Extending the Scenario Horizon: Putting Narratives to Work

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The quest for agency lies at the heart of futures work. Vuokko Jarva in her lead article for this number suggests that a clearer conception and application of narrative futures may well offer practitioners a bridge between the inner work of futures that seeks to problematize all certainties and the 'realities' such certainties uphold and the necessary structural features in which all human activity takes place. Thus she observes:

> "Deeper participation can be achieved when the co-partners of a futures project create the future narrative, its *storyworld*, characters, goals, and means, as well as plan and also realize the action. The end of the story can then be the state of the future at some point in time, possibly years from the start of the story. The narrative can live alongside the action and it can change when the situation changes." (Jarva, 2014, p. 21)

Jarva contends that the narrative evocation of scenario work is only half done if left at the end of a scenario process and that futurists need to take ownership of the post scenario stage and work with clients to "develop a scenario into a real 'shooting script' (film theory) or action plan". Her reasoning is that narratives offer "a more solid basis than the more complicated and abstract methods of futures studies".

The link between agency and narrative is based on coherence. What is wonderful in this is that *we live story* while co-creating it within communities of practice. Storying provides the coherent structure for our lives by supplying meaning and direction. Stories are the mimetic strands of meaning produced by culture and narrative is the way we understand the structure and form of events. Narrative is often understood passively but can be reframed as *the dynamic process of human making* that culture does all the time. Thus culture itself can be read as a story machine from which emerges a series of possibilities.

Foresight and Narrative

Storying is fractal but always grounded in a series of forms that are collectively maintained and reconfigured when ruptured by some internal or external event. Scenario work itself draws on these possibilities when applied to any complex issue. The futurist is working co-creatively to explore and extend, perhaps even rupture the commonplace narratives of the group they are interacting with. The historical philosopher Hayden White reflects on this same process as he

describes the role of narrative in the historian's craft. Thus he notes:

> "Narrative accounts of real historical events, then, admit of as many equally plausible versions in their representation as there are plot-structures available in a given culture for endowing stories, whether fictional or real, with meanings" (White, 2010, p. 232).

Plausibility linked with meaning are important elements in narrative work as the combination generates the energy needed for developing transformative future oriented narrative pathways that can be constructed by the participants in conjunction with the futurist. This collaborative effort is a central feature of futures work and points to the embedded nature of the human struggle for expression within constraints. It also points to the *implicit narrative dimension in foresight work* which builds on the anticipatory logic of a set of contextual features that come together to provide the rationale to our action.

Once we begin to look at what we do as futurists, narrative pops up everywhere. This is so whether we take a teleological view of narrative as the linear sequential unfolding of life's drama towards some defined or indeterminate end, or a heterotopic stance in which multiplicity is underpinned by the heteroglossia of divergent and competing ends.[1] The bottom line is that human beings are defined by their narrative consciousnesses. Take the story away and there is an absence of being. Kwame Appiah puts it like this:

> "We wouldn't recognize a community as human if it had no stories, if its people had no narrative imagination" (Appiah, 2006, p. 29).

Narratives Enable

Given then that scenario work is an exploration of possible future narratives, Jarva's call for an engagement with a continued and chosen futures script makes sense. Not only is there an ethical principal for this narrative extension that requires action beyond the play of possibilities, that relatively safe scenario space, but also because *a narrative is an enabling force* that can inform, empower and, in the best of all worlds, transform human activity. The scenario process enables participants to see narratives as process; it can also enable participants to identify their current narrative context. In this way, scenarios help us distance ourselves from the dominant script and see the world with new eyes. Perhaps scenarios can also help us recognise the various interests (power nexi) that narratives align with and of course support. If they can do this then they can begin the work of co-narrating and transforming their preferable futures as opposed to accepting any given story as real.

It seems then that *narration is a way of knowing and being in the world*. The narrative is not simply a story trope but an active and creative process that can take us beyond the current script. This is a powerful form of knowledge which resonates with Derrida's (2002) description of the world as text. It also links in with Foucault's argument that knowledge is a disciplinary process that if unquestioned always supports a given power centre. Thus for him co-narration would equate with critique: "the art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault, 2002, p. 193).

To not be governed by narrative is essential to our understanding of key futures processes which seek to return agency to those in any given context. This

return however must be nurtured. Thus anticipatory knowledge is also a form of anticipatory action learning (Stevenson, 2002). In this we all collaborate reflexively to bring forth new forms of being and doing. The moral imagination (Lederach, 2005) is at work here in that the co-narrators seek to establish and inform new modes of relating. A good narrative – one that returns agency to those in context – must also therefore be flexible to allow as many possible relationships of co-being to form. As Inayatullah (2004) demonstrates through Causal Layered Analysis the zones for relating are multiple and layered and causality sits wherever the narrative coalesces into meaningful form.

Foucault saw this and described it relationally as an attempt to create open ended networks:

> "…this network of relationships must not make up one plane only. These relationships are in perpetual slippage from one [to] another. At a given level, the logic of interactions operates between individuals who are able to respect its singular effects, both its specificity and its rules, while managing along with other elements interactions operating at another level, such that, in a way, none of these interactions appear to be primary or absolutely totalizing. Each interaction can be resituated in a context that exceeds it and conversely, however local it may be, each has an effect or possible effect on the interaction to which it belongs and by which it is enveloped. Therefore, schematically speaking, we have perpetual mobility, essential fragility or rather the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it" (Foucault, 2002, p. 203).

