Helpful feedback:

A Review of *Neocybernetics and Narrative*[1]

Paul Cobley[2]

When I first picked up Bruce Clarke's last monograph, *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems* (2008), it was not in the most auspicious circumstances. I was standing on a much delayed commuter train out of London, with just about enough room among the frustrated travellers to be able to hold a book, my elbows firmly pinned to my flanks. Yet, I remember little else from that 90-minute journey because of the mesmerising effect of the volume, particularly the pellucid exposition of Spencer Brown in the opening chapters. Thus, it was with a sense of anticipation that I picked up *Neocybernetics and Narrative* for the first time.

That anticipation was not initially rewarded. The book consists of an introduction and five, fairly long chapters. Each contains the thread of the thesis, but each could stand alone as sophisticated readings of particular narratives, popular or theoretical. The first chapter focuses on the science fiction novel, *Mind of My Mind*, by Octavia Butler. The second is devotedly purely to theory: that of Luhmann and Serres. Chapter 3 is mainly concerned with the films, *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The next chapter is a disquisition on Bruno Latour's *Aramis*. Chapter 5, at the end of the book, couples Bateson and Guattari in a discussion of Gaia-related issues. Each of these chapters is stimulating and involves juxtapositions that are startling and revealing. Yet the first chapter does not provide the auspicious opening that *Posthuman Metamorphoses* had. Its focus, as mentioned, is the Butler novel; but its key juxtaposition is Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999) and Derrida's essay on 'Telepathy' (2007). Under the aegis of this juxtaposition, Clarke (19) asks: "What does it mean for a trace to endure, to cross over the distances and durations that intervene between its coming to be in one place and moment and its itinerary of future destinations?" If one accepts the terminology and concept of trace, this is a fair question. In partial answer, Clarke writes,

> If you want to see a picture of the soul, observe an intentional scratch on a rock. The élan with which we receive the traces of signs is the origin or *Ursprung* of stories that pivot on these radical passages, displacements in space, in time, or in embodiment. Such displaced materialities may also occur with shifts in the literal medium of the narrative text – for instance, the leaping back and forth from verbal to visual signifiers – or with metamorphic shifts in the diegetic body depicted by the signifiers of that text. Breaking this back down to the

primal trace: any one mark, when received as a cue for cognitive operations, has multiple implications already built into it. Bound up in any mark is a potential dynamism, a contingent or nonrandom concatenation of signifying events, that is always already on the way to narrative formation.

The verbal acrobatics of poststructuralism are often like a Marx Brothers routine, particularly the discussion of the legal document in *A Night at the Opera* (1935) in which, after much wrangling over "the party in the first part" and "the party in the second part", the punchline reveals that "Everybody knows there ain't no sanity clause". Yet, Clarke has a sound point here: signs betray something of their sending and our creative readiness to receive them is the basis of narrative. Signs change in different media and they are 'polysemic'. This gives them their potential to contribute to narrative.

Although the first chapter proved a difficult read for me, the subsequent chapters, while still challenging, certainly made up for the opening and develop Clarke's thesis with the élan he credits to readers of signs. The second chapter gets down to business with a discussion, ostensibly, of Serres and Luhmann, but is equally concerned with von Foerster, whom Clarke references in a particularly cogent critique of the first-order fashion in which Serres treats the idea of 'noise'. Ultimately, Serres 'noise' is found problematic because it is still moored to the problematic of transmission and reception. Freed from the Derridean overtones in this chapter, Clark makes a persuasive case for the "infinite play of forms" as characteristic of the operational closures of observing systems.

Chapter 3 is pivotal. Putatively analysing two movies, it begins with an incredibly fresh take on 'feedback', taking Jimi Hendrix's trademark sound – which, over four exciting pages, Clarke makes the reader *feel* – and mixing it with observations on Kauffman's discussion of recursion and the lap games at the 1978 Whole Earth jamboree. The passage is typical of the jarring, but illuminating, mash-ups that recur throughout the book. On this occasion, it serves a discussion of some 'traditional' narratological concepts: analepsis and prolepsis. The cybernetic 'body electric' of Hendrix is implied to be of a piece with the taskk of imagining the troublesome 'virtual *fabula*' of films like *Memento*.

It is worth mentioning at this point that Clarke's work on narrative is completely out of the mainstream of contemporary narrative theory – and a good thing, too. Clarke's frame of reference would be difficult to assimilate to 'postclassical narratology' because the reading list of scholars in the latter only very partially overlaps with his. It is for this reason that he is able to articulate some concepts that 'postclassical narratology' cannot. One of these is the recursive, seemingly disembodied, problematic narrative processes that have been thrown up by complex storytelling and the contemporary puzzle film (see Buckland 2014). Another is the sustained consideration of the process of observership in relation to narrative. Discussing *Avatar* in Chapter 5, Clarke (177) notes,

> Three of the five narratives [*Mind of My Mind, Eternal Sunshine . . ., Memento, Aramis, Avatar*] we have examined stage and mediate a fictional network centered on a technological system that, when it fails or even when it works all too well, fails to deliver the social goals for which it is designed. In the stories

of the characters involved, this lapse is usually a desirable outcome, a fortunate failure. But, in any event, as usual, the fault lies not with our designed systems, but with ourselves, the designers.

Indeed, Clarke argues at the very end of the book, that the vision of Gaia is, effectively, a "renovation of the observer's relation to its universe in second-order systems theory" (181). In a sense, this addresses the issue that spurred Clarke to write this book: that neither media nor narrative are capable of cognizing on their own. His account of both amounts to a superbly provocative attempt to present their meaning processes in an autopoetic frame avoiding the pitfalls of "subject-centered and intersubjective hermeneutics" (xvii).

References

Buckland, W. (ed.) (2014) *Hollywood Puzzle Films*: London and New York: Routledge/American Film Institute.

Derrida, J. (2007) 'Telepathy' in P. Kamuf and E. Rottenberg (eds.) *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* Vol. 1. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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