Story Telling

"I've got to tell you something…" – how do we react to this type of announcement? Whether we believe the story or not depends on a variety of factors chasing through our mind. Who is the storyteller, why should we listen, what are the sources, and is the story interesting to us at all? Attention today is a scarce resource, and in this possibly lengthy mode of mediation we cannot just click Mercury away.

On the other hand the "oral tradition," whether using modern means of communication or the traditional way, is an instrument of alternative production of knowledge based on free distribution, collective production, guerrilla communication, tactical media. What's more, a large part of our contemporary culture is based on stories. The oldest writings are records of stories that had been orally handed down for centuries. Not only is storytelling a multifaceted process – listening is also an activity that is hard to get to the ground of.

In the explosion of the means of transmission of information, the so-called communication technologies, from analog audiovisual systems to digital, the fundamental economic asset is attention. The acoustic space around us is quickly filling with signals and voices of varied origin, as the new interfaces are increasingly based on this kind of demanding interactivity. Just like the old analog telephone rings in order to draw our attention to picking up the receiver, the new class of electronic devices shriek, whisper, blink in various colors to announce that the food in the oven is ready, that water needs to be added to the coffee machine, our mobile phone insistently complains its battery is running low, teller machines protest if we forget to pull out our debit card. A public confessional is taking shape in the city space, in which it is much better accepted to hold a conversation of a personal and intimate character on your mobile phone, which others around you share without visible interest, than to take a stand on an incident or some problem of true concern to bystanders. The weekly newspaper of Migros in Switzerland published an article on the phenomenon of a new generation of kids with mobile phones – mobile phone babies growing up shaping their linguistic culture and communication abilities carrying a cell phone. The BBC broadcast an interview about the Taliban in Afghanistan recruiting young boys for their gangs by offering them the privilege of owning a mobile phone. Media space is not neutral space. On the one hand there is the question of access, as exclusions are produced and a large part of our globalized world remains soundless and disappears from the geography of technological, economic and social networks. On the other, the fundamental question of input and output, from the point of view of privilege and power, always relates to the dual character of these

instruments, which beyond the transmission of information are always used for control and manipulation.

Mediatic reality and acoustic space are not only a matter of consensus based on standardized methods for assessing the quality of the acoustic space in terms of acoustic intelligibility, but are also shaped by continuously renegotiated agreements, tolerance and struggles. Just like the agreements regarding the contextualized meaning of messages must be constantly challenged and debated, even if media communities are dispersed, multiplied, in perpetual migration, regrouping and in most cases are treated as exclusive, as clients. When using technologies, a paranoid feeling consistently creeps in with our doubt whether anyone is listening to us on the other side. Our intrinsic mimetic abilities are matched by our need to receive a clear acknowledgment from the opposite side. Bergson notes that "laughter appears to stand in need of an echo." It needs to be collectively shared, and "our laughter is always the laughter of the group," an inarticulate laughter, indistinct, imperfect noises overcoming the feeling of isolation. We remain distrustful, hostile, lonely and lost as to whether the signal sent out, having traveled a long way, will not have withered to a mere technical trace. Elias Canetti sees any completely foreign language as an acoustic mask. If one understands it, it turns into a face that can be interpreted and will soon become close. But in the case of communication technologies we often do not have a face on which to place the mask in order to create another figure and from there to start creating and playing. We are left with only the mask, limited in our desires as there is nothing to hide behind it.

The Canadian media philosopher Marshall McLuhan claimed that we are living in an era of the ear, in an acoustic age in which all of humankind find themselves in mutual relation and speak to each other as if in a village: "*Time* has ceased, *space* has vanished. We now live in a global village… a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us" (Marshall McLuhan, 1967). What seems a visionary presentiment even today, more than forty years later, is not so much the anticipation, description and definition of an age determined by Internet communication, but rather the fact that we communicate interactively and exchange ideas and information through more or less direct channels. The question now is how we are to define such terms as "direct" or "mediated" today at all.

The activity of storytelling has gained significance and interest in a scientific context over the past decades, after it was noticed how large social groups have been excluded from classic historiography.

"Oral History" has become an inherent research tool, even if it has not yet been in use for long. Academic decision-makers explain as follows the urgency of the need for stories and their systematic research and consideration: "A democratic future needs a past in which not only the upper classes are heard. Many efforts of newer social historiography are therefore oriented towards including into the perception of history also and especially those who have not been in the limelight. These are confronted not only with the interests of those who would like to present the ruler figures of the Middle Ages as an ideal, and not only with the thinking habits of the guild of historians, but mainly with the limits of the tradition of the sources themselves." (Lutz Niethammer, 1985).

