Introduction: Narrativity and multimodal communication in the age of new media

BY: **Nicolae-Sorin Dragan**, Guest Editor

"His cool, white, flower-like hands, even, had a curious charm. They moved, as he spoke, like music, and seemed to have a language of their own."

Oscar Wilde ([1890] 2006: 21)

"When he spoke, his hands shaped his thinking, emphasized nuances, anticipated difficulties, and questions."

Mircea Eliade (1997: 46)

L ike many readers, we have experienced narratives in various communication contexts during our lifetime. For example, my grandmother would often take reflective pauses when telling a story, inviting me to go beyond the exigences of reality and step into the meaningful universe of the narrative. We found this oriental way of presenting to others the charm of narrative, in which a narrative does not exhaust its meanings with the literary traces of the text that describes it but seeks its meanings in the construction of other narratives, told on other occasions, in our meetings with an old man of the village that built wells. In this man's shared narrative experiences, we noticed for the first time how two of the universal paradigms of knowledge, in Solomon Marcus's terms (2011), *narrativity* and *multimodality*, can meet coherently and surprisingly. It is also the theme for this special issue of Punctum, which extends a recently published special issue of *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* (2022), where we tried to capture the interrelationships between narrativity, cognition, and communication in various communication situations.

Regarding narrativity, human beings have developed the *instinct of narrativity* as one of the fundamental solutions to the problem of transmitting thoughts and experiences from one mind to another (Greimas and Courtes [1979] 1982; Fisher 1987; Bruner 1991; Haidt 2012). Our minds resonate when we build and share meanings with the *otherness* in narrative forms (Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson 2010). Thus, we are emotionally and cognitively motivated to engage in cooperative behaviors (Zak 2012). Through narratives, we can restore to otherness both the unpredictability of the real, with the paradoxes and the spectacle of ordinary life and its possibility, the prolongation of the real in possible worlds. Understood as a specific form of semiosis characteristic of human *Umwelt* (Cobley, 2014), narrativity fascinates with its distinct ways of meaning-making. According to Petrilli and Ponzio (2001, 2020), narratives "suspend the order of discourse offering a space for reflection, critical re-thinking, dialogue, encounter, hospitality" (2020: 48). This is because most of the time, a narrative "always say more than they say, and often something else than they seem to say" (Pleșu 2012: 13). Narratives do not provide clear answers; instead they stimulate their search (Pleșu 2012). In this way, they offer a space for mediating meanings, in which people can build their meanings based on their experiences. From this perspective, the narrative is one of the *universal paradigms* of human knowledge and communication (Marcus 2011), which functions as a signifying practice by which people give meaning to complex phenomena and experiences.

As we suggested earlier, the paradigm of *narrativity* connects in the most challenging ways with another fundamental human communication paradigm: multimodality. People express meanings through narratives by choosing between semiotic resources and/or modes available to them in a particular social situation and moment (Jewitt and Henriksen 2016; Kull 2018). Traces of multimodality in narrative experiences can be observed both in *natural narratives*, like those mentioned earlier, and in *artificial narratives*, which have a "'constructed' nature and occur in specific 'storytelling' contexts" (van Dijk 1975: 285). In natural narratives, where the narrator organizes and presents the experiences of the real to the audience, certain aspects of multimodality can be directly observed. We can have direct access both to the literary dimension of the narrative and to the way the narrator uses different semiotic resources in his effort to convey in a coherent, consistent manner the universe of meanings of the narrative. In other words, the narrator's unique multimodal way of narrating is directly accessible to the viewer. This is what Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde's hero, does when he captures the charm of another character's multimodal behavior, or how Mircea Eliade describes the multimodal style of his illustrious professor, Nae Ionescu, through multimodal meaning-making practices of the *exbodiment* type that explain how "structures of embodied multisensory experience, such as image schemata and force gestalts, may visibly manifest themselves, at least to certain degrees, in the form of dynamic, ephemeral gestural and corporeal signs produced with speech" (Mittelberg 2013: 756).

In terms of artificial narratives, the meaning-making practices of a narrative are multimodally mediated. In today's multimodal society (Baldry 2000; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Norris 2004), where new information technologies are expanding rapidly, revealing a dynamic information ecosystem, new opportunities are emerging to explore long-standing issues, such as the interplay between narrativity and multimodality. Whether we are discussing natural or artificial narratives, multimodality can be understood as a performative aspect of narrativity. Things are not limited here, however, and precisely for that reason, the articles included in this special issue also explore other sides of the complementarity of the two paradigms, focusing on the multimodal dimension of narrativity in the context of digital culture.

