

Togetherness with Narrative Man

*Ownership, authorship, togetherness
at the end of a digital decade*

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Those of you who participated in *Interactive Screen* last year might remember that I tried to be true to my calling as a writer by reading, for a very long, very uncertain time, a 28-page essay in front of everyone. In relative fear and longing, forever trying to escape the place where I am made to speak from, I reflected back, in something entitled “Little Big Screen”, on the five first and last years of my practice in the field formerly and still known as new media, and on writing and film and it and my in-between ambitions, successes and failures.

In terms of new media, I was only half the age that *Interactive Screen* is now. Now I am six or so, and, from the solace of grammar school, I can look differently on home. It seems that, always unsatisfied by my own place and time, engaging with innocent, desperate alacrity in a sort of lifelong hopscotch, I had jumped ahead of this year’s suggested topic. Skimming through last year’s text, without enough time, if I was to write this, to read it all, I concluded that I could produce a kind of (shorter) sequel. Last year’s text was the product of transportation time — a variation on airport literature, Greyhound paperbacks and other stories of moving forward and forgetting where you are. When I think of the large bus I insist Jennifer and Iwona book me to Banff, I think of Greyhound bus stops, America in the 70s, the death of trains and that paperback copy of that still-unread, very difficult Thomas Pynchon novel, *V*. I should have been able to find it on some dime-store carousel in a lost town of the Midwest, here or south of here, but the times they are a’ changin’ and I bought it in a second-hand bookstore in the middle of a city I know too well and it now sits on top of a pile of books that I am thinking of selling. At the end of this string of reflections, of the kind brought about by too much time sitting inside of one’s own thoughts in a moving vehicle, I concluded that, in the polished politeness and half-

repressed anguish of my manic writing and reading, I had overshadowed a part of the question — that part formulated, in silence, by those who were listening to me. I hope and suspect that this silence also contains what whispers between the lines I wrote, but which I might have been too shy or unsure to speak out loud. Here I am again trying to voice it, very conscious that such communications are always pursued at the risk of exposing one's own easy to shatter *transparency*. Trying to “speak the truth”, as the formula wills it, is a wilful and fragile form of engagement, a test of the resilience of weakness in the silent face of the world, and it is always better done with a sort of gap-toothed cheerfulness that acknowledges the violence inherent to the set-up and is willing to acknowledge the eventuality of fisticuffs, back-patting or promises of devious complicity for the war to come.

True to the obfuscating spirit of bifurcation, in calling this so-called secret, I am borrowing the title (and it never fails to amuse me) of the afore-mentioned Thomas Pynchon's essay on nuclear weapon transport, written while he was a technical writer at the Boeing corporation — that funny title is *Togetherness*, and the humour and horror of the covenant comes from is being sealed around a bomb. Don't drop that missile, friend...

So, forever the positive paranoid, I now suspect that the underlying, hushed topic of *Interactive Screen* and its business subsidiary is *togetherness*, and the ways in which we choose to live and consider it in this *mongrel* culture we call “new media”, to use Mervin Jarman's elegant verbing. *Interactive Screen* reaffirms the mystery of our shared motivations as “new media perpetrators”, to pilfer Angus Leech's schedule-title. I like the criminal, or at least slightly conniving aspect of the word. And what I want to talk about is what we talk about in confidence and sometimes shame when we are no longer listening to all of us passing on the conference stage. I think it is time, after ten years have sped by in *this* moving pixel-pushed vehicle, to consider, with some hope of reconciliation, the concurrent loneliness driving the essay-reader and the one that passively afflicts the many recipients of his ear-whizzing parabola.

