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NARRATIVE, IMAGINATION AND EXTENDING VISIONS OF THE POSSIBLE *

Molly ANDREWS **

Abstract: This article examines why imagination is so central to narrative, and narrative such a vital component of imagination. What is the role of imagination in helping us to ‘see difference’, not only between others and ourselves but also between ourselves and who we might be, or might have been? The article explores the situated nature of imagination and its critical role in everyday life.

Keywords: narrative, situated imagination, temporality, everyday life

Résumé : Cet article examine pourquoi l’imagination est centrale pour la narration et comment la narration représente une composante vitale de l’imagination. Quel est donc le rôle de l’imagination en nous aidant à « voir autrement », pas seulement entre nous-mêmes et les autres, mais aussi entre nous-mêmes et qui nous pourrions être ou qui nous aurions pu être ? L’article explore la nature située de l’imagination et son rôle critique dans la vie quotidienne.

Mots clés : narration, imagination située, temporalité, vie quotidienne

Narrative and imagination are integrally tied to one another; that they are so is immediately clear to anyone who stops to think about stories – real and imagined, about the past or in a promised, or feared, future. Why and how this is so are questions which direct us to ruminate on what it means to be human.

* A more expanded version of this article appears as Chapter 1 “Trafficking in Human Possibilities” in my monograph Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.

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The argument I will make in this article is that narrative and imagination are combined, not only in our most elevated thoughts about the world as it might be, but also in the very minutiae of our daily lives. Although we do not often talk about the role of imagination in how we approach each day, carrying out and evading those responsibilities to which we have committed ourselves, and simply being ourselves in the world, negotiating our sometimes troubled paths between competing desires of our own and those of others, its importance cannot be overstated. It is perhaps a sign of our times that imagination, which so fascinated Aristotle and has continued to be a key concept throughout the development of Western thought, has been relatively neglected in our current age. Philosophers of the late 20th century such as Jean-Paul Sartre 1 devoted much time to thinking about, but the critical function of the imagination in the human psyche. However, more recently, those inquiries into the nature of imagination are less philosophical, less contemplative, more ‘scientific’ although there have been some notable exceptions 2.

The coupling of narrative and imagination brings into focus: 1) the salience of, and dynamic nature of, the temporal; 2) a mediation between the real and the not-real; and 3) the complexity of the construction of ‘the other.’ Clearly, narrative and imagination are not always conjoined: many, maybe most narratives do not concern themselves with the world of the imagination. They are, rather, limited to the world as it is ‘in reality’, even while that reality is always and invariably subjectively constructed. It is only when we attempt to unpack the layers of a narrative that we begin to realise the role of imagination in its construction. There are an endless number of forms that imagination can take, narrative being but one. However, when these two entities are brought into play with one another, there we encounter the balancing act which defines us as being human, living, breathing and interacting in the world even while our minds are full of memories and dreams. Through our narrative imaginations, we are both anchored and transported, and it is both the tension and the synergy between these two that informs my own work.

**Time travelling**

Meaning is inherently unstable; even when it appears to be constant, it is nevertheless perpetually created and recreated (just as it is perpetually contested and resisted). It is here that the importance of imagination emerges as it lifts narrative in to another dimension, offering it both the possibility of history and of a tomorrow.

Much has been written on the importance of expanding our conception of the temporal beyond linearity, beyond ‘clock time’ 3. The human psyche moves fluidly between time frames as a matter of daily course. That memory – bringing forward experiences of the past into the present – is a cornerstone of identity is clear.

2. See for example the researches of the Ceaq: www.ceaq-sorbonne.org
Without recollection, it is difficult to have a sense of who we are in the present, much less to configure a future for ourselves. We are forever revisiting our pasts, in light of changing circumstances of the present, and in so doing, our vision for the future is reconstituted.

Not only can we time travel, but we do it all the time. We must. We constantly move backwards and forwards in our minds eye, and it is this movement, which is a key stimulus behind our development. We learn from our pasts, not only as things happen, but as we reflect back on experience, in light of subsequent unfoldings. We routinely revisit moments in our lives where we now realise that had we chosen a different path, things would have turned out very differently. We ponder the ‘the road not taken’ in our own lives, and think about the lives we might have lived, the selves we might have become, the bad fortune that would have befallen us, had we turned at that point in the other direction. We look back on the selves we once were, selves who we are both connected to but distinct from our current selves- and this self-regard can be met with a number of different reactions, be it a fondness towards our youthful selves as we grappled to find our way, or a reticent distance from the yearnings which once occupied our hearts and minds.

Nor is our time travelling limited to our own selves. Rather, we do it about everyone, and everything. When meeting someone we know well, be it friend or foe, we regard them as someone who comes with a history. Based on our past encounters, we expect certain things from them, now in the present, and this is also the basis upon which we make plans with them, or don’t, for the future. These expectations range from the mundane – someone tends to run late, or not pay their share of a bill – to the more significant – we know this person will be honest, is trustworthy, or will sell our secrets to the first person they meet – and they are themselves a form of time travel.

Even our senses of objects and space are inflected with an ongoing revision of perception and evaluation. We read a book that we have not seen since our childhood, and are surprised at the racist imagery of which we, in our youth, were oblivious. How could we have missed that message, one which so offends our current set of values? Or we revisit a place and are surprised that it is so different from the way it was in our memory. We come to ask ourselves what in our current lives will we later regard with a similar sense of a detached, if sometimes disappointed, curiosity? In what Ricoeur calls the ‘now that...’ time 4, the encounter with our past spurs us on to imagine our future in which we are looking back on the present moment. Time traveling.

