Qualifying Field Examinations

Cameron Irby

Written Exam #3 – Kim Knight

Narrative Media

Question #2

In the "Introduction" to *Narrative Across Media*, Marie-Laure Ryan suggests that literary narratology operates as the "unmarked, standard manifestation of narrativity" against which other narratological models are defined (13). Working from the assumption that this is true, synthesize your readings of about narrative into a working definition of standard narrativity. Use this definition as the basis from which to define narrative media, addressing both what constitutes narrative media and how it functions in our current media ecology. Be sure to refer to specific theoretical readings and specific cultural texts (both analog and digital) to illustrate your analysis.

My writing of this essay exposes the irony of composing a theory of narrativity, for the theory must be put into practice to discuss it. I cannot describe to anyone what makes a narrative without making one myself. To make sense of stories, one must tell stories. The very structure of human languages reveals this, as each sentence weaves its subjects together with actions, adjectives, description, pauses, beginnings, and endings. We enthusiastically relay our life like our favorite storytellers, going the extra mile to draw out the smallest details and connect the pieces of random information and sensory data we are bombarded with every day and night into anecdotes, tall tales, and memories. Then, we share the stories others give to us, mostly through our words but occasionally through the chords of a mournful violin, the colors of a deep-red sunset, or the carving of wood and stone. Collecting stories becomes second nature to us to such an extent that many avid readers (including myself) obtain books we may not read for years, as if the mere presence of potential stories around us is a goal worthy in itself. The task of describing those intricate, inherent components that make up these stories feels like disentangling the whole of human culture.

But not all stories are created equal. While stories bring joy and knowledge, they equally bring misinformation and pain. I—like many other children raised in the US—felt betrayed when I learned that Santa Claus wasn't real; though some may rightly claim that the childhood belief in an ancient force that observes your every act, judges your behavior based on poorly-disclosed rules that are typically manufactured by those who wield direct power over you, and promises rewards of happiness and material goods for your compliance (and punishment for those that perform naughty acts of disobedience) is silly, religions and the stories and texts they are based on hold commanding sway over billions around the world. As I write this, the US faces conflicting narratives over the legitimacy of the 2020 election as accusations of voter fraud, the

dead casting ballots, and conspiracies of global networks of elites seeking to implant microchips into the populace unless the 45th president remains in office to thwart them continue to spread across social media. To better understand the power that lies within narratives and the media we use to communicate them, we must recognize the logical complexity, the affective stickiness, and the stubborn defiance of entropy that stories possess.

Media is the plural of "medium," a material or method used for a specific purpose, but "narrative" is a bit trickier to break down. The field of narratology works to this aim, and it continues to struggle over what the line between narrative and the information used to make it should be. Marie-Laure Ryan in her introduction to *Narrative Across Media* calls language the "medium of choice" for narrative and describes the literary and linguistic media of novels, oral storytelling, and news as "*the unmarked, standard manifestation of narrativity*: telling somebody else that something happened, with the assumption that the addressee is not already aware of the events" (13, emphasis mine). As the unmarked or unmodified narrative form, narratologists compare every other narrative media against it. Ryan posits that narratology has falsely presumed that language is the only narrative medium, offering an alternative view of narrative as a "medium-independent phenomenon," though she admits that language is to our knowledge the best at making "explicit the logical structure of narrative" (15). It is not that narrative can be told through any medium but that the medium *doesn't matter*. Narrative, for Ryan, is ultimately a "cognitive construct, or mental image, built by the interpreter in response to the text" (8). In the phrasing of semiotics, the signifier (text) fuses with the signified (interpreter's experiences, memories, knowledge, and imagination) to create the sign (the mental image). When one looks up in the clouds and sees recognizable shapes of trees, a U.F.O., or a rabbit, one experiences a similar process to observing narrative media.

