

## **What is narrative?**

**Corinne Squire**

In this paper, I want to look at two aspects of narrative that relate to common definitions of it, in order to take apart those definitions and reconfigure them in another way.

I shall start with a very broad definition of a narrative as a chain of signs with particular rather than general social, cultural and/or historical meanings. This definition means that narratives can involve sign sets that move temporally, causally, or in some other socio-culturally recognizable way, and that because they operate with particularity rather than generality, they are not reducible to theories. Within this definition, narrative can operate across media, including within still images. It derives simply from the succession of signs, independent of the symbol system, medium, or 'semiotic matrix' (Brockmeier, forthcoming) in which that succession occurs. However, in a narrative, the movement from sign to sign has a recognizable social, cultural and historical significance. A number series is a progression of signs, but its primary meaning is mathematical and does not lie in social, cultural or historical realms. A corollary of this definition is that stories do not have universal currency; they draw on and work within particular social, cultural and historical symbolic resources. The 'reading' of stories may therefore shift or break down between distinct social, cultural and historical worlds. Within such a definition, visual materials can certainly constitute narratives.

In many accounts of narrative, stories' temporal progression is privileged; I am not, however, prioritising it in the above definition. Lives unfold in time, so does the hearing or reading of stories, and stories' ability to parallel the lifecourse on this dimension is often taken as determining their value. But just because they happen in time, this doesn't mean that time is their major organising principle. After all, they happen in space too, and narrative researchers much more rarely spend time exploring the parallels between the spatial dimensions of bodies and lives, and the spatial extension of voices, writing, image. Moreover, the nonlinearity of apparently temporally arranged narratives is also acknowledged as highly significant within literary and cultural theory, as with the post-nineteenth century novel, or ways in which comic artists often disrupt the left-to-right, top-to-bottom temporal coding of images, or more complexly, the gaps within Jo Spence's (1999) sequences of photographs of her cancer experiences. Psychoanalytic accounts of film, too suggest it is a medium pre-eminently suited

to examine the flexible timings of the unconscious. Temporality thus signally fails to explain the narrative power even of moving images - unless we recast all that falls outside it as other forms of temporality, a move that merely reinstates it as an organising principle.

Still images are perhaps the most interesting cases to examine for narrative outside temporality – if, that is, we except those versions of them that are clearly temporally marked as for instance a moment in a larger verbal story, or a life; or those images that are surrounded by explicating text that ‘tells their story.’ As Rosalind Krauss (1993) has pointed out, there can be movement *within* still images. Writing about Cindy Sherman’s ‘disaster’ photographs, which re-enact, with mimetic failure and excess, earlier ‘history’ paintings, Krauss describes an ‘erosion of form from within’ in these still images as they move towards ‘formlessness,’ set in downward motion by the gravitational ‘forces of the horizontal.’ This generates another kind of narrative succession, towards, as Barthes (2009) would say more generally, death, within the photographs.



Sherman’s later photographs of ambiguous materials, abject and decomposing, trace similar progressions more explicitly, and without the historicising connotations of the ‘disaster’ series which could be taken as implicit temporalisation. In these later photographs, progressions of decay occur across the image, but they are not temporally marked and need not be read as such:



Similarly, the recent BBC radio series, made with the British Museum, a ‘History of the world in 100 objects’ (MacGregor, 2011) allowed those objects to display narratives crystallised within them. Of course, there are stories written about the objects, and they can be fitted into broader historical narratives too. However, the visible marks that the objects bear upon them *show* their narratives to some degree, independently of the other stories around them. This West African drum, for instance, demonstrates its origin in the wood it is made of. Its skin, reflecting the next stage in its journey and a complex, indeterminate history within slavery, is North American. The object’s location in the British Museum indexes the US-based collecting of rich English merchants, who were also often implicated in slavery. Some of this history is written strikingly into the object; much is not, but these historical disjunctions also at times figure within the object, for instance in the disconnect between wood and skin.

Figure 3 Akan drum



Laura Mulvey (2006) has suggested that contemporary visual technologies point up some different, ‘delayed’ ways to look at moving images. Pausing moving images, repeating them, zooming in, taking images apart and recombining them – these processes emphasise how meanings can be deferred and reconfigured. They suggest a more reflective, ‘pensive’ way of relating narratively to images. Contemporary processes of image reading thus show how we can read narratives in altered, fragmented and open ways. Mulvey addresses primarily moving images, but still images and objects provide a similar deferred narrative possibility, repeatedly stirred up by the differences within the image or object that a ‘pensive’ reading foregrounds – by subtle details within it, for instance.

