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The Spontaneous and the Literary in Self-Stories Within a Transmedial Environment

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Abstract

Among the genres that have emerged on the crossroads of narrative and media, the two that appear to need a closer scholastic interest are social media storytelling and web documentaries. While their technological, interactive and design-specific aspects have been widely discussed, their literary-narrative potential has been studied only by a small group of scholars so far. In this paper we draw on Verner Wolf's 2011 essay "Narratology and Mediality: The Transmedial Expansion of a Literary Discipline and Possible Consequences". Our purpose is to prove its central thesis, which states that, when approached with the literary-informed reading techniques in mind, social media true stories reveal the traits of near-literary narratives. The test case for the research is presented by a selection of self-confessional stories by ordinary social media users taken from the web documentary "Seven Digital Deadly Sins" (2014), a collaborative project between the Guardian and the National Film Board of Canada. Their qualitative analysis includes the affordances of the documentary's brilliantly designed interface, engaging the reader-users into the transmedial environment where they are given a chance to take the position of the sinners' "judges". The focus, however, is set up on the cognitive nature of the allegedly spontaneous tellability, experientiality and temporality of the sinners' confessional stories embedded in the interactive design. The results of the analysis show that, in effect, such stories are approaching the qualities of "unnatural", that is, literary narratives worthy to be seen as a new quasi-literary phenomenon.

Keywords

transmedial narratology, web-documentary, self-stories, social media, "Seven Digital Deadly Sins".

1 Introduction

1.1 Some Theoretical Prerequisites for the Literary-Narratological Approach to Social Media Storytelling

In the contemporary sociological field of narrative theory, the socio-cultural aspects of media storytelling have been widely discussed. Transmedial narratology, in turn, has been focused mostly on the ways various codes such as text, graphics, sound and video might interact in video games, web-documentaries and other novel genres of storytelling. However, sociologists and media communication theorists both tend to ignore the aesthetic potential of non-fictional narratives. The parallels between narration in the novel and spontaneous social media experientiality have received quite little attention. Meanwhile, platforms such as Facebook and Instagram on the one hand and web-documentaries on the other are gradually transforming our understanding of what narrative is considered compelling today [1, pp. 220-221].

In order to expand the narratological perspective on the emerging genres of interactive storying shared within social media and web-documentaries, it is necessary to understand the connections between conventions of literary narratives and the allegedly spontaneous self- expressions of social media users' experiences online. In following these connections, I adopt the position of Werner Wolf, a prominent representative of intermedial narratology, who insisted on understanding the literary origins of narrative theory and on the importance of applying narrative analysis techniques to non-literary material [2, p. 159]. The effectiveness of W. Wolf's methodology has already been demonstrated by a series of groundbreaking research accounts on the narrativity of "mini-stories" such as posts and status updates by users in Facebook and other genres of storytelling in computer-mediated communication [1, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Research by Maria Mäkelä, for one, [6] offers a particularly convincing base of arguments for taking a literary- narrative and cognitive stance to textual self-storying in social media. In this article I'll draw on some of her arguments while, unlike her, giving attention also to the transmedial environment designed as a frame for the stories of social media users. These stories were selected by the team of the Canadian-British web-documentary "Seven Digital Deadly Sins" to be embedded in its interface [7]. Their literary and cognitive analysis is claimed to suggest another evidence in favour of the expediency of adopting a literary reading strategy when dealing with non-literary material. Besides, the web-documentary "Seven Digital Deadly Sins" is a transmedial narrative that deserves a special consideration as a brilliant work of new digital art. It is designed as a polycode system offering the user various options to co-participate in the collective anthropological investigation of the ways new digital habits of communicating on social media have changed human values and morals.

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1.2 The Criteria of a Compelling Narrative

Studies of digital storytelling have hardly focused on how digital stories are actually told, what narrative genres they represent, and, particularly, what their main textual and interactional aspects are. By contrast, an emphasis on narratives in online environments as genres is emerging in

sociolinguistic research [8]. Although a move to make "non-canonical" social stories a part of narrative analysis is going in tune with cognitive approaches to narrative both within sociolinguistics and in narratology, sociolinguists tend to ignore the aesthetic and cognitive potential of literary narratives which, when consciously or subconsciously used in online communication, makes certain stories fascinating and others less so. In sociolinguistic approaches, the prototypical definitional criteria of narrative, such as the sequencing of events, are seen as necessary but not as sufficient. Instead, what counts as a good story in cognitive narratology presupposes the superimposition of a narrative form over reality to align the message with basic cognitive schemata of storytelling: readers (and social media users) seem to be looking for the signs of experience, affect, bodily reactions familiar to them.

