

# Articulation, the Letter, and the Spirit in the Aesthetics of Narrative

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## ABSTRACT

A furthered understanding of the aesthetic aspects of narrative is important to both people and machines who wish to author pleasing narratives. This paper gives an account of the aesthetics of narrative employing the triptych of articulation, the letter, and the spirit as a framework for understanding. The rhetoric of the letter and the spirit, with great intellectual precedent, is used in this work to segregate the mundane and habitual aspects of narrative (the letter) from narrative's mystified, mythical, and aesthetic aspects (the spirit). Articulation, understood as the interplay between the letter and the spirit, has certain aesthetic modes, and these modes and their relationship to connotation, defamiliarization, and myth are discussed.

Also central to the aesthetic qualification of articulation is the cultural and cognitive backdrop against which an articulation occurs. This paper will argue that in the culture of our contemporary period, media-driven commodification of narratives has led to the saturation of the cultural narrative space with cliché. If a narrative is to be aesthetic in this environment, it must face the additional challenge of resisting hyperarticulation, as hyperarticulation invites unflattering comparison to known narrative forms and techniques. This paper concludes with a presentation of four strategies which support aesthetic articulation in narratives under the current cultural context – intertextuality, unusual representation, aesthetic signature, and personalization.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5 [Arts and Humanities]: *Literature, Fine arts.*

## General Terms

Theory, Design, Human Factors.

## Keywords

Articulation, aesthetics, narrative theory, myth, creativity, spirit.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Narratives are not only communicative, they also have aesthetic value. Intrinsic in a narrative is motivation for its existence –

why it is being told, why it demands to be heard, and how it may be appreciated. Even if a narrative is meant primarily to communicate concepts, such as narratives belonging to the genre of *news*, a good narrative nevertheless obeys an aesthetic imperative, albeit an invisible one, governing aspects of the narrative such as, *inter alia*, point-of-view, selective articulation of details, consistency and coherence, dramatic storytelling technique, and the perception of authenticity. Crafting these aesthetic aspects of narrative is not only the trade of the storyteller, but also her art.

Given that the culture of our contemporary period has all but commodified narratives, and given that artificial intelligence and media technology are beginning to enable the mechanization of narrative production, there is some concern that the aesthetics of narrative might continue to take a back seat to its informational aspects, just as turn of the twentieth century technologies for mechanical reproduction prompted many, including Walter Benjamin, to be concerned for the diminutive caveats that those technologies bore for the “aura” of art (1935). Our present concern for the fate of the aesthetic aura of narrative stems from the observation that commodification and mechanization *privilege* (to indulge in Derridian discourse) the cleaner abstractions of *concepts* over the liminal, more-difficult-to-quantify contributions of *amorphous* meaning; yet the origin of narrative aesthetics, as we shall reveal in this paper, lies largely in *the amorphous*, and is actually weakened by *conceptualization*. As our contemporary information-obsessed culture plows on with its trend toward conceptualization, will the aesthetics of narrative experience decline, or can they survive? If so, what might be the terms and strategies of their survival?

In pursuing these questions, our inquiry will first focus on the role that *modes of articulation* play in the aesthetics of narrative, and in art in general. Though we will more fully develop the notion of articulation as a multi-faceted theme, we offer the following as a summary and working definition. *Articulation is the application of some interpretative apparatus to distill an amorphous space of meaning into discrete and bounded concepts*. Expressed in this way, articulation and our use of the term *conceptualization* are nearly synonymous, with the only barrier to their interchange being that “articulation” emphasizes a process, while “conceptualization” highlights the eventualities and results of said process.

A corollary notion we introduce is that of *hyperarticulation*. Because narratives have been packaged into univocal commodities in the information age, the collective memory of the mass culture is arguably more saturated than ever before with caricatures of all the known narrative forms and techniques, with exemplars drawn from the medias of music, film, television, and news. This saturation of our collective memory of narratives, we will argue, constitutes a pollutive backtext which endangers the aesthetic power of storytelling. The greater the degree of articulation in a narrative,

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the more susceptible the narrative is to being identified with clichés of form, content, and technique. Hyperarticulation, then, is the failure of a narrative to steer clear of the unaesthetic space of narrative clichés.

The position of this paper is that in the context of our contemporary period, only by resisting hyperarticulation can the aesthetics of narrative survive. The subject and implications of this position paper will be of interest to the artificial intelligence narrative understanding and generation community because it attempts to characterize the aesthetic consequences of employing overly explicit narrative representations, and will toward the end of the paper examine some computationally-suggestive strategies for preserving narrative aesthetics, centered around the principle of resisting hyperarticulation. The art and literary criticism communities will be interested in the novel way that cognitive and computational perspective are infused into thinking about narrative aesthetics and articulation.

The rest of this paper begins by first synthesizing a compelling thematic for the notion of *articulation* and its consequence to aesthetics. Second, we analyze the nature of articulation within the cultural context of the contemporary period, putting forth the position that the space of narratives today is saturated and that this poses specific challenges for the aesthetics of narrative. We conclude by nominating four strategies for preserving narrative aesthetics through the resistance of hyperarticulation.