As a consequence of globalization the great narratives have lost their totality. Under these forces and contradictions, and the decentralization of the power function of history, the cartographic "big history" of chronologies and ideologies dissolves into a ruin made up of fragments of insignificant histories. History needs to be reconstructed from a different perspective, circumventing the brutal and invisible action at the root of traditional historiography, in view of the conditions of the specific case. In the new social structures the emphasis is on division, dissemination, self-reflective practices based on difference and otherness, even personalizing to a point of familiarity and intimacy. We get the feeling that it is not difficult to apply, as a daily practice, the slogan of the feminists of the 1970s: "The personal is political." From this point of view we can look at the links and relations between collective and individual as global and local, or macro and micro. The generalizations and symbols are modulated by signals, vibrating signals. So many nuances, an explosion of new languages. We should not be troubled by misunderstandings introduced by translations, yet must not be oblivious to the frailty of the Tower of Babel. The question is how to learn tolerance, to share with others in a world thus tightened, never forgetting we are a multitude.

One of the Towers of Babel that did not take place is the utopian project Monument to the Third International (1919-20) by the Russian constructivist Vladimir Tatlin. A huge motorized open steel frame in the form of a double spiral with a ramp ascending through it to a height of more than 400 meters, it was to be composed of separate buildings each with their own shape, stacked on top of each other, each rotating once yearly, monthly or weekly, with a cinema on top rotating once an hour. The project was to become the headquarters of the World Revolution and symbolize the Revolution of Machines, of materials, of the endless potential of the future, creating a new art for a new society. Besides this it was to host an information center with the offices of international newspapers, a publishing house, as well as a radio studio.

Borges's *The Library of Babel* (Mar del Plata, 1941) is also a utopian project, even if it starts out with an epigraph quoting from "The Anatomy of Melancholy" (Robert Burton, 1621) and under the sign of Saturn radiates a weak, cold but eternal light bathed in the gloom of infinity and futility, repetition, with its corpses thrown out of the corpus and endlessly the idea of

decay. The main protagonist, the old librarian awaiting his death, cries out: "May heaven exist, even if my place is in hell. Let me be reviled and obliterated, so long as for a single instant – in a single being – Your vast Library finds justification." The Library is a sphere in which a staircase spirals upwards and down and disappears in the distance. "In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances. People usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite…" The mirrors in the library serve only to prove to us that the images we see today are images passed down to us from the past. In other words, our point of view on the library is a view from the past, and the new experience arises from memory. The Library scares us with its totality, its futility, the beautiful and symmetrical signs of the books arranged on the shelf contrasting with the shabby and cramped signs written by the awkward hands of people.

The greatest capacity for production lies in human beings, grounded in their mimetic abilities. Let us remember Max Weber's definitions of objective linguistic algorithms ("formal rationality"), a hologram like an elapsed reconfiguration of our mimetic needs, which ever more successfully codes information, to the extent that the smallest splinter of it can by itself re-create the world, merely making the image paler in the process, without losing its completeness and size. (In fact the library is inside us, since it seems that humans have the greatest aptitude to produce likeness. One might perhaps even say that there is not one of their higher functions that is not decisively determined by their mimetic abilities.)

The idea of a mythical language not only before the written word, but even before phonetic languages came to exist, fires the imagination of numerous linguists, writers and charlatans. This proto-language as an equivalent of complete human happiness remains somewhere in the dusty foundations of the tower doomed to collapse, the mysterious magical language spoken in the Garden of Eden, the language that names things by their true names, this common language of all people before they dispersed in all directions and their languages divided. Freud pragmatically avoids dealing with such an idea, which would have led him rather to the notion of returning to the womb as hot-blooded monsters listening at ease to the rhythmic thumps of the mother's heartbeat. He was interested simply in a language predating the written word, in relation to psychoanalysis and the interpretation of dreams. He does not conceive of this pre-literacy language as one. Rather, what these languages have in common is that they do not fix things. Before the written word language served only as raw material, refusing to reflect relations (power structures) – without a grammar reflecting gender, number, case, tense, mood. It was indeterminate, mixed and ambiguous. In spite of this according to Freud we cannot doubt its suitability, tone and gesture being the determining factors. Meaning and sense unfolded through the melody of language, closer to dance, in which the entire body participated along with the play of facial features. We can follow its emotional-physical expressive remains in contemporary communication relations, finding corroboration in buddies slapping each others' shoulders reassuring each other of their good

feelings, the long greeting procedures between youngsters which can go all the way to complex rituals with well-defined sequences of diverse hand-shakes, and even pointing to something with the hand or finger has not lost its power connotation in a certain contemporary context. In writing the gesture is replaced by a figurative sign. In dreams, as well as in sexuality, Freud comes across something similar to the indeterminacy, which for him is a central feature of all primitive systems of expression. Genders and even human anatomy can be conceived from this point of view.

We are interested in stories which fall out of the corpus of the library; in the noisy channels, especially the so-called "unscientific" languages, intractable, apocryphal versions, alogisms, dialects… We are interested in those rocks falling into a thousand pieces, the bugs and errors that break up the polished surface, in stories told without the language of dominance, those stories whose peak gets broken, the plateaux opening up the space to the horizon beyond great narratives, in the small details, characters, traces carrying the stamp of superstition, dirty words, nonsense, frenzy, troublemaking, riot.

