Christoph Bode, Rainer Dietrich
Future Narratives

Narrating Futures

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Edited by
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Volume 1

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(with material by Jeffrey Kranhold)

Future Narratives

Theory, Poetics, and Media-Historical Moment

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Content

Preface and Acknowledgements

The fundamental idea of "Narrating Futures" is a very simple one: as a rule, narratives have events as their minimal units. But there is a certain, hitherto undiscovered corpus of narratives that have, in addition to events, one special feature, indeed *differentia specifica*, that other narratives don't have: they have nodes. A node is a situation that allows for more than one continuation. The simplest kind of node is a bifurcation, but most nodes have more than just two continuations. If a narrative has at least one node, then we call it a 'Future Narrative' (FN), in contradistinction to narratives that have 'only' events – they are 'Past Narratives' (PN). So the definition of a FN is a purely technical one: if a narrative has a least one node, it's in – if not, it's out.

One of the resulting differences between FNs and PNs is that, whereas PNs are uni-linear, FNs are, by definition, multi-linear. One of the exciting aspects of FNs is that the concept cuts across all media boundaries: you find FNs in printed books, in movies, in games, or in computer simulations. Another exciting aspect is that it bridges the fiction-/non-fiction divide; or, if I may switch my metaphors: FNs can be found on both sides of the fence.

From a narratological point of view, the problem with FNs is that practically all the narratology we have is derived from the corpus of Past Narratives. The NAFU research project promised to address this situation and – given enough money and three years' time – to come up with a general and abstract theory and poetics of FNs. This is what this first volume of the *Narrating Futures* series purports to offer.

At the same time, while we were confident and unwavering in our optimism that such a general theory of FNs could be sketched, we also saw the need to delineate concretely how FNs are refracted through the different media. So our drive was directed both towards abstraction and towards the concrete, for we could not help but notice that FNs, while still one corpus, are also media-sensitive to a considerable degree.

That is why volume 1 is followed and complemented by volumes 2 through 5, which show, respectively, how FNs 'work' in print and digiture, in film and new visual media, in computer and online games, and, in volume 5, how the subgenre of alternate histories (novels of the 'what if?' kind) is theoretically and practically

related to FNs (some alternate history novels are FNs, and some FNs are alternate histories – but the full story is a bit more complex).

As we were working through masses of material, we realized that the media-theoretical order of this series also reflects a media-historical dimension. There is something in the sequence of 'printed book – movie – interactive visual medium – complex electronic game' that suggests, if not an evolution or teleology, at least a discernible trend towards the possibility of ever greater orchestration of FNs and of an increase of what we have come to call 'nodal power', that is, the degree of openness that any nodal situation offers. We felt that this had to be addressed especially in a media-historical sketch towards the end of volume 1, because it would have been systematically displaced in any of the following four volumes.

That is why volume 1 appears as it does: part one, written by me, offers a first blueprint of a theory and a poetics of FNs. True to the claim that if, in spite of all differences in appearance, the corpus of FNs is defined by one exclusive feature, viz. that a FN has at least one node, it should be possible to offer a formal, most abstract description of how a FN 'works' in general, of what the architecture of FNs looks like. This is what is attempted in part two of this volume, which was written by Rainer Dietrich on the basis of material left by Jeffrey Kranhold. The relation of these two parts can be characterized as follows: whereas part one is a narrative, part two is an abstraction based on Mathematical Graph Theory. Part three, written again by me, is the media-historical sketch just mentioned. It offers a tentative explanation of the curious fact that, although all the necessary ingredients for the full-scale emergence of FNs seem to have appeared between 1660 and 1720, it still took the corpus of FNs another 250 years or so to materialize and take off and then, all of a sudden, bloom and mushroom into the dominating corpus it now is. For it is easy to see that it is not only the future that belongs to FNs – it's already here: *the present is the period of FNs, for we are increasingly thinking in terms of possibility, contingency, openness, multiple paths, tipping points and feedbacks, and this simply cannot be communicated in a uni-linear form.*

Over a period of more than just the 36 months of the funding period, we had dozens and dozens of most inspirational conversations with interested colleagues and enthusiastic supporters. It is impossible to mention all by name, but allow me to single out at least a few and assure the rest: none of you is forgotten. The contributions of Espen Aarseth, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Cornel Zwierlein have been invaluable: thank you so much for your time, your questions and comments, especially when they were critical – for we needed that kind of feedback, too. Thanks also to Andreas Blüml, whose enthusiasm and support was exceptional.