Just because the reader comes up with the story doesn't mean that anyone could read Hamlet and think the entirety of the play is a recipe for brownies. The craft of storytelling centers around guiding the audience's mental images towards the creator's own. In literal terms, this can be the words one uses to describe a midsummer's day or, in film, a string of camera angles to show the reactions of characters having a conversation. However, there is always a non-zero chance that someone "misreads" a text in a way that departs from the author's intent. One notable example of this is in the many queer readings of "straight" texts. Alexander Doty argues that the inherent ambiguity of sexual desire in narrative works combines with the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ readers to recognize and articulate "the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (16). Yet the reverse is equally true, where straight viewers can read straightness into queer texts ("just good friends"). This dichotomy further illustrates the locus of narrativity as the interpreter's mind over the instigating media object.

"Don't judge a book by its cover," a phrase used by readers to separate the text of the book from the marketing and packaging of it, denotes an impossible task. The presence of a cover (or absence of one) affects what books we are drawn to and influences our judgment of the contents therein. This analysis characterizes Gerard Genette's exploration of the paratext. The paratext, Genette explains, "is a discourse that is fundamentally heteronomus, auxiliary, and dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its raison d'être. This something is the text" (12). Paratext can include the book's cover, the author's biography and accompanying photograph printed in the back of the book, the table of contents, the index, and all manner of promotional materials, interviews, and advertisements used "not to 'look nice' around the text but rather to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose"

(407). Paratext could also include the environment that one reads in, the events of the reader's day, and/or the wear and tear of the work itself. All these things shape our perspective of what the text means, directing us in certain directions at the expense of other possible meanings.

Although I use "text," "work," and "narrative media" interchangeably, they could easily be absent of language altogether (or, more accurately, use a different language). Paintings and sculpture tell their stories through visual media that avoids the directness of text. This heaps the burden of storytelling onto the viewer, which promotes a plurality of readings but could also *prevent* readings from taking place. Modern art frequently gets criticized for being obtuse and hard to understand, a problem caused by a lack of inherent meaning (i.e. the absence of recognizable signifiers); indeed, even the perception of modern art as "hard to read" acts as paratext for one's trip to a museum or an artist's exhibition. We have grown so used to seeing the narrative logic unfold in sentences, paragraphs, and books that we expect works to show us what they mean. Music, too, lacks the exposed narrative logic and instead utilizes the pitch, meter, and frequency of instrumented sound waves. There remains a logic to be heard, distinguishing music from noise, and many musical genres use human vocals to accentuate the logic of the instruments and lead listeners towards the intended message of the song. The performing arts of dance and theatre take the body, time, and space as their materials for crafting operas, plays, flash mobs, and other acts that blur the divide between stage and reality. None of these works are "texts" *per se* as they bear no reliance on the spoken or written word, but they can still be "read" through their own languages of meaning-making.

"Meaning" something is only one requirement of narrativity. We want to communicate not just the raw data of what happened to us yesterday but to fit together the disparate parts into an insight into the human condition. Walter Benjamin in "The Storyteller" stresses that the goal

of every story is that it "contains, openly or covertly, something useful," be it advice or moral wisdom (2). However, this insight must *also* be shareable and relatable. Benjamin continues, "The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time" (4). In other words, stories demand repeating whereas information's usefulness ends as soon as it is relayed. I regularly forget my parents' phone number because that information has no meaning for me beyond what I need to type into my phone's contacts menu; conversely, I have many memories of my parents' home address and can tell the story of how we came to live in that house shortly after my brother was born, how it weathered numerous hurricanes and even a great pecan tree that burst through the roof over my bed, and how many letters and gifts I've sent back to that address. None of those things are important in themselves, but the story I can weave through them keep that address in my memory.