So, this year, I am going for the largest spill-over topic — that of surrounding silence. It is as big as a decade, ten days or a single moment, compares to any amount of time, is as vague, then, in its encompassing complexity, as the very notion of time. By talking into this

relative silence, I want to be candid about something that, by some post-catholic twitch of conscience, I never stop thinking of, and yet always change my mind about: I want to talk of the *truth* — la *vérité*, as it sounds better in French — and the ways in which we choose to share it. I think I know what some of you want to say: that, these days, it is a bit of a dirty word, but I always think everyone should consider his fingernails and question where the cleanliness or the dirt really comes from. That is why I would like to ask a very simple question, the kind that belongs to everyday, plain language, but whose repetitions have more potential for truth than most: *What are we doing here, after all?* I can only bring it back to myself, and hope you will present the question back to me. Please trust that I will try to be as honest as possible in answering it, because I think it is a question that together, most of us ask ourselves at one moment or another of our stay here, and before coming, and after leaving. So let me now and once again turn back on myself with the kind of catastrophic enthusiasm that is one of the tastiest of the beautiful fruits of despair.

For many of us, the pleasure of being in Banff, of seeing old friends and acquaintances again, in mountainous air and light, is reason enough to come back year after year to participate in *Money & Law* and *Interactive Screen*. It certainly is reason enough, but, it begs the question: is there something more? In my personal history, Banff figures as a place of friendship and new artistic collaborations, a crossroads where I take stock of distances travelled — personally, professionally, artistically — and also start venturing down new paths, to use a stock metaphor and get away from the obvious. I even like to refer to Lori Ward, former coordinator of the event, as my agent — her powers of suggestion played a large part in my participation as co-founder and original director of *Horizon Zero*, in my collaboration with Wayne Dunkley on his *Diaries of Suspension*, with Wayne and Kurtis Lesick on *Ghosts of Industry*, and in my screenwriting of BlueSponge's *Bunker, le cirque* website. Interactive Screen also allowed me to meet Danièle Racine, be invited to participate in the Festival du nouveau cinéma in exotic Montréal and in time become one of its programmers and bring back to Montréal a lot of the works I was introduced to here. These were important moments for my understanding of my own position in regards to

new media, and to this craft of writing, and talking about what we call “content”, that I am branded with.

Upon coming in and consulting the schedule for this year’s *Interactive Screen*, Fadi Atallah, commented on the fact that I am always put down, in Canadian conferences and events, as the Narrative Man. So here I am, Narrative Man, once upon a time and once again, today, although I’ve never written a straight story or know exactly how to explain for what I should be paid. I’ve always objected to branding, as it’s the best way to lose one’s real name, but it seems one cannot escape from it, and if you think I might have cornered a niche market, as they say, I must tell you that I sometimes feel more like I have been cornered into it. In the Interactive Screen culture, I am a writer and a faculty-member, called upon to share my bric-à-brac on the spot wisdom. This mode of togetherness that sets me slightly apart from my colleagues, and makes me scared that, although they are always inviting me to work for them, I can never quite convince producers to go for my own work, as we all like to say.

The Banff method that Sara was recalling could also give a name to that strange and stimulating practice of tagging our presentations with titles, such as “The Narrative Arc of Ten Years of New Media” before they even exist. Every time, I feel as if I have to figure out what the organization thinks we might mean and mean it. New media, as it is now called, is always working back towards the naming of things. Things are over-defined by their naming. I call for a history of unsolvable, non-solvent notions, a commerce of all lost currencies and the constant doubletalk of memory. I say, we have been travelling down this road for ten years, so let’s do away with some of our excess lexical baggage. Left with a crumbtrail of wordtrends and we should eat it up and remember where we are. The crumbwords that have stopped us in our tracks too often to tell, and we decline with the tragic-antique accent of latin once-upon-a-time leftovers: virtual reality, dot com boom, convergence, peer to peer, artificial life, net art, metadatabases, nanotechnology, remix culture, visualization, personalization, pervasive gaming, wikis, ubiquitous computing, aura, nomadology are new again old again next big things that keep receding into flash memory, that spin back into place and obscure the view on the precise endeavours that are lost to the

story of culture. In the end, all things die on their own. Let us stop naming names, and look again for things as they are.