Some colleagues invited me to give early presentations of our research. They include Mark Bruhn of Regis University, Denver, CO; Andrew Johnston of the Freie Universität Berlin; and Jeffrey Cox and Jill Heydt-Stevenson of the University of Colorado, Boulder. An introductory talk and discussion were also given, fairly early on, at LMU's *Center for Advanced Studies*, which also hosted a wind-up one-day conference in March 2012, during which our research results were first given to the public, with valuable external contributions by Espen Aarseth and Cornel Zwierlein.

I was honoured and intrigued to find the interest of two of the biggest insurance companies in the world, Allianz and Munich Re, and I should like to deeply thank Dr. Volker Deville, Executive Vice President of the former, and Dr. Michael Menhart, Head of Economic Research of the latter, as well as Dr. Christian Lahnstein, also Munich Re, specialist for analyzing fundamental issues relating to the topic of social influences on liability and insurance: the hours I spent with all three of them were unusually productive and illuminating. Most of all I liked their surprise at the fact that a literary studies man should be interested in these matters.

My sojourn at the *Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research* (PIK) in November 2011 was one of the most transformative experiences during the time of this research project. It wasn't so much the experience of giving a lecture under the grand cupola of the old, historic observatory on the *Telegrafenberg* to an unexpectedly captivated audience of climatologists, mathematicians, physicians, geographers, philosophers, media experts and the like, as the intense interest they expressed in innumerable group and face-to-face discussions, which sometimes extended until well after sunset. After all, the talk I gave was only my entrance ticket – I had come to *learn from them*, and I was rewarded beyond the wildest expectations. I should like to thank the director of the PIK, Prof. Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, for all the support and engaging discussions; Dr. Jörg Pietsch, Dietmar Gibietz, who proudly introduced me to the holy of holies, Dr. Veronika Huber, Margret Boysen, Dr. Valeria Jana Schwanitz, Prof. Jürgen Kropp, Heike Munderloh, Heiko Martens, Dr. Bernd Hezel, Christiane Hütter (greetings to

the Egg!), Michael Flechsig, Mareike Schodder, Prof. Stefan Rahmstorf, Dr. Katja Frieler, Dr. Andrey Ganopolski and Dr. Armin Haas. But most of all I should like to thank Eva Rahner for organizing it all and for flexibly adjusting my schedule whenever new demands for interviews and encounters were filed. It almost felt like a homecoming.

Another magic location, this time for the whole NAFU research group, was the Seminar Abtei Frauenwörth on Frauenchiemsee, where we spent two immensely intensive weekends in the seclusion of a convent, which helped us to decisively hone our concepts and coordinate our approaches. More importantly, Frauenchiemsee really gave us a new sense of purpose and welded us together as a group. I am particularly indebted to Sister Scholastica for being such a wonderful host and for conversations that went beyond the mundane and secular.

Meanwhile, back home at LMU Munich, I should like to mention in particular Dr. Brigitte Weiss-Brummer, head of LMU's unit for international research funding, and her team: her help in getting NAFU going and support in sorting out problems with other units of the administration of LMU was invaluable, as was the steadfast support of the vice-chancellor of LMU Munich, Dr. Christoph Mülke, whose interventions will not be forgotten. Thanks also to Klaus Held, the librarian of our departmental library, who did not tire of ordering and signing in books that sometimes had very little relation to Eng. Lit., but who did not mind.

Down in the mines, the NAFU research team were helped by student assistants, who not only procured, copied, and scanned material, but who, before long, took part in our discussions, read our drafts, commented and corrected us – in short, were every inch a part of the collective effort. Their names are: Lorenz Beyer, Tarek Khodr, Claudia Köpfer, Anna Kunde, Lilian Loke, Eva Monning, Sandra Steinke, Barbara Tautz, and Maj Wenk-Wolff. We are more than grateful to all of you, but special thanks go to Sophia Hager and Isabel Schneider for the proofreading of volume 1, to Chrissy Fleps for her work on the index, and to Heidrun Patzak for her meticulous proofreading of all five volumes.

Since the NAFU research project received no support from the central administration of its host institution in the actual project management and its financial management, all this was exclusively left to and carried out by the Principal Investigator himself and by his secretary, Doris Haseidl. If there is one person without whom the whole project could not have been run, this person is Doris Haseidl, who, with her unfaltering optimism, pragmatism, and superhuman radiance, more than once proved the mainstay of the entire venture. I cannot thank her enough.

