“EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY” – LOSING THE PLOT IN THE ERA OF THE IMAGE

Y. GABRIEL
“Every picture tells a story” – Losing the plot in the era of the image

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"His paintings don't tell stories", says, Griet, the central character in Tracy Chevalier's *The girl with the pearl earring*, à propos of Johannes Vermeer’s works (Chevalier, 2001, p. 91). As if to demonstrate the girl's lack of imagination (or her lack of awareness of intertextuality), Chevalier contrived to write a highly compelling novel inspired by Vermeer’s painting by the same title. The novel's central character is a girl whose family has fallen on hard times as a result of her father's loss of sight. Once a skilled painter of Delft tiles, he was blinded in a kiln explosion. Griet has been her father's eyes, reporting for him what she sees. The novel starts with Griet, chopping vegetables in the kitchen and arranging them on a board according to colour. It is her sensitivity to colour and her ability to organize through colour that impresses the painter. He hires her, first as the family's domestic servant, later as his assistant, his muse, and, eventually, his model for the famous portrait.

Reading the numerous readers' reviews in the Amazon web-pages, one concludes that for the majority, Chevalier has succeeded brilliantly in 'capturing the essence of the painting'. Maybe, we should add, her success mirrors Vermeer's success in 'capturing the essence of his subject'. This success is only partially repeated by the film of the same title which, in spite of some beautiful imagery, does not quite capture the psychological subtleties of the novel.

Who would nowadays dispute that a painting, an image or a photograph tells a story. "Every picture tells a story" has become a widely accepted platitude today. The expression can be traced to the opening chapter of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The heroine of the book, looking at Bewick's *History of British Birds* on a rainy day, explains:

"Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in good humour" (Chapter 1)

For Jane Eyre the illustrations of Bewick's book evoked stories of shipwrecks, solitary rocks and promontories and the vast expanses of icy Nordic landscapes. Today, as academics we have come to view most if not all pictures as telling stories. Indeed few
would dispute that any image, a building, a tattooed human body or even the gleaming surface of an automobile tell stories? We have become accustomed to reading stories in the most un-story-like texts, to treat them perfectly seriously as if they were stories.

In this presentation, I would like to probe and question this view, namely that pictures tell stories. Of course, there are numerous narrative paintings inspired by particular stories. In the genre of ‘continuous narrative’, for example, several episodes from a particular narrative are depicted in the same picture, and the main characters appear several times in different capacities. Thus, a representation of the martyrdom of John the Baptist may include different scenes, including his birth, Salome’s dance, the saint’s incarceration, his beheading and his head on a silver platter. (Andrews, 1995).

Yet, it is possible to argue, as some artists do, that their paintings tell no stories, or that they, as artists, do not seek to tell stories. Of course, no-one can stop readers or writers from reading and writing stories inspired by such paintings. I shall argue, however, that the attempt to read a story in every picture, every image or indeed any meaningful text is symptomatic of an era which has lost its ability to tell and to listen to stories. This is what I shall describe as narrative deskilling. Narrative deskilling involves the inability to develop narratives with individualized characters and plots that grip the imagination and generate meaning. I shall argue that treating every picture as a story is a consequence of this deskilling. Having lost the skill necessary to create, tell and listen to stories we lapse into viewing every sensible text as story. “Every X tells a story”, where X becomes virtually anything. Try, for instance, “symptom”, “brand”, “accident”, “building”, etc.

Further, I shall argue that, in an spectacle-centred and media-dominated culture, stories are transcended by mass-produced images, some of which assume iconic standing. Such images possess considerable emotional and rhetorical power and may even claim to ‘tell a story’. My argument, however, is that a line should be drawn between stories with characters and plots told by individuals singly or jointly and images or ‘photo-stories’ which rely for their effect on very different processes. My argument does not lament narrative deskilling, nor does it look back nostalgically at some time when ‘proper stories’ were told around the family hearth. What it does is to use narrative deskilling as the starting point for a sketching of new sense-making patterns which are becoming increasingly preponderant today but also for an appreciation of the enduring and compelling power of stories with characters and plots. I conclude by suggesting that in our times, narrative deskilling is matched by
the development of new skills. What we have lost in our ability to construct stories with beginnings, middle and ends, characters and plots, we have gained in an ability to read signs, accepting ambiguity and multivalence; the ability to withstand confusion and cacophony, to filter out relevant information from a huge bombardment of noise, to decode difficult or non-specific signs and to endure multiple plots, and multiple storylines without clear beginnings or ends. Maybe, I shall argue, there is no deskilling without corresponding reskilling.