This account of narrative moves away from what is perhaps the socio-historically specific dominance of ‘pure’ temporality in narrative studies, sustained in social-scientific ideas about narrative longer than in some other fields (Mitchell, 1987; Fried, 2012). The lack of foregrounded temporality in still visual images and objects especially, allows us to look at other possibilities – spatiality, conceptual progressions, interpersonal co-constructions – as primary narrative organisers.

Anthony Appiah talks about the open possibilities of future readings of the Akan drum. It is often said that objects and images are more likely than verbal materials to generate shifting or broken narrative readings through their ‘openness’ – that is, through the much larger set of signifiers to which each signified potentially connects. This truism perhaps derives its force from the comforting but misleading familiarity of certain kinds of language, rather than visual or object, interpretation, within contemporary western cultures – and also from long histories within those cultures of argument about the relative functions and status of words and images (Derrida, 1987; Mitchell, 1987). When we start to read in detail, at different levels, for what is not there as well as what is, it is no longer self-evident that verbal stories allow more stable

and bounded readings than visual or object narratives. Multiplicity, fracture and contradiction characterize narratives across media. Narratives are all put together from signs whose own disarticulations are compounded by the chains of signs that constitute stories.

I am going to look now at the place of exceptions in narratives, especially in relation to the HIV epidemic, my main research field, whose exceptionality is itself often the subject of debate. In relation to this epidemic, I think we can see exceptional stories working in at least two different and valuable ways.

The importance of particularity in stories, which in its most acute form manifests as exceptions, is widely recognised by narrative researchers – the particularity of stories is indeed what distinguishes narrative from theory, for instance, for Bruner (1990). I think this distinction is useful - narrative is usually differentiated from theory, precisely to the extent that it explicates through specificity. But the distinction is not fully tenable. My own work and that of many others is always concerned with multiple instances of narratives studied across multiple participants – not as many as would be addressed in a quantitative study of course, but a number similar to that characterising many qualitative studies. In such work, researchers are aiming not for generalisability, which relies on defined conventions of sampling and significance –although these of course differ markedly between social, natural and physical sciences. Rather, this kind of work relies on what is often called transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) – that is, the possibility for audiences and very often, researchers themselves to relate findings from one context to those in another context, to make connections that may offer ways of understanding other findings in other contexts and that may even suggest *what* findings may emerge in them. This is not generalisability or predictivity but rather, pragmatic versions of them which recast them as transferability and informed speculation.

In such circumstances, narratives, analysed across multiple instances, can produce heuristics, if not theories, of phenomena. Theories in any case occur at multiple levels, and many of them are pretty close to being heuristics, especially in the social sciences. The possibility that such heuristics offer of going beyond description and singularity in researching narratives is important. But the role of specificity and exceptions doesn't seem strong in such an account. However, it is narratives' rootedness in the particular that allows them to bring into research, phenomena that are new, ignored, or recalcitrant because of their complexity and opaqueness.

It's this rooted particularity that allows narrative research to become more or differently transferable, to build better heuristics.

There is also a large amount of narrative research that is much more clearly grounded in particularity: research on specific stories, biographies, and cases. Elliot Mishler's (1999) work has been exemplary in arguing for the importance of variability in narrative research, showing that such research is not just doing what the majority of qualitative research does anyway, but is contributing something really distinctive in its exhaustive pursuit of what comes next in the story, the other story, the untold or unheard story. I think this is interestingly different from what anthropological particularity offers, though this is a distinction needing more unpacking than can be achieved here.

Such variability and particularity function in two apparently different ways. Sometimes they are emblematic. Part of this emblematising process, involves including exceptionality. The exceptional nature of some stories helps support arguments, because it suggests the generality across highly idiosyncratic circumstances of those arguments. So in such cases, stories are found or constructed and used to illustrate or encapsulate a more general truth, as when researchers tend to use story extracts in describing narrative patterns across a large dataset. It's clear, though, that in such cases, the individual story does not really matter for the argument, even if it is what readers remember; and also, that a story can be used to bolster some quite questionable arguments, because the reliance on stories tends to divert readers, both logically and because of the sheer column inches the stories take up. Narrative researchers are not immune to these failings.

The other way in which narrative particularity functions is explicitly *as* exception – that is, to point up radically distinct phenomena rather than to illustrate general ones. This kind of particularity involves unassimilable stories which point outside the usual theoretical frame. Such stories can be problematic for narrative researchers. Sometimes indeed researchers might be advised to throw such stories out of their dataset, such is their atypicality. Their theoretical reach is apparently limited – they can support only a preliminary, single-instance account - but their significance for the testing and development of theory -or heuristics - is great. By making things messy, they challenge existing explanations and expand the scope of future ones.