Our editors at Walter de Gruyter were Dr. Manuela Gerlof and Christina Riesenweber. It is true that the NAFU team would have preferred, parallel to the publication in book form, an open-access publication of our own NAFU Wiki, which

served us so well as a research team forum in the process of our research – there would have been less of a contradiction between what 'Narrating Futures' is all about and the form of its presentation, and we would have loved to invite the interested public to 'play on' what we started. But there are, as of now, certain irresolvable conflicts of interest between academic publishers and the researchers (besides, our Wiki would have needed a radical overhaul, for which we simply did not have the time). In full recognition of the advantages of publishing with a renowned academic publisher and without reservation, we therefore opted for this format, knowing full well that the future holds more dynamic forms of sharing and exploring and adding to knowledge. The care taken of this publishing project at de Gruyter has been absolutely professional. I have never regretted to cooperate with them ever since Dr. Gerlof contacted me because she had heard of the NAFU project.

Originally this preface had two endings, an ironic and a sentimental one. I've scrapped the first. The remaining one is this: as many times before, my deepest gratitude goes to my family, to my wife for 25 years and steady partner for 35, Helga Doerks-Bode, and our children Jenny, Andreas, and Benjamin. In whichever version of the tale of my life, they are the ones that make a difference – and give meaning to it.

<div align="right">Christoph Bode</div>

1 The Theory and Poetics of Future Narratives: A Narrative

The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed.
William Gibson

1.1 Future Narratives: A New Kind of Narrative

'Narrating Futures' is about a new, hitherto unidentified kind of narrative. The fact of its discovery is exciting in itself, but no less exciting is the key feature this new kind of narrative displays: it does not only *thematize* openness, indeterminacy, virtuality, and the idea that every 'now' contains a multitude of possible continuations. No, it goes beyond this by actually *staging* the fact that the future is a space of yet unrealized potentiality, or, technically speaking, a 'possibility space' (cf. Boyd 122) – and by allowing the reader/player to enter situations that fork into different branches and to actually *experience* that 'what happens next' may well depend upon us, upon our decisions, our actions, our values and motivations.

It might therefore be said that these narratives *preserve and contain* what can be regarded as defining features of future time, namely that it is yet undecided, open, and multiple, and that it has not yet crystallized into actuality. It is by virtue of their capability to do exactly this – to preserve the future *as future* – that these narratives are here called 'Future Narratives'.

It is clear from the above that Future Narratives mark a fundamental and radical break away from traditional narratives. Most, though not all, narratives we know are concerned with past events, with something that has already happened – whether in reality or purportedly, i.e. in fiction. Such past narratives endow events with meaning by discursively aligning them with other events, thereby suggesting a meaningful story. It could be argued, and indeed it has been argued, that this is actually the main reason why humanity has *narratives* in the first place: they are *meaning-creating devices*, they make sense out of life, the universe, and everything. Past narratives are backward-looking processing practices (or pretend to be) and they mostly aim at a reduction of otherwise worrying or confusing complexity (although there is a fascinating sub-class of past narratives that aims at exactly the opposite).

By way of contrast, Future Narratives do not operate with 'events' as their minimal units. Rather, their minimal unit is at least one situation that allows for more than one continuation. We call this a 'nodal situation', or a 'node', for short.

Between these nodes (if a Future Narrative has more than one node) or before and after a node we still find events, linked with each other in normal narrative procedure (whatever may be called 'normal'), but they are not what defines a Future Narrative as Future Narrative. That is the node. The node is what Future Narratives have – and other kinds of narrative do not have. If they can produce a node, they're welcome to the club. But only if. A node is the *differentia specifica* of a Future Narrative.

The break away from past narratives that Future Narratives constitute is so radical that it might well be asked whether Future Narratives are still narratives. This question will be addressed in due time and it will be discussed with great seriousness, because it is a legitimate question. But the answer – and this will not surprise you since you know the title of this volume and the title of this series – will be in the affirmative. Our idea of 'narrative' in general is largely based on our knowledge of past narratives – understandably so, since that is the kind of narrative most familiar to us. But they are not the only ones. There's a new kid in town. And what is more: this kid has been lurking there for quite a while now. The kid's no stranger.

Why then do I say that this is a new, hitherto unidentified kind of narrative? Because, up until now, Future Narratives have never been identified as *a corpus in its own right*, as a class of narratives that is constituted and defined by one feature that, in contrast to all other kinds of narrative, they hold in common and that pertains to them alone: *nodes*. They contain situations that allow for more than one continuation; and by 'contain' we mean: they do not only *mention* such situations, but they *present* them, they *stage* them, so that you can enter them and *act* (except for in an interesting borderline case, which later on will help us hone our concepts and terminology).