## 2. THEMATICS OF ARTICULATION

We preface this section by recapitulating our initiatory understanding of articulation as a point of departure. *Articulation is the application of some interpretative apparatus to distill an amorphous space of meaning into discrete and bounded concepts.*

### 2.1 Articulation as

#### Interplay between Letter and Spirit

The amorphous space of meaning is that rich tapestry of the sensorial, affective, chimerical, and reminiscent existing in every mind, eluding language, and escaping the shackles of definition. The amorphous space, alive with meaning, intimate, and fraught of creative tensions, is a place where the aesthetic, especially of a personal nature, resonates. Because it is at once alive and lively yet ephemeral and elusive, the amorphous is akin to a *spirit*. If the spirit has an archenemy, his name is *letter*, that which is definite, rigid, inanimate, and existing only as a fossilized social construction. The letter refers not only to words and language, but also to culture and any social constructs characterized by order and definition. In narratives, the letter is seen in the explicit aspects of the text, such as the words themselves, and in clichéd techniques and forms which are used to structure the narrative. A cliché is an entity which is known to the social consciousness and is thus easily recognizable. While most clichés belong to the letter, a notable exception is a special cliché called *myth*, which belongs dually to the letter because it is structured and familiar, but also to the spirit because it is ritualized, sacred, and possesses a wisdom which transcends the mundane. We will defer further discussion of myth until a later point in order to preserve a cleaner characterization of letter and spirit in the present discussion.

The rhetoric of the letter versus the spirit has been used widely throughout history and discourse, though all uses remain remarkably consistent in their characterizations of letter, spirit, and their interplay. As far back as the Bible, the apostle Paul advo-

cated “a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3.6). By “letter,” Paul was likely referring to the Torah, whose rigidity of law and detachment from the self he protested. By contrast, Paul probably meant the Spirit to be something much more capable of personal affectation than the external letter. As the system of law emerged out of religion, this rhetoric was inherited and transcoded into the tension of “the letter versus the spirit of the law.” This rhetorical export illustrates that even in the legal system, where the orderliness of signifiers is highly privileged, there is an admission that laws viewed as narratives, embody more than only the literal aspects of that text; there is also an unwritten, unarticulated spirit which lives *intertextually* and is somehow more authentic, authoritative, and more aesthetic in nature than the letter of the law.

In the post-structuralist treatises of Lacan and Jameson, the interplay between letter and spirit is even more apparent. The spirit is understood as a mythical source of meaning which underlies the *letter* and motivates its articulation. The spirit is always forlorn for articulation because that process provides catharsis for the creative tensions which brood within the spirit. But it is easy to forget that it is this same tension which animates the spirit; thus the act of articulation, on the one hand a vehicle of catharsis for the spirit, is also its betrayer and executioner.

The letter is endowed with order and definition, and is inherently a socially constructed and public entity, so articulation into letter allows an idea to be freely communicated; however, there are also disquieting and unaesthetic qualities about the letter. In “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” (1966), Lacan likens language to bondage, and says that all subjects are “slaves of language.” Jameson extends Lacan’s portrayal by painting the letter as “ideological” and arguing that “ideological closure” undermines a mind’s capability to make new and original meanings (1972).

The relationship between spirit and letter can also be interpreted in terms of Lacan’s three phases of human development from infant to adult: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic (the trajectory of this series is a progression away from Nature and into Culture). The Real is a place of psychic fullness and completeness, and a state of Nature, and the home of the spirit. By contrast, the Symbolic is a place dominated by the letter and Culture, and is characterized by Lacking rather than fullness. Lacan describes the movement out of the Real into the Symbolic as an irreversible and irretrievable loss of naiveté. Movement from the Real to the Symbolic parallels the process of articulation, in which a wanton and multivocal spirit is shackled and defined into letter. Like the former process, the latter is irreversible, though perhaps tenuously recoverable through forgetting and disintegration.

In summary, the spirit is the amorphous space of meaning that is the substrate to the articulation process. It is personal, alive, and full of tension, and thus the preferred dwelling of the aesthetic. In contrast, the letter is a socially constructed entity with definition; and the system of language, while facilitating communication, is also an oppressive force which ties down the spirit. The spirit craves articulation into the letter for catharsis, but full articulation endangers the spirit, which is d.o.a., dead on articulation.

Why is the spirit such a source of power for a narrative, and why does the aesthetic side with it rather than with the letter?

## 2.2 Partial Articulation and the Power of the Spirit

It is not quite right to say that the spirit exists in a narrative but remains completely unarticulated. If that were the case, it would follow that the spirit might exist completely detached from the perceivable aspects of the text, and the sense is that this is not the case. At the very least, the spirit has a hand in shaping the deliverance of the literal aspects of the text, and more judiciously, the spirit exists *partially articulated* through connotations and contexts. Partial articulation nudges the reader toward a particular interpretation and appreciation of a narrative without the obtuseness of explicit exposition. The freedom of discovery is preserved for the reader, and thusly a narrative with a strong partial articulation of spirit engages more of a reader's psychic energies than a narrative which has fully articulated a spirit (by offering pre-interpretation rather than nurturing original interpretation), or one altogether devoid of spirit.

