"Working Through Contradiction Interminably": Towards a *Mathesis Singularis*?

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In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes the paradox of infatuation with an object and the problems of simultaneously addressing it "scientifically." He is torn between languages and describes a desperate resistance to "any reductive system":

> Then I decided that this disorder and this dilemma, revealed by my desire to write on Photography, corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses, those of sociology, of semiology, and of psychoanalysis - but that, by ultimate dissatisfaction with all of them, I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me (however naïve it may be): a desperate resistance to any reductive system. (Barthes 1981: 8)

This conflict is constitutive to the book; it is reflected in its form: *Camera Lucida* is not only a personal narrative on memory and death, it is also a philosophical discourse on central questions of representation, and, by extension, on theory and method. Barthes raises the question: how do we look at photographs? He arrives at what he calls a "curious notion": "why mightn't there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer *universalis*)?" (Barthes 1981: 8).[1]

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[1] Barthes does not elaborate on his use of the two terms. The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://www.rep.routledge.com/philosophy; all the following quotations are from the web site and can easily be searched there) refers to Ramón Llull who in the Spanish middle ages "developed a complicated combinatory logic ... which offered an ingenious foretaste of our current axiomated logics." According to the encyclopedia, his thought "contains the seeds of the *mathesis universalis*, which served as the basis for European Rationalism as developed later by Descartes and Leibniz." Descartes' rules of method "were interpreted as recommendations to start with a few simple and acknowledged notions (axioms) and thence to proceed to unkonwn ones (theorems). ... The supporters of such an interpretation maintained that the axiomatic-deductive method should replace logic and be the

A *mathesis universalis* implies a systemic approach to the object to be analyzed, the establishment of a theoretical apparatus.[2] Such an approach values the insights that come from comparing and differentiating, and considers them essential for the application of the apparatus in analysis.[3] Thus, the construction of for example a collective memory may seemingly invite a parallel construction of several versions of a *mathesis universalis*, of "sciences" of collective memory within the humanities and/or the social sciences.

In my ongoing work with a PhD dissertation, *Kennedy Dying*, I analyze how certain narratives evoke a particular historical event, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and reflect upon how they are part of the shaping of a collective memory of the event. Such a memory is shaped culturally and, to a tremendous degree, by a transgressive narrativity that seems always to suspend classification. Modern storytelling affects our notions of the past in various and significant ways and encountering motion or still pictures, graphic or textual novels, short stories, epic poetry or theatrical performances, to mention a few of the forms I have come across, I am inevitably left with a sense that the narratives simultaneously both invite and resist classification. Such paradox can easily result in a theoretical impasse. The narratives share

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model for the right conduct of understanding." According to Cartesian logic, such understanding would serve as a universal science of invention, a "universalis."

Gilbert of Poitiers (c. 1085-1154), theologian, philosopher, and logician, distinguished between three branches of theoretical knowledge: physics, mathematics, and theology. At the time Aristotle's *Metaphysics* was not known in the west. Gilbert differs between *concrete* and *abstract* objects of knowledge, where theology is the science whose object is the non-concrete. The concrete can be considered as it is ('natural consideration'), or, when we attend only to forms (and not matter), in an abstract way (mathematical consideration). For the last type of consideration, *mathesis* or *disciplina* is used; *mathesis* concerns "not quantities but abstracted forms ... Mathesis is special because it is a certain way of knowing, consisting in conceptual analysis. Its inquiry concerns the meaning of concepts such as corporeity or life. Thus concepts of forms are freed from the concrete state of affairs with which they are connected. Mathesis concerns itself with the question of what other concepts are implied by the range of meaning of a certain concept: with what other concepts is a given concept compatible or incompatible? ... Gilbert emphasizes explicitly that the categories are referred to more adequately by abstract than by concrete terms."

[2] In "Unity of Science", an essay from *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* web site by Jordi Cat, Isidore, the Bishop of Seville who compiled etymologies in the sixth century, Llull (see endnote 1), and Petrus Ramus, who "introduced diagrams representing dichotomies" all represent an "organization of knowledge" that reflects "the idea of a world governed by the laws dictated by God, creator and legislator." This organization is systemic.

[3] Petrus Ramus (see endnote 2) argues that "the starting point of all philosophy is the classification of the arts and the sciences" (http://www.rep.routledge.com/philosophy)

fundamental features that need to be taken into consideration: they invent the past as much as they record or retell it, and even if the strategies vary, they all relate to that same event, and often in profoundly similar ways, across or beyond generic boundaries. There are essential intertextual relations between all the narratives in question. And yet, each narrative resists sweeping statements: needless to say, as narrative, a graphic novel differs widely from a movie or a novel. Each narrative stages and re-enacts the event in its own way. Significantly, the generic forms I have suggested ("novel," "epic poetry") often fall short in "defining" the constitutive elements of the narratives.[4] As a result, I indeed find myself wishing for a *mathesis singularis* for each new form. It is this conflict I wish to address here. Particularly, I wish to contrast how the wish for a *mathesis universalis* finds expression in recent attempts to re-articulate theories of "nonfiction," and how, at the same time, the practice of interdisciplinary analysis calls for theories that revolve around "conceptualizations" rather than systemic methodology, an approach reminiscent of Barthes' "curious notion" of a *mathesis singularis*.