You can find such narratives in print, you can find them in movies, you can find them in computer and online games, you find them in sophisticated simulations of complex real-life processes, in scenarios used by insurance companies and world climate change experts, by peak oil aficionados, politicians, and communicators. They are everywhere. They cut across all media and genre boundaries, they cut across the dividing line between fact and fiction, between the actual and the virtual. As I said: *they are everywhere*.

Why then is it that they have never been identified, up until now? One reason may well be that, exactly because they can be found practically everywhere, we have not seen them as *one corpus*, but only in their different manifestations. Fooled by their protean forms, deluded by conventional media and genre demarcations, stuck with the fiction-/non-fiction divide, we have not seen the enormous *spread* of Future Narratives, their awesome ubiquity. Our compartmentalisation of reality has backfired on us and we haven't seen the wood for all

the trees. Camouflaged through their widely differing appearances – in books, in films, in games, in computer based simulations, in policy scenarios, etc. – Future Narratives have so far escaped detection and identification. That's all over now. We have identified a new class, or set, of narratives that cuts across all media and genres as well as across the fiction-/non-fiction line. Their underlying principle is, in fact, very simple: what they have in common is that they operate with nodes, rather than with events only. We define them thus – and we call them: *Future Narratives*.

This new class of narratives and this new field of inquiry are therefore constituted by us. *As a class of objects of inquiry*, Future Narratives did not exist before they were identified as such. That is normal procedure. To be sure, as phenomena in the real world, they have been with us for quite a while. Everybody knows them in one manifestation or another. Yet no one has seen them as a class of their own before – what is more: as a class of discursive practices that is about to transform our society in absolutely unprecedented ways. For we are beginning to see a major sea change in the way we think of ourselves, of our past, of our options, our potential, of our futures, in the way we feel and experience the glorious and dreadful openness of existence. In whatever measure, Future Narratives are always about how we see ourselves in relation not to 'things as they are', but in relation to *things to come – in relation to things that are not (yet), in relation to what is in a state of becoming* (if indeed that can be called a 'state'). We have crossed this threshold – it is happening already. Out there. It's a fact. Surely not because this writer has identified a new kind of narrative. That claim would be presumptuous and ridiculous. Rather: the fact that in recent decades this phenomenon has gained such force and magnitude was the material precondition for the identification of its core element, the one feature that it has in all of its forms – *nodes*, not events, as basic units.

This – *and* some simple ideas and beliefs, like that one should not be deceived by appearances; that behind variety we can find simplicity; that to be a radical scientist means to go to the root of the matter, to arrive, by way of radical abstraction, at the deep structure that is underlying the plenitude of different forms; that a deep understanding of underlying structures will eventually filter into new applications; finally and fundamentally, that often what appears to be different can, in fact, be shown to be fundamentally *the same*. Which is, after all, what an *identification* is.

1.2 What Narratives Do for You

Up until now, it has been comparatively safe to say, 'We speak of narration when at least two events are linked together in a language' (note that this definition is wide enough to include, for example, the visual language of movies; basically, any sign sequence that can be read as conforming to a message-code dialectics [and this seems already implied in 'sign sequence'] can be addressed as happening 'in a language') – 'at least two' because the mere statement of an isolated fact is not yet a narrative; and 'linked together' because the mere statement of two unconnected facts doesn't constitute a narrative either. Narrative *is* the linguistic and mental linking of events (cf. Bode, *Novel* 10–14).

Note, too, how this does not differentiate between the tenses in which a narrative is told. It is a good thing that it doesn't. For basically is does not matter whether the narrator (or any narrative instance believed to be the 'source' of the narrative) is reporting events that happened a long time ago or events that are happening right now – nor, for that matter, whether these events are real or fictional: as long as narrators link events in and through their discourse, they are narrating. (By the way: that is why they are called 'narrators'.)

And in a way, it is still comparatively safe to say that narrative is the *linking of* (at least two) *events*. For Future Narratives, or FNs for short, do that as well. After all, that is why they are called *narratives*. But FNs go beyond that in *adding* nodes. And that is a total game-changer. Why? To answer this, we have to step back a bit and inspect and review, on a very fundamental level, how and to what end narratives other than FNs actually work.