With regard to the criteria applied to evaluating non-fiction stories, research into socially and cognitively informed narratology has foregrounded the three categories that are of crucial importance for understanding the ways narratives communicate meaning. These are experientiality, temporality and tellability.

Temporality involves presenting the events and episodes in different tempos (a speeding-up, a slowing-down, a stand-still, etc.), modes (retelling past events, description of a scene, a dialogue, an account of the dull, routine actions etc.) and order (a chronological sequence, a flash- back, a flash-forward). Narrative temporality thus allows for high variability in representing different events in different shots, so that uninteresting, routine actions are shown as iterative while meaningful and psychologically significant experiences are framed as richly detailed scenes. This possibility, in turn, involves variation in the use of tenses. While the narrative past tense is normal for accounts of the past, the use of Past Perfect will create the effect of a flash-back and the present tense forms will render the effect of simultaneity, crucial for the existential impressionistic quality of the "now" moments.

Tellability may be defined as the quality of "being worthy to be told": "tellability has to be assessed in terms of manifestation of some significant exemplary experience <...> [that] reaches beyond the local context of the immediate context situation and is open to further

Social media settings render tellable the very effort of telling a boringly routine or, conversely, a significant experience of coping with life challenges.

"Narrativity as mediated experientiality" is a concept from Monica Fludernik's "natural narratology". She has connected sociolinguistics to the analysis of non-fictional narratives on the grounds that their perception lies in "naturally occurring storytelling" [9, pp. 19-20]. Mediated experientiality refers to "narrativizing" life occurrences to fit our basic cognitive schemata for story comprehension [9, p. 33]. In a narrative account the pull toward reading or listening comes from the prompt "What's on your mind?" or "What is it like?", as "the reader is on the lookout for familiar epistemic, affective, and bodily parameters that would yield a presentation akin to the reader's experiential schemata" [6, p. 5].

elaboration" [10, p. 203]. A story may deserve the right to be told either for its intriguing plot or for a moral lesson it contains. A story may have a high or a low threshold of tellability: some events may have little significance for the teller, for the setting or the listeners, while others are so intimate that the tellers tend to avoid sharing them in the current context.

Narrative frames of unpretentious personal stories may forge more truths than fiction has ever done. Social media settings render tellable the very effort of telling a boringly routine or, conversely, a significant experience of coping with life challenges. Such accounts matter because

Fig.1. A screenshot of a story fragment with an online update and an option to share it on FB or Twitter.

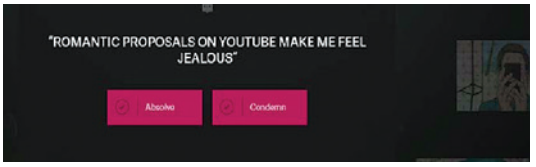

Fig. 2. A screenshot of the interactive opinion poll offering the user to "absolve" or "conemn" a digital habit (Envy).

they demonstrate recognition of individual hardships and joys of struggling with life. Such narrative practices are worthy of a literarily-informed analysis because the mere experiential framing of true life contexts in the "what's on your mind" prompt lends an aura of tellability and internalized eventfulness to any reported fragment of life.

2 "Seven Digital Deadly Sins": Transforming the Myth by the Media Environment

The web-doc "Seven Digital Deadly Sins" is a website created by the Canadian National Film Board in collaboration with The Guardian, UK. This "interactive reflection on our digital selves" (as the site's subtitle states) is a brain blowing test case of representing the power of the digital habits imposed on humans by social media, on the one hand, and the power of the traditional, verbal code of communication used by them to reflect on the transformation of their morals, on the other.
Pablo Vio, the creative director of the web-doc, emphasized the significance of its digital structural frame: "if you want to tell stories that move people, every pixel matters" [7]. In fact, the interface does make an important contribution to the cumulative narrativizing effect of this transmedial project.

2.1 "Every Pixel Matters"

The names of the taditional sins – Greed, Gluttony, Sloth, Envy, Wrath, Pride and Lust – are arranged on the opening screen like a hovering interactive ribbon and, as an option for the viewer, as a list of topics to navigate.

All the "sins" are structured in similar patterns. Each includes a video monologue by a famous person. Folk singer Billy Bragg confesses that he wouldn't have become a famous songwriter had there been You-tube in the times of his youth. Now, he confesses, he spends days on end watching fail videos there. Comedy actress Josie Long confesses in having given the elbow to her boyfriend so he wouldn't interfere with her devotion to Twitter. Such videos are surrounded by links to short confessional textual stories about sinful behaviours: "I spy on my kids", "I've been cyber-bullying", "I am a member of an extramarital dating site" etc. Each story is illustrated by an evocative picture to the right and one or two facts in the left margin, such as "The Number of selfies posted on Instagram so far is 35 million", which are updated online (see Fig. 1).

