

Original Paper

Delivering Competent Knowing and Living in the Narrative Space Framed by “Inscriptive Connectivities”

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Abstract

Advancing modernity fatally weakened direct ways of intervening in the social, whether by the Divine Will or barricades. Nietzsche’s technique of inscription has been gradually adapted to reach the present as hazardous sub-brands of “digitally enhanced” inscriptive connectivity born out of an unlikely alliance of emergent tools of networked communication and technophobia of much of the humanities. Even some specialist topics enter the public space as “narratives”, no longer grounded in open allegiances to a system of thought or worldview. Instead authors prefer a travelogue format which hides intended connections. What then is the genealogy of this way of structuring narratives? In particular, what might serve as a tutorial door opening not only to the hidden content of such narratives but also to turning them into useful tools of learning and competence building free of top-down impositions and rote learning familiar from the curriculum delivery demanded by much of the educational Establishment? It will be shown how to guide the reader in an interactive, bottom up manner so that he or she can, gradually, and at the level of ability and resources peculiar to the case in hand, proceed through ascending stages of reading and engaging with the text, and systematically dispel the baggage of layers of loss and uncertainty preventing confident, critical approaches to communication, work, and citizenship.

Keywords

relating narratives, competence development, human-machine interfaces, understanding and inequality

1. Introduction: Actuality of the Narrative Expression

1.1 Temporalisation and Localisation of Communicative Expression Re-inscribing Facticity

The Cosmos of Aristotle was a purposeful unity of Gods, humans, and things. Galileo replaced God's command with "measure and quantify" and broke up the unity of Cosmos. Immanuel Kant set out to reconcile Galileo and Newton with philosophy. To this end he divided the world into phenomena and noumena. We can then achieve reliable knowledge of phenomena thanks to *a priori* forms of perception of space and time. The content of Practical Reason must remain open. If one knew how to be free and moral then morality would belong to "reliable knowledge", i.e., would be the object of science! Yet, although we do not "know" how to comprehend the moral imperative and beauty, we do comprehend their incomprehensibility and this informs our judgment. That makes our existence enigmatic: for when products of pure reason leave the closure of the lab and cloister they too fall into the realm of value judgement.

The post-Einsteinian science and mathematics de-legitimated claims to universal validity based on the notions of eternal truths and absolutes of space, time, and spirit, and recast them in terms of the limits of their applicability. In the absence of any absolute reference point—offered by God or by Nature to the Kantian observer—thought is a perpetual movement of signifiers. This has far reaching consequences. Concept generation and negation are no longer constrained by the demands of transcendental theory; any thought is only "local". Then signs do not "represent" any prior entity but derive their credibility by reference to other systems of signs. Thus this temporalisation and localisation of judgement re-inscribes facticity; i.e., the visible sign does not represent a face, a landscape or injured body as a thing out there recognizable by the meaning granted to it by a fixed place in a shared structure. It is made so as to put before us whatever brings to life a "driving engine" on the scale of a particular form of selection or "measurement" we have made; and it is often framed by conscious or unconscious attempts to make sense of any change by behaving as if there were a formula, a prescription-like arrow pointing from of A to B whether such a relation really exists or not.

Although the process of confronting narrative particulars with results of science and science-inspired logical inquiries enlivened by artistic brilliance has long exposed the limits of assumptions on which the speculative reason shaped our cultural history, it does not mean that Homer's *Odyssey*, Plato's *Republic*, the Bible, Newton's *Principia* and Kant's *Critiques* etc. are no longer documents of great value. By discoveries of independent reason of the rational grounding of our past efforts we have not lost anything. Rather we have been gradually liberated—be it at the cost of having to learn to live with novel challenging finitudes of life—from the limitations that speculative schemes supposedly of universal validity imposed often quite ruthlessly upon mankind. Nor is it right to claim as many have done that the age of reason delegitimised our spiritual inheritance without putting anything in its place. For the pursuit of this very reason has recently provided humans with the means for recasting our heritage via genealogies of independent order generation and application as a function of increasing degrees of complexity. Without such clearing of the action space from the chaotic flow of value