The prime reason why they work so amazingly well is that it is ridiculously simple to link two events and give them a semblance of coherence, a semblance of cause-and-effect nexus. Often, the mere indication of a *temporal* sequence – first this, then that – is enough to trigger the idea that maybe this sequence is not only a coincidence, but that the two events are causally related. In fact, as David Hume argued, that is how the (illusionary) idea of causality is formed in the first place: we observe an event following upon another with sufficient frequency and then conclude – without any logical legitimacy – that the two are connected by necessity, as cause and effect: an unwarranted assumption, which, however, seems to have had some survival value for our species.

Narratives play on this software of ours, but with a vengeance: it suffices that they mention two events *only once* and, if need be, in their purely temporal relation only, and we already jump at the conclusion that there must be a connection between them: 'The king died, and just a few days later the queen died too.' Immediately we speculate: 'Was it of grief? Had they caught the same fatal virus? Were they poisoned, only she was given a smaller dose? ' *How* we actually fill

out what the narrative does not say doesn't matter. What matters is that, almost automatically, we provide the linkage the narrative itself withholds. The inverse proof of this is that it is extremely difficult to come up with two events described in successive sentences or clauses that do *not*, in one way or another, suggest a narrative. So, in narrative the causal connections between the events need not be explicitly stated at all: it's enough for them to be implicit, to be possible, to be plausible. That is extremely important, since it suggests that a large part of the essential narrative labour of connecting can be delegated to and be carried out by the reader, who will readily respond even to the smallest signal. As Brian Boyd put it. "We are not *taught* narrative. Rather, narrative reflects our mode of understanding events [...]" (131). "[W]e will interpret something as story if we can" (137). One must bear in mind that this mechanism of ours kicks in *whenever* we are given the raw material of a narrative – this is decidedly *not* a phenomenon of extremely experimental avant-garde fiction with an unusually high number of 'gaps of indeterminacy' (Wolfgang Iser). On the contrary, we practice this every day in everyday communication. And that is why it must also be borne in mind that, when we say 'narration is the linguistic and mental linking of events', it is always, invariably, and necessarily so the reader or listener who takes over that part of the job. *For future use this should be written in stone: it is always already the reader or listener who eventually makes a story out of what is 'only' discourse.* If that is kept in mind, it will save us a lot of trouble and eliminate many termino-logical quibbles and quarrels and prevent nasty theoretical wars when we come to the question, Who then is it that 'makes' the stories in Future Narratives?

Among other things, humans are story-telling animals. Indeed, we are abso-lutely hooked on narratives. We see them wherever we can, we respond to the slightest suggestion (like patients in a Rorschach test, who are shown an abstract ink blot and are asked to interpret what they see). We do what our software allows us, indeed forces us to do: we seek possible links, patterns, connections, and *Gestalten*: we seek meaning.

For *meaning* is exactly the stuff that *is produced* when two events are linked to each other. Two isolated, unconnected events do not have any meaning what-soever. Two linked events have meaning. The meaning resides *in the connection*, and rightly so: because it is there that narrative energy was invested – in the bridge, in the binding power that connects those two points, like the cohesive power that binds atoms to form a molecule.

And we *need* meaning – we could not live without it. Like bees their honey, we produce it ourselves. Only some people feel more comfortable with the idea that *the* meaning is 'really' there, solid and given from somewhere (above?) – as if a meaning produced by other humans or, *horribile dictu*, a meaning produced by themselves, were somehow an inferior kind of meaning, a second-hand variety.

There is a certain timidity or lack of confidence in their own power. For the sake of these souls, our civilization provides all sorts of mechanisms to veil the fact that meaning is what is spun out of narratives. Well, whatever works.

For others, the very idea that meaning is something that is discursively created by linking events to each other and not something that resides in an event itself seems counter-intuitive. This is understandable. In everyday parlance we say, 'This was very important for me', or 'This opened my eyes', or 'Our holiday in Denmark was simply the best so far' – that is, we constantly seem to attribute meaning and value to events *as such*. But we do this by either eclipsing the relational manner of such value attributions (the best, compared to what? in which respect?), or, as I just did, by quoting these phrases *out of context. In context,* all these propositions would have been part of a narrative and *why* such and such was important to me would at least have been suggested, if not made explicit; *why* such and such was an eye-opener for me can only be communicated, if there is a relation to something that went on before; etc.

So it makes sense: the meaning of something resides not in itself but is the result of how it is related to something else. That is the most abstract way of putting it, but at the same time, if you think of 'related' in the sense of 'told', it is also the most concrete way of saying how meaning comes into this world. It is by narration.