That the spirit entices the reader into discovering it, then, affords the spirit its hypnotic power. The literature of psychoanalysis is particularly multiloquent on the power of the spirit, especially the writings of Jung. One way to interpret the meta-narrative given by Jung in *Symbols of Transformation* (1912) and *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (1956) is to view the spirit as that which pervades Jung's realm of symbols. For Jung, symbols are mystified and amorphous, like the ouroboros, and for that reason, they possess "symbolic power" and stay active in the mind, becoming a "transformer of consciousness." They invite personal interpretation and are free to be associated with personal experiences because they lack clearly delineated *a priori*s. The equivalent of full articulation into letter would be the attachment of a symbol to a singular static meaning, and Jung explains that in doing so, the psychic powers of the symbol are vanquished.

The spirit can also be seen in the Jungian notion of a psychic *libido*. In his theory of opposites, Jung conceptualizes mental energy, collectively known as the libido, as the product of the conflict between opposites. He declares that "there is no energy unless there is a tension of opposites" (Jung, *Two Essays*, 63). The importance of tension to the spirit is paralleled in Blake's meta-narrative, advocating tension and opposition as sources of creativity.

In addition to Jungian symbols and libido, a third source of power for the spirit is *myth*. Myth is unique because it possesses both the letter and the spirit, being at once familiar and mystified (however, it naturally resists habitualization). In narratives, myths are frequently employed as patterns to structure storytelling activity.

While a portion of the realm of spirit is determined by a personal unconscious – that unarticulated body of one's own thoughts, feelings, and urges not usually accessible to consciousness – and both Jung and Freud agree on the existence of a personal unconscious, Jung further postulates that there also exists a *collective unconscious* inherited and shared by all minds, the basic compositional unit of which is a psychological archetype, a universal pattern imprinted on the collective psyche, which represents a single unit of myth called a *mythos*. Regardless of the validity of Jung's ideology about the origin of mythical archetypes, myths possess the spirit because they are widely understood as universal themes, patterns, narratives, and images which are profound because they transcend time and culture.

Like libido, myth is alive, and it is the eternal tension between the everyday and the divine which sustains curiosity in it (a tension not likely to ever be resolved). To some extent of course, myth also possesses the letter, because people are vaguely aware of what it is, and can recall with great familiarity the many instances where it is uttered and recapitulated throughout the arts. However, unlike other manifestations of the spirit, myth resists death-upon-articulation. This is because myth describes that which recurs eternally inside and outside of us, and because it is an omen of the divine, it inherently is impervious to full resolution and definition. Unlike most symbols, myth refuses to be tied down to static meaning; and in this sense, as frequently as mythical patterns are found in narratives, they remain forever partially articulated entities, always retaining the power to intrigue.

However, this is not to say that myth cannot be parodied or caricatured. Certainly over-essentializations and distortions of myth lack the spirit of a genuine myth and thus fall more into the realm of the letter. An important quality of genuine myth is that it remains unconscious rather than awkwardly explicated and forcing conscious consideration, for articulating myth into consciousness corrupts its intimate nature and depletes its psychic power.

Myth is sacred and ritualistic. In *Awakening the Heroes Within*, Pearson nominates twelve common archetypes which pervade art, literature, and other media: the Innocent, the Orphan, the Warrior, the Caregiver, the Seeker, the Destroyer, the Lover, the Creator, the Ruler, the Magician, the Sage, and the Fool. This cast of characters has been thoroughly ritualized and reappears in narratives across time and place. For example, the Warrior can be seen in King Arthur in the middle ages, and again in Luke Skywalker in contemporary times. The myth of star-crossed lovers has been ritualized and recapitulated from *Romeo and Juliet* to appearing in nearly every theatrical musical to almost every Bollywood film. We observe that while myth is recognizable, it nonetheless, being of the spirit, remains in the subtext; the Warrior myth is only projected unto Luke Skywalker, and the star-crossed lovers myth is only projected onto the characters of a musical.

While certain characters and story patterns are recurrent elements of myth, their rote invocation in narrative does not guarantee that the resulting narrative has any mythical quality. According to Campbell, "You can keep an old tradition going only by renewing it in terms of current circumstances;" (Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 26) this advice can be interpreted to mean that in composing new narratives, old mythical archetypes must be invoked in a way such that they make natural sense with respect with the gestalt context of the new narrative. Above all, narrative authenticity is most important to the engagement of the reader's energies and psyche; only when a reader has intimately embraced a narrative can we entertain the possibility of awakening the mythical spirit.

In summary, the spirit pervades the connotations, contexts, and subtexts, and manners of speech of narratives, and should remain only partially articulated. The power of the spirit lies in the troika of symbol, libido, and myth. As mystified symbol, the spirit invites and entices interpretation without being tied down to static definition. As libido, the spirit feeds on the creative tension produced by the conflict of oppositions. As myth, the spirit is most resistant of mundane habituation, as the wisdom of universal eternally recurring themes and patterns of ritualistic magniloquence hypnotize the reader in spite of any recognition of pattern.