With the same narrative drive, we should also reconsider the binaries of success and failure, playing and winning, having been there and going somewhere, success and failure, art and money, money and art, first and last waves. And perhaps we should never say something is dead — cinema, music, net art, paper or body — if we are still talking about it. For all proclamations of death, we must ask the question: what is over? In this media, all it means is: game over. So play again. New media is not and never was a killing media. Its forms have a tendency to falter and die on their own, to replicate and displace themselves, and new media is not only next media, it is always no media, in that it participates in a larger reality of culture, the great spillage of forms that forces us to change its name to retain the illusion of its togetherness. We are still spinning around the same ideas, and that motion occupies the space needed for the renewal of gestures. “Must we mean what we say?” We do not often have to. Rather, we must strive to learn and speak the language of effect. What if we first and foremost consider new media as a form, occupying a space, deploying various topologies, changing its name and image... But I am getting lost in variations.

In the contrived, enjoyable moments of togetherness at Interactive Screen, we are called upon to recognize ourselves as members a culture, using this sign system or that, defining our roles in or outside of it, in an ongoing dialogue of art, business, and science (as we are told). My annual, gently unheard plea, is to be brought in at “the time the artists start talking” — when *Money & Law* fades into *Interactive Screen*, and the lingo of the culture shifts from business to creation. There is a paradox of the separation and conniving of “business” and “content” in an industry predicated — in Canada at least — by state intervention. There is a difference between a budget item and the fostering of a culture.

This raises a related question, which was the subject of a hotly-debated discussion at Props Pub two days ago with Phone Book et al. perpetrator Ben Jones, as to the value chain — the term is borrowed from this year’s introduction — of form and content. I do not like the distance between those two words, and will use a dubious pun and say that I think we

should unchain the term “value” and think of it as a moral question. Although fancy 1960s semioterms such as signifier and signified seem more precise in describing the constant and blurry go-between of doing and the intention that gives rise to it, and the worldview that emerges from their see-sawing, the sound of the words — their material nature, then — is much too close for them to remain useful in common currency. To me, there should be no *Money & Law AND Interactive Screen*, as it perpetrates a perhaps unnecessary ownership and separation between two kinds of processes: a game played according to the rules and implicit values of an established power structure, and a set of free-floating wills and intents that are constantly forced to retrofit themselves and become so-called content, while all they wanted was to go on espousing the shape and beat of things. It seems to me that what disappears in this transaction is the real value of the interface — the Interactive screen, as it is. In Canada, “content production” seems to be more and more dominated by thematic guidelines and lines of capital drawn by the state, and authorship becomes the fading background radiation of a culture that seems to already know what it wants to say before it is even saying it. Case in point: the writer that I am is more and more, in this ecology of cultural themes, becoming a simple consultant, a post-articulator of dismembered, pre-articulated speech, providing galvanic spark and nervous structure where he would have like to go beyond the lab frog and invest in the full life of his craft. Why struggle to say something better when we are already told what to hear and speak, what to croak out (apologies to the frog)? This sort of professional defeatism, of course, only gives me more will and time to spend on my own projects, and enter the satellite economy of state-funded artists, lost to the togetherness of larger productions. Despite all claims to the contrary, most of us continue to evolve in a precarious economy of survival, predicated by the generosity and control of the state. Maybe because I want to change its nature, or learn its real name, content sounds more and more to me like something we dig a hole to put into.

What we call content should not just be something that we put in something else. Yet, ironically, that something else is often the only thing that is respected as content. In most cases, what we call “medium” — in the way that funders and publics *already* understand it — is really the content, and we do not let what we say with it change its form. I believe

“content” must cover the interface, relate to gesture, both intended and expected, and disappear into its flow. The story should live as close to the interface as possible, respect the interference of objects, in order for it to appear not just as a story but as a living part of the world.

This year, and I might be wrong, I have the distinct feeling that the “content producers” amongst us are coming to a sort of consensus in terms of disappointments and active optimism. Everybody seems to be going on about their work with a renewed clarity of vision, and a certain lucidity as to the fact that the Shangri-la of past hopes has receded into quaint, sometimes comforting personal darkness and that we have lost the map on the way and will follow any light that will take us to port. In the end, as Fadi Atallah eloquently put it in a question that was almost immediately ignored in favour of the next item on the schedule: “We have no power to create an economy of the kind of content that we would like to see exist.” And so it is that we spend our lives making what we are asked to make while trying to change it at the same time.