In "Deleuze's meta-cinematic framing: Multimodal meaning-making in Installation Art," Sotirios Bahtsetzis offers a detailed reflection on the multimodal meaning-making practices specific to cinema, or the *seventh art* as Ricciotto Canudo (1922) called it, starting from Gilles Deleuze's problematic of the *image* "as the formative ground of our thinking." Bahtsetzis extends the Deleuzian understanding of the cinematic device to contemporary Installation Art and curatorial practices in a way that emphasizes the complementarity between narrativity and multimodality in imagining new worlds and, at the same time, allows the viewer's perspective a privileged role in describing and understanding the world.

Explosive cultural processes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, inevitably generate narratives through which social actors try to make sense of reality. In "Healthcare workers Vs. Coronavirus: A semiotic study of the Hero-Villain narrative articulation of the Covid-19 pandemic," Sebastián Moreno Barreneche examines one of these hegemonic narratives that have been weaved around the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking narrativity as a "key principle in the articulation of social discourses," Barreneche focuses on how the hero-villain narrative structure shaped the discursive construction of the coronavirus as a villain and the healthcare workers as heroes. Moreover, through analyzing a series of multimodal visual artifacts, the author draws our attention to the socio-political consequences of this type of narrative, which contribute to the "discursive construction of a human *Us*" in ths challenging times of the Covid-19 pandemic, and "how these contents serve to construct the idea of solidarity" in meaning-making practices.

Camelia Cmeciu, in "Representing agency and action in the #storiesfromvaccination governmental campaign in Romania. A multimodal approach," captures another aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic, namely that of health communication campaigns launched online by institutional actors. Cmeciu analyzes a range of multimodal narratives used "as a persuasive strategy in health communication campaigns" on the #storiesfromvaccination Facebook campaign launched by the Romanian Government in April 2021 and draws crucial conclusions about their implications for healthcare professionals. But, of course, how the multimodal cohesion aspect, respectively the multimodal representations of agency and action across multimodal narratives on

which such institutional communication campaigns are built, have consistent, persuasive effects on audiences remains an open topic for further research.

In "Concept formation and the text in digital culture," Aleksandr Fadeev examines how the young generations acquire the concept of text in contemporary digital culture. His valuable epistemic effort involves incorporating Lev Vygotsky's theory of concept formation as a methodological foundation for researching the process of meaning-making in educational practices.

Christina Fakalou and Roula Kitsiou explore the multimodal dimension of narrativity by analyzing official institutional texts from the Greek context. In their article "A Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis of identification documents in the Greek asylum context," the authors suggest that asylum identification documents are "small institutional stories that re-produce institutional power," in this case, the Greek nation-state. The complementarity between multimodality and narrativity is operationalized here as a methodological tool for analyzing such texts, making visible "the way in which the nation-state as a social actor enacts discursive bordering practices relating to asylum (im)mobilities and social rights."

In the following article, "Contemplating post-digital narrativity: Co-active, multimodal meaning-making on Instagram and its implications on learning," Anastasia Topalidou Laskaridou, Nikolaos Papadopoulos, and Dimitrios Koutsogiannis propose an 'adaptive digital ethnographic' approach to a multimodal teenage narrative on Instagram Stories. Their rigorous analytical approach to their case-study allows the exploration of critical aspects of the multimodal dimension of narrativity specific to the new digital ecosystem. In their perspective, the multimodal narratives of a thirteen-year-old teenage girl on Instagram can be seen as a model for understanding meaning-making practices on digital interaction platforms and the sociocultural trends in constructing meanings in the digital environment. By extension, such digital ethnographic research models also have a learning dimension, which the authors call "post-digital literacies pedagogy," one of whose objectives is the cultivation of a "critical media-discourse awareness."

The last contribution of this special issue, "Spatialization as a perceptual basis for information: how perception becomes a narrative," is authored by Didier Tsala Effa and concerns the spatialization of data as a perceptual basis for information. Upon reading it, I recalled a particular sequence from *The Bit Player*, a film about the life of Claude Shannon, the father of information theory. In this sequence, Shannon explains that he came up with the idea of understanding information as "the resolution of uncertainty" by recalling the simplest binary choice exercise people do when throwing coins into the air. In a similar vein, Didier Tsala Effa's analysis of the ways we represent data spatially clarifies how this activity shapes our perceptual experiences, creating premises to transform them into narratives.

All the articles selected to be part of this special issue of *Punctum* aim to bring together contributions that explore the multimodal nature of narrativity (Page 2010), the particular ways in which the two universal paradigms – narrativity and multimodality – can combine in a joint effort to advance our understanding of the complexity of the new realities of digital culture.

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