judgments there would be no elbow room for recognising and fostering genuine creativity and imagination in arts and design, no protection from fraud and muddled interferences for the concept generation enabling directional movements of the mind. This is particularly relevant at a time when a Facebook executive openly calls on his company to expand its worldwide infiltration of connectivity even if it means that people could be harmed (e.g., Marantz, 2020)! Indeed, the techno-scientific development has been so fast, and has taken place on scales far exceeding those of the human body, that our social structures and their ownership by citizens have much to live up to. The results of state of the art research are still emerging only in an uncoordinated, case by case manner, often cast into highly technical terms that the general reader—be it one among the well-educated—can rarely appreciate. Yet, since the limits of genealogies of order generation offered by the quantitative empirical methodologies of the digital age are known, they can inform our judgement; it gives us the confidence and tools to proceed with iterative loops of inquiries, asking at every turn what the relevant parameters and their limits of application are, and how to improve upon them. This is well in keeping with the notion of knowledge acquisition as an open process perpetually to be critically re-positioned and updated (see Jaros, 2019a, and refs. therein).

1.2 Credibility of the Narrative Space Conditioning Work, Value, and Citizenship

When value is grounded in social labour, work becomes an onto-epistemic concept. Then, so hoped Karl Marx in his dreams about social emancipation, humans can transcend the commoditisation of their labour. For it makes it possible at least in principle to appreciate value in terms of a generic relationship between work and all aspects of life. Although most of current work practices are far removed from the capitalism of *Das Kapital*, it is this methodological turn that makes Marx's legacy relevant even today (e.g., Harvey, 2010). A generation later, Vladimir Lenin's project, from the opening gambit of "What is to be done" to "all power to the soviets" which informed his utopian vision in "State and Revolution" of 1914 and grounded the political power in councils elected directly in a bottom up manner by the local community, again rested on the assumption of open access to communicative action. However, the trying conditions of institutional collapse heightened by the civil war rapidly turned his vision into a dictatorship guilty of even cruder impositions and disenfranchisements than what he and his comrades so detested in the 19th century capitalism.

Already in the cosy confines of Café Central of pre-WWI Vienna, Rudolf Hilferding argued that in their hateful reaction to Marx his critics lost sight of the social labour that produced most goods (Wasserman, 2019; Sigmund, 2017). Only by perpetually focussing on and updating the systems of signs and their accessibility in all processes of exchange could humans hope to improve upon social accomplishments. In his view, the libertarian elevation of the individual as the ultimate source of value, and the key object of social theory in general and economics in particular, mistook what is always a historically contingent variable conditioned by the prevailing system of signs for a universal one. This is how we ended up with sound bites like Mrs Thatcher's infamous "there is no society, only

individuals”. The result was unbridled subjective valuation of even the most complex scenarios. When life became dominated by ever present social media and distributed production systems, any consensus that could tame wild fluctuation of moods of millions of actors trapped in perpetual messaging on media platforms could have only been ephemeral. Not to mention misuse of imported conceptualisation of the social. For example, the key motif on which stood the ideas of founding fathers of what we now call neo-liberalism, of thinkers like Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig Mises, was “...the state in which a man is not subject to coercion by the arbitrary will of another or others” (Sigmund, 2017, p. 207). Yet that was also the canonical line for Emanuel Kant and any philosopher of the Enlightenment, the movement blamed by Hayek and his fellow libertarians from the Mont Pelerin Society for the camps and gulags! Of course, the meaning of a formal statement is in the potentiality it fosters. Its actuality, the social content, i.e., what happens when it enters the realm of material exchanges called life, depends on contextualisation making its transmissivity and applicability real. Then it necessarily depends on who does the translation and what practices are subject to its application. For example, although a young person living in France or Britain today is unlikely to be subjected to any legally identifiable coercion, it is only because the laws that form the boundary conditions and the operational space of the law protecting individual liberties is such that it does not see any.

The neo-liberal regimes reacted to the runaway rise of complexification of life in general and of the narrative space in particular by reducing value to price. The realms of work and value have been separated from those of production and communicative action driving development. Although a few Hayekian gamblers may have ended up with pockets full of hot dollars, instead of enjoying free-wheeling independence they perhaps more than anyone end up trapped in what can best be described as “digitally enhanced serfdom” of schizophrenic consumption for the sake of consumption (Jaros, 2018).