The discussions this last Tuesday showed us that ownership and authorship, are the wealthy and power-hungry close relatives of form and content, and inform the domination of one over the other, which is only one way of erasing their boundary. We are so keen on knowing and controlling who owns art and ideas that we sometimes forget what they are about — that they are *about us*, which does not mean that they ever, totally, *belong* to us. In our greed for authorship, we forget that things, in the end, always exist in and of themselves. The question of self-expression is often reduced to the attribution of the utterance, and the revenue streams and strings that are tied to its ownership. I am a strong believer in the idea that ideas don’t belong only to those who pretend to have them, but also to those to whom they are given to consider. “Culture” might be the very thing that escapes from the nets of ownership, not that snobbish currency that makes one rise above and away from others, not that thing chained to the misnomer of value. The aura, to take one of the hot arguments of this beginning week, does not belong to the saintly concept or conceptualizer, but to its confused onlooker.

There is, of course, an equal danger in fetishizing things and the concepts of things. The problem is the fluctuating desire for ownership, whether of Walter Benjamin's living dead words, of patents copyrights or other lines of power. So if we know that Walter spoke of the aura, and that there is what we make of it, and what we refuse to make of it, and what he made of it, we can only really be sure of what he wrote down of what he made of it. This brings us back, of course, full circle, to the fleeting and informal nature of intellectual property, and to the deeper question of what it means to call something something rather than something else. As Ben suggested in our pub conversation, ideas are a currency we can and should always afford to spend, and if the mode of togetherness that is IP protects a transactional model, actual culture largely escapes from its dealings. I think that this is the object that many of us are exploring — this idea of the here and now as it happens, whether or not it should, in constant struggle with the allocations of common sense and pre-ordained truth. Simply put: let's do away with form, content and media and let's just do something.

It occurred to me, listening to Fiddian's soda presentation, Matt's Blast Theory narrative and Fee and Paul's phonebook word games, that playing Lego, hide and seek or hangman and such variations on instant storytelling are a form of culture, of togetherness, whose mythological power seems never leave us, moving through subconscious iterations and endlessly leading us back into our earliest realizations of being human. Likewise, seeing again Julia's cinematic traumatron, *Miracles in Reverse* or Wayne's anthropopersonal *Diaries of Suspension*, I was reminded that the life of memory is primary and daily stuff of our engagement with the facts and situations of the world. The sense of play that one seeks to recover with the devices of technology — that listening to the whim of everyday things, is very close to our earliest intents as storytellers; our intent to make the world a place of infinite, awkward, sometimes joyful, sometimes upsetting storytelling. These inventions frame, like Mervin's shape-shifting container of learning, places for reclaiming voiceless culture — whether of now or then — for everyday living. They illuminate the computer screen with the impropriety of moral ambiguity and make-believe, their afferent horror and wonder and a renewed sense of togetherness. Make-believe will always measure up to role-

playing. Art, at its very best, proposes no distinction with fact, and facts are never exhausted by their formulation as ideas. Once an image exists, it exists as fact, a fact that is, like any fact, detached from its source, and that we can walk into as if the frame never was out of this world.

We live in cryptographic times, buildings talking to buildings, no longer needing corridors to connect and pour their presence one into the other. Whether or not we are there to be seen is accessory to the fact. We live with the continuous parallel presence of others amongst us: the click-clacking local lights of wireless laptops in this room, making everything half-seen and half-heard, prove it. This is the speed at which we materialize and decompose the times we live in. Although patience is sometimes its equal opposite, speed has a tendency to abolish things in favour of their surface. Let us take care in the shaping of our make-believe, and treat it as the permanent fact that it is. We must follow it as we do logical operations, and uncover the sesame to the unlocking and dissolution of the frame: whether it is through reading, playing, imaging, imagining or remembering.

I hope that now, in the future, at the end and new beginning of the parabola of this digital decade, in its swoop and sweep, we will make media that we want to see exist, and see again, and we will see again media that we thought was gone for good, and for good reasons. I hope that now we will expect the same thing for new media that we had been getting from old. That now we will recognize ourselves in the machine, and ask of the machine no question that we cannot bring back to our own consciousness. And that now we will forget the frame and screen and interface and the idea of truth and never think again that we leave the world when we pass through our open windows.