Narrative 'lines of flight' within the networks, and the openness of narrative to new forms, are kept alive through these incessant interactions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Such a process is inherently fragile as Foucault notes in the above passage. So, to stay and co-narrate a possible future with a group who has been through a scenario process is to help build a *stable relational bridge* not simply between the participants and a desired future, but also between as yet unforeseen possibilities and a host of possible 'others' who may emerge as participants in turn, in the unfolding narrative. Such others can ultimately include non-human actors from animals and plants through to the Cosmos as relational consciousness expands to take in multiple interlocutors in a neohumanist community of narrative action in which the humanistic consciousness of the past expands to take in the entire community that frames our human context (Bussey, 2006). This expanding *narrative community* introduces new elements of possibility into our cultural milieu. It brings new meaning to the cosmopolitanism of our shrinking planet (Appiah, 2006).

This process as Ananta Giri (2011) suggests is a collective work of co-narration which calls forth the relational qualities of empathy, compassion, dialogue and listening. This is meditative work not simply in the existential sense of the term but also in the cultural sense of a collective turning inward to discover new possibilities. It is an expansive and trusting labour of co-narration which is a necessary condition before a more resilient sense of narrative extension can emerge. Such a state of narrative openness generates a form of knowing based on *narrative inclusion* which functions dialogically with elements of the future that are yet to be encountered along with the core meanings that narrative offers to those striving for alternatives.

Narrative Knowledge

Giri captures some of this through his concept of knowledge as a verb that incorporates multiple spaces of co-realisation. Co-realisation implies that to know oneself one must also know others. Realisation of course is another form of narrative cohesion in which an individual accesses their own story; co-realisation offers us the understanding that no one individual has their own story without the presence of other stories. This kind of knowing is embodied and collective. Giri notes:

> "Knowledge is a multidimensional meditative verb of self-, co-, and social realisation. Knowledge as verb involves practices of knowing together, which in turn involves both compassion and confrontation. In practices of knowing together, we create a compassionate community and help each other to learn. This is also a space of solidarity, a solidarity which is always in a process of fuller realisation rather than a fixed thing" (Giri, 2011, p. 2).

Looking at the context for scenario work it nearly always occurs within community. Scenarios are a form of community knowledge creation. Their goal is to both guard against risk and to explore optimal futures. This is what is at the heart of anticipation – the fear of harm versus the allure of possibility. The community, as it engages in the scenario process, can grow richer, deeper, through the interactive and open space such encounters generate. In this way scenario work can foster solidarity in the sense Giri offers. It can also create the space for alternatives that critique present representations of the real. In the right hands scenario work and the narrative engagement following it can also be understood as a process of co-realisation in which transformative narrative possibilities emerge. To take these forward is to not just honour the process but also to extend it beyond its own given boundaries. Such boundaries – in this case the idea that scenario sessions end with the generation of a set number of effective scenarios – are themselves culturally conditioned practices and part of limiting narratives that we can now, after 40 years or more of work with scenarios, challenge.

Narrative Consciousness

The relational dimension of narrative knowledge is key to how we can progress Jarva's call for narrative action in the work of futurists. The fact that, as eco-philosopher David Abram (1996, p. ix) asserts, "Humans are tuned for relationship" suggests that we generate narrative consciousness within the scenario context which is then extended or operationalised in the movement from in-house scenario reflection to active working towards the exploration (some might think of implementation) of a given scenario. In this strategic action, it becomes strategic once a goal is set, is augmented by a narrative consciousness that generates and sustains sets of values, meanings and actions that are necessary for the work-in-progress scenario.

Narrative enables commitment by demonstrating to participants the self evidence of the task. It brings what Hans Joas (2013, p. 173) calls, 'affective intensity' into the extended scenario work of the futurist. When the reflexivity of the anticipatory learning process unfolds and contextualizes all narrative engagement, then narrative consciousness emerges as a source of strength, but even more importantly, because it acknowledges multiplicity and inclusivity as key elements

of narrative action, as a source of individual and collective resilience. One could characterize the state before this reflexivity emerges using Walter Benjamin's concept of the *readerly text* (Hughes-Warrington, 2005, pp. 216-217). A readerly-text carries narrative and authorial authority and triggers within the reader a passive acceptance of the narrative state. Benjamin contrasts this state with the condition of a *writerly text* which draws the reader into an active engagement with the narrative process. Futurists working on the narrative extension of a scenario process are in effect establishing with their clients a writerly-narrative context that is dynamic, open ended and transformative.

Towards Narrative Resilience

The work of narrative extension beyond the scenario phase is an exciting domain to explore. It of course requires us to go from theory to practice. In this we need to develop sets of indicators, collect case studies and also to develop a typology of narrative futures that includes the scenario phase as a necessary first step. This brings us back to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia: the multiple and layered nature of languaging-narrating the world. Narrative extension work is certainly committed to a defined end even while participants need to learn that the end is always deferred.

In the narrative of the Tower of Babel, the tower was caste down by an angry and jealous God for whom it represented the hubris of a single language that would threaten his monopoly on the singular. This Biblical punishment has come to be humanity's saving grace as we must deal not with a singular and hegemonic narrative, which would cede us a cultural determinism without end, but with multiplicity, difference and the endlessly varied possibilities of writerly-narrative. I would argue that a futurist's task is to foster the relational consciousness needed to celebrate difference. This condition of celebration can be brought to bear in our work as the source of narrative resilience. Such resilience is at the heart of a narrative knowing that is flexible, open and inclusive. The human creativity of this condition is capable of transformative action and that of course is what futures is all about.

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Notes

1 See Michel Foucault on heterotopia: (M. Foucault, 1986) and Mikhail Bakhtin on heteroglossia: (Bakhtin, 1982); of relevance here is also my article on shamanic futures: (Bussey, 2009).

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