The attempt to describe a type, to distinguish it, and to test its occurrence and systemic function in relation to other types can be identified in literary theories of the twentieth century, such as Northrop Frye's theory of archetypal structures or structuralist theory.[5] Mieke Bal presents a break with such traditions in a second and revised edition of her 1985 book *Narratology*, in 1997. In her introduction she explains how she grew uneasy with the first edition when working with the second. She felt uncomfortable with the "tone of it," the references "to being sure," and "all those remnants of the positivistic

[4] Although Steve McCabe's *Wyatt Earp in Dallas, 1963* (1995) can be read as an epic poem, it is a postmodern version of the epic, a genuine hybrid.

[5] See Frye 1957 and any introduction to structuralism. Frye believes that literary criticism should "acquire something of the methodological discipline and coherence of the sciences", but several critics have found his approach "excessively schematic" (Lodge 1995: 421). "There is a place for classification in criticism ... The strong emotional repugnance felt by many critics toward any form of schematization in poetics is again the result of a failure to distinguish criticism as a body of knowledge from the direct experience of literature, where every act is unique, and classification has no place," Frye claims in his "Polemical Introduction" to *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957: 29).

"Structuralism," as proposed by cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, normally refers to a form of analysis informed by Saussure's linguistic model. Structuralism considers cultural phenomena as a signifying structure, "a combination of signs that have a set significance for the members of a particular culture," and analysis explains how phenomena achieve their "cultural significance, and what that significance is, by reference to an underlying system" (Abrams 1993: 280).

discourse of my training that inhere in structuralist thought" (xiii). Bal found that there was a discrepancy between her practice as an analyst and the systemic approach to narrative, between her encounters with narrative as "object-language" and her analysis as "meta-language." In the afterword of her new edition, she claims that there is "no direct logical connection between classifying and understanding texts":

> Asking whether or not an object 'is' narrative is both obvious and futile, just as the notion that an image 'is' visual hardly calls for visual analysis to make that point. On the other hand, if so much of culture 'is' narrative, or, if not, at least 'has an aspect of' narrative, doesn't any invocation of narratology initiate a circular argument that begs the question of specificity? This is why traditionally, narratology has been used to differentiate 'types' of narrative, narrative situations, 'modes' of story-telling ... But what's the point of *that?* ... Delimitation, classification, typology, it is all very nice as a remedy to chaos-anxiety, but what insights does it yield? ... There is no direct logical connection between classifying or understanding texts. (Bal 1997: 221)

Bal's contention is that initial classification and the application of a consistent theoretical apparatus in analysis too easily promotes dichotomy. When a value system is appropriated to the apparatus, it potentially disqualifies a specific kind of narrative that is formative for collective memory in particular ways. A classification that promotes a "fiction"/"nonfiction" dichotomy can therefore potentially seclude the historical event from the realm of "fiction," and leave it to the documentarist or the historian to treat it in narrative. Bal therefore cautions against a confusion of understanding and axiology, against a sense of "value inherent in narrative." The danger is that narrative is either understood as "true, hence, good" or as "intrinsically false, fictional, manipulative, hence, bad" (223). In either case the essential tension that is integral to a specific vision of history is neglected.

The reasons for cautioning against an axiology of "fiction"/"nonfiction" are, then, partly ideological. Bal's approach to "close reading" is definitely anti-totalitarian. She insists that no academic discipline can function without a notion of the concept of *meaning* (26), a view that is reminiscent of for example Bakhtin's textual/cultural approach, since Bakhtin insisted on any text as simultaneously "polyphonic" and "laden." Bal does not, however, embrace "the disabused endorsement of undecidability" (91-2). Meaning is not forever delayed, it is rather articulated and re-articulated in interpretation, securing an ongoing questioning of textual authority.

In the case of the Kennedy assassination the narrativity in what John Hellmann refers to as an "unbounded cultural space" is a battle of cultural authority (Hellmann 1997: x).[6] On this battleground, the narratives I analyze co-exist with an abundance of narratives that claim to be "objective" and "scientific," and thereby present a closure in terms of meaning. They "stage" the historical event and may therefore be said to "play with meaning." The question of "truth" is as contested as ever when a story of the past is told, and this is particularly the case in the unsolved murder mystery of a president.[7] Numerous Kennedy assassination narratives problematize the very distinction between "fiction" and "nonfiction" narrative by *not* resolving this basic tension. Novels such as Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) or movies such as Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), which are about events surrounding the assassination, are routinely placed in "fiction" shelves. Readers and spectators are familiar with the contrast implied, but the process of *reading* and *watching* is more complex, and invites a particular kind of interactivity. Of course, the reader/spectator does not interpret a movie or a novel in the same way as for example the first official interpretation of the event, the Warren Commission report in 1964.[8] Whereas the documentary approach of the Commission attempted a necessary but flawed conclusive interpretation, the artistic narratives cannot and will not achieve such a truth-telling status, and their power is rather of a negative character; they are free from burdens of *empiri*, open for artistry, and they raise questions about knowledge and the authority of knowledge. Their own considerable authority is thus of a different character.

