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Commentary

Now What: Sharon Daniel and David Clark on the Digital Imaginary

Stuart Moulthrop

In the venerable mode of M. C. Escher, Douglas Hofstadter, and those exquisite Monument Valley games, we might weave these two essays into a braid, or metaphysical double-wind. In this combination Sharon Daniel may appear the more exacting master, taking on heavy matters of crime and punishment, while David Clark seems at a first more allegro, given to coincidence, free association, and “puncepts.” As the threads cross and re-cross, though, it is Daniel who lands on the side of humanity, focusing on grand mechanics of empathy, while Clark for all his playfulness ambles over to post-humanity and species death. Perspectives shift, the axes go all duck-rabbit, and we find ourselves traversing the ceiling to reach the door. Welcome to the world of new media, whose project may well be to operationalize the last century’s paradoxes. This is progress, maybe.

In any event, things converge. Different artists, same medium: two digital interventions into what has become of documentary cinema, and thus two serpentine paths along the same pole or tree-branch, perhaps an occasion to discover, uniquely, where sixty-plus years of expressive processing have taken us. What have we learned? We might begin with rejection of a received understanding of narrative. Daniel says:

I don’t think the way to effectively address those large-scale systemic issues is by telling one person’s story of achievement or transformation. It seems to me ... in the documentary field now ... there is a desire only to fund documentary and interactive documentaries that are [about] basically tragic or transcendent characters. To me this is such a disconnect – like you don’t need interactive technologies to tell single character, character-driven narratives.

Clark is even more emphatic: “What I wanted to do was remove plots! The electronic literature form is interesting because it doesn’t have to rely on some sense that we’re taken down a garden path, things are being planted only to use later on.”

These are familiar sentiments, reverberating from Ted Nelson’s initial definition of hypertext as “non-sequential writing” (Nelson, 0/2), or Michael Joyce’s famous recipe for “a story that would change each time you read it” (Joyce, in Barnet, 117). The idea has been to advance into a new space of possibility: to augment the old, monodic media; to transform one into the many; and to slip across the border into some new rhizomatic territory. Thus most recently, Markku Eskelinen stated on the problematic status of “the textual whole:”

What is the textual whole (or the literary work) if it can appropriate and mix texts not yet published, cannot be read in its entirety, if only a few of its signifiers can or will be shared by all its readers, or if there’s no clear termination point to its metamorphosis and reading process? Moreover, many digital and ergodic texts set conditions and constraints to their readers and users ranging from temporal limitations to personal and personalized perspectives. This affects the relationship between text and reading in ways to which we should pay more attention. (Eskelinen, 95)

In addition to revolutionary critics, this attention comes most naturally from makers like Clark and Daniel, who have worked through the consequences of textual post-integrity through several iterations. Thus, the real interest of this braided pair.

It is probably worth admitting that that encounter between narrative and digital media or methods looks less like a case of rational *remediation* (with its lingering hint of dialectics) and more like that master-trope of late capitalism, Disruption. Being-digital requires a stage of dislocation, a not-being something else. The conjunction of digital and narrative, which both these artists approach with notable intelligence, asks us to discard inherited wisdom, and to invest (in Aarseth’s term) “non-trivial” time and attention. As Daniel observes, digital documentary is not at home in entertainment market: “With entertainment you go, ‘ohhh entertain me’ and you don’t have to do any emotional work to access entertainment, necessarily I don’t necessarily want to make it easy. I try to design work so that people want to pay attention.” As she goes on to say, this escalation of demands raises immediate questions of technology (quality of image, sophistication of interface), and so also questions of address and audience (for whom is the work intended); but like all disruptions, this overturning of

narrative entertainment raises an even more fundamental question. Once we have left the “garden paths” of fiction and cinema, where do we find ourselves? Now what?

To narrow the question: what comes after “sequential” (or properly, mono-sequential) narrative? For both Daniel and Clark, the answer is *the database*. Indeed, as Lev Manovich has crucially observed, most if not all digital works can be understood as “one or more interfaces to a database” (Manovich). For Daniel this is less a matter of technology than rhetoric, or perhaps political economy:

I think of a social problem as a site, rather than a story, and I want to examine that site by getting as much data and information about it as I possibly can I see the set of issues or social problems, like mass incarceration, as a site or territory, say, 100 square miles, and I want to map that territory by populating it with the testimony of those most impacted. Then I want to provide access to that territory and testimony, but instead of moving ... the viewer or audience from point A to point B to point C, in a kind of narrative arc, I want to drop you into that territory and let you find your own way through it, and hopefully have a transformative experience.

