

Chapter Three

NARRA (2013-2016)

In systems perspective, there are no contrived confines such as the theater proscenium or picture frame. Conceptual focus rather than material limits defines the system. Thus, any situation, either in or outside the context of art, may be designed and judged as a system. Inasmuch as a system may contain people, ideas, messages, atmospheric conditions, power sources, and so on, a system is, to quote the systems biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a 'complex of components in interaction', comprised of material, energy and information in various degrees of organization. In evaluating systems, the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system. Where the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control.

Jack Burnham, 'Systems esthetics', 1968⁷⁶

I had to work consciously to do work that would imply the kind of richness and complexity that I saw around me; and I think those things just got into it. One of my painter friends says I'm awfully good at the edges. It was intended as a joke but I think that that may be true; but there's been a conscious attempt for me to treat any area whether I only have half an inch more before I hit the wall, or whether it's dead center, to not treat any one area with a kind of dramatic preference. I dealt with that several ways. One is with a kind of simple-minded formal idea about composition by just putting something of no consequence dead center so that when you look there, yes, there it is, but you see that

76 Burnham, 'Systems esthetics', 32.

certainly doesn't matter any more than anything else; that's not what the center is for.

Robert Rauschenberg, interview, 1965⁷⁷

NARRA is conceptualised as a system for organising audiovisual material nonlinearly, for viewing online. NARRA can also function as a presentation interface for audiovisual material in physical space. The act of organising on the part of the authors actually transforms the process of making work(s). The act of creating the resultant work, as well as its navigation by its intended audience, has close analogies in the critical literary theories of Bakhtin, Foucault, Barthes and Derrida, and, perhaps most importantly, the thought of Deleuze and Guattari. However, NARRA is designed for media-makers using, as *prima materia*, video and audio rather than text. However, Landow, in *Hypertext 3.0* (the successor to *Hyper/Text/Theory*, 1994, and *Hypertext 2.0*, 1997), draws no distinction between hypertext and hypermedia, as online they function similarly.

NARRA does not derive from critical theory but it so closely echoes in its functions the ideas of the above philosophers as to almost seem as an exemplar of their thought. In describing how hypertext functions, Landow⁷⁸ outlines textual openness, intertextuality, decentering, polyvocality, nonlinear models of the network and, most importantly for us, Deleuze's concept of the rhizome. Even in his initial definition of hypertext, Landow is content to let Barthes's utopic description stand:

In *S/Z* Barthes describes an ideal textuality that precisely matches that which has come to be called computer hypertext - text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-

77 'Oral history interview with Robert Rauschenberg conducted 1965 Dec. 21', by Dorothy Seckler, for the Archives of American Art, accessed 1 October 2018, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-rauschenberg-12870>.

78 George Landow, *Hypermedia 3.0: critical theory and new media in an era of globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), Chapter 2.

ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms *link*, *node*, *network*, *web* and *path*. ‘In this ideal text’ says Barthes, ‘the networks [*réseaux*] are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilises *extend as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable ...; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.’⁷⁹

This could equally be an appropriate initial description of the goals of NARRA - to create an AV authoring tool, also suitable for the viewer, based on the possibilities afforded by networked collaborators, networked information and infinite extensibility. In contrast with other similar recent tools (Klynt, Korsakow, Pageflow, pan.do/ra, Scalar), NARRA is designed for media-makers, working in collaboration, using extensive quantities of audiovisual materials, to create open-ended works not predicated so much on narrative flow as on discourse. It is a navigable repository as much as interactive ‘film’.

Possible directions for an artist’s cinema include the confluences of Robert Rauschenberg (silkscreened still images, painting, overdrawing within a single artwork/image), Thomas Hirschhorn (ideas, actions, sculpture, images, texts, assemblage) or Jason Rhoades (gallery-filling heaps). These are models for a cinema not concerned so much with sequence as with temporal contemporaneity, not nonlinear but concurrent, and dependent on where you are looking and what you are seeing and hearing once you look, for there could be many things to see that might not be apparent until

⁷⁹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 5 and 6, quoted in Landow, *Hypertext 3.0*, 2.

you have seen other things within the same work - things that you could see, or imagined you could see if you heard the same work with another soundtrack, for example, or had seen another series of sequences beforehand.

One of NARRA's central tenets is a shared body of media, a potential archive, to be used in authoring multiple moving-image sequences. Hence the viewer's memory, upon re-seeing shots used in other contexts, acts as a resonator for the thought-images from 'other' sequences.