1.3 Naming the Unnamable: Change as Movements of Matter

Humans have always endeavoured to seek new forms of order and organisation whether in Nature or in the Mind. It has been something of a driving force constitutive of civilisation. With the advent of the Age of Reason, it rose to the forefront of social awareness as a measure of progress in human self-understanding. Already Adam Smith reminded us in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776, p. 415) that “...there is scarce perhaps a single moment...without any wish for alteration or improvement of any kind”. For without its gradient, people throw themselves upon each other and end up somewhere like Jean-Paul Sartre’s hell of *In Camera*! However, lack of systematic application of reason soon turns any apparent improvement into chaos by unintended outcomes. Only independent order is invariant to naming. Indeed, from Plato’s *Republic* to Michel Foucault’s *Order of Things* philosophers have been telling us how to cope with life—with what happens when the order of things turns into the order of signs, and words in particular! Any contextualisation of products of pure reason can only be made meaningful by comparison, as part of a genealogy of naming, and is therefore perpetually actualised

whether we acknowledge it or not by recasting its conceptualisation in relation to its past and present. Hence the practice of relating narratives is of key importance; it enjoyed heightened attention during the last decade of post-modern discourse (e.g., Cavarero, 2000, and refs. therein).

Making meaning is to select and organise experience; and to do that one must “measure” though it is rarely called so! For once put that way, it forces us to identify the intended level of complexity and the empirical limits of the application, i.e., what exactly there is to measure, its metric, precision and error. It also requires explicit statements about the choice of variables, units, boundaries, and comparability with their predecessors in the vector of development in question (Morris, 2010; Piketty, 2014). This creates conceptual challenges and calls for sharp, creative thought. For when it is done without a credibly structured database or reduced to speculative constructs the result is a kind of lone event that at best disappears after its twenty-minute fame. Most interventions are and have always been unwittingly in the latter category—in the long run they make for “censorship by inflation”! With the rise of the Age of Reason, the flow of “measure and quantify” from the lab and cloister gradually exchanged the standards based on rituals of sacrifice and reading of religious texts for accounts of events expressed in terms of movements of matter—be it for most at the level of narrative. So quickly did it come that it left little time and social energy for finding a stable system of signs to make life with the runaway generation of new forms of order more liveable. That led to a crisis of modernity touching its very foundational principles. For actualisation of independent reason cannot maintain itself without perpetual renewal via spatio-temporal translations of couplings between social systems and the citizen on one side and emergent knowledge and its institutionalised face on the other. Since in place of absolutes and their ritual re-enacting there is the quantum probabilistic dynamics of material exchanges, the Kantian canon “to be free is to be autonomous”, i.e., only in transcending the commoditisation of life one can glimpse at what is and what ought to be, may now appear to some as yet another superstition. We also have to put up with revelling in atomised existence as a popular form of self-defence; it is easier to hide in the black hole of unstructured interventions (Houllebecq, 2001; Eshun, 2004). Not to speak of Henry Kissinger’s laments that the balance in world order cannot be maintained or even conceived when the most powerful of social and political functions are hidden from view in the cyberspace with no international standards of conduct (Kissinger, 2016). It is of course much worse. Already the interior ministry of Louis XVI in the decades before the revolution believed that who controls the past controls the future and acted upon it; they secretly employed a group of monks to frustrate the power of what they perceived as their adversaries (Baker, 1990)! At least they owned what they wanted: the Big Data and algorithmic chaos when left alone merely promotes the growth of Big Data and chaos! Furthermore, today all messaging flows via coding which functions as a contingent mediator, wittingly or unwittingly—but always because of some movement of matter in the shape of “data” or performance—re-making the rules of the game whatever that might be. Some even delegate the management of the flow of objectified matter to the machine by plugging it in as if it were

a fancy version of a telephone land line. That only makes the coming of a crash more likely as we now know only too well!

The widespread fascinations about complexification with a life of its own also lead to highly speculative extrapolations; e.g., Ray Kurzweil's Omega Point and his "universe with a purpose", not to mention non-material labour, luxury communism, and many others (e.g., Mirowski, 2013, and refs. therein). Fortunately, there are also brilliant Omega antidotes (DeLillo, 2010)!

1.4 The Archetypal Role of Loss in Western Culture and its Meta-Modern Other

Genealogies of cultural development are punctuated by ever present be it perpetually changing narrative expressions of irredeemable loss (see e.g., Dollimore, 2001). Doctrines of the Fall, breakup of the unity of Cosmos, the divided self of the post-Freudian mind, the enforced shift in the inquiring mind from Aristotle's Why and Galileo's How to post—Einsteinian What—all that made it look as if humans have been losing their starry position at the center of Universe that had been gifted to them by Providence, and then step by step taken away by advancing rationality.