### 2.3 The Aesthetics of Articulation

The spirit, rather than the letter, is the primary dwelling of the aesthetic, as evidenced by the observation that personals aesthetics itself is beyond full articulation; thus it follows that the narrative (or any art for that matter), which aims to be aesthetic, must be imbued with the spirit.

A primary reason why the spirit should be more sympathetic toward the aesthetic than the letter is because the spirit entices the reader to grasp it and articulate it or at the very least to acknowledge and laud its presence; by contrast, grasping the habituated and known letter is a mundane exercise. In his treatise on art criticism entitled *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey views art as that which engages a subject into active *perception*, rather than a passive and mundane *recognition*, paralleling our present narrative on the engagingness of the spirit versus the fixity of the letter.

That the spirit is aesthetic because it activates the mind is also echoed in Shklovsky's *Art as Technique* (1917). For Shklovsky, the letter is seen in the habituation of perception, which he describes as a "process of 'algebraization,' the over-automatization of an object." In light of the numbness of the letter, "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*." Because full articulation has a literalizing effect, it promotes habitualized perception rather than artful perception. To imbue a narrative or art with spirit, Shklovsky might suggest that we *de-articulate* the letter so that it has more spirit: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."

The technique of *de-articulation*, or *de-familiarization* as it is often called, can be seen widely through art (especially modern art), literature, and media. Its goal is to re-aestheticize the mundanely familiar by de-identifying the signifier, and shifting the signified meaning underneath the signifier. The Surrealist artist Magritte, for example, captions an image of a smoking pipe with "Ceci n'est pas une pipe;" by denying the image the power to signify a real smoking pipe, Magritte calls into question the signifying power of the image. Furthermore, he de-authoritizes our habitual assumption that the word "pipe" even points to a smoking pipe at all; after all, "Pipe" in French carries a second slang *entendre* of "blowjob," and Magritte tempts us with this tabooed re-interpretation which also preserves the tautology of the caption. In other examples, the metafiction of Nabakov, Borges, and Cortazar exploit reader expectations for habituated narrative patterns as opportunities for de-familiarization by intentionally violating expectations and reflexively exposing the author of the narrative in the narrative.

While de-articulation denies recognition and thus re-energizes perception, there is a different aesthetic to be found in what we will refer to as *re-articulation*. Horace, in his *Ars Poetica* explained that 'things which are repeated are pleasing.' This is not to say that all things which are repeated are pleasing, like for example, the uninspired use of cliché. Rather, that repetition should be backed with spirit seems to be implied, especially given that Horace's domain of discourse was poetics.

As quintessentially spirited and repeated, the deliverance of myth is a prime example of the re-articulation aesthetic. Myth, which is a distillation of the wisdom of human culture, is pleasing when re-articulated because it is evocative of the divine and eternal. Re-

articulation is not mundane because the heart of myth transcends the world, and it is not habituated because each enunciation carries with it the weight of grandiosity and a mysterious tension which is irresolvable. The repetition of myth is aesthetic because identification with the sublime comfort of myth is an aesthetic process. That the grand chorus of myth speaks univocally, with absolute clarity and profundity, gives solace to the oft-felt triviality and ephemera of day-to-day human realities.

The profundity-of-myth is itself a meta-narrative, albeit a most powerful and spirited one, but there are other meta-narratives found across art, literature, history, and cultures which are also amenable to re-articulation. Meta-narratives are almost as sublime as myth, though not always as universal. Realism, the Enlightenment project, Buddhism, Modernism, and Postmodernity can all be thought of as meta-narratives. Perhaps the class of meta-narrative is also amenable to the aesthetic of re-articulation because at the heart of each meta-narrative is a well-elaborated aesthetic system which guides perception and action, paralleling the workings of the spirit.

In summary, the spirit of articulation can be characterized as having two aesthetic modes: de-articulation, and re-articulation. De-articulation is an aesthetic that impels the reader to an active perception by subverting the habituated signification process. Re-articulation is an aesthetic in which the repetition of myth and meta-narrative are lauded as being a sublime experience which brings solace and comfort. Rather than mundane familiarity, the aesthetic experience of re-articulation might best be described as *Grand Familiarity*.

In this section, we tried to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the role of *articulation* in narrative by exploring its various thematics. First we introduced the opposition of the letter and the spirit and posed articulation as the interplay between spirit and letter. A second thematic explores the spirit as something which should only be partially articulated. This can be achieved by allowing the spirit to exist in connotation, context, subtext, and the manner of speech. Spirit loses its effect if it is too fully articulated because its power stems largely from mystification of the symbol, the *libido* of creative tension, and sacredness of myth. The aesthetics of articulation are a third thematic. Articulation takes at least two aesthetic modes – de-articulation, which aims to remove known forms and symbols from the realm of familiarity; and re-articulation, whose aesthetic is a Grand Familiarity, experienced through identification with myth and meta-narrative.