This is also true for the meaning of incontestable historical facts. And it is very important that I really mean *incontestable facts* – my argument is not about borderline cases or dubious and controversial cases. It is not about how difficult it is to know the past, how hard it is to know what *really* happened, since there are so many conflicting reports or all is filtered only through more or less reliable documents, and so on and so forth. That is all true, but the example for my case is not the controversial fact, but the non-controversial fact – say, that Christopher Columbus discovered America on October 12, 1492. That fact is non-controversial, even if you point out that the Vikings discovered it long before Christopher Columbus or that the people who lived there before Columbus *and* before the Vikings sure must have discovered the place in some way. And this fact is true no matter whether you believe it is cause for celebration or for deep shame because of all that followed this discovery (a platitude, of course: the fact that you evaluate an historical event presupposes that you believe it).

Which brings me to the point: the *meaning* of the historical fact does not reside in the event itself, it is a matter of its emplotment in a specific narrative that links the event to what went on before and after. In doing this, historians can take recourse to certain established narrative conventions or genres and arrange the events (in themselves unchanged and untampered with!) in differing patterns – to quote the historian Hayden White:

> [A]ny given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of real events is *intrinsically* tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story or type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning [emphasis added]. (44)

It is difficult for some to accept, but nevertheless true that a fact – *as fact* (think: Christopher Columbus discovered America on October 12, 1492) – can remain unchanged, though its *meaning* differs radically, depending on in which kind of narrative it is embedded. Its meaning is no attribute (quality or property) of the event. Rather, its meaning is something that is *conferred upon it* in narration.

I would say this is true of all narratives, whether fictional or non-fictional, whether they are past narratives or narratives that try to capture what is going on right now, this very moment. Just two brief examples to work against our *déformation professionelle*, or professional bias, that 'narrative' automatically has to mean fiction and has to mean *past* narrative. Say, a friend tells you about his recent vacations. The very moment he tells you about his trip and sojourn, about the highlights and disappointments, about the hotel and whom he met and what the weather was like, he makes sense out of his experience, he gives it a meaning (before he eventually closes by summarizing, 'Our holiday in Denmark was simply the best we've ever had.'). In telling you about it (particularly so when he tells this for the very first time), he processes his experience into a narrative – he preserves his experience in this form, safely pickled. There are some strong indications that *already while* experiencing what he would later tell you he was experiencing whatever he did in the form of a narrative, as he was connecting one experience to what went on before, forming it into a meaningful, coherent whole, often modelled on the blueprint of former processings of experience (either by himself or by somebody else). Some people's stories remain remarkably constant over time. The meaning of X does not change for them as years go by. Is that a good thing? Or should that worry us? With others, their stories change shape all the time. Should *that* worry us? Maybe only if they change the facts as well, and not only their emplotment.

Narratives are all-pervasive. We need them, because they produce the nutrient solution in which we exist – as beings that are absolutely dependent upon meaning and purpose, upon sense and direction. It is a good environment for us that saturates us with stories, or, more precisely: that gives us both the raw material *and* the cultural, discursive techniques and the instruments to produce what we so urgently need: meaning. What we, in turn, bring to this cultural environment is this our need – and the skills and predisposition to satisfy and quench

that need. It is a demand-side economy, but the good news is that, with regard to meaning production, we are the masters of this universe, because we have this machine that transforms otherwise meaningless raw material into meaningful sequences: narration. Linking past to present and putting all that is grist to its mill into a perspective – which means: relating it to somebody for whom *a* linked to *b* means this or that – narration is not only "the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time" (Abbott 3), it is also the basis for our sense of identity, both as individuals and as members of a civilization (and as such also as a species).

Narrative is the way in which we make sense of the world – we're hardwired that way. There was a time when child psychologists believed pre-school children could not follow extended narrative. This has changed:

> At three and four and five, children may not be able to follow complicated plots and sub-plots. But the narrative form, psychologists now believe, is absolutely central to them. 'It's the only way they have of organizing the world, or organizing experience,' Jerome Bruner, a psychologist at New York University, says. 'They are not able to bring *theories* that organize things in terms of cause and effect and relationships, so they turn things into *stories*, and when they try to make sense of their life they use the *storied* version of their experience as the basis for further reflection. (Gladwell, *Tippping Point* 118, emphases added)

Small wonder then that 'narrative' has been proffered as a new foundational concept for the Humanities: after all, it encompasses all the meaning-producing and meaning-processing and meaning-transforming practices we know. It is therefore a very strong candidate for the palm of MVP in the game of all historical sciences (which includes, of course, the history of sciences).

