

Re-Narrate

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A loosely structured talk about more or less random encounters with the idea of narrative
by Kirsten Strom

I. Porn: Linda Williams in her book *Hard Core* points out that early porn or “stag” films consisted entirely of “meat” and “money” shots with no apparent aspirations toward narrative. This is true of the early “cinema of attractions” in general, but it seems especially interesting to note that even porn films eventually seem to mandate some form of storytelling. The reason why it is particularly intriguing is the very fact that these films generally handle narrative so poorly, so unconvincingly, and yet it is still basically taken for granted that some form of plot stringing together the sex numbers is a requisite component. This leads some to speculate that narrative is itself inherently pleasurable, and that humans have an innate desire for it.

II. Mythologies: While it is rather un-post-modern to argue that anything is essential or inherent to human “nature,” it does seem to be basically true that more or less every culture has constructed some sort of mythology for itself, and usually these mythologies assume a narrative form. The purpose of these storytelling myths is generally to explain or make sense of those things in the world that are deemed otherwise inexplicable. The structure of a narrative, then, which typically culminates in some sort of conclusion, offers a sense of closure that affirms our desire to believe we live in a world in that makes sense, and that indeed we can master the world by making sense of it.

III. Star Wars: What interests me about the new Star Wars films (apart from how terrible they are) is that we all know the outcome at the start: everybody knows that what’s-his-name is going to become Darth Vader, that he will father Luke Skywalker, etc. So why does anyone see these films? This phenomenon suggests that we have a desire for suspense, that does not necessarily need to be expressed in the form of the ultimate outcome. It can also be expressed in terms of discovering not what happens, but how it happens. Either way, the effect is the same: we seek some form of closure; we want answers to our questions.

IV. Freud: But Freud and his various followers might argue that we need and crave the questions as much as the answers, that suspense allows us a safe haven in which to rehearse our anxieties in a context which poses no real threat to us. This again affords us an opportunity to attain an ego-affirming illusion of mastery, in that we have emotionally worked through the drama and conflict of the story, and that upon its satisfactory conclusion, we can feel affirmed in our will to believe that all is right with the world.

V. Metahistory: Hayden White argues in his book *Metahistory* that the expectations of narrative inform—if not distort—the way we write histories, that our desire for elements such as “conflict,” good guys and bad guys, morals, and conclusions, all of which we basically expect from a good narrative, causes us to manipulate history in order to make it fulfill these expectations. This is a call to look critically at the idea of narrative.

VI. Postmodernism and the critique of master narratives: This call for criticality is developed further by postmodern critics of the so-called Master Narrative, or meta-narrative. This critique maintains that narratives have been used not only to explain the world, but to justify iniquitous distributions of power. François Lyotard, in particular, developed the idea of the Master Narrative to describe self-serving cultural mythologies that assert the righteousness of the highly subjective point of view of those in power. A classic example of such a Master Narrative is the idea of Manifest Destiny, developed in this country in the 19th century to justify westward expansion through the perpetuation of the myth that it was not only the right but the duty of the “white man” to “settle” this continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This myth obviously serves the interests of the European settlers, and it is clearly no coincidence that it was constructed by them in order to validate their interests. Manifest Destiny is not merely a concept, but also a narrative in the sense that it implies movement or duration in time; it’s “the story of how the west was won.” Lyotard believes that post-modernism is characterized by an increased ability to see through these Master Narratives and to be more sensitive to the dangers of narrativizing the world.

VII. This show: So ultimately, what I see in this show is an articulation of a post-modern re-evaluation of the idea of narrative. I see this being characterized by two major tendencies: the first is the open-endedness of the narratives implied in these images. They suggest storytelling possibilities without forcing a tidy sense of closure, such as that characterizing most historical narratives in Hayden White’s observation. Contrarily, these images invite the viewer to be more active in experiencing narrative and to embrace the possibility that not all ends will be neatly tied up. A second trend that seems evident is a desire in the images to reveal their own process, to show that they are made up of disparate and even seemingly contradictory elements that might be coming from journalism, comic books, high art reproductions, etc. In this sense they are not aspiring to the status of a seamless mythic Master Narrative, but instead they aspire only to be what might be termed micronarratives, telling of one person’s more or less random encounters with the world, without trying to assert the authority or righteousness of their story over anyone else’s.