Having sketched out a theoretical framework for understanding the aesthetics of narrative in terms of the letter and the spirit, the power of the spirit, and modes of articulation (*i.e.* partial articulation, full articulation, de-articulation, and re-articulation), we now examine the politics of articulation within the context of today's media- and information-driven culture.

### 3. CULTURAL AND COGNITIVE CONTEXT FOR ARTICULATION

The letter is mundane and unaesthetic, but because it is habitually known to all, the letter is easily recognized; thus it poses the danger of distracting the reader from seeing the spirit. In skillful articulation then, there needs to be a certain economy of the letter, perhaps to prevent drowning out the spirit, for if the spirit is drowned then the aesthetic is sunk.

### 3.1 Cultural Narrative Space

The constitution of the letter is not a fixed quantity; it changes as culture changes. The letter is that collection of forms and symbols known to the cultural collective, whose collective unconscious is habituated to their recognition. Because skillful articulation requires the careful negotiation of the space of the letter, the constitution of the letter is of paramount importance. In the realm of narratives, the letter can be regarded as the space of known narratives, forms and techniques.

To understand the politics of articulation in narratives, we must also understand the backdrop of the *cultural narrative space*, inhabited by the exemplars of narratives, techniques, and forms well known to participants of a cultural system.

In the culture of the contemporary period, this space is saturated like never before in history. With the media and consumerism driving this culture, narratives and other aspects of culture are heavily commodified. The cultural production of narratives has coalesced into mechanized industries like the music, book, magazine, and film industries. Serving as a vehicle for marketing and branding, narratives are found everywhere in advertising, and especially in industries governed by fashion systems. As narrative production comes to be driven by market forces, there is a sense of inevitability that all past narratives will be maximally exploited for every ounce of what aesthetic value they still hold, if it pleases the market.

If a new aesthetic narrative is created, it will in short time be mimicked and commodified. Any spirit born of the new narrative is opportunistically imitated and articulated to the masses and dies as letter. Like a bloodhound, market efficiency relentlessly seeks out new aesthetics, ruthlessly ravaging them until they are spent.

### 3.2 Insights from Fashion

The fashion system is the cultural institution responsible for the systematized exploitation of new aesthetics. In *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (1994), Davis details the mechanization of aesthetic production in the garment system, but his analysis is generally valid across all the industries governed by fashion.

Garments, Davis explains, follow a sartorial code, which is akin to the letter in our present discourse, and the aesthetics of garments traditionally follows a fashion cycle whose stages are invention, introduction, leadership, increased visibility, and waning. In the initial stage of the fashion cycle, garments are undercoded because the narrative which explicates what a garment represents is only beginning to be articulated. The spirit which motivates new garment narratives are what Davis calls, identity ambivalences, which are the creative tensions which exist in gender, sexuality, and class (they might constitute perhaps what Jung might call a cultural libido). This stage is particularly aesthetic because as we have noted, it represents only a partial articulation of the narrative underlying the new garments. As the garment narrative becomes more fully articulated to the masses, its value wanes and it becomes unaesthetic, having been fossilized into letter.

In *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, Davis notes interestingly that the traditional fashion cycle seems to be undergoing transformation. He notes that fashion cycles are so short today that nothing practically ever goes *out-of-fashion* for very long. There is a new pluralism and polycentrism which now describes the populus. This observation bears an interesting consequence for the consti-

tution of the *cultural narrative space*. When fashion cycles were lengthy and protracted and fashion was univocal, the space behaved more like a practical memory. Each cycle births some prevailing narrative which is foregrounded and made prominent in memory. As the cycle ends and the next one begins, this narrative recedes slightly into the background and the next prevailing narrative is foregrounded. This memory can be thought of as a serialized stream of narratives, whose recall is degraded over time, and the whole system is capable of forgetting and revision in recall. But degradation and forgetting should be viewed as desirable properties in the sense that as time passes, the letter is decomposing back into the amorphous substrate of the spirit.

When the univocal fashion cycle is replaced by pluralism and polycentrism, the *cultural narrative space* ceases to behave like a practical memory. There is no forgetting, no degradation, only an ersatz media-driven sustainment of all past narratives, awkwardly fossilized in the present moment. In the age of pluralism and polycentrism, the cultural narrative space is saturated and bloated. All past aesthetic narratives that carry consumer and market cachet today are exploitatively resurrected, commodified, and maintained in the cultural narrative space.

### 3.3 Falling into Cliché

The current cultural narrative space is filled with more examples than ever before. While in the past it may have been possible for an individual subject to possess a relatively intuitive understanding of the space, that becomes a more difficult proposition today. In order for an individual subject to accommodate more examples, these examples become further conceptualized and caricaturized. This can be understood as a form of information compression. There is reason for concern because caricaturization amounts to the distillation of spirit into letter, and ideal compression implies the complete eradication of spirit.

That today's cultural narrative space is bloated with too many examples and that each example is overly conceptualized and caricaturized holds a two-fold consequence for articulation.