Strategically important are the three online polls embedded in each section, which invite the viewer to take the role of the judge, that is, to 'condemn' or to 'absolve' a particular sinful behavior (see Fig. 2).

Through such an anonymous opinion poll, a collective statistics is generated which clarifies the patterns of our collective consciousness and the growing discrepancy between the two lives we live – the life online and the one that we live in the real world.

The cumulative effect of the "Seven Digital Sins" is determined by the deliberate combination of these and other technologies. Similar to a social medium, this interactive website creates a narrative environment in which the user is lured to read what others tell, because, like a psychoanalyst, he wants to know what the others think, what the others feel on the subject. His narrative schemata are tuned in in such environment. On social media, even simple messages about the user's location (at the airport, in the mountains) gain the expression of "qualia", that is, the ability to mediate experience to the reader (What does it feel like

to be here? What are you thinking about?) only through the technical possibilities of a particular platform that activate the reader's tuning into the reception of stories about someone else's life experience.

We believe, however, that all the technological affordances of interactive platforms play but a secondary part compared to the verbal, storytelling element – in our case, they are masterfully tuning up the orchestration for our reception of self-stories written by the twenty "digital sinners".

2.2 The spontaneous and the literary in the digital sinners' self-stories

To highlight the literary techniques in the digital sinners' confessional auto-narratives, we will use the traditional methods of literary text analysis aimed at identifying their genre, plot structures and the level of their tellability, Another feature to be considered is the rhythmic patterns of temporality and other narrative elements that true writers have used so far. In order to reveal the cognitive schemata in the self-stories, we will analyse their experientiality. To do so, a simple test consisting of two questions will be applied. We'll keep asking the authors "What did you think?" and "What do you feel like?" to see the patterns of alternating the events and the states.

A Sitcom of Digital Wrath

The first narrative to consider is taken from the "Wrath" section. The author, who calls himself Walter, tells a story of an undeniable tellability. In effect, this guy's story looks pretty much like situation comedy (sitcom).

The exposition informs that his province premier (a woman) shut down her Twitter account because of a scabrous accident that had occurred to it:

> *A few years ago, the premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, Kathy Dunderdale, got into some hot water over her Twitter account. It seems whoever was managing the account for her had managed to link to some very distasteful porn.*

Such an entanglement immediately turns on the reader's curiosity: What did you think? What did you feel? Walter writes that he felt annoyed, that is was "a ridiculous overreaction":

> ***It annoyed me.*** *I don't know if I was necessarily angry – but* ***I was frustrated****. I think that it's very important for political leaders to keep in touch with the people they are working for.*

The story then takes a still more unexpected turn: Walter "disguises" himself into that female politician by opening a Twitter account and posting tweets in her name "to channel his frustration". He made her into "a conglomeration of <... > the Newfoundland women" he had grown with. The "character soon developed" and the game was a great success:

> *"Within nine months, I had accrued 10.9K followers. Pretty soon <...> CBC Radio had me on the air talking about it. I****t caught on big time"****.*

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The comedic line, however, ends with a reflection revealing a real drama. When Walter wonders, whether he "was cyber bullying Kathy Dunderdale" his answer is "No" – his intent was "not malicious", never going to fat-shaming her. When we are wondering, what he felt, whether he had any pangs of conscience, Walter's reflection astonishes us again:

> *I found the whole experience* ***therapeutic****. It allowed me to express my frustration over things about the place I grew up, my province, in a fun way that people enjoyed. I mean, <... >,* ***I'm gay****, and grew up in a town of 33 people in rural Newfoundland called Cull's Harbour. If it weren't for social media I don't know who I'd be. Probably* ***just an unhappy hick.***

Lust: a Post-Digital Emma Bovary

Another story comes from the subject of "Lust". The author, named Jane, confesses to the adultery she practices through a dating site: "I'm a member of an extramarital dating site". The plot suggests a high degree of tellability, but the author does not emphasise any vivid details of her infidelity. She captures our interest in a different way, that is, by regular alternations of events and states:

> *The exposition: I never thought of myself as a potential adulterer. My dad cheated on my mum years ago, and I didn't speak to him for years after that. –> What did you feel? I was horrified. At the time I thought it was the most immoral thing ever, but now I see it from a different angle. A change in life: I have been married for the last seven years –> What do you feel? My husband shows no sexual interest whatsoever in me. And I am deeply unhappy. The beginning of action: After I set up a profile (on a dating site – L.K), I was inundated with winks and messages –> What did you feel? <...> it's flattering if you're feeling a bit low. <...> Being anonymous makes you feel safe, because it's almost like you're invisible.*