The argument I will develop is not one that I expect will find easy acceptance. The weight of opinion today among numerous scholars researching discourses, narratives and stories suggests that we inhabit a narrative universe, where storytelling is the principal or even the only way of making sense of the world. This is in a characteristic reversal of an earlier argument which was to view modernity, with its totalizing narratives of science, ideology law etc., as leading to the end of storytelling (Benedict, 1931; Gabriel, 2000). Late modernity, by contrast has rediscovered and celebrated stories and storytelling. In a characteristic passage, Novak has argued

"The human being alone among creatures on the earth is a storytelling animal: sees the present rising out of a past, heading into a future; perceives reality in narrative form."

(Novak, 1975, pp. 175-6)

Narratives themselves are also exalted and celebrated, not in their modernist mega-forms, such as theories, ideologies and doctrines but in their highly individualized, personalized and privatized mutations – the petits récits as against modernity's grands narratives. Thus Hardy:

"We dream in narrative [different font], daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative."

(Hardy, 1968. p.5)

Building on such narrativist premises, theorists in our time have developed an elaborate set of arguments regarding the narrative base of experience, our on-going attempts to develop coherent life stories, the contestation and denial of such stories,
and the living out of such stories. In these arguments, the word story becomes a verb, indeed a transitive verb, denoting the work that goes into emplotting different episodes of experience, different incidents and events of personal and social lives. Storying emerges as an on-going sense-making effort through which identities, relations and actions assume shape and significance. David Sims, for instance, has argued eloquently that

"We lead storied lives; we are continuously producing storied versions of what is happening in our lives, as well as revising the way that we tell the stories of earlier parts of our lives. We also spend much time plotting and imagining the next chapter in our lives." (Sims, 2003, p. 1197)

Sims captures well the reflexive quality of storying – the author of the story and the story's central character co-create each other[]. At every moment the storyteller creates a protagonist, whose predicaments redefine the storyteller. In telling the story of my life, I make sense of past events and create a person living in the present as a continuation of the story. It is in this way that experience becomes digested, meaningful and the basis of identity.

"The narrative tradition in research grew up in the belief that storytelling and experience are not separable. Experience is only made available, through memory, when it is turned into a story." (Sims, 2003, p. 1197)

Storying work is not easy – Kearny likens it to the work of the mid-wife who delivers a baby.

"From the Greek discovery of human life (bios) as meaningfully interpreted action (praxis) to the most recent descriptions of existence as narrative temporality, there is an abiding recognition that existence is inherently storied. Life is pregnant with stories. It is a nascent plot in search of midwives." (Kearney, 2002, p. 130)
And Sims points out that the story is created against resistances, both from internal and external audiences.

"We create stories about ourselves and our situation, and then proceed to live out some of them. Some of the stories we create, however, are contested, denied or simply ignored by others. We are on the verge of living out a story which features a major victory, a pinnacle to our achievements, or a rescue of some deserving cause, when someone else shows total disdain for our narrative of our lives by walking roughshod over the story we are creating." (Sims, 2003, p. 1196)

Many authors believe that in our times, a variety of circumstances conspire to make the storying of our lives particularly difficult. Thus Boje:

"Some experiences lack that linear sequence and are difficult to tell as a 'coherent' story. Telling stories that lack coherence is contrary to modernity. Yet, in the postmodern condition, stories are harder to tell because experience itself is so fragmented and full of chaos that fixing meaning or imagining coherence is fictive." [Good quote, but isn't it the case that precisely when experience is chaotic storytelling used to offer the answer?] (Boje, 2001, p. 7)

The view that storying has become especially hard in our times is highly developed in Richard Sennett's work. He argues that new capitalism with its emphasis on flexibility, opportunism and the powerful illusions of choice and freedom fragment life's narratives, denying them the continuity and coherence enjoyed by the narratives of yesteryear. (Sennett, 1998, p. 31) Along similar lines, Brown (1987) (REF) has argued that personal narratives become problematic in an era when private lives and public conduct become detached from each other. These authors agree, however, that the emplotment of lives continues as a pressing need and that unplotted experiences are the source of malaise and alienation.
Nothing escapes from this line of argument which ultimately equates meaning with narrative, not even scientific theories. In a tour-de-force of narrative argumentation, Czarniawska’s demonstrates that many scientific theories, like for instance Hirschman’s The passions and the interests, emerge themselves as stories, with characters, plots, turning points and so forth. Theory is the distillation of scientific writing, it is the name that we give to the plots of scientific genres – "theory is the plot of a thesis" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 125).

To summarize then a very wide but fairly cohesive body of theoretical discourse, it is argued that nothing or more specifically no meaning exists outside narrative.

1. Human life and experience is lived in a storied manner, i.e. people endeavor to fit their experiences into story-like patterns, in short to emplot them.
2. By placing incidents in story-like patterns, people make sense of their experiences and establish some coherence in a potentially chaotic and meaningless world.
3. This process is reflexive, in other words in constructing their stories, people create themselves as individuals with histories and identities, i.e. the telling of the story becomes itself part of the story being told.
4. The telling of stories is not easy, since such stories are contested, denied or ignored by audiences, internal and external.
5. This process has become especially difficult in our times, because of the fragmented or even chaotic qualities of contemporary lives.