First, because the space of narratives is so exhaustively covered, the road to articulation of new narratives is mined with cliché. The narrative exemplars of the cultural narrative space are cliché because they are so compressed, caricaturized, and devoid of spirit. The graveyard of narrative clichés is vast because the market will not allow narratives to die. It is surprisingly easy to fall into cliché because the cognition of reading narratives causes the language of known narratives to be projected onto what is being read, even recognizing cliché even if it was not intended. In any case, the vast size of known exemplars in the cultural narrative space makes it difficult to enunciate new ideas.

Second, in our contemporary culture, articulation of known narratives from the cultural narrative space is rarely aesthetic. This is because the cultural narrative space is fraught with cliché, yet devoid of myth, which is the only form that never loses its aesthetic cachet. Myth and cliché are two edges to the same sword. Both can be familiar and possess of the letter, but whereas myth also possesses of the spirit, cliché has had its spirit eradicated from it in order to improve economy of representation and efficiency of social communication.

### 3.4 Decline of the Naïve Narrative

The present culture favors concepts for their economy, and consequently, the letter over the spirit. Among other things, this

tendency has led to a saturation of the cultural narrative space, which becomes such a distracting cognitive backdrop of clichés for the subject-reader so as to render many traditional approaches to narrative aesthetically ineffectual.

And indeed, the value of traditional narrative in our culture has declined. In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin attributes the waning importance of storytelling in the twentieth century to a devaluation of experience and the fact that “the communicability of experience is decreasing.” (1936). In our phraseology, Benjamin’s *experience* is of the spirit because it is rich and personal, and it opposes concepts, which are of the letter. In the “information age,” concepts are favored over experience because they have an economy of representation and a memetic efficiency, which in turn, in the psychology of this culture, lends concepts the cachet of a greater social importance.

Just as traditional notions of the storyteller have declined, myth and Jungian symbolism have also become more inaccessible. In *Images and Symbols*, Eliade laments the demystification and desacralisation of Western society in the late twentieth century (1961). Eliade implicates the development of modern science and the mechanization of scientific thought as contributors to the erosion of the historic richness and complexity of mythical systems. This analysis is echoed in the works of another scholar of modern myth, Campbell, who wrote the following of modern scientism, “The earth was beginning to be systematically explored, and the old, symbolic, mythological geographies discredited” (Campbell, 1961). However, both Eliade and Campbell hold that myth and the sacred have not completely vanished, but rather they lie neglected and forgotten as repressions of the individual and collective subconscious, resurfacing occasionally and unexpectedly.

Decline of Benjaminian experience and myth is a decline of the spirit, and this, along with the crowding of the cultural narrative space, has made artful narration difficult. Naïve approaches to narrative which simply recapitulate known narratives, techniques and forms, risk being overpowered by a backtext of cliché. Even if a narrative celebrates myth, our present cultural context may not lend itself to an appreciation of its aesthetic value.

In this section we introduced the notion of a cultural narrative space as the embodiment of the agency of the letter for narratives. We reported that the present media- and market-driven culture has hyperarticulated the cultural narrative space with a bloat of clichés of past narratives, techniques, and forms, creating a disruptive backtext which undermines the aesthetic potency of new narratives; furthermore, the power of myth is endangered because myth has evacuated from modern cultures. These problematics render naïve approaches to narrative as *hyperarticulate* and thus impotent, necessitating more advanced strategies of articulation for aesthetic narratives.

#### 4. ARTICULATION STRATEGIES FOR AESTHETIC NARRATIVES

Given that today, the letter is overpowering, and the spirit is repressed, artful narratives seem more and more to resort to psychoanalytic play to liberate the aesthetics of spirit. There is a sense that, in order to maintain a careful balance of letter and spirit, artful narration requires walking on eggshells atop the backtext of the cultural narrative space to resist entropy toward hyperarticulation. In this section, we nominate several articulation strategies

that protect and promote the aesthetics of narrative, centered around the principle of resisting hyperarticulation.

##### 4.1 (Inter)Textuality

Textuality perhaps best represents post-structuralism’s reconceptualization of the traditional structural narrative as a deconstructed *text*. In *S/Z* (1970), Barthes famously synthesizes Derrida’s advocacy to “escape structurality” with Kristeva’s notion of *intertextuality* to explain how traditional narratives become post-structural texts. Structurality represents the letter, and must be escaped in order to arrive at the more aesthetically interesting space of the intertextual, which represents the spirit.

Traditional narratives, whose structure is dictated by an underlying cultural code, can be re-read as a post-structural text when the reader becomes aware of the “structurality of structure,” and in the process, the reader becomes both cultural critic and semiotician. By foregrounding and habituating away the *structurality* of cultural codes and forms which underlie cultural narratives, the reader is in a sense inoculated to hyperarticulation, because *structurality* gets de-authorized. As a result, a reader is urged to attune to meanings which are only present *intertextually*; a sort of reading-between-the-lines if you will. When the narrative is freed from its *a priori* center, narrative coherence is created only through each reader’s own *original interpretation* of the text, and it is in this original experience that spirit thrives.