Benjamin's emphasis on the repetition of stories—he frankly refers to the whole of storytelling as "the art of repeating stories"—may seem odd when compared to the weight of the meanings therein (5). The most emblematic example to Benjamin's point is our history. The very tales we tell about our past are what we use to talk about what is important in the present. In "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," Hayden White refutes the idea that history has *one* meaning as "histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by…the encoding of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot-structures…" (280, original emphasis). Historians look at the information (the weather, the events immediately before and

after, the *dramatis personae*, etc.), find the story elements that this information corresponds to,

and then mold the events "into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and

the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of

view, alternative description strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we

would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play" (281). This doesn't make

history "false," but it does prevent history from presenting itself as a perfect recollection of every

minute detail, every last-second decision, and every eyewitness account. The moral of "those

who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it" takes on a new meaning here as well, as

historians tell and retell the same stories despite the changing facts, with great disasters attributed

to the same problems while great successes are based on the heroic qualities of those involved.

And for so much of "history," the stories told were of great White Western Men who gained

Wealth and Power through their Great Deeds (and not at *all* thanks to the legal restrictions,

economic instability, or violent suppression of anyone who didn't fit the script). As more people

from differing walks of life take up the role of historian—of storyteller—history's interpretation

of events gains new facts to tell "different kinds of stories" to learn from (282).

Not every story has the luxury of having actually happened. Some fictional tales will

enshroud their fictiveness by espousing to be "based on a true story." Others like Wham City

Comedy's multimedia horror project *This House Has People in It* (2016) will go the extra mile

by recording hours of "found" security camera footage, crafting websites that viewers can visit,

and even filming a "separate" show playing on the television set in the aforementioned footage

to convince the audience the characters, setting, and supernatural shenanigans are *real* (to

varying degrees of success). If history is the construction of a story out of facts and information,

then fiction toys with the heavily constructed nature of storytelling by creating its own facts upon

which to build its narrative. Disconnecting narrative from reality has its benefits; for one, the storyteller's reservoir of collected stories can be let loose without their real-world referents. Stories that took place thousands of miles apart in reality can now happen within eyesight of one another, myths that have been enshrined in the night sky's constellations can be remixed and refurbished with new meanings and new feats of daring, and readers of new, never-before-seen worlds and universes can still take solace in the humanity of its denizens. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan contends that even the *storyteller* is a work of fiction, one constructed to "embody in a work ideas, beliefs, emotions other than or even quite opposed to those he has in real life," flexibility that can allow for different "authors" to make different works by the same "real" person and yet can possess enough stability in the author's construction to remain "ideally consistent with itself within the work" (89-90). Some stories are more obvious in this than others, such as the epistolary narratives of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the "hands" that collected the letters and journals therein for publication. The storyteller's persona of the storyteller also constructs a perceived audience, the narratee, to take the role of the "real" person trying to interpret the story (Rimmon-Kenan 92). Depending on who might hear it, the story of Achilles and Patroclus can be told as a tale of fierce warriors battling a seemingly-unstoppable enemy, of pompous blowhards fighting in a war over a woman who wanted no part, or a tragic gay romance and a failure to communicate. Every story has a "real" author, a narrator, a narratee, and a "real" reader, each constructed in their way.

From all this, I suggest that narratives are the interpretations of information and events (real or otherwise) that the interpreter finds meaning in, who then desires to share that meaning with others. Thus, narrative media must be structured with an internal logic such as language and given enough paratext to frame the meaning that the storyteller wishes to impart and to nudge

potential interpreters away from inconsequential or irrelevant meanings. This internal logic differentiates narrative media from media used to store information or which lack the context necessary to produce evocative moments for the interpreter. A blank piece of paper nor an alphabetical list of films cannot tell a story on their own, but given enough contextualization (for instance, a list of films released in 2020 interspersed among silent pauses or news reports about COVID-19), a shrewd storyteller can make something out of nothing.