The anti-totalitarian polyphony of the narratives depends on their hybridity, on a textual play that frustrates generic and formal classification. They operate in a zone fittingly described by Bill Nichols as "between boundaries," where "the world put before us lies between one not our own and one that very well might be" (1994, ix), hence their troubled mimetic character. The novel *Libra* and the movie *JFK* address the assassination by way of montage of documentary material and reenactment, by way of

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[6] In Vågnes 2002 I discuss the implications of this kind of narrativity for the formation of collective memory.

[7] One result of this is that critics simultaneously classify narratives as "fiction" and performs ethical criticism; a novel or a movie is first labelled as a work of the imagination, then criticized severely for its representation of history.

[8] See an extensive list of titles that present criticism of the Report in Parenti, 1999: 206. In 1978, a House Select Committee concluded against the Warren Report that there was more than one assassin involved in the Kennedy shooting.

combining what is imagined with indexical data, never settling in one mode, always disrupting what is simulated with what is real, always telling what may have happened.[9] The use Stone makes of the 8 mm film of the assassination shot by Abraham Zapruder is highly controversial, because he "mixes Zapruder's real vérité with his own simulated vérité" (Williams 1999: 311). According to Marita Sturken it is this montage that defines the dialogical relationship between narrative and spectator, that allows the viewer to raise fundamental questions of meaning:

> The meanings of the Zapruder film continue to shift each time it is reenacted ... The Zapruder film replaces personal memories of the Kennedy assassination, becoming those memories, and *JFK* has the capacity to replace the Zapruder film. All subsequent depictions of the Zapruder film are irrevocably altered by its inscription in *JFK.* (Sturken 1995: 35)

Sturken claims that it is "the reenacted image that carries the weight of historical narrative, that allows for a sense of participation in history" (1995:

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[9] On the hybridity of *Libra*:

"*Libra* preserves the historical texture of everyday life the [Warren Commission] Report offers in its countless interviews and empirical facts and details ... DeLillo assembles and organizesthe historical materials of The Warren Commission Report in conjunction with several conspiracy theories of the assassination. *Libra*, however, does not vindicate either narrative of the JFK assassination, but rather negates each plot by revealing its moment of untruth, the blind spot that enables each narrative to restore meaning and/or stability to social reality." (Willman 1999: 622-23)

"What [DeLillo] has done in *Libra* is given us one perfectly shaped, intention-driven narrative while folding within it, every other chapter, a second narrative, his imagined biography of Oswald ... With his double narrative DeLillo toys with conventional political and novelistic expectations. ... Oswald is a contemporary *production*, a figure who is doubled everywhere in *Libra*, even, most harrowingly, in strategic places, in the narrative voice that DeLillo invented for this book." (Lentricchia 1991 b), 201-3)

On the hybridity of *JFK*:

"Upon the film's release, the criticism continued along two fronts: Stone's decision to base his narrative on the much-discredited Jim Garrison, former New Orleans district attorney, and the film's visual strategy of intercutting archival footage with reenactments of alleged events." (Simon 1996: 205)

"Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary - realistically imaginary or imaginary real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated ... All of the events depicted in the film - whether attested by historical evidence, based on conjecture, or simply made up in order to help the plot along or to lend credence to Stone's paranoid fantasies - are presented as if they were equally historical, which is to say, equally real, or as if they had really happened." (White 1999: 68, 69)

35).[10] The meanings "continue to shift," and ongoing participation leaves history open-ended. The kind of spectator participation that Sturken describes thus depends fundamentally on the essential tension that characterize this kind of narrative. This interpretational activity resembles the one preferred by Bal, a Gadamerian approach: one should always allow the object to "speak back" and allow a "suspension of certainties" (Bal 2002: 45). Theory, according to Bal, is not an "instrument of analysis" as much as "a discourse that can be brought to bear on the object at the same time as the object can be brought to bear on *it*" (65). The point of interpretation is, Bal claims towards the end of *Narratology*, to ever raise "Gadamer's perpetual questions" (Bal 1997: 224).

This dialogic relation between "object-language" and "meta-language," where both can be said to problematize and investigate epistemological authority, disqualifies readings that insist on a clear-cut distinction between the two. Several of the narratives "do theory" in the sense that they both reflect and invite reflection on, say, "history as institution" or "the epistemological claims of historical representation."[11] The narratives can make claims that are theoretical.[12] In *Libra*, one of DeLillo's characters is a retired senior analyst of the CIA, and as we follow him in his work we are bound to share his historiographical reflections. Similarly, if we read Norman Mailer's *Oswald's Tale* (1995), a historical novel of almost 800 pages, we are bound to read through an immense amount of "documentary" material (interviews, records). This should not surprise us. In his essay on the relations of science and art, Thomas Kuhn points out that there are "close and persistent parallels" between science and art, the two enterprises he had been taught (as a former physicist) to regard as "polar."[13] One cannot, according to Kuhn, apply "classic

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[10] For elaborate discussions on how narratives such as *JFK* can engender a new kind of historical consciousness, see Nichols 1994, 1996.