At this point a few qualifications and perhaps even a few definitions may be in order. Is there a point in adhering to a distinction between story and narrative? I find this distinction to be quite a useful one. It seems to me that many different genres of text have narrative qualities, such as timed sequences of events, motivated characters, predicaments, recognitions and so forth. Narrative texts may include most novels and films, ballads and legends, epic poems, chronicles and historical accounts, and so forth. Some pictorial texts, such as narrative paintings and strip cartoons, have narrative qualities. Stories too are narratives, but I would argue that not all narratives are stories. Stories are particular types of narrative governed by their own ‘regimes of truth’ and (as I have sought to show elsewhere) by a unique form of narrative contract between author and audience. This contract generally allows the storyteller poetic licence in return for a narrative that is verisimilar, but at the same time, has a plot. The narrative contract between a storyteller and his or her audience is quite
different from that between a film-maker, an epic poet, a historian, a chronicler and their respective audiences. This is an important point, given that what I want to argue is that a painter, an image-maker, a spectacle orchestrator and so forth, engage in different relations with their audiences which may not necessarily involve plots or verisimilitude at all, in short, that they operate within realms of experience that may be unstoried and non-narrative (even though academic readers etc may treat them as stories).

If not all narratives are stories, not all texts are narratives. What is NOT a narrative? A question. And an answer. A question IS NOT a narrative. What happened to the cat that drank the green ink out of the bottle? A question may invite or augur a story, but by itself it is not a story. Moreover, a question may be answered in other non-narrative ways. When did the queen die? Contrast the answers: She died in the year 1901. And “She died of shock when she heard that her much loved poodle had suddenly died”

For a long time, I thought that facts and information (including generalizations, lists, tables, recipes, etc.) are far removed from narrative, in as much as they their loyalty lies predominantly with accuracy, inviting very different types of ‘reading’ from narratives and stories. “Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius”, or “the battle of Waterloo took place in 1815” would count as such factual statements. Of course, as the numerous accounts of the battle of Waterloo testify, facts can feed rich narratives and stories. Yet, outside of ‘plots’, context and contestation, facts remain just information.

Facts, however, are far from the only things that are not narratives. Let me try some different answers. A noise is not a narrative. A sound may constitute a narrative, but it is not a narrative. The sound of a voice telling the story of Cinderella is performing a narrative, but sound itself is not a narrative. Likewise, a musical score, for instance, Bach’s Matthew Passion or Bob Dylan performing The Ballad of Hollis Brown are narratives, but many musical scores and musical performances are not narrative. What can be said of sounds, can also largely be said of images. An image by itself is not a narrative. An image may under certain circumstances evoke a narrative or a story, such as the judgement of Paris. Thus the image may prompt a narrative, may illuminate a story, or may even offer an interpretation of a story, but it is not a story.
Images, like sounds and like facts, can assume diverse relations with narratives. For example, images can inspire or feature in narratives. In Chevalier’s novel, for instance, the painting by Vermeer, its inspiration, composition and consequences, are the narrative’s driving force. Alternatively, images can function as icons standing for well-known and well-understood narratives. Icons neither tell a story nor re-interpret it for us. Instead, they represent the story or a particular scene from it. As representations, the core quality of icons is that they are based on fixed, non-arbitrary relations between signifier and signified, in which the sign reproduces (or imitates) some of the qualities it signifies. Of course, there are many paintings which challenge or dislocate the relation of the signifier and the signified, offering new insights or interpretations of existing stories, framing, portraying and highlighting features of the scene in ways that suggest particular interpretations. Great paintings and works of art can undoubtedly suggest new meanings and interpretations to a story, inviting us to think of the story afresh.

Image]. is the generic word I use for a text that is appropriated visually without the help of an alphabet. An image of a person captured on a security camera is just this, an image. The image of a sunset I am looking at is just this, an image. Pictures are particular types of image that have been composed by an author, such as a painter or a photographer. Spectacles or shows, for their part, are complex associations of images and pictures, often moving ones, produced by museum curators, television, film or theatrical producers and so forth. What I have recently come to realize is that in spite of our academic fascination with images still and moving, films, advertisements, television programmes and so forth, we have been generally blind to their essentially unstoried qualities. What we have failed to recognize is that more often than not, images do not invite incorporation into a story or a narrative, but act as stand-alone emotional triggers, stimulating desires, arousing fantasies, prompting associations with other images. My argument is not that images and pictures exist in a vacuum, or that they inhabit a different universe from the universe of words. I would not agree with Foucault’s argument at the opening of The Order of Things that “pictures cannot be put into words” (See also (Spence, 1984)). On the contrary, we often find ourselves translating images into words and words into images with greater or lesser success. We equally often learn to 'read' images and words simultaneously, as we do in most drama and movies. An image of a happy person uttering an apology is very different from that of a glum face articulating the same words. As an opera lover, I recognize that music, words and images can form a powerful discursive cocktail. What I am arguing, is that increasingly we, not as (discourse-) theorists but
as spectators, come to appropriate images with or without words, incorporating them in our experience without necessarily seeking to turn them into narratives. As our daily universe has become saturated with images, jumping at us from our television sets, our magazines and newspapers, our computer screens and our digital cameras, our advertising billboards and our shop windows, we have mostly given up trying to fit them into stories and have learnt to accept them as spectacle pure and simple, pleasing or annoying to the eye, evoking, prompting, comforting, upsetting, entertaining or irritating. They are mostly part of a spectacular rather than a narrative universe.