Barthes's term for a single unit of navigable text, 'lexia', has no precise filmic equivalent. Perhaps 'the shot' comes closest, but the shot can be many things - edited, unedited, with original sound or without, etc. Florian Thalhofer's Korsakow system uses the SNU (smallest narrative unit); with the pan.do/ra system, each frame of video material has a unique URL; with NARRA, we still speak in traditional terms, of raw footage that can be divided into shots, or not, short edited sequences or longer master sequences, and complete 'works'. Any one of these can of course be iterated or versioned: edited for specific artistic/narrative needs; processed in postproduction; colour-corrected; have original sound or some version of a soundtrack comprised of multiple tracks or even hundreds of singular audio events;⁸⁰ include textual overlay embedded in the image, etc.

NARRA is a tool primarily for videomakers to build interactive media works, but what remains after the public viewing experience is an essential fact too. NARRA's extensibility makes it a space for expanded works that can be extended, returned to, and explored anew, or renewed again from different perspectives at a future time. It seems that some subjects should perhaps not be used to create narrative as an end in itself, or that a narrative drawn from a

⁸⁰ Chion's *Audio-Vision* describes the cinema image defined through its container, 'the frame', while soundtrack events or elements have no similar 'auditory container' and exist within, through and, importantly, outside shots and scenes. See Chapter 4, 'The Auditory Scene', pp. 66 onward.

subject today will not be the narrative we understood at the time. In terms of end use, it is more precise to understand NARRA projects as media repositories and story(s) rather than as ‘interactive films’. Two analogies are USC’s Shoah Archive and more recently, Arnau Gifreu Castells’ *The Negotiators*, a Transmedia project to document Colombia’s FARC guerrillas as they return to society from the jungle. In each case, possible eventual uses for the archival audiovisual materials warrant a longer view on potential public presentation of what, even at the moment of capture, becomes archival media:

New Dimensions in Testimony (NDT) is a collection of interactive biographies from USC Shoah Foundation that enable people to have conversations with pre-recorded video images of Holocaust survivors and other witnesses to genocide.

So far, 16 survivors - 15 from the Holocaust and one from the 1937 Nanjing Massacre - have been interviewed for the project. Each survivor selected to participate has also given his or her testimony to the Institute’s Visual History Archive, which contains 55,000 video testimonies of survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides. But NDT is a new kind of initiative. The survivors were interviewed surrounded by cameras arranged in a ring to capture a three-dimensional recording of them telling their story in a new way, by answering questions that people are most likely to ask. Thus the material both becomes an archive of testimony, raw material for a contemporary AI-based interactive museum display and over the next x years who knows what form of audiovision?⁸¹

Walter Kempowski’s *Das Echolot* (English excerpt translated and published as *Swansong 1945*) and Svetlana Alexievich’s threaded

81 ‘Dimensions in testimony’, USC Shoah Foundation, accessed 1 October 2018, <https://sfi.usc.edu/collections/holocaust/ndt>.

narratives, each unique in approach, make extensive use of archives and recorded interviews, respectively, as source materials. The authors weave these materials into linear narratives. We could easily imagine an expanded navigable method of returning to their sources. Authorship needn't be lost but agency is accorded to the extensive voices of the original materials.

In the face of rapidly changing web architectures, software and plugins, even software languages, operating systems and media codecs, perhaps the whole premise of NARRA is as utopic as Barthes's premise of infinite extensibility, though. As an archive to be returned to, navigated and re-explored, a stable space for the extension of initial premises, as a complex media work, in five years' time will we be able to see it without an intensive/extensive shift in focus to media migration paths? This issue is explored below.

Filmmaking, videomaking, the digital: moving images, over their 120-odd years of history, have used different tactics to create meaning, to build story, to transmit veracity. From Eisensteinian montage, in which sense arises from the cut, to our shaky smartphone videos, in which we imagine truth to reside in the lack of editing or postproduction, multiple strategies coexist today. NARRA attempts to constitute a discursive medium whereby discourse between collaborators both breaks and then builds meaning. Multiple viewpoints, multiple media, exegesis, comment, re-contextualisation through re-use of shared material necessarily does not permit any single story to predominate. Our mutual story, and 'story' in the loosest sense of the word, is a result of context as much as content. Over the entire story space of a single project narrative, causality or sequence is moot. It exists at the micro level but is subsumed into the larger grain of the presentation of a body of experiences, using sounds, text and images (moving and still) that constantly expand as the work is explored by the viewer or kept alive by the authors' adding further resources.