[11] For an essay on how literary texts can "do poetics," and how interdisciplinarity problematizes further distinctions between meta- and object-language, see Bal 2000. Bal's *Quoting Caravaggio* (1999) examines how art works "theorize cultural history" (5) and "do history" (7).

[12] W. J. T. Mitchell explains in an interview how he, when working with *Picture Theory* (1994), wished to "silence the theoretical chatter" and "let pictures talk and to allow images to attain some kind of theoretical status" (Mitchell 2000: 2). Instead of trying to "replace" the object with commentary, Michell wishes to "let pictures 'do' theory and give theory a physical, visible, figured body" (ibid): "the aim is to investigate the ways in which these forms theorize *themselves*, not to apply theory imported from some academic discipline" (3).

[13] In the humanities, the rise of a journal such as *Rethinking History* reflects a need for "a new form of historical writing" (cfr. call for papers, http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/termine/1998/cminia10.htm) that problematizes a polarity of "object-language" and "meta-language." The editors of the journal invite contributions that are

dichotomies" between "the world of value and the world of fact, the subjective and the objective, or the intuitive and the inductive" and use these to distinguish art from science (Kuhn 1977: 340). Kuhn finds "disquieting" that "the distinction between artist and scientist or between their products seems to evade us" when we are "deploying our subtlest analytic apparatus." However, this is "due less to their intrinsic similarity than to the failure of the tools we use for close scrutiny." Kuhn propagates a search for an "alternate set" of tools, and hopes to find "entry points" in a reconsideration of parallels between science and art drawn by E. M. Hafner from three areas, "products," "activity," and "response" (341). Central to Kuhn's argument is the difference between the goals of art and science. In the arts "the aesthetic is itself the goal of the work," whereas in the sciences it is "a tool" (342). Sciences are to "unlock the puzzle." Whereas the artist "also has puzzles to solve, whether of perspective, coloration, brush technique, or framing edge" their solution is not "the aim of his work but rather a means to his attainment" (347).

Obviously, Kuhn refers in these passages to the painter-artist, the epitome of traditional artistimages. However, the conflicting modes of thought described by Kuhn in a different essay as "convergent" and "divergent," resulting in a "tension" which is "essential" to "the very best sort of scientific research" is a better characterization of what is achieved in the artistry of some of the JFK assassination narratives (226). The dynamics of a narrative that evokes the assassination of a head of state does not merely depend on its aesthetic elements, and if it is to provoke reflection on our understanding of the event, it demands of the artist something resembling what Kuhn finds in the "successful scientist": an ability to "simultaneously display the characteristics of the traditionalist and of the iconoclast" (227). Even if few would think of *Libra* or *JFK* as scholarly or factual accounts, or expect them to tell the *truth* about what happened, it would be reductive to think of their primary goals as merely the development of a specific aesthetic. They also suspend the unlocking of the puzzle of an historical event, to remain with Kuhnian metaphor. They invite "play," but serious play, in the Gadamerian sense of the term. (See Gadamer 2002: 101-133: "Play as the clue to ontological explanation."). They are not uninterested in questions of truth.

"Miniatures," for which the only requirements are that the topic "be in some way historical and the length no more than 1500 words ... the subject matter of a Miniature need only be limited by the imagination and inventiveness of the historian. Like all contributions to *Rethinking History*, Miniatures will be refereed - by standards appropriate to the form." Editors Robert A. Rosenstone and Alan Munslow suggest that contributors send them "vest pocket biographies, poetic reflections, personal encounters, outrageous reinterpretations."

Does a classification of narrative as "fiction" or "nonfiction" have to obscure this "essential tension"? Or can it help the interpreter to understand each narrative better? Two views that differ radically from that of Bal are presented in a recent debate between Eric Heyne and Daniel Lehman. Both share a firm belief in distinguishing in analytical practice between the "fictional" and the "nonfictional." They have, however, different views on how this may be done. Heyne believes in the application of a theoretical apparatus that can help the interpreter define narratives as "fiction" or "nonfiction" narrative, whereas Lehman rests heavily on the metaphorical in his conceptualization of a specific version of "nonfiction."

Heyne outlined his first vision of a "theory of literary nonfiction" in *Modern Fiction Studies* in 1987, where he stated his interest in finding a way "to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction" (Heyne 1987: 483).[14] Thirteen years later, in *Narrative*, Heyne rejects what he refers to as his "earlier binary model for the fiction/nonfiction distinction," but has not given up hoping that a more complex systemic theory is possible:[15]

> I have spent the last decade waiting for renewed critical attention to focus on 'the theory of nonfiction reportage.' The practice of various kinds of 'creative nonfiction has proliferated ... and surely theory would follow practice. Unfortunately, it hasn't happened. Not only has there been little progress in our theoretical understanding of ambitious nonfiction, but there is no more

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[14] "In order to evaluate a complex nonfiction narrative, it is essential to understand the exact truth-claims being made and how they fit into the author's overall intentions. ... I think it is important to frame our discussion of literary nonfiction in terms that recognize its potential success as both a useful model of reality and an aesthetically pleasing verbal pattern of human meanings" (488-9).