The unity of Cosmos also meant unity of virtue, truth, and perfection. Without such bonds, advances in making and shaping not only heightened a sense of loss and insecurity but also of some generic "ruininess" of the human condition. When we say that the chief function of narratology is to make our human condition liveable, dispelling the myth of loss and opening access to liberating moves of independent reason freed of imposing layers of illusory certainties must be what it is about. What a formidable challenge! Centuries of religious as well as secular speculative thought claiming universal validity built up layers of illusions of stability exploiting the power of constitutive value of loss framing human existence and expectations. When people believed that God created matter, it looked as if he must have endowed it with a purpose of its own, so that it cannot be merely a container for something else. Yet rational moderns cannot see any purpose in nature, for otherwise it could not serve as a neutral referent which is one of the pillars on which stands independent reason in general and Galilean science in particular. This condition alone makes our alienation from nature and the sense of loss it brings explicit. Since humans identified themselves in time and space by marking the earth, loss is a fault in the fabric of being they ought to own, poised between form and formlessness where it now stands separated from the context of production which brought it to light. No wonder that already in the Hebrew tradition prohibition of idolatry was not just about protection of monotheism but a way to address what it saw as limitation of the status of objects. "You shall not make unto the any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above or that in the earth beneath or that in the water under the earth" (Exodus, 20:3-4, p. 24). For a thing as an embodiment of finitude is less than suitable for conveying the divine content of the absolute. Since form cannot express everything a thing is either, any representation must appear as a kind of violence which fixes the object in the finitude of its making. Matter formed into meaningful shapes ultimately breaks up and opens space for new structures to be made. It is through such acts of recognition, what Greeks called *anagnorisis*, that we

pass from ignorance to knowledge. It makes for a world of what would appear to be generically damaged goods, of a world as if constituted by a new class of ruin-ness with action micro-spaces separated by ephemeral gaps and voids. Time, extension, and materiality on which stood the Cartesian ontology appear to be “out of joint” in a space whose metric is unexplainably fluid. The command of language depends on competence to “own” its functioning and meaning making. Hence, we must ask what new ways of knowing and being has this development brought about and what are the key manifestations of their actuality in narrative accounts of the human condition.

It is essential and urgent to make the process of perpetual translations and metamorphosis of products of the human mind and hand transmissible (Jaros, 2019b). We must free *materia poetica* and concept generation it fosters from any chaos by fostering independent means for taxonomy of novelty and its separation from imitation, trivia of opportunism, and from commoditisation of life at large. Not to reduce life to layers of silicon “bits” but to protect it from them by making actualisation of reason recognisable and retrievable—narratable (Jaros, 2020a)!

2. Demise of Traditional Story Telling

Humans can only remain human if they possess competent command of language. The necessary condition for this to materialise is to keep translating human experience of life so as to maintain quasi-continuity of meaning making. That in turn depends on the degree of recognition and directional pursuit of disparate forms of independent order and its genealogy. Only then is personal independence and social emancipation achievable, and only then can the human-machine interfaces remain within the bounds set by the human design no matter how robotic is their functioning. The fear of what would happen if human delegated too much of the action space to machines is no more or less than the fear of losing competence in recognition of and engagement with novel forms of—to use the Foucauldian term again—the order of things. Although new methods of modelling fostered by quantitative empirical methods and tools make it possible perpetually to upgrade the level of our accomplishments and cast them into genealogical sequences based on transparent parametrisation and limits open to public scrutiny, their application remains confined to case by case studies and cast in highly technical terms challenging even the well-informed audiences. The task of narrators is—as it has always been, be it now with an upgrade to what might be called “digitally-enhanced challenge”—to make the flux of order generation and structuring into signs capable of enchanting living places.