Looking more broadly at narrative material, I think it's helpful to think about such narrative exceptions as never fully exceptional, and about radical exceptionality as appearing even in

apparently more emblematic, transferable material. Narrative exceptions get their strength from the conventions they step outside; narrative conventions get their strength from their exceptions. (This, perhaps, is how the notion of exceptionality differs most clearly from that of deviant case analysis - Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Nussbaum (1998) has argued something similar in the case of tragedy. Circumstances of suffering may be baroque and distant, unalloyedly exceptional, she says, but that only underlines the commonality of suffering itself, and of the agentic albeit doomed attempts within tragedy to overcome it. At Occupy London's Tent City University, at a stories workshop, I told a story about an HIV positive woman in South Africa specifically for us to see whether the radical otherness of the material made any narrative sense in that context. It was indeed the strong unfamiliarity of the details of the story that reinforced the common narrative line the listeners extracted: that terrible events can be accepted, transcended and even used to shape a progressive life path. Again this dialectical working of narrative convention with exception is hardly a new or original insight. Mishler (1999), presenting material from craftartists' individually unique life stories, points out that across this disparateness the common occurrence of turning points in life narratives for instance is apparent to readers in very different circumstances.

Conversely, moments of exceptionality can often be recognised in even the most conventional narratives. They are the signifiers that drop out of the story without having a clear meaning, the unreadable elements that either stick in the head or immediately get forgotten, like the puncta that Barthes (2009) describes in photographs. This is where reading for exceptionality, what Schor (2006) calls reading in detail, becomes important for all narrative work, whether it's based on small or large stories, cases or large databases.

Recalcitrance to meaning is indeed the appeal I would say of the particularity of stories – the unincorporable elements of them. Many critics of the narrative turn – Craib (2004), Frosh (2002), Cowen (2009) - suggest that we are seduced by the closure and predictability of stories, while lives are messy, inchoate and nonsensical. But a growing body of research and indeed all our work at CNR I'd say *emphasises* the incoherence, the intrinsic multiplicity and contradictions of stories (Hyvarinen et al, 2010) . In this we are drawing on well-established literary-theoretical ideas about the discontinuities within language, including narrative language (Butler, 2005). In my case, particularly in relation to HIV narratives I've found the work of the analyst and literary theorist Julia Kristeva (1984) useful in trying to read stories as provisional nets of meaning thrown over abysses of unrepresentable abjection.

(Of course there are pleasures of repetition and closure in narratives, but it's interesting that exact repetition, exact closure, is not what we usually demand of stories. Even for children, the much-desired repetition of a story is happening always in another context that (as Derrida in Cornell, 2005, puts it) opens up another meaning. Even in oral traditions often caricatured as faithful reproducers of narratives, innovation is prized alongside familiarity. As we might expect then, the recuperative power of stories, well captured in McAdams's (2006)'s book on redemption narratives, is always underpinned and shadowed by stories' more disruptive effects. Cowen says we avoid the 'complex story maps' that are really required to do justice to phenomena; I think that such complexity is itself attractive, even if it is implicit and covert within many apparently conventional and coherent stories. Perhaps the other interesting thing about what Cowen calls his suspicion of narrative is that it's a suspicion of pleasure, surfaces, triviality, 'meaningless' details, perhaps femininity itself.

I want to turn now to exceptionality in some stories from my most recent research about HIV. Of course, exceptionality in the HIV case applies to lived phenomena and not only stories. But there has been longstanding argument in the HIV industry about just how exceptional HIV is – is it just another condition of low health resources, gender inequity, underdevelopment and postcolonialism? Is there something exceptional about its scale, stigmatisation and effects? Or is this 'exceptionalist' claim simply one made to extort money from northern governments and international NGOs while the epidemic flattens out into yet another ongoing health problem? Is HIV now just differentially treatable according to resources, like many other conditions, with strong but not unique resource implications and no likely new theoretical interest for social researchers? (De Waal, 2006).