For a certain mind, Daniel’s remarks may invite ventriloquism or remix. Imagine these words coming from, say, a writer of hypertext fictions, or a designer of videogames. These too are people who desire to release their audiences into a certain wilderness. While this thought experiment might involve a certain backward slouch toward entertainment, at least in terms of the game market, it nonetheless reveals a common principle. The cybertextual turn seems to imply a shift from a certain logocentrism—the regime of the definitive sentence—to what we might call lococentrism: an entry into story space, the composition not of statements but of maps and territories.

Though in fact *lococentrism* is not the right word at all, because the main effect of this transformation is not re-centering but de-centering, an at least ostensible forswearing of hierarchies. Losing the center, we might instead say *perilocality*, indicating not a dominion of focus but unconstrained distribution: not a move to a new empire of signs but rather to a place of potentiality—the open map of Liberty City, the cosmos of lighthouse worlds at the end of *Bioshock Infinite*, or more generally those eversions of cyberspace we now call home (Jones, after Gibson). Where stories were, new media sows ludonarratives, those quintessentially negotiable relations of algorithm and play that emerge as we traverse spaces of digital possibility. Perhaps this substitution amounts to progress, yet it is obviously not the final yard to gain. We do not reach some *telos*

point of success, fulfillment, or an end to discourse. “Of course, the concept of the textual whole has not vanished from the scene,” Eskelinen points out (95). As Daniel says, there remains in the minds of funding officers a hunger for more conventional and personalized narrative. Stories of triumph, tragedy, and uplift are still desired.

As artists, then, we cleave to perilocalism at our peril. One player’s sandbox is another’s Empty Quarter. We do well to remember that warning sign posted in the old ur-hypertext, the one that warns about Margate Sands, where “I can connect nothing/With nothing” (Eliot). Or as another ancestral voice says, “Nothing will come of nothing” (*King Lear*, I.i) especially when the object of desire is corporate or state support. *Ya gotta have something*, says a more recent singer (Preston): the operative word being *thing*.

Perhaps, reeling from agoraphobic uncertainties of inside-out cyberspace, our sensibilities turn inevitably these days toward objects. Daniel and Clark, these artists of the immaterial, seem notably fascinated by materiality. For Clark we could point to the Freudian cigar, or the numinous, doomed elephant of 88 *Constellations*. For Daniel it is what we might not-so-punceptuously call Tables of the Law, those luminous rectangles that are variously placed, removed, and replaced during the introductory segment of *Inside the Distance*. Daniel’s table is very much what a French wit once called *le nécessaire pour la conversation*, although it is dealing with life-changing dialogue, not salon banter. Still, the furniture is in every sense necessary, providing a space of intervention as well as a sight-line for mutual regard.

Daniel’s phrase “the distance” has multiple meanings, including, as she points out, the time in the ring a boxer sets out to endure. But surely this quantity is convertible back to spatial measure. The white space of the table encloses and defines “the distance” of confrontation in physical terms. Its origin lay, Daniel says, in a (perhaps apocryphal) painting by Michaël Borremans in which two men in severe white suits sit around a mysteriously luminous rectangle. Though Borremans’s work is widely reproduced on the Internet, I can discover no such painting, though there is a cinematic still frame that comes close to Daniel’s description. The image is tagged as “The Feeding” and seems associated with Borremans’ 2006 short film *WEIGHT*, though it does not occur in the version of the film that is accessible online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nrNjJxOCbk

In this image the men are standing, not sitting. It is worth noting both are black, though it is not clear how their race signifies. Their enigmatic relationship to the blank rectangle invites speculation. In *WEIGHT*, which seems to capture

this same scene from a closer angle, we can see that the men have placed their hands below the topmost rectangle without touching it (Borremans). They seem to be levitating the rectangle, which belongs to a stack of similar objects, the whole ensemble floating above a darkened, draped table. As Daniel says, the lighting of the scene is striking. As she also says, the image refuses any simple reading. Whatever the levitation might stand for, it clearly involves concentration. Both men—neither “inmates” nor “orderlies,” I would say, but technicians or magicians—look down intently upon the blank surface. Their eyes are downcast, partly closed. Whatever the object represents—a rotated, bleached-out version of Kubrick’s space-brick? an ironically empty screen or canvas?—it commands focus. If not devotion or worship, the scene evokes a deep, purposive investment in the artifact.