Today even topical interventions in physical and social sciences enter the public space as “narratives”. However, they are almost as a rule no longer grounded in open allegiances to a system of thought, what is often labelled as ideology or world view, style or social system, and brought to perfection by the great novelists and commentators of the 19th and 20th century from Victor Hugo and Fyodor Dostoyevsky to John Galsworthy and Don DeLillo. With the decline of collective consensus and its home the modern Common, even allegory lost its effectiveness. For when something like an ephemeral

“crypt” is supplied—alas, now by the very allegorist—its impact in the chaotic cyberspace is almost certain to lead to unintended outcomes. Instead authors prefer going on a “trip” (e.g., Sebald, 2000). There they pick “cases of interest” they deem fit for being “translated” into tools in the service of a chosen anchor concept or agenda—or so the reader must hope for today their identity is often unintelligible. In performing these “translations”, “customers” are led to acquiring a particular way of looking at and connecting things that then informs any of their future encounters. They all have one thing in common; the constraint of depending for the work’s readability on at least a rudimentary knowledge of a structured reference system of thought, and of having to be ready to defend its assumptions—not to speak of the charge of being liveried servants of some unpleasant comrade of the establishment—can be set aside. The “issue” is only limited by author’s imagination and linguistic skills—and “funding”! What then is the genealogy of such a way of building up and delivering narratives? How can its tools be brought into the open? In particular, what are the layers of different ways of meaning making created in the course of their development? And, above all, what might serve as a tutorial door opening not only to the content of such narratives but also, if possible, to turning them into useful tools of learning and competence building free of top down impositions practiced by the neo-liberal educational Establishment?

3. Being as Wayfaring in Search of a Lifestory

We have lost the aura and authority of traditions in a world that is dominated by mediation via networked structures of disparate character and purpose; what is more, we now depend on them for our wellbeing without ever fully mastering their functioning. Our response is governed in the main not by direct seeing, hearing, and touching of static objects out there whose meaning is “fixed”. Instead we depend on pseudo-algorithmic rhythms of neo-liberal social practices. They lend contingent meanings to direct encounters. The flow of objectified material exchanges and its assemblage-like machinic character incorporates the human body, and this body in turn incorporates the images of other objects to the point of being dominated by them (Rabinow, 1992)! The living in an unstable human environment is then a kind of wayfaring, of making moves that keep re-constituting and re-engaging one’s identity and a sense of purpose. Under the description of the actual travel path, there is a promise of a deeper motive and a story to tell. A walk, “travel” happens via bodily movements, more generally via an object and it is therefore an obvious means of self-recognition in the material condition of humans. The apparent reason for the journey invariably hides an onto-epistemic content under wholesale aesthetisation of life (e.g., Steyer, 2017, and refs. therein). It constitutes the self by its journey and that in turn constitutes the journey as a living, experiential space-time. It amounts to punctuated experimentation and depends for its initial conditions on involuntary memory of the world of action, and for its being on access to rails along which thoughts can travel and collide. It raises the status of facilitating this access—to education in particular—to the level of importance normally reserved for

health and wealth! What then constitutes the actuality of meaning making in the narrative space framed by novel means of human expression peculiar to the dynamics of neo-liberal decades?

4. Birth of the Art of Inscription

The dominant mode of human expression in the course of the long 19th century, in many ways well into the 1980ties, was steeped in the increasingly furious discourse of ideologies. In spite of the warring conditions, it remained in the main fueled by beliefs in this or that version of “universal history” and progress in human self-understanding, with all its socio-cultural consequences. However, already in the mid-19th century some of the most perceptive minds grasped the significance of coming of a generic change in the position of humans in relation to nature and to themselves. Leaving aside the veil of linguistic acrobatics his work has been surrounded with, Friedrich Nietzsche’s project can be seen as one of the most insightful responses to this change—be it also most lethal and open to gross misuse. Nietzsche anticipated dissolution of the traditional philosophy and human powers of representation it has fostered. In his *Anti-Christ*, section 14, he opens with “...Our knowledge of man today is real knowledge precisely to the extent that it is knowledge of him as a machine...free will...may no longer be understood as faculty...(it) no longer ‘moves’ anything...” For the Galilean science accredited with rationality without any limits internal to itself the human object and its social being will be there to be dissected again and again and the result available for perpetual processing in the quest for knowledge and power. However, since “a tool cannot criticize itself”, in Nietzsche’s judgment the human as a social being had no chance of engaging this potentially runaway freedom so as to impose sustainable humanizing limits and directionality upon it. The object-event could no longer be seen for what it really was by direct means, by immediately visible appearances—the individual had to be “guided” via a concept in order to grasp it!