To progress this theory of narrative any further would limit the range of potential stories that can be told and potentially curtail the power and perceived complexity of already present narratives. Other theorists have sought to codify narrativity to such a fine degree that people who wanted to learn how to tell stories were relegated to telling the *same* stories as posited by these theories. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* introduced the concept of the Monomyth, where he declares that every story "will always be the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story" (1) This "Hero's Journey" proceeded to be used as a guide by the likes of George Lucas (who used it for *Star Wars*) and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The Monomyth's universal claim erodes numerous subtleties, narrative turns, and alternative formulations; also, it reifies a masculine, conservative, and stale interpretation of all past, present, and future narratives. Theorists who noticed the numerous stories that cannot be contained by Campbell's Monomyth have their all-consuming structures to sell, like Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots* or Ronald Tobias's *20 Master Plots*. David Bordwell chronicles the folly of "neo-structuralist narratology," which believed that "the characteristic principles of film narrative are best understood by identifying distinct narrative features and charting the internal relations among them" (203). This short-sighted field seeks to turn the exploration of storytelling into cut-and-dry scientific facts, where the Dutch Angle signifies unease and nothing

else. Bordwell denies the efforts of neo-structuralist narratology (and by extension any atomistic or universalizing theory of narrative), noting that narratives and the ways we make them are constantly changing and adapting to better relate the message (207). I cannot and will not say what stories should or shouldn't be told or how they should be made.

Nevertheless, we can explore the many, many forms stories take today and the ways they affect people around the world. It remains critically important to explore both the creative constraints imposed by each medium's physical limitations and the narratives that are frequently told despite them. To better examine the expanding and varied media that storytellers employ, N. Katherine Hayles calls for the application of a media-specific analysis, "a kind of criticism that pays attention to the material apparatus producing the literary work as physical artifact" (29). Media-specific analysis recognizes the materiality of seemingly invisible or intangible media like computer software and how the "materiality of those *embodiments* interacts dynamically with linguistic, rhetorical, and literary practices to create the effects we call literature" (31, original emphasis). Matthew Kirschenbaum continues this line of thought with his conception of a "forensic imagination" that searches for differences, misprints, glitches, grooves, and other material traces between two supposedly identical pieces of media (254). Both concepts work towards a view of media as integral to the formation and continuation of narratives.

One of the oldest and most fawned over media for storytelling is the novel. Though I lack the time (or energy) to go into a detailed history of putting words to the page, the novel continues to stand out as among the longest-lasting narrative media forms. Nancy Armstrong in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* traces the novel's initial rise in popularity can be traced to around the Victorian Era and the rapid industrialization of the UK and the US. The novel's immediate predecessor, the conduct book, offered advice and instructions for women

trying to maintain or increase their economic and social status in this rapidly changing time, "producing a culture divided into the respective domains of domestic woman and economic man" (Armstrong 67). As more women became confined to hearth and home, they spent their time writing novels "to redefine what men were supposed to desire in women and what women, in turn, were supposed to desire to be," but many of these novels—emblemized by the works of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans)—rebelled against the one-dimensional woman portrayed by the conduct books, "retailoring the representation of women to indicate that each individual had slightly different desires; no two women could be right for the same man, nor any two men for the same woman" (258, 259). This practice of women tutoring other women in how to navigate love, romance, marriage, and sex endures in the romance genre, which continues to be the single highest-selling novel genre.

Another instance of narrative media that gets overlooked is the radio. Radio has fallen out of public view due to the advent of television, the proliferation of music streaming services, and the intense commercialization of and restrictions applied by the music industry. But the radio is more than the songs that play on each station. Rather, it is the careful cultivation of speech, noise, silence, and voices that structures listener expectations in an extremely accessible media format. Martin Shingler and Cindy Wieringa advocate for the examination of radio as such, noting its narrative range—"informal, intimate, natural and gossipy or authoritative, public, preachy, and artificial, with a huge range of possibilities between these two extremes"—and its near-universal presence in homes, cars, emergency broadcast systems, and workplaces (33). However, radio's decline as well as the shrinking popularity of the novel coincides with the dominance of visual media. The primacy of the eye in storytelling should be brought into question, but our theories surrounding the use of non-visual language are limited. One example

