

WHERE DO WE WANT NARRATIVE TO TAKE US IN THE 21st CENTURY?

Extract from Deborah Levy's Keynote Paper.

When my first novel *Beautiful Mutants* was published in 1987, a critic described its author as "the anti - christ of narrative." In my circle of artists that was a kind of compliment.

Narrative was perceived as a tyrannical structure that insists on coherence at the expense of complexity, relies on stability and linearity rather than instability and multiplicity - and flattens and sanitises the poetic, off beat and irrational - all the things that made me want to be a writer in the first place.

In fact the kinds of writers who talked endlessly about how they were "born to tell stories" never told stories in a way that interested me. They seemed to use narrative as a mechanism to escape terror, a sort of pain killer, a tranquilliser to dull the difficult, in-between, fragile, illogical, incoherent parts of living a life. Roland Barthes said it first: "Narrative being the image of an order, is one of those numerous formal pacts made between the writer and society - it escapes the terror of an expression without laws".

If as a fiction writer I found that conventional ideas about narrative did not fit the kinds of fractured identities I was writing about, there were different problems in the British theatre at that time. Narrative had in my view horribly damaged playwrighting - despite the brilliant earlier interventions of Pinter, Genet and Beckett. Its old fashioned utopian humanisms, the unbelievable way it resolved conflicts and restored moral order to the proceedings, its traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, its linear chronology sequenced in the present tense with no fracture of time - all of these were the big killers of pleasure, of sensation, of thrill, of any kind of magical thinking, of sadness, of strangeness. Worst of all, was its dependence on naturalism, that slow, dulling imitation of real life that was much more boring than any conversation I had at a bus stop. As Oscar Wilde put it so perfectly - Being natural is simply a pose - and the most irritating pose I know.

Yet, although I did not know it at the time, I was a writer deeply engaged with narrative. After all, how meanings are arranged, the ways in which a novel or a play pulls through time, decisions about what is revealed and what is concealed, giving the right information at the right time, suspending a moment, digressing, returning to that moment, assembling a number of fragments into a larger conceptual scheme - this is the great adventure of a writing life.

All the same, critics of both performance and literature who had spent most of their University education learning contempt for what they considered "the modern and experimental" came down very hard on any attempt to break from an established grammar of narrative conventions. This meant that the work of some very skilled artists at the time was described as shapeless, and perhaps correctly, firmly positioned outside mainstream narratives.

In 2006 I no longer know what mainstream narratives are. There are blogs and pod casts, self-help books disguised as memoirs, Hollywood films that are a bit like Independent films, theatre that is a bit like cinema. There is theory that moves between poetry, psychoanalysis, sociology literature, semiotics, biography. There are sit-coms like The Office, where actors pretend they are performing for hidden cameras, while on real reality TV, libelous words are bleeped out of the lips of crazed celebrities with under water sounds and bird song. At the same time, a war is being waged for oil with so many conflicting opaque and transparent narratives attached to it that despite the driving motivation - energy- we no longer have a grip on what is emerging as the dominant story, where the emotional focus is, who is writing the script and what sort of outcome we want for any of the players.

It is clear to anyone interested in language (right across the humanities, arts and sciences) that the orthodoxies and established comforts of conventional narratives are no longer able to service a world changed by new modes of space and time, technological innovation, globalization, migration, fundamentalisms and the erosion of myths about female character and destiny.

This means contemporary narratives are in a state of mutation and renaissance and might just be the one vibrant manufacturing industry left in the UK today.

Narrative in this atmosphere is much more inviting to the theatre and performance practitioners who once rejected it. In fact it would be wise to revisit it because so much post-modern performance has become as predictable as naturalistic dramas. Its form, and form is what Barthes calls a "sort of behaviour" has ceased to push its language on. It seems to be stuck in its repetitions, its displacements, its distrust of emotion, its endless deconstruction of theatre itself. If amongst other things, narrative is a cross disciplinary tool to construct the ways in which we experience the world - and above all to manage time - it seems interesting to think again how innovative narrative might map ways of seeing and being in our new century.