The construction of texts which are meant to be read intertextually is itself an artform. Traditional cultural structures are still invoked in a text, but perhaps used quite irreverently and in a manner such as to invite connotation and comparison. Rather than giving the narrative explicitly, the storyteller articulates only the rough ingredients necessary to construct the narrative, deferring its construction to the reader. Of course, the storyteller-psychoanalyst can still influence what narrative a reader is likely to construct by considering how a reader’s psychology and intuition might lead him to interpret what is before him.

Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, and Lynch’s television text *Twin Peaks* are all prime examples of artful post-structural texts. In *Twin Peaks* for example, Lynch nurtures intertextuality by casting actors from other Lynch texts, and melding different film and television genres (*e.g.* Westerns, commercials, horror, and sitcom) and aesthetics (*e.g.* 1950s middle America) into a single soap-operatic detective story.

Despite its aesthetic potentialities, the validity of textuality as an articulation strategy in praxis is called into question when we consider that it puts an incredible onus on the reader to find or create narrative closure. A reader must be quite informed about the cultural space, capable of cultural criticism, and possessed with a high level of attention and dedication to active reading. At its very best, when the readership is qualified, textuality can deliver a slew of transitory aesthetic experiences weaved together in the reader’s mind. However, in the absence of creative reading, textuality may produce narratives judged as fragmented, incoherent, and unstable. Jameson (1983), for example, condemns *pastiche* – the mimicry of various styles – in post-structural texts as “blank parody;” and the decenteredness of the post-structural text as a schizophrenic experience which becomes increasingly brilliant with iconification yet evermore confusing. Given these caveats, the textuality articulation strategy is only aesthetic if applied appropriately and judiciously.

## 4.2 Unusual Representation

The cultural narrative space is saturated with all-too-common narrative forms, styles, mannerisms, and other techniques. We have become collectively habituated to these knowns, so when they appear in a narrative as a vehicle for other story ideas, both the vehicle and that which is carried are recognized as mundanely familiar and unaesthetic, relegated to the bin of known narratives, and unflattering comparison with clichéd works is invited. In order to maintain a reader's attention and interest, these *vehicles of narrative* must not be the habitual knowns, but rather, the storyteller should employ unconventional representations. Of course, this is not to say that a representation need only be unusual to do the trick. The representation must also be intuitive, insightful, unique, and coherent.

Artful storytelling employs unusual representations to achieve storytelling goals at various granularities. At the higher granularities are thematic planning and story flow. Here exists an opportunity to vary in unusual ways many of the more established forms and techniques. Playing with and violating expectations of established forms is the technique of many metafictional works, such as those of Cortázar. In his short story, *House Taken Over*, Cortázar seems to follow a mystery and suspense theme in relating the story of a brother and sister living in a house possessed of unwelcomed occupants. However, the story ends as the unwelcomed occupants take over the house, yet with no articulation of the identity or nature of those occupants. The resolution which is typical at end of suspense and mystery narratives is withheld, thus violating the reader's expectations of known story form.

Another technique of unusual representation is the use of metaphor in story planning (related to the technique of allegory). In the short story *Blowup*, Cortázar takes the metaphor of making blow-ups of photographs to create a unique story flow. In the story, a photographer is observing a scene between a man and a woman across a river. While at first he arrives at one analysis of the events transpiring between the man and woman, he progressively reinterprets those events with increasing detail and clarity, just as a photographer enlarges a photo to reveal further detail.

The strategy of unusual representation also applies to the lower granularities of storytelling, such as narrative perspective and discourse style. A single event, when visited through various narrative perspectives, will appear different as each perspective cognitively highlights different sets of features about the event, both quantitatively in which details are told, but also qualitatively in the mannerisms of the telling. Narrative perspective can be understood as a kind of impressionistic observation. Even more granular than narrative perspective is discourse style, or word-choice. Nabakov, for example, prefers long sensorial descriptive vignettes and in particular, synesthetic cross-sensorial description. The narrators in his fictions describe sounds as having tastes, scents as having colors, they fuse together concepts in interesting combinations, and employ abundant psychologically revealing metonymies.

By violating traditional representations for narratives and developing new representations through intuitive metaphors, a storyteller resists hyperarticulation by avoiding or defamiliarizing known forms and techniques.

## 4.3 Aesthetic Signature

We define a narrative's *aesthetic signature* as the gestalt of all the small storytelling decisions which sum up to produce a unique narrative voice or style. Aesthetic signature is important to a narrative because it is so unique that it is very difficult to duplicate or make commonplace, thus, it is rather immune to becoming letter, even in the contemporary period's saturation of the cultural narrative space.

Nabakov is a masterful storyteller who understands the aesthetic value of narrative point-of-view. Each of his fictions and short fictions are narrated with such a strong aesthetic signature in large part because both the narrator and the storyteller (the two are sometimes the same, other times different) employ a unique representation or approach to storytelling and discourse. Nabakov's narrators wield words as a masterful director wields a camera. He may start focused with a passage on a particular detail, then zooms out to a larger context, then pans across a scene or shuffles through memories or associations. The manner of the narrator and the storyteller and the unique lens they take on the world constitute the aesthetic signature. This signature aestheticizes a narrative by lending it aesthetic closure – a sense of consistency and coherency over the gestalt. The aesthetic signature in its gestalt is articulate and spirited, but because this gestalt is formed out of small, non-textual and non-explicit influences shaping the storytelling, hyperarticulation of the letter can be averted.