that Shingler and Wieringa use to illustrate the difficulty therein is the stunning failure of the 1978 audio drama *The Revenge*, which exclusively used sound effects without any dialogue to tell a tale about a man on the run, which the authors called "only half a story" (53). Sounds could be interpreted to some degree, and the sequence of such noises implied a narrative that could be interpreted from *The Revenge*. But, Shingler and Wieringa argue, "if it had not been called *The Revenge*, and if the announcer had not proclaimed it to be *The Revenge* before and after the play, would any of its listeners have had any clue that these actions were motivated by vengeance?" (52). Because of this and other failed attempts at constructing a non-visual language, radio instead uses the combination of music, personality, and speech to communicate. Much of radio's range has been adapted away from the heavily produced and time-sensitive radio station and towards the realm of podcasts, recordings, and video, but all these elements draw from the history, technology, and methodology of radio.

Visual media may dominate discourse around the best ways to convey narrative, but there continue to be debates on what media are valued. For instance, the novel perseveres as an erudite narrative media while Scott McCloud laments in *Understanding Comics* that comics are cast alongside advertisements as "at best, a diversion for the masses, at worst a product of crass consumerism" (McCloud 140). McCloud finds the animosity between the mixing of visuals and text in the widening gap between how the two come to be understood as visual arts like sculpture and painting were "obsessed with resemblance, light and color, all things *visible*," and as writing became "rich in *invisible* treasures, senses, emotions, spirituality, philosophy" and the like (145, original emphasis). Regardless of how comics appear to cultural critics, popular opinion (and the megacorporation that is Disney) has shifted in their favor with the resurgence of superhero films and other comic book adaptations.

The result of its technological innovations, its global reach, and its continued role as the chief artistic export of the US, cinema's weight in narrative media (and its absence during the COVID-19 pandemic) can be felt even now, over a century after its inception. Films may have escaped the silver screen, finding their ways onto digital databases and home video, yet the experience of going to a theater and watching a movie lingers in our cultural memory. Alice Maurice recounts in *The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema* that cinema has had multiple "starts" between the rise of technicolor, the shift from silent films to "talkies," and the implementation of computer-generated images, providing "opportunities for the medium to restage its own technical, aesthetic, and cultural power—to cast its shadow, and its net, over audiences" (18). This prominence of cinema's technological factor acts as a metanarrative for the film industry, one obsessed with progress and an increasing (perceived) capability to present the "real" world through the camera lens, the "real" world meaning "the way that reality has looked on film" rather than what it is (191). Maurice points to cinema's history of blackface, racial stereotypes, and constant surveillance of actors and actresses' public image as proof of this filmification of life and notes that race has been treated by cinema as "that magical quality that promises to align physical traits and spiritual essences, the ineffable with the perfectly legible" (223). We witness the ongoing effects of cinema's reliance on race as a narrative tool in 2D and 3D animation, video games, television, and nearly every visual art.

Television marks a turning point in visual narrative media by introducing the visual to the home. Before TV, many homes used the radio and the novel for day-to-day entertainment and the cinema for special occasions. Today, we could hardly argue that we've escaped the television's grasp even though Netflix, YouTube, and smartphones have shouldered their way past the networks and the television itself. Sheila Murphy attests to the near omnipresence of the

television but argues that television is far more than just a screen: "Television is, in fact, more a set of connected ideas, beliefs, and technologies than it is any one thing that can be reduced to the home electronics device with a screen that might be found in a living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, or other space within a home or in a doctor's office, airport, bar, or electronic store" (5). Television, for Murphy, has become both a medium (the screen itself) and a transmedia construct (the programming and content originally produced for the screen), bringing to each new platform and medium "a long history of stylistic forms of address and narrative conventions, all of which can be carried over and reiterated online and elsewhere, rendering the new media more recognizable and readable in the process" (69).