The idea that we live in an era saturated by spectacle where image reigns supreme is of course not new. Parodying Marx, Guy Debord opened his situationist manifesto with:

“In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.” (Debord, 1977, paragraph 1)

Allowing for the obvious hyperbole, Debord’s premise seems to be even more powerful today than in the 60s when he made it the basis of his then fashionable critique. Numerous theorists, including Bauman, Ritzer and Baudrillard, have since argued that spectacle has become the primary type of experience in late modernity, dominating every aspect of our public and private lives. Spectacle liquefies most forms of social exchange, colonizing politics, sport, religion, education and so forth. What has changed since the situationist critique is the more nuanced evaluation that we accord spectacle, the less unequivocal equation of spectacle with passivity and stupefaction. Inspired by Bauman, Ritzer (1999), for instance, has argued that spectacle has led to a re-enchantment of the world in late modernity’s cathedrals of consumption. Shopping malls, glass buildings, tourist resorts, sports venues and theme parks, are all minutely planned and orchestrated shows, with spectators themselves becoming part of the display. Immense amounts of money are spent in advertising and packaging, films and television shows, magazines and printed images. Spectacle becomes the archetypal experience of our time, offering “the promise of new, overwhelming, mind-boggling or spine-chilling, but always exhilarating experience.” (Bauman, 1997, p. 181)
Spectacle stimulates every kind of emotional experience – horror, joy, anger, compassion, nostalgia, and so forth. Baudrillard who has pushed the argument furthest argues that we live in an era where only the spectacular counts as real – in short the dominant regime of truth is the regime of the simulacrum. He chillingly suggests that "other people’s destitution becomes our adventure playground . . . we are the consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own efforts to alleviate it . . . when we run out of disasters from elsewhere or when they can no longer be traded like coffee or other commodities, the West will be forced to produce its own catastrophe for itself . . . When we have finished sucking out the destiny of others, we shall have to invent one for ourselves." (Baudrillard, 1996, pp. 67ff)

Images then, like narratives, have their own regimes of truth. We respond differently to a painting, a cartoon, an advertisement and a photograph. Some of these regimes may mirror those to which we subject narratives. We may, in other words ask the same questions of an image as we ask of a narrative: "Is it an accurate representation?" “Does it ‘work’?” “Does it evoke another image?” “Has someone orchestrated it to create a specific effect?” and so forth. In many cases, the ways we answer such questions in relation to images are similar to the ways we answer them in relation to stories. For example, most advertising images, just like most advertising stories, are known to be idealized, exaggerated and contrived, i.e. the result of careful doctoring, touching up etc. Yet, at some level they are felt to be true. As Campbell (1989, p. 82) has argued, such images are illusions, relying on our “ability to treat sensory data ‘as if’ it were ‘real’ whilst knowing that it is indeed ‘false’. ... It is this ‘as if’ response which is at the heart of modern hedonism.” Other images, are recognised as ‘representations’ of actual events, triggering a wide range of unstoried emotions which supplant moral judgement in what MacIntyre described as emotivism. (MacIntyre, 1981) In this way, we treat images not as mere surfaces hiding underlying depths or ‘capturing’ a moment or an event. Instead, we use images to create reality, to define events, to constitute the world in which we inhabit. Images constitute many of our core experiences of the world and many of our core memories. Far from constantly constituting our lives as continuous narratives, I would argue that most of us, most of the time accept our lives as disorderly sets of photographic flashbacks, which have a disconcerting tendency of arriving uninvited to our consciousness, posing questions, evoking emotions and, occasionally, triggering off stories.
A few theorists have noted that as our culture becomes more ocular-centric, i.e. dominated by spectacles and images appropriated and experienced through the eye, many of our theories have become ocular-phobic. (Jay, 1993; Kavanagh, 2004) We tend to assume that images are produced in the same way as narratives, are consumed in the same way as narratives and work in the same way as narratives. The idea of a text steamrolls those qualities that make each text unique, suggesting that every text is read in the same manner. We read our newspapers, we read the screens on our computers, we read photographs, we read virtually any material object.