But in case this sounds a bit too complacent: if indeed narrative can be regarded as the transformation of actual or imminent contingency into the semblance of (narrational) necessity, then this production and establishment of meaning always, and inevitably so, takes place against the backdrop of the possibility of sheer meaninglessness, over an abyss of futility and of the absurd – most prominently so if the possibility of failure or breakdown in the production of meaning becomes thematic and is thereby being foregrounded. The disquieting quality of much contemporary fiction is due to the fact that all too obviously it lays bare the mechanisms of meaning-production, shows its instruments, and points to the precarious business of making sense of it all, even and particularly so in a fictional microcosm.

But to shift from the existential level to the more mundane and quotidian, and from past to present narratives: imagine a football reporter on the radio. It is a live reportage. He reports what he sees. The slight delay of a couple of seconds should not hinder us from saying: he tries to narrate events while they're happen-

ing. Anything else would be splitting hairs. Not only as our reporter pauses and summarizes does he give shape to his story – already as he describes the moves of one team against the other, the passes, shots and counter-attacks, he fabricates a story. The crazy thing is that he himself does not know how it will end. That's part of the excitement – of his and of ours. And what form or meaning his narrative will take or attain, respectively, will depend not only on his skills as a live reporter, but also on his partisanship: one reporter's tragedy is another's triumph (even if, and that is the point, the facts of the match should be non-controversial – which they rarely are).

What happens – and we are slowly approaching the future now – when somebody tries to tell neither what has already happened nor what is happening right now, but the future? Not like a fortune-teller who reveals events that are (purportedly) pre-destined and pre-determined, not like some latter-day Nostradamus, but like somebody who imagines a future and tries to tell us a story about what is not (yet), about things as they could be, about events as they might possibly occur.

1.3 Approaching the Future I: Great Shock – Utopian Tales No Future Narratives!

When you mention Narrating Futures (NAFU), a great many people suppose that we are looking at utopian novels. We are not. And the reason is very simple: in general, utopian novels do not qualify as FNs.

Let us take a look at the beginning of what is probably one of the most disconcerting (negative) utopias of the twentieth century, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.
>
> The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats. At one end of it a coloured poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide: the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features. Winston made for the stairs. It was no use trying the lift. Even at the best of times it was seldom working, and at present the electric current was cut off during daylight hours. It was part of the economy drive in preparation for Hate Week. The flat was seven flights up, and Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pic-

tures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran. (5)

Grammatically, this is a common or garden past narrative: we are told, in retrospect, that this and that happened. Event follows upon event. And all descriptions are in the past tense, too. Now one might object, and many will, that later in the novel we learn that all this is set in 1984 (the clocks striking thirteen are already a hint that this is either in another country or in another time), a year that, when the novel was originally published (1949), was in the future and that its author wanted to warn about certain tendencies in mid-twentieth-century politics that might eventually lead to such a nightmare state. This is all true, but totally beside the point – which is: this is simply a past narrative whose temporal point of telling has been projected into the future, and from that point in the future it works like any regular past narrative. None of its parameters is changed in any way.

Or take *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s rival dystopia, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* – here is its opening:

> A squat grey building of only thirty-four storeys. Over the main entrance the words, CENTRAL LONDON HATCHERY AND CONDITIONING CENTRE, and, in a shield, the World State's motto, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY.
>
> The enormous room on the ground floor faced towards the north. Cold for all the summer beyond the panes, for all the tropical heat of the room itself, a harsh thin light glared through the windows, hungrily seeking some draped lay figure, some pallid shape of academic goose-flesh, but finding only the glass and nickel and bleakly shining porcelain of a laboratory. Wintriness responded to wintriness. The overalls of the workers were white, their hands gloved with a pale corpse-coloured rubber. The light was frozen, dead, a ghost. Only from the yellow barrels of the microscopes did it borrow a certain rich and living substance, lying along the polished tubes like butter, streak after luscious streak in long recession down the work tables.
>
> 'And this', said the Director opening the door, 'is the Fertilizing Room.' (15)