One technology that built on television was the personal computer, where the computer and the television overlap as a single unit. Certainly, the computer uses the screen to visually inform the user what they are doing (case in point, I'm using it to see the typing of the words onto a digital page). The visuality of the screen is incredibly important to the kinds of "new media" that have spawned since the computer entered our lives, but we must acknowledge the unique qualities of the computer itself and how it uses the space of the screen to guide the user to some actions (clicking the mouse) as opposed to others (feeding the mouse cheese). Brenda Laurel in her work *Computers as Theatre* takes the view that the computer is "naturally suited for representing things that you could see, control, and play with," which designers used to their advantage by making the graphical interface the "desktop" and bits of information "files" (ch. 1). Conceiving the computer as a sort of stage, Laurel proposes that the technical workings within the computer are less important to the spectator-as-user than the result: "For actor and audience alike, the ultimate reality is what is happening on the imaginary world on the stage—the representation" (ch. 1). The computer's continued success, Laurel writes, lies in "our

uninterrupted experience of engagement with the representation" of reality on the screen, be it through writing words on a word processing program or playing a video game (ch. 4). The complexity of computers leads many storytellers towards "new media" forms—a distinction that Murphy notes was started by scholars who "[pit] old versus new in a narrative of progress, loss, innovation, or competition" as part of a larger metanarrative of the transcendental nature of the Internet and digital technologies (26). Janet Murray skirts around such a narrative, instead reveling in the potential of storytellers and computers to have joint, procedural authorship over texts where the pair "creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities" (187). Amid the many attempts to form a new medium from the nebulous realm of new media, video games succeeded to make a name for themselves independent of (though reliant on) the computer, the television, and cyberspace.

In some ways, video games have taken the role of comics as the most maligned media form in the eyes of critics, but the outrageous economic force of the games industry has fast-tracked gaming into the public's heart. As one of the oldest "new media" forms, video games have adapted techniques from the radio (the implementation of audio cues and sound effects), the novel (writing and scripting), film (in-game camera angles), and theatre (cutscenes). Curiously, theorists and fans alike argue simultaneously for video games to be harmless hobbies of no consequence *and* unprecedented forms of narrative media. The dispute has seen multiple rebrandings, but in the interest of cohesion, I'll refer to its Ludology versus Narratology incarnation. Murray recalls that much of the underlying vehemence between those who wanted games to be studied based on their mechanics and underlying code (ludologists) and those who explored games through a critical lens honed through literary and film studies (narratologists) centered on a growing animosity "linked to nationality and gender," but remarks that the debate

has since affirmed that "narrative analysis is often highly relevant to understanding and designing digital games" (190, 191). One of the contentions surrounding "reading" video games has been their participatory nature. Steven Jones in *The Meaning of Video Games* argues that the participation of the player is integral to any attempts to interpret games, as they "must be understood as parts of complex social networks, and that meanings flow through video games, and are produced at their prompting by communities of players"; in other words, the story of video games is created through procedural authorship (15).

These are only a fraction of the possible ways people use media to create and share stories. Storytellers experiment with more unusual, unseen, and unheard methods right now, and other raconteurs can be found mining the depths of history for older media and forgotten tales. In a sense, every "new" media bears a trace of an "old" one. J. David Bolter calls this "remediation" and describes the crafting of new media forms as a way to "honor, rival, and revise" those that came before (15). But why make new media? Bolter supposes that we strive for two core attributes: hypermediacy and immediacy. Hypermediacy, where "everything that technology can present must be presented at one time," can be seen in our pursuit of a perfect virtual reality system, capable of relaying touch, vision, smell, taste, and sound of any experience (269). However, hypermediacy sometimes borders on overstimulation or showing "too much," which can lead to issues like the uncanny valley effect (where artificial human faces become disturbing). A recent example of this comes from the video game *The Last of Us 2*, which features brutally rendered violence and death in its pursuit of graphical fidelity. In contrast, immediacy works "by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation" (11). Bolter's conception of immediacy mirrors that of Murray's theory of immersion, which she warns is a "paradoxically fragile and easily disrupted" trait (Murray 155). This disruption can

come from anywhere, such as a papercut from turning a page or a video pausing to buffer, and immediately takes the audience out of the experience. Balancing the desire for hypermediacy (understanding that no one media can fully transcribe an author's intent or every possible sensation) and immediacy (the awareness that no one media can hold someone's attention forever and that the cracks will show over time) is vital to the creation and understanding of new and old media.