In a sense, it is perfectly appropriate to read any cultural artefact that carries meaning. And it is perfectly true that images carry meanings. But as the anthropologist Grant McCracken argues the fact that images and objects may carry powerful symbolism does not alone turn them into stories. (1988, p. 69f). Material culture cannot express the same nuance as language, it cannot generate plots, it cannot portray reversals of fortune and can only at best create ambiguous characters. Of course, different images and spectacles are invested with symbolism; this is where the power of brands resides. But this symbolism, whether metaphoric or metonymic, is far from the symbolism of stories and narratives, with plots and characters.

As academics, some of us spend a lot of our time ‘reading’ literary or academic works. We may also spend much time ‘reading’ other artifacts crucial to our profession – images, documents, photographs etc. We have lately started writing a lot about how people read, and this is something about which we know a lot, since we do it a lot. But we are making a mistake if we assume that everyone reads like us, or indeed that we read everything the same way. Following the work of Eco and Rorty, for example, Czarniawska has done some extremely interesting work on the way we read texts, showing that both literary narratives and scientific monographs can be read in a ‘semantic’ or a ‘semiotic’ way (Czarniawska, 1997, 1999, 2004). In her own work, she offers several brilliant examples of reading. Hers is a high-calibre semiotic reading, in contrast to naïve or semantic readings which are content with establishing the meaning of a text.

But are these two ways of reading the only possible ones or even the dominant ones? I would contend that even academics have different ways of reading texts – a
student's artless essay is read differently from a paper under review for a prestigious journal or indeed a paper published by a prestigious journal. I would, in fact argue, other forms of reading exist – for instance, ‘opportunistic’ reading which neither seeks to discover what a text says (semantic reading) nor how a text comes to say what it says (semiotic text) but whether the text contains any particular element that may be useful for some other agenda. Consider too the purposeful reading we engage in when we seek a number in a telephone directory. Or indeed skim reading, which I suspect is commoner among academics that either semiotic or semantic reading, when we just let our eye drift along the written page letting it ‘wash over us’, almost subliminally picking up some pieces of information. Close semiotic reading of theories, narratives and images may be one way of engaging with them, but it is not the only or even the main one. The skills required for such reading take much time to develop and the results they yield are not consistently effective, as evidenced by clumsy interpretations and ridiculous inferences drawn by 'wild' or 'inexperienced' readers. (Spence, 1984).

If written text can be read in many different ways depending on one's skills, one's circumstances, one's motives and the qualities of the texts themselves, other texts can be read in many different ways too. We will read an artistic masterpiece differently from a photograph on the front page of a newspaper or from the image on an advertising poster. The fact that, as theorists, we interrogate images and narratives in similar ways is a reflection of our own professional habits rather than the qualities of images and narratives themselves. In fact, I would argue that images and narratives do not ‘work’ in the same way. As spectators (rather than as theorists) most of the time we do interrogate images, but like everybody else we let them wash over us, reading them almost subliminally. In our spectacle-centred culture, most of the time, people do not seek to emplot the image or the spectacle – but rather appropriate them visually. Our relation to image and spectacle is not logo-centric but ocular-centric, not trying to make sense of image through some notion of plot, unfolding story and eventual conclusion, but as self-contained flashes to be read, experienced and decoded in distinctly different ways from the ways stories and narratives are read, experienced and decoded.

One of the most interesting differences in the ways images and narratives work concerns timing. An effective image can work almost instantaneously and subliminally, whereas an effective narrative, excepting one-liners, may require rather more time to unfold. An image may create a powerful emotion in a fraction of the time
that a story can. The expression on a person's face, the tensions in their body, the lighting, the perspective, can instantly communicate a mood, an emotion or a moral tone. Images are often appropriated intertextually, by reference to other images.

But I would contend that the major difference between image and narratives and, in particular stories, lies in the plot. In his dazzling analysis of tragic plots, Aristotle famously identified three core features, 1. Peripeteia, i.e. the reversal of fortune (e.g. from happiness to misfortune or from being healthy to being sick), 2. Discovery or recognition (anagnorisis), i.e. movement from ignorance to knowledge, whereby the protagonists come to realize the true significance of events, accidents, omens, identities and so forth, and 3. Suffering (pathos), the action of a destructive or painful nature, such as the perpetration of violence, the experience of physical or emotional pain and so forth. Aristotle rightly insists that this third ingredient of the plot, suffering, is the least significant, and rightly so. A man being constantly beaten up may be a horrible and disturbing spectacle or situation but it is hardly a story. Prometheus bound on the Caucasus or Sisyphus pushing the rock up the mountain, by contrast, are highly tragic plots, since they entail both peripeteia (reversal from former glories) and recognition. And yet, it is suffering, this least significant of the plot figures that paintings, photographs and other pictorial representations can 'imitate' rather than peripeteia and recognition. I would argue therefore that it is wrong to accuse our culture of gratuitous portrayals of violence – in a spectacular culture, this is the part of plot that can be portrayed.