The aesthetic signature is a well-authenticated construct because even the storyteller herself cannot claim to have full conscious control over all storytelling choices. Those storytelling decisions invisible to conscious intervention are a product of a storyteller's intuition, subconscious, and unconscious, all agencies of the spirit rather than of the letter.

## 4.4 Personalization

Personalization is the customization of narrative to speak to a particular readership, such as members of a subculture, or even a single person, which is a new affordance granted by computer generated narratives. Personalization resists hyperarticulation on the premise that many of the nuances of a subculture or a person remain unarticulated in the cultural narrative space because these nuances are not common enough to have been articulated among the masses. If we think of the letter as being a popularly dictated agency, the nuances of many subcultures are simply not popular enough to have (yet) been the victim of commodification and caricaturization.

Diaspora is perhaps one subcultural phenomenon whose nuances have not been articulated to death, although admittedly the overall notion of diaspora has been the victim of caricature. Kundera's novel, *Ignorance*, takes diasporian experience as its subject, but unlike a novel about the experience of falling in love, there are far fewer clichés to be compared against, so articulating the diasporian experience in an interesting and aesthetic way will face fewer priors for comparison.

Narratives that involve tabooed subjects or values can also be interpreted as a form of personalization because taboo can be viewed as a subcultural safe zone from hyperarticulation since the letter as a socially dictated agency, is generally bounded against articulations of taboo. Much of "contemporary art" relies on narrating taboo as the source of its aesthetic, tackling socially repressed subjects like gender, sexuality, and death.

Finally, artificial intelligence and electronic media now affords the opportunity to customize narrative down to a single person, based on a model of his or her background, experiences, interests, tastes, and personality. Elo's PLUM story program (1995), for example, reformulates details of news stories to make them more personally relevant for a reader. A news article about a flood devastation in Nigeria reports that 127,000 people were left homeless, and to generate greater contextual relevance to the reader, PLUM augments the story with the fact that "127,000 people is roughly the same as 10 times the people living in Bellefontaine," where Bellefontaine is the town where the reader lives.

These sorts of personalizations produced by machine narratives are aesthetic for now, but the techniques are still in their infancy. In the future, it is unclear whether or not personalization will remain aesthetic, or possibly be clichéd as more and more machine personalization programs saturate the space and push these techniques into the letter.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we posed the aesthetics of narrative as problematics of *articulation*, *the letter*, and *the spirit*. We established the letter as the agency of social language, of the explicit, known, mundane, habituated, and thus, unaesthetic. In contrast, the spirit is the agency of the aesthetic; it is an amorphous, anomic space that is alive with meaning, fraught with creative tension, and home to the unarticulated, unarticulatable, mystified, sacred, and mythical. Whereas the letter is socially constructed and maintained, the spirit arises out of the personal and collective unconscious, its chief vehicle to the realm of the conscious being through the agency of intuition.

A central problematic of articulation is that if the spirit is overarticulated into letter, it becomes de-aestheticized, as well demonstrated in the fashion cycle where a new idea becomes increasingly stale as it undergoes massification. Therefore, to maintain the aesthetic integrity of a narrative, the spirit should only be partially articulated, and indeed, there are many subtle spaces that the spirit can be partially articulated into, such as connotations, contexts, and subtexts, and manner of speech. In addition to partial articulation, two other aesthetic modes of articulation, both of which avoid the habituation of the letter, are de-articulation – defamiliarizing a symbol by shifting the signification or meaning beneath it; and, re-articulation – the aesthetic of Grand Familiarity, gained through identification with myths and meta-narratives.

To better understand how artful articulation might be achieved, we also examined the cultural backdrop against which the quality of art can be evaluated. We termed the sum of all commonplace narratives, techniques, and forms which are present in the collective consciousness the *cultural narrative space*, and reported that in our contemporary period, the media-driven commodification of narratives, together with trends toward pluralism and polycentrism, have led to the saturation and bloating of this narrative space with cliché. This fact, together with the decline of myth in modern cultures, have condemned the traditional, "naïve" structuralist narrative to the realm of unaesthetic because such narratives hyperarticulate what already belongs to cliché.

Given our current cultural context, the production of aesthetic narratives then becomes a question of resisting hyperarticulation. In the penultimate section of this paper, we nominated four articulation strategies based on the resistance or avoidance of the letter

of the cultural narrative space – (inter)textuality, unusual representation, aesthetic signature, and personalization. Central to all of these strategies is that they avoid the letter by relying on intuition, the gateway to the spirit, to generate or interpret narrative.

Of course, in spite of this paper's advocacy for the spirit, the letter should not be discounted wholesale, as the tension between the letter and the spirit is itself a source of the aesthetic, just as Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian forces interplay to form tragedy, or Bergson's intuitive and conceptual thinking combine to form a dynamic understanding of reality. But we shall end here, resisting the temptation to articulate any further.

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