Remediation can also apply to the stories themselves via adaptation. Honoring, rivaling, and revising the narratives they are based on, adaptations allow different media to bring reinterpretations of older tales to light. The Marvel Cinematic Universe seeks to adapt the stories and characters of Marvel's comic book legacy into cinematic homages, the Joycestick project hopes to convert James Joyce's *Ulysses* into a VR landscape, and there is no shortage of takes on the works of William Shakespeare. Kamilla Elliot in "Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma" proclaims that the sheer number and variety of popular and successful adaptations "suggests that form is separable from content, after all" (221). This concurs with Ryan's notion that the "content" is assembled into a narrative by the interpreter—even if the media changes, the story can still be retold and reassembled by a new audience.

With so many kinds of media and the possibilities that arise from adapting other stories into different media, one may ask: what do we do with it all? Worded differently, what is the end goal of telling stories through media? If stories are for the transmission of wisdom, as Benjamin believes, we must examine what that wisdom is. Benjamin proposes that wisdom is "counsel woven into the fabric of real life" or the application of sound advice to specific people or events (3). This would explain the sheer number of stories we can tell one another, but it does little to explain how two, ten, or a million people can feel so attached to stories produced with no *one*

person as their recipient. What keeps the opposite from happening, where the audience grows bored or cannot connect with the story? Likewise, many stories find themselves at the other end of the spectrum, disregarded and lambasted for being too "sentimental," preachy, or emotional. Where is the "wisdom" that Benjamin searches for? For that, I turn to Robyn Warhol's *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*, where she argues in favor of sentimental media. Warhol marks the modernist assumption that within the human body, there lie "real" emotions and false ones implanted by "false sentimentalism and affectation," a belief stoked by psychoanalytic theory and self-psychology (11). This belief drives many people to interrogate their emotions— "Do I really feel the way I feel?" —and suspect any outside forces that bring us to tears or make us laugh (12). Warhol questions this notion:

> Who is to judge whether the woman sobbing at a melodramatic movie is experiencing a 'sincere,' 'authentic,' 'real' emotion, or whether she is 'merely' being 'manipulated' by sentimentalism? She is having a good cry, experiencing a feeling, and the tears in her eyes and convulsive actions of her chest are real enough to qualify as manifestations of an affect. (23)

She instead takes as given that "emotion is elusive and complex, ineffable, inexpressible, and ultimately impossible fully to communicate or indeed to analyze" (13). Even the most basic, well-trodden story can inspire joy, sadness, fear, and laughter: "And yet we who feel them experience them as nonetheless intense" (119). This is the wisdom of all stories, that we are human and that we can share our feelings through whatever narrative media we can get our hands on.

There lies another question here: who has been left out of the narratives we tell? To start, anyone who isn't a straight, cis-gendered man tends to be left behind. Warhol finds that cultural debate in the US associates "sentimental media" with "a gynophobic and homophobic reaction to the effeminate connotations of textually induced crying," and that female authors are far more

likely to be criticized for being sentimental (as opposed to artistically or logically gifted) than male authors (31). Any examination of a "canon" of literature, film, comics, or television will find far more men taking credit for their stories than women. What *kinds* of media get examined by cultural critics are inherently gendered. Nancy Baym, author of *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, bemoans the constant bashing of soap operas and those who watch them: "In a nutshell, soap operas' orientation towards emotion makes them bad, possibly even dangerous. …Obviously, this is not how soap opera viewers understand themselves, but we generally are not granted, nor do we seek, the spaces to articulate our point of view in scholarship or the mainstream media" (41). Said spaces are typically hostile to sentimental media (and women). Queer voices also face accusations of posturing or "being political" for telling their stories.