Nor should it be thought that because image cannot portray peripeteia and recognition it is less symbolically charged or less powerful that a story. On the contrary, in our spectacular culture it is often said that "a picture tells more than ten thousand words." It is interesting to contrast this cliché with the earlier one "Every picture tells a story". Although falsely ascribed to an old Chinese proverb, the expression was itself the product of high modernity with its spectacular, image-driven qualities appearing for the first time, according to my Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs, in the 1920s. It was high modernity with its photographs and moving pictures, with its artificial lights and new forms of mass entertainment, with its questioning of plots, characters and narrative conventions that dislodged storytelling from its privileged position in the narrative universe signalling the coming hegemony of the image.
Narrative deskilling was part of a wider range of deskillings brought about by high modernity, which include undoubtedly the Taylorist deskilling, but also deskilling in a wide range of domestic, social and political contexts. Why learn the violin to perform Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata, when we can readily experience it, enjoy it or discard it by listening to a recording of it? Why learn to cook and risk many disappointments when Marks and Spencer's will reliably provide high quality meals with which to impress our friends? Why learn to weave when machines produce high quality woven materials? And, for the purposes of the present argument, why learn to tell stories, weaving plots, when stories are available in every type of medium? And more importantly, when stories are far outshone and outsued in their ability to stimulate emotion, trigger symbolism and change minds than photographs, images and movies. Why develop stories of how beautiful or how powerful one is when one can invest in cosmetic surgery and expensive cars? Choosing a cosmetic surgeon, learning to programme a DVD player or to use a digital camera, being able to play computer games on the internet pressing keys with millisecond precision while also preparing tomorrow's homework, these are a few of the skills that have replaced the old ones.

Many of the old skills involved patient application, concentration and slow learning. By contrast, the skills we acquire today involve speed, multi-tasking, short bursts of concentration and quick gratification. This can be seen most clearly in the case of stories. If quick gratification has supplanted the skills entailed in the telling of stories, it has also supplanted the skills in patiently listening to stories of others, waiting for little clues regarding the imminence of peripeteia or recognition. Instead, we allow images, noises, tastes and sensations to wash over us. Even movies, which are capable of enormous narrative pyrotechnics increasingly turn into visual and sound pyrotechnics, in the words of the great Greek film-maker Theodoros Angelopoulos, treating their audience as shooting targets on which to practice.

Quick gratification is what most of us most of the time are after, and quick gratification can be obtained by simply seeing, listening or speed-reading. But quick gratification requires skills of its own. This is I think where late modernity has equipped us with remarkable new skills. These include

- learning to filter out much that is irrelevant noise and focusing on what creates a memorable emotional experience
- learning to tolerate uncertainty, lack of plot and absence of closure
• learning to cope with pluri-vocality, with ill-defined characters and ambiguous moral messages
• learning to juxtapose, compare and criticise
• learning to live experiences with ambiguous or opaque meanings, without closure
• learning to enjoy puzzles without permanent solutions

The key question that confronts us much of the time is not as Barbara Czarniawska suggests “What does this text say?” nor indeed “How does this text say it?” but rather “Is this a text?” and “Does it matter if it isn’t?”

While I was preparing this presentation, the gruesome and grotesque pictures of Iraqi prisoner abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere were published, first on CBS, then Washington Post and the New Yorker and then they saturated the world media and cyberspace. Film of the beheading of an American hostage circulated on the internet. The dread and horror of the pictures paralysed my thinking processes for quite some time before raising age-old but still burning questions of morality, and politics and colonial relations – they also, however, seemed to offer ample confirmation for both of the old clichés that “a picture tells more that a thousand words” and “every picture tells a story”. Each picture of prisoner abuse had far greater effect than personal testimonies by witnesses, stories of prisoner abuse which had been circulating for some time previously, and also official reports that confirmed that the horrors portrayed by the pictures were no aberrations but endemic and systematic.

What I came to realize is that the images themselves told no stories, but rather acted as anti-stories, in two distinct ways. First, they torpedoed official narratives according to which the coalition, having failed to identify any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, legitimated the invasion and subsequent occupation of the country by presenting them as the aimed at removing an abhorrent dictator and his callous regime with its record of human rights abuses from power. The symbolism of abuse being perpetrated by the Americans and their allies in the very prison where Saddam Hussein's had tortured his victims is too obvious – different regimes, same prisons. In this way, the images acted as 'killer-facts' of the official narratives.
But images of prisoner abuse also functioned as anti-stories in a more radical way – they confirmed that stories are no longer a match for images in creating a climate of public opinion. As long as images of prisoner abuse have not leaked out of Guantanamo Bay detention camps, horror stories to former detainees may be ignored or discredited. It is not the story that has power as long as it can be dismissed as propaganda, exaggeration or allegation. The image, however, even when contested (as in the case of photographic evidence of prisoner abuse by the British Royal Lancashire regiment) is incontestable, evidence of its hegemony in our times over any other type of text.