[15] One such attempt can be found in Marie-Laure Ryan's "Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality" (1997). She considers "the crisis of the dichotomy [of fiction and nonfiction] as a challenge to sharpen our definitions" (Ryan 1997: 165). Her alternative in the essay is an expansion of the dichotomy "into a three-, and then four-term model for the epistemological classification of genres" (166). Her model is problematic in a number of ways: 1) It develops a typology based on truth-telling status as parameter; 2) It reduces narratives to homogenous and consitent structures; 3) Like Heyne, she envisions literary production as isolated from other cultural production. The result is the conceptualization of a theoretical appratus that is bound to operate as a reductive in the interpretation of recent narrative (and significantly so in the case of Kennedy assassination narrative).

For further reading, see also *The Distinction of Fiction*, in which Dorrit Cohn addresses the "uniqueness" of fiction, which according to her can be "precisely identified and systematically examined" (Cohn 1999: vii).

> widespread agreement about the nature of the fiction/nonfiction
> distinction than there was twenty years ago. (Heyne 2001a: 322)

Heyne submits these views in a critical review of Lehman's *Matters of Fact*
(1997), a book whose "single most important theoretical claim," according
to Heyne, is "that the presence of flesh-and-blood characters in a narrative
makes the experience of that narrative qualitatively different, creating a
'boundary' or 'edge' that must be crossed by writers and readers of
nonfiction" (323). It is not difficult to agree with Heyne that Lehman's
reliance on a single spatial metaphor to characterize the
"fiction"/"nonfiction" distinction represents an oversimplification of a
complex phenomenon (326). Nevertheless, Heyne's alternative is
problematic. According to Heyne, there is need for a theory that can
address a "the human ability to process narrative in terms of categories like
fiction and nonfiction" (326), an approach that "offers us some help with
identifying the 'criteria of validity' for nonfiction status" (329). Such
"criteria" have to be established rather than identified, and a theoretical
apparatus must be conceived accordingly. Paradoxically, however, Heyne
claims that a "sorting mechanism" for "fiction" and "nonfiction" is
"something we all employ routinely every day," and that it "operates as a
complex individual algorithm for each person, based on that person's
experience, belief, knowledge, and desire" (331). Does this mean that we
apply a *mathesis singularis* in our individual interpretations of these
narratives but that we need to construct a *mathesis universalis* in a practice
of analysis? Is not a scientific approach that merely suggests a
systematization of the intuitive trivial? Lehman (like Bal) problematizes the
notion of differentiation as significant for analysis. In his response to
Heyne, he claims that he leaves to others "the task of sorting stories into
piles" (Lehman 2001: 334). Rather, he remains with metaphor of
movement and claims his interest in "the heft and shape of nonfiction, its
ability to alter space and make noise" (335).

Heyne and Lehman disagree, then, on how to address this ability to
distinguish "fiction" from "nonfiction." Their debate may reflect a period
of crisis in the practice of critical analysis, where classification, generic and
otherwise, is increasingly problematic because of a genuinely hybridized
cultural production. One result of this may be that much more work has
been done in recent years on for example narrative theory than on modern
genre theory (Gorman 2001). Heyne considers genre theory relevant for
analysis, whereas Lehman questions its ability to produce insights that can
prove helpful in the challenging reading of a particular kind of narrative.

Hence the debate is not only theoretical, but also institutional, there is also a divergence in their views on critical practice. In yet another response, Heyne defends classification because it is to him a *joyful activity*:

> There is some intrinsic joy for me in hearing the names of things, in learning how to distinguish among the many different kinds of things in this world. I feel the same joy when someone identifies for me a new literary subgenre in such a way that I can see it more clearly, understand it as not merely a unique instance but a type of literary production that shares crucial features with others of its type. I have the same sense of having learned something solid and useful, a pattern that helps me make sense of this complex and fascinating world. Some might argue that no learning is possible without classification; without going that far, I have to say that sorting things out makes me happy. (Heyne 2001 b, 343)

Is this an example of what Bal refers to as classification as "a remedy to chaos-anxiety" (Bal 1997: 221)? Such "chaos-anxiety" implies that textual production is chaotic. According to Larry McCaffery, an understanding of what is often referred to as "postmodern" narrative depends on an ability to accept and reorientate oneself within a "culture of mass media" that "has conspired against the ways in which art was previously created and received" (McCaffery 1995: xiv).[16] One of these ways is the genre-based interpretation of narrative. Recent historiography suggests an awareness of a narrative's epistemological claims by implying that we consider how narratives make us think of "knowledge," rather than the "truth-status" of a given narrative. Hayden White, a central proponent of this historiography, has been misplaced as a post-structuralist or has been accused by fellow historians of proposing a constructivist historiography because of his ongoing study of the figuration of historical narrative.[17] Richard T. Vann points out, in "The Reception of Hayden White," how White has been

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[16] The reorientation McCaffery refers to implies a keen awareness of new and "innovative strategies of narrative approaches modeled on more kinetic, dynamic, nonliterary forms of art" (xxii), of which McCaffery lists quite a few (xxii-xxiii). What McCaffery describes is a culture of extensive visual/textual transpermutation, the recognition of which any interpretation of narratives such as *JFK* or *Libra* depends upon. Both Heyne and Lehman are astonishingly devoted to a study of literary narrative that takes the technological reality (an immense production of visual narrative) that surrounds literary production in to account only to a limited degree in their readings.