In my most recent interview round investigating HIV support in the UK, I interviewed 46 people living with HIV – 15 of whom I've interviewed before – and found a strong tension between the narrative naturalization of HIV- its management through medicalisation normalisation and marketisation – and the narrative disruption of such processes by stories of being left behind by treatment, social services, public representations of the epidemic, by stories of everyday lives lived excluded from or on the margins of families, work, relationships, citizenship, and by stories of resisting medicalisation, refusing to be normal, rejecting markets or setting up their own (Squire, 2010). These disruptions do indeed demonstrate HIV exceptionalism, though I think there are better ways to describe it . For it's really about not a general HIV exceptionalism of the kind that used to be argued for, but rather, about very specific characteristics: the particular history of illness and deaths around



this condition; its particular medical unpredictability and treatment difficulty; its particular and continuing, sexualised, gendered, homophobic stigmatisation in many contexts; and the particular new physiological and psychosocial phenomena around this relatively young condition that are always coming into existence and the specific unspoken abdication of HIV treatment in low-income countries (Nguyen, 2010) and its limitations in many other contexts. While one can see such narrative patterns across different epidemic contexts, developing over the last decade and a half of treatment access in the west, the narrative *tension* has I think increased in the contemporary austerity context, so that many of the stories in the interviews appeared to be stories about living in a recession rather than living with HIV, accompanied by concomitant moments of narrative alternatives where interviewees found ways of framing their neoliberal lives differently.

I want to present a couple of stories whose narrative exceptionality is also a way of conveying these particularities of the HIV epidemic. First, this is a story Robert (all names are pseudonyms) told – not for the first time- by about how he met his boyfriend.

**Robert:** Yes, I mean, it's quite funny, because he's someone that I'd seen around for years, who I fancied, and then we got into contact online and then, there's an application on the iPhone, called Grindr, and I messaged him on Grindr, and we were chatting on that and then I thought, 'right, I'll disclose', so I disclosed that I was positive, and he said, oh, 'so am I', and I went, 'oh cool' and he said, 'those aren't the words I'd use, but I know what you mean.'

This is a story, which Robert himself tells as atypical, of romance and disclosure by messaging – Robert later says he thinks that medium gives people a space to respond that face-to-face disclosure does not - , and of a transgressive valuing of HIV as 'cool'. Robert's now-boyfriend thought the last text message a little un-pc; Robert like a number of other interviewees talked a few times about his flippant and 'darkly' humorous address to HIV, something not all HIV positive people, let alone all people, shared. A lot of audiences, of all HIV positive statuses, can understand a story that ends with the relief of two people not having to deal with serodiscordance in their relationship – calling that 'cool' for many contravenes an appropriate seriousness. However, this story of 'cool' does work to exemplify something really specific about the epidemic in this time, in those circumstances: that HIV positive people who are being treated can and will consider and sometimes have unprotected sex with each other, as Robert describes later – and perhaps with people who are HIV negative -because their low viral loads make infection risks very small. This, within a continuing context of blaming HIV positive people for their condition and othering them, can

be a disturbing thought – should people living with HIV have the same pleasures as everyone else? And if people living with HIV can be so healthy that unprotected sex is not risky, how can they be understood as reassuringly, punitively different from others?

The ‘coolness’ Robert mentions is also related by him later to him and his boyfriend’s ability to care for one another, and here again the exceptionality of this story points to something quite particular about the contemporary UK epidemic: that it’s invisibilised, medicalised and stigmatised to such an extent that much non-medical care is indeed given by HIV positive people to other HIV positive people. Perhaps something else that’s transgressive about this story, is that readers glimpse in it something of the seriously uncool *social* relations HIV positive people often have with those of other statuses, the personal toll exacted by exclusion and othering.

I want now to show you a really different story, again highly specific and in this way opening up the contemporary contexts of the epidemic as well as escaping them in its idiosyncrasy – but working more as radical exception, less as exemplification. Here is Dorothy, an HIV positive woman in her forties from Southern Africa, living in the UK, telling us about her difficulties with her daughter, and how her son died:

**Dorothy:** She (daughter) still in {country 1} yes um, I tried to bring her but it didn’t work out and then I thought, I thought she was in primary school there going to secondary school so I had not looked for a place for her because I thought it was going to be possible but it didn’t, I had to go back to my sister again and beg her to take her so she took her, and then at one time she beat her up, with um you know the rawhide, you know they put a stick at the other end , she beat her, my daughter never told me, she beat her and she put salt and put chillies, my daughter never told me, I didn’t know about it until she went to visit at her father’s sister, that’s when they saw the scars and asked her and then she told them that my sister had beaten her and she had stolen some money from her , she didn’t want me to send her money but I said when I was going to school my parents used to give me a 50 cents at least you know...I feel I haven’t been there for my children you know and my son died in his sleep and I understand he was fasting, I don’t know what for and er, I dunno they told me at one time he wanted to commit suicide, and I regret having I told him to look after his sister you know, and I regret having told him that, because I don’t know why he wanted to commit suicide you know, seeing the people in Africa who are HIV.