Race is yet another blind spot in most explorations of narrative media. So much of our media landscape is visual, yet that visuality is tightly controlled by laws, regulations, and communities. Nicholas Mirzoeff describes in *The Right To Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* that visuality is a way of looking at history that "sutures authority to power and renders this association 'natural'" (6). This visual history has traditionally excluded people of color, indigenous peoples, and ethnic minorities from the grand narratives of nations and, therefore, from positions of political, economic, and cultural authority. This, too, can be seen in the ways race continues to be instrumentalized for stereotyping in cinema per Maurice or how few video games feature protagonists of color. Mirzoeff, in *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter*, proclaims, "To appear is to matter, in the sense of Black Lives Matter, to be grievable, to be a person that counts for something. And it is to claim the right to look, in the sense that I see you and you see me, and together we decide what there is to say as a result" (18). In the same vein,

the stories we tell about one another and with one another must work against the oppressive

forces that seek to compartmentalize us into easy-to-govern roles.

When I think about what narrative media should be used for, I think of Black Lives

Matter, of the Women's March on Washington, and of the stories woven into the AIDS quilt. I

think of the jokes whose punchlines shattered my point of view on politics, family, and tradition.

I look over at my bookshelf and see animations that made me cry for days, films that I eagerly

went to theaters multiple times to see, books whose characters feel like old friends because I've

spent so much time with them. I log onto the Internet and find people gushing about how they

saw themselves in the latest game, blowhards denying that a work of fiction could make them

feel anything, and fledgling storytellers working out what the next chapter should feel like.

Above all else, I am reminded of this quote from Murray:

> We need stories in every medium we can master, truth and fiction, ephemeral and
> enduring, unilinear and interactive, secret stories between lovers or family members,
> mass entertainments shared by millions. We need this creative practice for its own sake,
> but more than that, we need the process of continuously expanding our means of
> storytelling, because it allows us to expand our ability to know who we are and to
> collectively reimagine who we might become. (362)

Stories make us human. Stories help us show each other that we are human, too.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. Oxford

    University Press, 1987.

Baym, Nancy. *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Sage Publications,

    2000.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*. Schocken Books, 1969.

Bolter, J. David. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, 1999.

Bordwell, David. "Neo-Structuralist Narratology and the Functions of Storytelling." *Narrative

    across Media: The Languages of Storytelling,* edited by Marie-Laure Ryan. University of

    Nebraska Press, 2004, pp. 203-219

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed, New World Library, 2008.

Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. University of

    Minnesota Press, 1993.

Elliott, Kamilla. "Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma." *Narrative across

    Media: The Languages of Storytelling,* edited by Marie-Laure Ryan. University of

    Nebraska Press, 2004, pp. 220-243.

Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Writing Machines*. MIT Press, 2002.

Jones, Steven E. *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*. Routledge,

    2008.

Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. MIT Press,

    2008.

Laurel, Brenda. *Computers as Theatre*. 2nd ed., Addison-Wesley, 2014. *O'Reilly*,

    https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/computers-as-theatre/9780133390889/.

Maurice, Alice. *The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema*. University

    of Minnesota Press, 2013.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Harper Perennial, 1994.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "The Appearance of Black Lives Matter." NAME Publications, 2017.

-----. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Murphy, Sheila C. *How Television Invented New Media*. Rutgers University Press, 2011.

Murray, Janet Horowitz. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*.

    Updated edition, The MIT Press, 2017.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction Contemporary Poetics*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Introduction." *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling,*

    edited by Marie-Laure Ryan. University of Nebraska Press, 2004, pp. 1-40.

Shingler, Martin, and Cindy Wieringa. *On Air: Methods and Meanings of Radio*. Bloomsbury

    Academic, 1998.

Warhol, Robyn R. *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*. Ohio State

    University Press, 2003.

White, Hayden. "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." *CLIO*, vol. 3, no. 3, June 1974, pp.

    277–303.