[17] Particularly "The Modernist Event" (1999), an essay in which White discusses questions of representation and the Holocaust, has been controversial.

referred to increasingly as a "literary critic" (Vann 1998: 148). This is partly because White recognizes "the basic impulse to create narrative form from whatever reality presents" (Partner 1998: 167).[18] It also, in effect, suggests that many of his critics think of his particular interest in narrative structure as more relevant for literary analysis - or the analysis of "fiction" rather than "nonfiction." According to White, the historical event, "by which one used to mean something like 'the assassination of the thirty-fifth president of the United States,' has been dissolved as an object of a respectably scientific knowledge" (White 1999: 71).[19]

It is difficult not to see these developments in how art/history are created and received as effects of the rise of a culture of mass media: the unprecedented mediation of the event of the assassination, which is still considerable, is fundamentally intertextual, or, to use Hellmann's phrase again, located in an "unbounded cultural space."[20] Kennedy famously became the first "tv president" (Watson 1990), and no Kennedy narrative does not reflect this. Significantly, Kennedy assassination narrativity coincides with what W. J. T. Mitchell refers to as the "pictorial turn," or "the age of electronic reproduction," an age of "new forms of visual simulation and illusionism" (Mitchell 1994: 15). Both Mitchell, McCaffery, and Bal envision all textual production in such an age as "contaminant," and consequently conceptualize analysis, unlike Heyne or Lehman, *interdisciplinarily.*

Towards the end of *Picture Theory*, Mitchell speaks for a "terminological economy":

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[18] F. R. Ankersmit claims that the traditional criticism of White by historians is "misguided," and that historians "customarily distrust historical theory" (Vann 1998: 182). One would suspect that Ankersmit places Perez Zagorin in such a category, since Zagorin refers to a "postmodernist syndrome" that has been "largely inspired by Hayden White's book *Metahistory* (1973)" (Zagorin 1999: 17), and a postmodernist philosophy that is characterized by "its skeptical and politicized view of historical inquiry [which] is deeply mistaken" (1). Vann, Partner, Ankersmit, and Zagorin are all quoted from editions of *History and Theory*. For White's views on "post-structuralism" cfr. the essay on Foucault and (particularly) the closing essay in *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), and essays on Foucault and Jameson in *The Content of the Form* (1987).

[19] "Indeed, such singular events as the assassination of a head of state are worthy of study only as a hypothetical presupposition necessary to the constitution of a documentary record whose inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps, and distortions of the event presumed to be their common referent itself moves to the fore as the principal object of investigation." (White 1999: 71)

[20] See Scott, A Reference Guide to the Kennedy Assassination, 1999.

A book called "picture theory" should, I suppose, end with a picture of the whole argument, a visible architectonic that would diagram the relation of all the parts and leave the reader with a grid to be filled in with infinite detail. Unfortunately, I have no such picture to offer. ... The list of new theoretical concepts and terms is deliberately short and unoriginal. ... This terminological economy is partly a result of my conviction that we already have an overabundance of metalanguages for representation and that no 'neutral' or 'scientific' vocabulary (semiotics, linguistics, discourse analysis) can transcend or master the field of representation. (Mitchell 1994: 417)

Mitchell resists the notion of a *mathesis universalis*, and instead introduces two concepts, "imagetext" and "metapicture," that have a power, he claims, that "is largely negative" (417-18). As concept, "imagetext" enables Mitchell to analyze a narrativity that depends on the visual as well as the literary. The negative power comes in part from the distinctly interdisciplinary character of the concept, and especially the implications of this particular conceptualization for analysis. To Mitchell such a conceptualization is inevitable since the Saussurean sign is a "mixed medium":

I prefer to think of [the imagetext] as the name of a recurrent gap or structural relationship among symbolic practices, a trope that signals a boundary or fold in the field of representation. ... When I take the theory of representation to sign theory, I point out that Saussure's picture of the sign is not, as it first appears, based in a simple binary opposition between the signifier and the signified. It has, you will recall, a third element, the bar between them. ... Why does it turn out that in order to show the structure of the sign, Saussure needed to use three different kinds of signs - what Peirce would have recognized as a symbol (the word), an icon (the image) and an index (the bar)? It suggests that the internal structure of the sign is a mixed medium. (Mitchell 2000: 16)

The consequence of this is that a master key to semiosis is impossible, "an illusion projected by the hope for a master theory."[21] Representation always involves a mixed medium. Mitchell is reluctant to define the goals of the conceptualization of "imagetext." He rather considers it productive for working with theory dialogically and dialectically, "not in the Hegelian sense of achieving a stable synthesis, but in Blake's and Adorno's sense of working through contradiction interminably." In place of a *mathesis*

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[21] Marie-Laure Ryan attempts a systemic theory very much in this spirit (1997).

universalis, then, Mitchell proposes an ongoing examination of image and narrative that is open for rearticulation and reorientation, an examination of "cultural formations as contested, conflicted forms of mediation" (17).