Nietzsche exploited the methodological opportunity presented by this novel, emergent condition of humans by launching a “subliminal” method of individualized genealogies of judiciously chosen object-events. Waiting behind the narrative appearances was a new agenda thriving on runaway generation of “local” concepts enforcing de-territorialisation of experience and its records. There he implants into the reader’s mind a vector of sensitivity to recognition of a selected class of encounters, de-contextualised and arranged into brilliant patchworks of linguistic provocations, floating on a promise of “self-deliverance”. It was programmed by an intentionally concealed, aesthetic-in-extremis, individualized dimension of life whose philosophical grounding and directionality remains “unreadable” to the uninitiated majority. In Geoff Waite’s words, Nietzsche was the first truly effective “revolutionary programmer of late fascoid-neoliberal techno-culture”. His texts are “immunopathological” in that they are “producing antibodies against the auto-immune community it has established within itself” (Waite, 1996).

More recent versions of the method of inscribed meanings have assumed novel significance since the ascent of neo-liberal doctrines and their cultural echoes, and have been inventively adopted almost anywhere, from academic interventions to the crudest twitting of “false news”. It always amounts to

calculated integration of human life into larger than human structures through which life is, under an “attractive narrative cover”, manipulated into assimilating the patterns of a particular behavioral framework. This is how a fenced off action space is manufactured ready made for selected elites who can take advantage of their privileged position to read or misread with great social impact the texts and images so presented; and their returns are made as if of the transcendental subject! Alas! The only “Will” that matters here has no regard for reality other than one’s self-assertion—even at the cost of one’s life not to speak of that of others. Such a life is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon; the world is a solitary “work of art” produced by and unique to the mind of its creator. Since it does not represent anything other than itself, it lives and dies with the fleeting illusion of its bearer!

5. The Archaeological Method of the Arcades Project

Since in this way of approaching Nietzsche’s intervention it is seen as a result of the shift in the material condition of humans rather than a freak result of a twist of sickly personal brilliance, the emergence of new technicity of the human condition is a problem for his followers just as for any other tribe then and now. Indeed, much of methodological effort in the last hundred years or so has been devoted to rising to this challenge and hoping to move beyond the blind alley of destructive individualism without falling back on the manner of grand speculations of the 19th century. In particular, by mid 1930s it was clear to many that not only Nature but also politics and culture at large are neither linear nor continuous, and that the legacy of Kantian autonomy, Hegelian history, Newton’s mechanical and reversible universe, as well as their numerous successful off-springs, were no more or less than outstanding simplifications. Furthermore, access to reality by direct experimentation—observing falling stones, taking photographs or making linguistic signs of proof and poetry—no longer seemed an unproblematic route to the Cartesian “clear and distinct” as it did to Galileo and Kant. It was also the time when Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1999) launched his last, alas unfinished research project. In a truly creative move, he set out to account for the crisis of the Subject in terms of the dynamics of the shift in the material condition of humanity brought about by advancing capitalist modernity. However, instead of launching yet another exercise in top-down theorising, he grounded his project in object-based, concrete (visual, material) representations of reality, cutting across the boundaries of domains of being traditionally thought to be autonomous, and one in which empirical documentation leads to and ultimately recovers and makes visible the philosophical concepts underlying them. Hence the Arcades Project became a material counterpoint not only to abstract projects like Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s but also to dated versions of historical materialism and positivism.

Although “literal reading” of Nietzsche’s texts is open to almost any interpretation, only a fool unaware of the rigid programmatic conceptual structure developed throughout Nietzsche’s research project would fall into this trap. Benjamin’s method is inscriptive in exactly the opposite sense. The inscription here is in the form of an assemblage of concrete visual and textual material constituting in the broadest

possible way seeds of the empirical content of the theme in question. It invites a projection upon the conceptual structures that have occupied the best minds of our civilisation. The aim is to instil a bottom up method of successive approximations, a tool that may prove particularly useful in today's society of high complexity, dubious news and data.