We are now deep in the era of spectacle. Some of us, not yet narratively deskilled or fighting a rear-guard action against narrative deskilling, may seek to interpret, deconstruct or narrate the images that assault our senses. But we deceive ourselves to believe that we live our lives through narratives, that we routinely infuse it with meaning through stories, or that we seek pleasure and fun in tales. To be sure, in the course of each day we encounter numerous narrative fragments, still-born stories, opinions, fancies and so forth. Occasionally, we encounter a story whose plot moves us, which 'resonates' with us. Swamped by images, pictures and spectacles, we are more likely than not to forget it in a matter of days or weeks and quite unlikely to retell it to anyone. Newspapers peddle their own stories liberally supported by pictures while around the clock newscasts urge us to stay with the "unfolding story" while excited reporters seek to keep our attention with liberal doses of opinion, speculation and interpretation. These are constantly interrupted by advertisements which interject their own images or story fragments into our consciousness. Our consciousness is now saturated with image and our memories are to a large extent visual ones. As Susan Sontag put it recently:

The memory museum is now mostly a visual one. Photographs have an insuperable power to determine what people recall of events. … To live is to be photographed, to have a record of one’s life, and therefore, to go on with one’s life, oblivious, or claiming to be oblivious, to the camera’s non-stop attentions. But it is also to pose. To act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images. … Events are in part designed to be photographed. (The Guardian, G2, 24 May 2004, Susan Sontag, “What have we done?”, pp. 2-3)
Allow me to offer you one last illustration from the memory museum. This is a picture that many of you may have seen and may still remember. I wonder if you can guess how many years ago this picture was taken. The picture, known as The Madonna From Bentalha, was taken by the Algerian photographer Hocine who awarded the prize for the best World Press Photo of 1998. The photograph is one that remained imprinted in my memory since then, even though I thought it had been taken far more recently. It took me quite a long time to trace it on the internet and my pleasure, if I can use such a word about such a picture, of finding it was considerable. My pleasure was even greater, when I discovered the story behind the picture, eloquently told by a reporter from The Copenhagen Post:

On February 13 the Algerian photographer Hocine was awarded the prize for the best World Press Photo of 1998. The story behind the photo was of an Algerian woman grieving for her eight children killed in a massacre. A few days after the award was given the French press agency AFP and the organisation World Press Photo announced that in fact, the woman was grieving for her one brother and not her children. Eight months on, with the World Press Photo exhibition currently showing in Øksnehallen in Copenhagen, somehow the wrong story managed to be placed with the award winner photo, renewing the debate about the link between image and story.

The newspaper Politiken, which has arranged the World Press Photo '98 exhibition here, was quick to acknowledge its mistake. "Unfortunately we overlooked the disclaimer of the original caption text when we arranged the exhibition. It is Politiken's fault. I want to stress that neither World Press Photo nor Øksnehallen are to blame," said Søren Rud, footage manager at Politiken.

The mistake was pointed out by a journalist from another
newspaper, Aktuelt. Rasmus Lindboe had visited the woman in Algeria and says that the photo, titled The Madonna From Bentalha, has destroyed her life. According to Lindboe, the woman feels humiliated and abused by the media, and that the photograph had caused her to be abandoned by her husband. She also lives in fear of her life, afraid that the authorities or religious fundamentalists will blame her for the bad publicity created by the Bentalha massacre (22 Sept. 1997).

The row about the truth of the story behind the photo has raised questions about the power of news pictures. The photo won the award because of its image of a grieving woman, and was a true representation of sorrow and mourning. In this way, the director of the World Press Photo Foundation, Árpád Gerecsey, stands by the prize-winning picture. "It is a very strong picture of a woman in grief. The photo documents that World Press Photo represents high quality photography," said Gerecsey to Politiken last week.

Copenhagen Post on line

http://www.cphpost.dk/get/56475.html

Who now remembers the struggle whose tragic outcome the picture ‘captures’? Who remembers the woman? Who remembers the facts, the story, the history?

[For those interested, here is an account from the Amnesty International web-site:

In 1997, the civilian population has been targeted in an unprecedented manner. Thousands of men, women, children and elderly people have been slaughtered, decapitated,
mutilated or burned alive in their homes. Babies and elderly people have been hacked to death. Pregnant women have been disembowelled. Most of these massacres were committed around the capital in the Algiers, Blida and Medea regions - in the most heavily militarized part of the country - and often near army and security forces barracks. Many massacres, often lasting hours, took place only a few hundred metres" away from army and security forces" barracks.