When McCaffery submits that a culture of mass media conspires against previous ideas of artistic creativity, he refers, then, to this fundamental contamination of narrativity that in the "pictorial age" is unprecedented, and that characterizes Kennedy assassination narrativity. Born out of such a culture is a narrative that McCaffery loosely calls "AvantPop," a phenomenological rather than a generic description; a flexible "concept" open for reconceptualization.[22] AvantPop narrative is characterized by an originality that McCaffery recognizes in its rich texture, in its particular "spirit of subversion and emphasis on radical formal innovation" (McCaffery xviii). The intertextual play of AvantPop narrative resists a logocentric approach:

> Avant-Pop shares with Pop Art the crucial recognition that *popular* culture, rather than the traditional sources of high culture - the Bible; myth; the revered classics of art, painting, music, and literature - is now what supplies the citizens of postindustrial nations with the key images, character and narrative archetypes, metaphors, and points of reference and allusion that help us establish our sense of who we are, what we want and fear, and how we see ourselves and the world. (McCaffery 1995: xviii)

McCaffery describes a "popular" culture defined by its hybridity, by textual transpermutation of all kinds. Images of Kennedy occur in poetry, crime novels, television series such as *X Files, Red Dwarf,* and *Seinfeld,* and in music videos from artists such as Marilyn Manson.

Interestingly, if we turn to one systemic and well-conceptualized approach to narrative, White's *Metahistory* (1973) in which he adopts the tropology of Northrop Frye to the analysis of historical narrative, White expresses reservations about the systemic approach in a footnote: Frye's method of analysis works well enough on "second-order literary genres, such as the fairy tale or the detective story," but "it is too rigid and abstract to do justice to such richly textured and multileveled works as *King Lear, The Rememberance of Things Past,* or even *Paradise Lost*" (White 1973: 8n). Textual complexity may not be a contemporary (or "postmodern") phenomenon, but this does not mean that the textuality of recent narrative

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[22] McCaffery uses the term for literary narrative; however, he opens up for a wider use of the term.

may not differ from that of earlier times. I would argue that the textual play McCaffery refers to resists the systemic approach that Heyne proposes. It also resists or an updated version of the systemic theory Frye proposed, like White seems to suggest. Bal claims she "would prefer first to explore messiness" rather than be delimited by the order of White's "system that neatly coordinates figures, literary genres, and historical periods" (Bal 1999: 45).

What characterizes Mitchell's own approach? In an interview he submits that his attempt (in *Picture Theory*) at a synthesis of contemporary thinking about representation and art theory did not issue "in any system or method," and that it instead tended to be "somewhat anarchistic and eclectic, working by essayistic forays into concrete problems rather than an architectonic elaboration" (Mitchell 2000: 5). "Imagetext" as envisioned by Mitchell is what Bal calls a "travelling concept" (Bal 2002: 56-95), and Mitchell claims that he believes "in 'travelling light' when it comes to technical terminology" (Mitchell 2000: 5). He is more comfortable working with "mutable concepts" (6). Bal proposes a use of "concepts" as tools for analysis, not in order "to label" but because concepts can "offer miniature theories" (Bal 2002: 22). Bal's contention of "theory" differs distinctly from "theoretical apparatus" in ways similar to that of Mitchell. "Concept" is to be understood not as "clear-cut methodological legislation," but rather as "territory to be travelled" (23). According to Bal, interdisciplinary analysis benefits from the projection of "working concepts" (99), concepts that have a history from more than one academic discipline. The movement back and forth between disciplines she envisions metaphorically, hence "travelling concepts."[23] A trajectory is proposed for the reader/spectator instead of definitions or truth-claims (60). Textual hybridity invites an analysis that draws on different disciplines, an analysis that is to lead the analyst to resist "sweeping statements and partisanship as well as reductive classification for the sake of alleged objectivity" (44). Bal even conceptualizes "messiness" in cultural analysis, by deliberately "messing" (as she puts it) with concepts. (Bal 2002, 178-82).

A systemic theory that relocalizes boundaries of "fiction"/"nonfiction" cannot address messiness: Bal's argument is that the intertextuality of the work motivates an interdisciplinary analysis that constantly invites reconceptualization. "Messiness" is thus as serious a concept as "play." In her critical practice, Bal addresses the uniqueness of the work's aesthetic effort,

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[23] Bal points out that the destinations are bound to be uncertain, as you find that "after returning from your travels, the object constructed [for analysis] turns out to no longer be the 'thing' that so fascinated you when you chose it" (4).

and, significantly, recognizes "messiness" as a helpful concept when confronting the danger of ethical criticism in any theory of art that depends heavily on notions of generic purity or strict classification. Ethical criticism advocates a form of narrative that is "fictional" but that also addresses history and therefore needs to be "truthful." I would argue that an analysis that addresses the performativity of the narratives in terms of historical accuracy is reductive. Their performativity is defined by their "messiness."[24] An analysis that presents "concepts as miniature theories" in ways similar to what Mitchell and Bal suggest is more appropriate for an interdisciplinary approach.