This is one narrative sequence in a complex interview story that piles difficulty on loss on guilt on struggle. It is not more difficult in content than other stories in the interview.

However, it is more problematic to ‘make sense’ of.

There are groups of stories about migration, detention, leaving children, living on vouchers, and getting diagnosed late, to all of which Dorothy's interview contributes. These stories of hers act as a kind of window onto the range of issues HIV positive migrants face, issues so wideranging and intense that HIV itself often disappears from the picture. Such particularities tell us that HIV is often not at the centre of people's stories; they lay out the current complexity of those other factors as well as of HIV itself. In addition, many of these stories perform a depression that cannot be generalised or narrated away, that just gets repeated again and again, that is inevitably quite disturbing to listen to and much more to tell -but that is highly comprehensible. However, some of Dorothy's stories – like those above - are also exceptional in ways that do not convey understanding. These stories of her sister and children contain many elements that are entirely idiosyncratic. She has an ambivalent and very specific relationship with her sister, particularly but not only around HIV; she has a daughter who has tried to protect her from sending remittances by stealing money; her son, who had a serious non-HIV-related illness, contemplated suicide because, she fears, her injunction to take care of his sister led him to know his mother had HIV, and to fear that– like other HIV positive people he had known – she would die; perhaps his fasting was expiatory.

Such exceptional stories are not illustrative. They open up aspects of the epidemic such as relationships within HIV affected families, and across generations, that call for explanation, without telling us much about them. Nevertheless, such variability is important to know about even if, in the present, recognising it is all we can do; otherwise we would indeed be settling for the stories we know, the familiar ones, the comfortable ones that do not jibe with messiness of lives.

It is at this point of radical exceptionality , that the question of what narrative is, comes close to another question: what is narrative for? As Butler (2005) suggests, this is, in the case of personal narratives, foundationally a moral question. Self-narratives position us ethically in response to the social call to be moral subjects. But the moral narrative order is a contested and sometimes incomprehensible terrain. Narrative's radical exceptions lead us to think about the particularity of stories as ethical, not just representational, features.

## References

Barthes, R. (2009) *Camera lucida*. New York: Vintage Classics.

Brockmeier, J. (forthcoming).

Bruner, J. (1990) Culture and Human Development: A New Look. *Human Development*, 33, 344-355.

Butler, J. (2005) *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Cornell, D. (2005) Derrida: the gift of the future. *differences* 16, 3: 68-75.

Cowen, T. (2009) Be suspicious of stories.

[http://www.ted.com/talks/tyler\\_cowen\\_be\\_suspicious\\_of\\_stories.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/tyler_cowen_be_suspicious_of_stories.html) Accessed 08.03.2012

Craib, I. (2004) Narratives as bad faith. In M.Andrews, S.Sclater, C.Squire and A.Treacher (eds) *Uses of narrative*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction

De Waal, A. (2006) *AIDS and power*. London: Zed Books

Derrida, J. (1987) *Truth in painting*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

Fried, M. (2012) Forward, in G. Lessing *Laocoan*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Frosh, S. (2002) *After words*. London: Palgrave

Hyvärinen, M., Hydén, L.C., Saarenheimo, M., Tamboukou, M. (eds) (2010) *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

Krauss, R. (1993) Cindy Sherman's gravity: a critical fable. *Artforum International* 32, 1: 163-6.

Kristeva, J. *Powers of horror*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lincoln, A and Guba, E (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

McAdams, D. (2006) *The redemptive self*. New York: OUP USA.

MacGregor, N. (2011) *A history of the world in 100 objects*. London: Allen Lane.

- Mishler, E. (1999) *Craftartists*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mitchell, W. (1987) *Iconology*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press
- Mulvey, L. (2006) *Death 24 X a second*. London: Reaktion Books
- Nguyen, V-K. (2010) *The republic of therapy*. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press
- Nussbaum, M. (1998) Victims and agents: what Greek tragedy can teach us about sympathy and responsibility. *Boston Review*, December 20.
- Schor, N. (2006) *Reading in detail*. New York: Routledge.
- Spence, J. (1995) *Cultural sniping*. London: Routledge.
- Squire, C. (2010) Being naturalized, being left behind: The HIV citizen in the era of treatment possibility. *Critical Public Health* 10, 4: 401-27