One of the most captivating storytellers of all times is Scheherazade, the storyteller of the *1001 Nights*. She structures the Persian epos (from Greek έπος, *"what has been said"*, *"stanza,"*, or also *"short story"* or *"poetry")*. Furious for having been betrayed by one of his wives, the Sultan of Persia decides to get married every evening, only to have his newly-wed wife killed in the morning, bathing his subjects in blood. In order to free the women, mothers and daughters of Persia, from the terror of the Sultan, Scheherazade meticulously plans the whole story. She starts in pure gambling, playing her chances of success over 1001 nights against the horror regime of the jealous cuckold. She gets her father the Grand-Vizier to propose her as the Sultan's wife, and enters a conspiracy with her sister, who is to ask to spend the last night of her life in the same room with her and the Sultan, as the two sisters love each other so much. It's a trick to demand the Sultan's attention and catch him in her net of stories. She asks her sister in advance to wake her up an hour before sunrise and ask her: "Dear sister, if you are not asleep, I beg you, before the sun rises, to tell me one of your charming stories." And indeed, the Sultan agrees to let Scheherazade's sister sleep in their room along with them, and Scheherazade gets a chance to tell a story to her sister – with the Sultan as a casual listener. Every morning, the story not being finished, the Sultan lets her live to finish it the next day.

The threat of being beheaded, the threat of her own murder, her own death, fatally and continuously haunts the storyteller, compounded by her own oral pleasure in attracting the attention of the Sultan to her story and inciting his desire to hear it to the end, in the interaction between his own enjoyment of the narrative, the whispered, murmured words. The pleasure is in the speaking. That is where life is. Entangling him in the mesh of woven narrations, unfolding her veil, enigmatically day by day she is telling her story which never ends, entangling it endlessly so as to avert and postpone the decision of the Sultan to execute

her sentence. Before sunrise, in the achromatic gamut of near black and white and the as yet not lengthened shadows of the new day setting in, in a crack appearing between here and outside (like the one appearing in a wall, leading nowhere, through which Ingeborg Bachmann's nameless first-person narrator and heroine in her novel Malina disappears, tired of speech leading to tautologies, having rejected repetition and wished for her own death, and then nothing, just collapsing, disappearing into endlessness, "a place in which death no longer stands in contradiction to life"), a door at the threshold of shadow and light, of night and day, of calm and sound, of silence and speaking, of her life and her death, of real and unreal, a kind of zero point outside of time, in folded space. "The story is born from the point of fear," says Borges. The interplay of mutually connected and opposite terms points us to the roots of the concept of time, in its linguistic, but also calendar, conceptual, philosophical sense. The telling of every story is a kind of small death, yet at the same time the key both to her own survival and to saving the other women. The stories here create not only a real, but also a fictive time, which are intertwined, indivisible, just like everything in this story is woven into everything else.

At the same time language stands as primary, as creating the first relations, both real and fictive; one cannot be separated from the other, all follows language, is a consequence of it. Language as an instrument (the light pointing us to the immaterial, wisdom, memory, but also to the visible, and yet the storyteller needs the night and the dark in order to fulfill her plan). Having at her disposal only language and memory, she succeeds in creating something different, to reassembling over and over, from plain "ordinary" order, the banality of language, extracting the sense of words from their deep-seated power, from the violence underlying language, subverting the instruments for other aims, challenging the relations of "responsibility," "power," "body." Borges: "I continuously write in order to divert from pondering the present condition of people." Scheherazade tells stories in order to alleviate the condition of people, and in speaking defends the human. A story against horror, Babel, tower of voluptuousness and pleasure. Manipulating the desire of the Sultan to hear the end of the story, words revealed, she enthralls him with that emotional power known in religion as force, wisdom, passion. But her stories are no religious admonitions, nor about mythical god figures, but stories about ordinary people. Scheherazade's story is a cultural utopia, an intellectual operation with magical force, because that which reality is hiding through fiction finds its way to life, and reality. Finding utter pleasure in listening to Scheherazade, the Sultan changes day by day, in the end spares her life and, deeply changed, is overwhelmed by new feelings and a new sense of responsibility.

Not the play of mutual attraction determines the relations here – a different type of dependency is at play. Just like the relation between the librarian and the library is key, so is the relation between the storyteller and the listener grounded in the interaction of intensities arising from the encounter of opposite poles in a certain conflict. Different parables crossing each other in a certain point of intensity, of fear, of violence. The relation develops between

Eros and Thanatos. Between sex, death and dream lies life and salvation, as relief and trust arise from speaking. Even if we can make out a certain dose of self-imposed sacrifice, Scheherazade changes, following the principles of pleasure, her listener in a human sense. In order to attain a sense of responsibility, she seeks no self-restraint and abstinence, no strictness characterizing the dialog between teacher and student, nor any dependency on some transcendental reason enforcing a postulate. She experiences pleasure in speaking, like her listener in listening. A dependency aptly described by Elizabeth Wright in a discussion of Lacan: "There is a structure of narrators who pass the story on, a mirror-maze of glances in which they and the reader become enclosed. The very fact that I get drawn into this structure proves that the text desires me and that I desire it."

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