Nevertheless, the considerable challenge of such a contention of theory cannot be underestimated. Mitchell warns against interdisciplinarity as "buzz word," against the absorption of "everything into this undifferentiated soup" (Mitchell 2000: 10). Bal presents similar warnings in her introduction to *Travelling Concepts.* In spite of this, Mitchell and Bal insist on a more pragmatic kind of "labour of reading" (Bal 2002: 26), which, if successful, might (but only might) result in what Richard Rorty refers to as an "inspired" kind of "unmethodological criticism":

> Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens. ... [W]hat excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced. (Rorty 1992: 105)

A reading is only one out of many, and cannot "explain" or systemically "place" a narrative. Such a pragmatic conceptualization of analysis is bound to both frustrate and inspire the analyst. Another pitfall is that a notion of narrative as value-neutral can result in analysis that is value-less, and consequently propagate a nihilistic interpretational activity that is radically unethical. Such criticism may canonize narratives that are open-ended in a way that undermines the significance of a particular historical

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[24] A number of the fiercest critics of *Libra* and *JFK* blamed the narratives for their "messiness," and argued that it defined their manipulative character. One of *JFK*'s fiercest critics, Janet Maslin in the New York *Times*, commented that "[i]mages fly by breathlessly and without identification ... Real material and simulated scenes are intercut in a deliberately bewildering fashion" (quoted from Kagan, 204). An astonishing amount of the criticism of the movie focused on its montage and whether it was "manipulative," that is, false and "bad." In a similar manner, as different voices as George Will and Jonathan Yardley both condemned DeLillo's novelistic treatment of the assassination story in *Libra* for its textual play. In his syndicated column, Will blamed the novelist for his "bad influence." See Frank Lentricchia, "The American Writer as Bad Citizen" (1991 a)).

event. Several critics have recognized such a tendency in the interpretation of Holocaust narrative.[25] Recently, the television series *Live from Baghdad*, which aired on HBO in the fall of 2002, was accused of depicting the CNN coverage of the bombing of Baghdad as an act of heroism on the part of reporter Peter Arnett. FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting) criticized the series for repeating manufactured and untruthful news stories from 1991.[26] The producers of the series claimed a truth-telling status (unlike Stone or DeLillo) that invited protest. Merely to write off the series as "untruthful" does not, however, prevent its historical vision from having a formative effect on the collective memory of the event. The task of the analyst of such a narrative is, hence, to initiate a theoretical approach that depends on the viewer as *participant* rather than passive "receiver." When historical reality is, in the words of Bill Nichols, "under siege" (Nichols 1994: 2), the analyst must scrutinize each narrative that depicts an historical event with attention to *how it addresses* knowledge and truth. Some of the Kennedy assassination narratives can thus perhaps, by "doing theory," engender a new kind of historical consciousness, very much in the way that Nichols or Bal envisions:

> [R]e-visions of baroque art neither collapse past and present, as in an ill-conceived presentism, nor objectify the past and bring it within our grasp, as in a problematic positivist historicism. They do, however, demonstrate a possible way of dealing with 'the past today.' This reversal, which puts what came chronologically first ('pre-') as an aftereffect behind ('post') its later recycling, is what I would like to call a *preposterous history*. In other words, it is a way of 'doing history' that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating highlights - a vision of how to re-vision the Baroque. (Bal 1999: 6-7).

> It is the ceaseless dialectic of past, present, and future that sustains historical consciousness for the historical actor as well as the historical spectator ... Collage ... retains the paradox while simultaneously aiming it in the direction of a will to transform. Realism alone clearly will not suffice ... A crisis of representation ensues from the failure of classic realist narrative models to convince us of their commensurability with the reality we experience beyond them. Different models arise and contend ... Questions arise that cannot be answered by traditional storytelling techniques. (Nichols 1996: 56-58)

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[25] See Zachary Braiterman, "Against Holocaust-Sublime" (2000) for a thought-provoking discussion.

[26] Lismoen 2003.

Such a consciousness depends on what Sturken refers to as "participation," and serves as what Mitchell refers to as "the dialectic between illusion and reality," in which illusion can only "be in some kind of dialectical relationship with the real" (Mitchell 2000: 20-1).

Only by way of close readings can one hope to investigate how such consciousness can be activated in different instances of narrativity. This may be a difficult task, but is not difficulty and resistance what interpretation is all about? Mitchell refers to the disillusion of the analyst as a "positive symptom of the fact that somehow we do keep on learning as we think our thougths" (3). Even if the title of this paper may sound somewhat sisyphean, it may also serve as a motto for a particular conceptualization of theory and analysis. I leave it open whether one must, as Camus proclaimed, "imagine Sisyphus happy" at the foot of the mountain.

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