In spite of the virtual absence of action from these opening paragraphs, the few temporal indicators we have all point to the fact that this, again, is a narrative about past events. True, the story is set in the year 632 After Ford (which is 2540 A.D.) and the narrator even makes an effort to link this future period to ours by describing a fictional historical 'bridge': after the disastrous 'Nine Years War', so we learn, Christianity, Liberalism, and Democracy – which, as forces of the past, all stood against the necessary abolishment of the nuclear family, against the establishment of large-scale hypnopaedia and against a bio-chemically induced

caste system – lost their influence as compulsory consumption was introduced: "[T]here was the conscription of consumption. [...] Every man, woman and child compelled to consume so much a year. In the interests of industry." (49) The growing resistance of the populace – "The sole result [...] conscientious objection on an enormous scale. Anything not to consume. Back to nature [...] Back to culture. Yes, actually to culture. You can't consume much if you sit still and read books." (49) – was then broken by brutal force and violence: in the interest of consumerism and a stable society "simple lifers" and "culture freaks" were shot and gassed. But then the soft, non-violent totalitarianism of Brave New World was discovered to be a much more efficient way of controlling everybody – people were eventually made *to love* their servitude and mental slavery. As one of Brave New World's slogans has it: "But everybody is happy!"

Undoubtedly, this is a great novel that hasn't lost its power and impact and topicality – but grammatically and narratologically it is definitely not a FN. It is a past narrative throughout. One event that is supposed to have happened is linked to another that is supposed to have happened, and so on and so forth. To say this is not a critique, it's a simple statement of fact. And it is important to state this fact, *not* because we are possessive about territory and dogmatic about upholding a definition of FNs that, after all, nobody *has* to subscribe to. This is not some terminological stubbornness – it is quite simply about a certain distinctive *quality* that these utopian novels do *not* have, viz. the quality of being able to present *in their form* the future as still open and undecided, as variable and multiple. This, utopian novels decidedly do not do. The basic form of utopian narrative is nothing but the narration of a future which has already happened – and therefore grammatically as well as narratologically the narrative of a(n) (imagined) *past*. They present the future as *past* space: closed, determined, with uni-linear action. This is a totally different game from FNs. It's the old game. There are no nodes here. And that is why here essential aspects of future time are not preserved and its defining potentiality is not staged and is not prepared in such a way that it can be experienced.

And, by the way, that is why against the will of their authors, these negative utopias exude such a depressing air of determinism: not a few readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* come away from their reading with the inescapable feeling that this 'future' development is somehow inevitable, that nothing can be done about it – when, quite on the contrary, Orwell's and Huxley's impulse was to shake people into action. Well, you cannot easily have it both ways: to give your tale the semblance of suffocating inevitability (which they both have to an overpowering degree) and to signal that this is by no means inevitable. Past narratives are very good for the former, but less so for the latter.

They fail to achieve the latter goal to the same degree that they portray the future as a foregone conclusion.

It is often said that utopian novels tell you more about the time in which they were written than about the future. That is most certainly true, but my objection (if objection it is) is much more fundamental: in simply using the tools of Past Narratives to capture the future, these novels miss and deny what distinguishes the future from the past – namely that is has *not yet* crystallized into one single actuality. Utopian novels are Past Narratives shot into future space – that doesn't make them Future Narratives in any serious sense (just like *Mickey Mouse* is not a zoological treatise). If in telling the future, the key aspects of future time are not preserved, then, strictly speaking, the future *as future* is not told. Nothing could be more obvious, I think.

If, then, the deep reason for the failure to capture the future as future – which is, after all, a dimension of time that is *special* – is, at least in part, a grammatical one, what about narratives that are set in the present tense and that try to capture the exact point in time where potentiality is fed through the needle's eye of the present and thereby solidifies into actuality? Is that not as close as you can get to the future, if one defines 'future' as 'time yet to come', which, by that very definition, we can never touch, let alone inhabit anyhow?

1.4 Approaching the Future II: The Unbearable Gravity of the Present

If the distance between the events that are reported and the point in time when the reporting takes place is radically reduced, the action is shifted towards that line at which future time is converted into past time – the meridian of narrative: the present. And the closer you move towards that line, the more likely it is that funny or eerie things will happen.

Take, for example, a diary novel with daily entries. In William Golding's *Rites of Passage* young Mr. Talbot keeps such a diary while on a passage to Australia. One day, he is invited to have a glass of wine with the first lieutenant and Talbot, obviously flattered, ends his entry after having received the invitation with these words: "It is not the Captain, of course—but the next best thing. Come! We are beginning to move in society!" (45) In the following entry we read: "I proceeded to the passenger saloon to keep my *rendez-vous* with the first lieutenant only to find that his invitation had been extended to every passenger in this part of the vessel and was no more than a kind of short preliminary to dinner!" (46)