Such pattern of narrativizing one's life experience perpetuates a view of reality as a recognizable succession of disappointments, inconveniences and pain, and of the virtual world as a space of freedom and fun. It is similar to the Flaubertian technique of writing, his novel narrativisation of Emma Bovary's boredom, her seeking an escape from the vulgar reality in adultery. The author of our story is certainly not Flaubert, but intuitively she uses the same techniques of temporality as the French classic. The mundane routine that makes her unhappy is represented by summarizing long time periods (I did't speak to him for years; I've been married for the last seven years; My husband shows no sexual interest in me...), while the transition to a radically new model of life is marked by the narrative device of frequency. As a result, the new life, too, immediately turns into another routine, taken in a rather broadly brushed enumeration of her many dates: I've met maybe 20 or so men and I've gone on to have physical or romantic relationships with at least three-quarters of those. Remarkably, the change in life leads to a transition from auto-reflexivity to a description of the states of others, i.e. her new men: To be honest, most of the men I've met have just been incredibly lonely.

While the new Madame Bovary resembles her predecessor by an iterative narrative model, in their ultimate assessments of the sinful behaviour patterns they differ. Our contemporary, unlike Emma Bovary, is not experiencing any moral crisis, neither has she any intention of giving up on life. On the contrary, in the coda Jane confesses that sinning on the dating site has made her happier:

> *I am so much **more relaxed**. I am getting on better with my husband <...> **I'm happier**, and the needs he isn't meeting are being met elsewhere. I think I can safely say that being on that website has turned my life around.*

An Epiphany on "A Happy Front of Facebook"

The third story, entitled "I always put on a happy front on Facebook", is an illustration of "Envy". A journalist named Erika finds a dream job in Thailand and posts pictures of the beaches in her Facebook account to realise quite soon that the new job is unsuitable for her. A plot like this may look to many quite banal, meaning that the threshold for its tellability is quite low. However, the story is worth reading because it is vibrating with "the voice of our generation", the generation of Facebook users. It is a cry of an individual who has suddenly seen the futility of his attempts to reach success, who is craving for attention and feeling lonely in the social medium which was originally conceived as the one to bring people together.

The narrative frame allows the author to convey the tension between her inward collapse and the desire to "create a beautiful façade" required by the Facebook ethics:

> *People saw them (the pictures – L.K.), but they didn't know **how lost I was, the feeling of dread** that I had. I let people think my life was awesome. I didn't exactly realise I was doing it at the time, but **I did it out of pride**. I didn't want to look bad in front of my friends <...>.*

This inner monologue makes a well-read reader remember J. Joyce's epiphanies, that is, short sketches of trivial moments of life evoking a

revelation, a momentary clarity of vision that makes the character capture the essence of things. For Joyce, the trivial truth of life, comprehended by the hero in a moment of epiphany, was linked to the concept of beauty. His stories about Dubliners end with such sketches, particularly poignant in the childhood cycle:

> *I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real. <...> The upper part of the hall was now completely dark. Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger* [11].

This is the final episode of "Araby", depicting the young protagonist's painful moment of realizing the futility of his romantic dreams, of the chivalrous service to "his lady", which collide with the ordinariness of Dublin's inhabitants. The confessional story of our contemporary, Erika, employs a similar narrative technique. The insignificant context gives way to the epiphanic comprehension of the poignant truth about herself as "a creature driven and derided by vanity", and it is this mediated experientiality that matters, that pulls the same strings in the reader's mind to make him, too, recognise the falsity of the external entourage of Facebook communication:

Facebook is about you putting yourself out there, and you want to present the best version of yourself <...> It's a kind of social politeness. Facebook elevates the social nicety of someone asking how you are to an art form.

3 Conclusion

Three confessional self-stories, taken for analysis by random sampling from twenty others, are indicative enough to provide an insight into the "small stories" of the post-digital world. They show different thresholds of tellability, but the specific communicative environment makes it possible to narrativize one's everyday life reality, though it is not always fit for narrativity. We can see how literary traditions are manifested in these self-stories, how the spontaneous self-expression gives way to new narrative practices. Perceiving "Facebook voices" from the perspective of a literarily aware reader allows us to hear in them a variety of configurations of narrativity, expressiveness, temporality, emotionality and representation of consciousness.

Besides, these stories matter because they offer a striking analysis of the ways our values and morality have changed under the influence of our digital habits. "Seven Digital Deadly Sins" shows just how much media is consuming us. Many of these stories make us wonder if the new patterns of behaviour are really sinful. Our contemporaries, in their majority, don't feel the remorse or guilt. On the contrary, digital sinning turns out to have had a liberating effect on them.

Finally, placing self-representational media practices in the spotlight of sociolinguistic and narrative investigations would shed further light on the ways digital stories can empower their writers and readers.

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