In all that I have been describing here, I think the role of imagination cannot be emphasized enough. Even when our memories are accurate – for instance we believe certain things happened at certain times with certain people, and we are right – the meaning which we attribute to those experiences, in other words the

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reason they are important to us, is highly influenced by the imaginary world we weave around them. In this sense, the word imaginary alludes to the extra bit we bring to our perception, the ‘seeing beyond’ referred to by Sartre above. It is the drive of the imagination which impels us to ask ‘if only’ of our past, and ‘what if’ of our futures. When we revisit the past, as we do when we tell stories about our lives, it is our imaginative urge which gives us the ability to contemplate a world that might have been, as well as one which might still be. It is our imagination which gives us the necessary sustenance to create visions of alternative realities, which “differentiates human beings from all other animals.”

The real, the not-real, and the not-yet-real

This brings us to the second point of our discussion regarding the bond between narrative and imagination. As we have just indicated, narratives are not necessarily limited to life as we know it, but might derive much of their meaning when considered in relation to what Sartre calls ‘the not-yet real’. Sartre argues that freedom, relies upon our ability to see things not only as they are, but as they are not: from one’s knowledge of the real, one must be able to extrapolate, to build out towards a world that is not yet real but which one day might be. Although clearly not everything we imagine is in fact realisable – consider only the very rich genre of science fiction for examples of the fantastic –however, if something can be imagined, it is not ‘absolutely impossible’, i.e. not possible in all of its dimensions. Implicit here is a bridge traversing the pathway between what is known, and what can be known, between the present and possible futures.

This discussion highlights a creative tension between temporality and possibility: just because something does not exist in the present does not mean it will not exist at a time in the future. The real and the not-real are not then polar opposites, but rather are positioned in relation to one another, linked by a thread of ongoing change and perpetual becoming.

The movement between the real and the not-real is not only temporal, but may be spatial as well. Questions of space not only direct us to where one is, but also to where one has been, and where one might go – questions which are as much about physical realities as they are connected to our innermost imaginaries. Those who have been exiled from their home, and dream of returning one day, hold dear those sights, sounds, smells and tastes which for them are indicators of that space. The spatial dimension is thus both real and imagined, and this becomes increasingly apparent when one considers for instance the power of nationalism and the role of borders.

Imagination, then, like knowledge, does not come out of nothingness, but is a creative synthesis which emanates from a particular location. The imagination is

‘fundamental to why, whether and what we are ready to experience, perceive and know in the first place...’

Constructing the self and other in narrative imagination

The third and final point regarding the vital relationship between narrative and imagination builds on the current discussion of situated knowledge. That the ‘speaking I’ is always located in place, space and time is clear, and that this fundamentally influences not only what happens in one’s life but also how one makes sense of these events, is a cornerstone of much narrative scholarship. Giving accounts of ourselves is part of our everyday lives as we routinely “order our experiences, memories, intentions, hopes, desires, fears, and concerns in an autobiographical perspective”. But the lens from which we view our lives and the world around us is one which is not only situated, but dynamic, that is to say in a constant state of being created and recreated.

How and what one perceives and understands about one’s own life is always connected to one’s view of others. Who am I (and who are ‘us’) invariably invites the question of who are ‘they’ (or other). This construction of self and other is ongoing, and draws equally on (situated) knowledge and imagination, reaching out not only to the future (aspirations and fears), but deeply rooted in our pasts (sometimes acknowledged, sometimes hidden). How one comes to think of oneself in relation to others and to negotiate the space between them is not only the basis of much moral philosophy, but is something with which we are confronted every day of our lives. The challenge is practical and ethical in equal parts, and at its heart is the question of who and how we are in the world.

But here is the challenge: how to travel the world and be open to the stories we hear, balancing a respect for common humanity with an acknowledgment of difference. If we are to avoid simply projecting on to others our own thoughts and feelings, how are we to access the world of the other? How can we be empathetic, while at the same time holding on to the important differences between the experiences of others and our own? When we begin to think seriously about the viewpoint of another, one of the first things we must confront is our own otherness: the imagination is not only vital to our attempt to penetrate the meaning-making system of another, but it is employed in our attempt to understand how we are viewed by them. The more insight we have into the make-up of our own perception, the greater the possibility is that we will be able to see beyond that which we already know.

Everyday imagination

The relationship between our powers to make sense of how the world operates (reason) and our inclination to be able to build other possibilities from this base (imagination) are not necessarily antithetical, although they are often assumed to be so. The mind’s eye, that which we can envision but which might not yet be, can be a most worthy guide in the journey to realising new possibilities.

The focus in my own work is on an imagination which does not leave the real world far behind, but rather is grounded in it, which extends from the ‘real’, the world as we know it, to the world of the possible. It is imagination in its everyday guise, imagination as it is manifested as we think about our lives as they have been lived, and as they might be led, as we try to make sense of people who seem very different to ourselves, and even those with whom we think we share so much. Our imagination, in this sense, is not something which we dust off and put on for special occasions, a psychological tiara of sorts. Rather it guides us from our waking hour to when we go to bed at night. It is with us always, sitting side by side with our reason and perception. It is our imagination which assists us in synthesizing the information we take in about the world around us, and helps us to process it, looking beyond and beneath what is.

Contemplating the role of narrative imagination in everyday life brings us finally to the question of what it means to know our world. If we are to acquire an understanding about the meaning of our lives in the larger sense, we must have a way of moving beyond current reality, even while being anchored within it. If we can abandon our paths of certainty, and thus render ourselves vulnerable to new ways of knowing, we will not only be transformed in the process, but we can in our small way contribute towards creating new realities. This possibility of renewal and change is one of greatest gifts of our narrative imagination.

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