Hundreds of men, women, children and even babies, were massacred in Rais and Bentalha, a few kilometres south of the capital, Algiers, on 28 August and 22 September, respectively. Both Rais and Bentalha are virtually surrounded by army barracks and security forces outposts, and survivors of the Bentalha massacre have reported that military troops with armoured vehicles were stationed a few hundred metres away as the massacre was taking place.

The massacres lasted for hours; Yet despite the screams of the victims, sound of gunshots, flames and smoke from the burning houses, the security forces stationed nearby never intervened to come to the rescue of the victims, nor to arrest those responsible for the massacres, who got away on each occasion. In Beni Messous, near the most important barracks and security forces centre of the capital, more than 60 civilians were massacred. Neighbours telephoned the security forces who refused to intervene saying the matter was within the mandate of the gendarmerie.

Such testimonies add further weight to reports that armed groups who carried out massacres of civilians in some cases operated in conjunction with, or with the consent of, certain army or security forces units.
The Algerian authorities blame the massacres on the GIA (Groupe islamique armé - Armed Islamic Group) and other such groups, in the same way as they also blame other killings and abuses committed in the past five years on these groups. However, they have consistently failed to investigate, or to allow others to investigate, killings and other abuses blamed on both armed groups and security forces.

Armed groups, calling themselves "Islamic groups" have also continued to deliberately and arbitrarily kill civilians, often targeting the most vulnerable, including women and children, or carrying out indiscriminate bomb attacks in public places. Among those targeted by such groups are people from all walks of life, including relatives of members of the security forces, civil servants, journalists, artists, youths who had completed the compulsory military service, and people whom they accuse of being supporters of the government. In addition to killing civilians armed groups have also been responsible for abductions and torture, including rape, and for issuing death threats to individuals and groups of people.

In one of the most widely-quoted excerpts of his work, Roland Barthes argued:

"The narratives of the world are without number. In the first place the word 'narrative' covers an enormous variety of genres which are themselves divided up between different subjects, as if any material was suitable for the composition of the narrative; the narrative may incorporate articulate language, spoken or written; pictures, still and moving; gestures and the ordered arrangements of all the ingredients: it is present in myth, legend, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, pantomime, painting (think of Carpaccio's Saint Ursula) stained glass windows, cinema, comic strips, journalism, conversation. In addition, under the almost infinite number of forms, the narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives." (Barthes, 1966/1977, p. 79)
Coming at a time when narrative was viewed as an endangered species, Barthes’s plea to recognize the diversity and ubiquity of narrative served a useful purpose. It dazzled a generation of narratologists who could expand their analyses to myriads of genres, forms and specimens, ranging from conversations to buildings and from telephone directories to internet chat-rooms. As part of the linguistic turn in the social sciences, the reading of such diverse texts (or narratives as Barthes would have liked us to believe) generated considerable insights and has caused much excitement. Yet, the price that social sciences have had to pay for these insights is considerable – that of reading everything the same way, disregarding the peculiarities of different texts. To use the expression of the conference organizers we have tended to project a remarkably narrow range of architexts onto textscapes that cry out for a very different type of appreciation (Keenoy & Oswick, 2004).

Undoubtedly some of today’s architexts contain narrative fragments or possess narrative qualities. Yet, in parallel with these, we are surrounded by immense textscapes where the primary text is the image, pure and simple, devoid of narrative, story or plot. These are the textscapes of high and popular culture, true anti-narratives (rather than Bojeian ante-narratives). It is the plethora of these anti-narratives that makes the persistence of narratives and even stories a remarkable and valuable cultural phenomenon.

It is time to return to our opening example. A painting of a young girl with a pearl earring is staring us sideways. Her lips are moist, slightly parted. A well-known painting by a notoriously unprolific painter. One that came to prominence as a result of an engaging novel and then a Hollywood film. It is now visited in its home by millions of visitors, intent on experiencing the original, having been moved by Chevalier’s book. An anonymous Amazon reviewer of the novel, writes:

“I was attracted to this book for one reason. I was at the Mauritshuis Museum at the Hague in the Netherlands in 1996 and saw Vermeer’s "Girl with a Pearl Earring" and "A View of Delft" (both pictured on the book’s dust jacket) in person. They are the most unforgettable paintings I have ever seen. Vermeer's paintings are incredibly hypnotic, drawing us into a time and place that no longer exists. By virtue of thousands of brush strokes, we are pulled into a time warp which places us into a scene the same surreal way that an old photograph
The painting draws us indeed into a distant world. We are drawn into the world of a girl who has sat patiently for hours while a painter carefully and patiently lavished his brush strokes on the canvas. As a deliberate pose, it may strike us as anticipating our world of posing, images and photo-stories. But such an interpretation would be very naïve. Griet’s world is a very different world from ours. We can only surmise what such a world might have been like. But as numerous commentators have noticed, this is a world of stillness. It is a world whose tranquillity should not be confused with peace, and whose orderliness should not be confused with order. But it is a universe apart from the noisy, clamorous and spectacular world of ours.


