhaps autofictional) situation of the protagonist: it authenticates the narrative, because it shows that the "lost children" foregrounded by the novel fall into a highly significant, and disturbing, extratextual trend. Moreover, this strategy contextualizes the narrative through what one could describe as a shift in scale, from the novel's protagonists to the shocking number of migrant deaths reported at the border (some of them shown on the Humane Borders map).

If narrative is biased towards a small number of characters, the integration of visual and archival (that is, non-narrative) material in this novel contributes to addressing this bias: in this way, the novel manages to evoke both individual experientiality and large-scale patterns that transcend personal experience. This kind of non-narrative corroboration can serve as a template for critical storytelling practices outside of experimental fiction.

Spatiotemporal network

Just as storytelling in rooted in personal interaction, it tends to stage situations that are bounded in both space and time: put otherwise, it is well suited to encapsulating knowledge of

particular spatial and temporal contexts. However, this emphasis on the local carries some risks at a time when geopolitical challenges call for a "sense of planet," to use Ursula Heise's terminology—that is, "a sense of how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape daily routines" (Heise 2008, 56). One way for narrative to convey these global networks might be to model itself on the *form* of the network, by combining storylines that are separated in spatiotemporal terms and by tracing their convergence or divergence.

David Bordwell (2008) has talked about "network narrative" to describe a certain type of coincidence plot that is becoming more frequent in contemporary film: a network narrative follows characters living in different parts of the globe but also stages the way in which planetary forces (from globalization to natural disasters) bring these characters together in surprising ways. An example of this strategy can be found in Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2006 film *Babel*, which—perhaps not coincidentally—centers on migration and takes place in part at the US-Mexico border. This could almost be understood as an episodic film: it is the global circulation of a commodity, a hunting rifle, that unifies the film's three parts (see Caracciolo 2020). This network strategy allows the film to embrace a diverse set of characters, each with their unique affective experience and sociocultural background. What a film like *Babel* does by distributing characters on a global stage other contemporary narratives do in temporal terms, by staging storylines set across centuries: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and, more recently, Hanya Yanagihara's *To Paradise* come to mind. Both novels evoke a historical network by staging a longue durée of processes—primarily capitalism and colonialism—that shape reality as we know it.

This sophisticated use of spatiotemporal networks, while arguably more common in fictional stories, need not be limited to them: it, too, can be part of a narrative realism adapted to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Intersubjective confrontation

If narrative's focus on individual experientiality lends itself to manipulation, then one possible corrective might be to embrace a plurality of stories and experiential perspectives in dialogic

interchange. Rather than the simple, binary logic of like/dislike (or retweet/dismiss) favored by social media, this kind of intersubjective confrontation requires time, patience, and willingness to question one's assumptions.

To flesh this out further, I want to talk about a narrative method that plays a central role in a research project I am involved in. The project is titled OPPORTUNITIES and funded by the European Union as part of the Horizon 2020 scheme; it is coordinated by Roy Sommer, a fellow narrative theorist at the University of Wuppertal in Germany, and includes a number of NGOs as well as universities in various European and African countries. The central metaphor of the project is that of creating a "level telling field" between migrants and existing EU citizens, where the "level telling field" image is derived from the "level playing field"—a key idea in the economic history of the EU's single market. The goal of a level telling field is to enable migrants to take control of their own stories and—if they are willing—share them in a public context, instead of having narratives imposed on them by the media and other institutions. Concretely, the project aims to create a level telling field through events called "cross talks," where migrants and non-migrants in various EU countries are given the opportunity to share and learn from one another's stories. Re-enacting another person's story in public performances (in collaboration with local theaters, for example) allows for the respectful bridging of interpersonal and cultural differences: ultimately, the project hopes that these local initiatives will contribute to a fair, more balanced, less polarized dialogue on the subject of migration in Europe.

The project points to the importance of embedding narrative within participatory practices that allow for and foster multiperspectivity. While the OPPORTUNITIES project focuses on in-person interaction, there is no reason why intersubjective confrontation couldn't take place in digital environments. But for that to happen digital platforms would have to implement safeguards against the distortions of viral exemplarity; existing social media practices seem largely unable to cultivate that type of exchange.

Conclusion

Ranging from literary novels to conversational storytelling, this paper has examined some of the ways in which story can retain its epistemic value in today's digitalized and networked media environment. Admittedly, my discussion cast a wide net, embracing both fictional and nonfictional stories in an attempt to chart the common ground between these narrative practices: on the one hand, contemporary fiction like Luiselli's novel is increasingly challenging ontological divides and opening itself up to nonfictional and even non-narrative genres; on the other hand, nonfictional stories can learn from the self-awareness and sophistication of fictional practices.

Narrative may not be a remedy against the facile belief that defines our cultural climate; in fact, in many respects it is part of the problem. But a critical use of narrative may well contribute to advancing and deepening the conversation about these issues, and I believe literary and narrative scholars have an important part to play in that project.