We could perhaps take “The Feeding” as a sign of our times, relating it perhaps to that vogue for speculative realism and object-oriented ontology that has lately taken root with certain philosophers (e.g., Graham Harmon, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost). While fiction and documentary are making their laborious turns through the perilocal, philosophical commentary seems to be rounding the next corner—veering, as Joan Didion once said, into the particular. Here is Levi Bryant:

If it is the signifier that falls into the marked space of your distinction, you’ll only ever be able to talk about and indicate signs and signifiers. The differences made by light bulbs, fiber optic cables, climate change, and cane toads will be invisible to your and you’ll be awash in texts, believing that these things exhaust the really real. (Quoted in Bogost, 90)

“No ideas but in things,” William Carlos Williams famously insisted (Williams, 6), a dictum people like Bryant have begun to echo. Stop cathecting on the signifier, they tell us; pay more attention to stuff. At least one increasingly celebrated game designer, David O’Reilly, has also taken up this idea. In *Mountain* (2014) and *Everything* (2017), O’Reilly dives into the possibilities of object consciousness. *Mountain* is an alpine-awareness simulator. Our avatar in the game is a giant mass of rock floating in a fantastic space reminiscent of those Roger Dean covers for early Yes albums. Play, if we can call it that, consists primarily of being. From time to time smaller objects—anything from park benches to thumbtacks to bowling balls—tumble in from the greater beyond and can embed themselves in our mountainous flanks. Time passes, and with it seasons. Rain comes, and snow. Trees lose their leaves and green anew in spring.

In the newer game, *Everything*, the player is able to transfer attention/investment into just about any visible object or life-form. The trailer for the game, itself arguably a major piece of game-related art, juxtaposes images of play with a lecture by the Buddhist teacher Alan Watts, focusing on the universality of consciousness and the illusion of individual existence. With these pseudo-games a feedback loop clicks shut: the object-oriented software design of games, which Bogost partly credits as an inspiration of object-oriented ontology, is put to use in an ontological simulation that celebrates haecceity. Stuff is the center of happening. Things rule.

For some, this reach beyond self and signifier must surely be its own end, a radical revision to the terms of awareness. Yet even though they take their own first steps along this line, Daniel and Clark remain attached to certain conventional teleologies. For Daniel, the perilocality/polyvocality of database serves the struggle for social justice, allowing us to explore the proposition that offenses should be understood within, not against, the social. Her table, with its crucial span of “distance,” enables the at-one-ment of victims and offenders in the realization that we all occupy these roles at some point in our existence. Clark’s move beyond the simplistic narrative self starts out in an attempt to lose “the plot,” with its infamous logic of deathwardness, but somehow the gravity of this mortal proposition proves inescapable:

The posthuman thing – it becomes a big thing in the new piece [*The End: Death in Seven Colors*]. One of the endings is this theme of the death of the human, and the final chapter is centered on chess and the idea of the “end game.” Ultimately, it evokes things like the Cold War and Star Wars. And, hence, there’s this bigger sense of species death. So, yes, I guess that’s a little bleak.

No doubt, as Clark takes pains to point out, death as we speak of it is always construction or projection. Outside the realm of faith, we know of no one who has experienced death completely and managed to reflect upon it. The ultimate reality of death remains the great unknown. Moving from persons to masses, there may be some species-specific fatal number, like the age Benjamin invokes in *The Storyteller* to remind us that a man who dies at thirty-five is at all moments of his life a man who dies at thirty-five (Benjamin). Maybe for *Homo sapiens* that final age is 752,000 or 1.2 million, or counting population not time, some number in the high unit trillions. Or we can turn again to objects. There is the *memento mori* in *Hamlet* and elsewhere, contemplation of a calcified skull, the ultimate nihilistic narcissism.

More often we invoke endings, even in absolute terms, as (perhaps dangerous) figures of punctuation or extinction. *He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is.* For certain subjects there would seem to be no happy or progressive possibilities. And yet there is in any boundary or limit at least the possibility of inflection or deflection, not the passing into nothingness but a turn into a different state. Instead of species death, we might contemplate transformation, or the orientation toward a new episteme we have been struggling to achieve these last seventy years. Once upon a time we told stories. We dreamed about a magical place called cyberspace. Then we turned it inside out, and got it all over ourselves, and now we find ourselves at play in various sandboxes, in the world as database.

This process, which Sharon Daniel and David Clark so deeply understand in their own ways, teaches us something of what we are, but also announces what we can no longer be. It speaks of what we may become and also what we may never become. As Clark says:

The more we snuggle up to computers and the more they absorb some of our humanity, the more we also realize that we will never get to understand their ontology. It will always remove itself from us.

Or perhaps it is we who can or must remove ourselves from the way of the machine. Such is life under Disruption, an unceasing series of removals, a perpetual unwind.

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