Benjamin chose the 19th century Paris as the empirical domain in which to develop his method resembling that of an archaeologist uncovering a buried city, layer by layer, patiently connecting found objects across adjacent temporal and spatial domains. He found artefacts coexisting as fragments—as if scattered by a giant explosion across the sacred Parisian ground. He took as his starting point the ruthless, systematic destruction of traditional bonds and narratives grounding the intuitive notion of order by the runaway capital accumulation. Benjamin's montage, allegory, quotations etc., are consistent with the organisation of his Arcades Project as a whole; it is to reflect the new structural principle of his day: to erect large constructions out of smallest (architectural) units that have been “sharply and cuttingly” manufactured (stone blocks, columns, beams, bricks, iron and glass products), to discover the “crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small particular moments...” (Buck-Morss, 1989, chapter 3). The price he must pay for this novelty is that the traditional criteria for internal consistency of philosophical systems must be sacrificed on the altar of liberated access to the flow of material exchanges constituting the social. The genesis of onto-epistemic concepts can at best be quasi-continuous, dynamic, born and growing up as it were on the road, in moments when dialectics is “brought to a standstill”!

However, Benjamin's was not a vision of capitalism leading humans into a void of runaway consumerism. He did not anticipate the unleashing by technology of body-invasive, self-organizing, and on and off super-profitable bio-matter witnessed by recent decades. Nor was he after Heideggerian debunking of techno-science or promoting Nietzschean individualist vitalism. He wanted to recover under the fragmentary appearance of reality a material trace of Ur-history, of “originary” history of signs and bonds. He believed that all this slaughter of traditions, Karl Marx's melting of all that is solid into air by steel constructions and machinery, would liberate workers, and return them to a utopia of some primeval freedom from alienation and slave-wage. In his vision, the new urban space would be re-enchanted by the flood of new signs and wish symbols inspired by technology; for him inscribed under the surface mask of history is the trickster of theology animating socio-technological development! The conceptual back-bone of his Arcades Project was chosen to represent Jungian-like archetypes of the 19th century capitalism; the gambler and the flaneur personify the empty time of bourgeois modernity, the whore signifies the commodity form of femininity a la Baudelaire's mother-prostitute, the decorative mirrors and interiors consumer subjectivism, mechanical dolls are emblematic of worker's existence, the store cashier is an allegory of the cashbox... They stand there supported by concrete documentary material of citations and images etc. waiting to be projected step by step upon the established models of the world. They represent novel means for developing a personal,

experiential ownership of a route into knowledge acquisition such that the mind is equipped critically to stand up to top down impositions. From this point of view, whether the site of such intervention is Baudelaire, Eiffel tower, or anything else that can be so documented becomes secondary if not irrelevant!

6. Vertigos of the Post-Conceptual Wayfarer

On the back cover of Sebald's *Vertigo*, the publisher tells the reader that this is "Part fiction, part travelogue,...succumbing to the vertiginous unreliability of memory itself...What would possibly connect Stendhal's unrequited love, the artistry of Pisanello, a series of murders by a clandestine organisation, a missing passport, Casanova, the suicide of a dinner companion, stale apple cake, the Great fire of London, a story by Kafka about doomed huntsman and a closed down pizzeria in Verona?..."

Sebald appears to have constructed his text as if out of brief, often only several sentences long blocks, each carefully crafted so as to look almost self-contained. Their solidity is enhanced by the economy with which the sentence is composed. It invariably contains seemingly factual information—such as that 50 000 horses and men were killed at Waterloo—even though the story has nothing to do with the battle. Still less is it necessary to provide details about its death toll. Here he makes it clear that understanding details is a key to grasping the turn of events; it is not there to inform as such but as a methodological tool; "tiny details imperceptible to us decide everything". He employs great precision to embellish the passage or building block of text with concrete names of archaeological-genealogical importance. He inserts photos—of intentionally poor quality—of tickets, buildings, dresses, schematic drawings, with dates, numbers and brand marks clearly visible though the photos are of poor quality again to indicate they are a tool, not data. He refers to measurable physical properties such as material composition, colour and sound, light reflection, to acts of performance, even though judgements themselves often openly deny any possibility of uniqueness or indeed reality of what is being described. By frequent references by name to churches, railway stations, streets, gardens, the reader is led to developing high level of confidence in the narrator. Yet there is not quite the sense of completeness familiar from traditional novels. Even Franz Kafka, with whom Sebald as it turns out wants to be compared, settles his characters into their cloths and chairs and makes sure we know they are "there". His depends on recognition of what people do. There is none of Sebald's "abstract selectivity" and none of the generous supply of would be data, names, etc. arranged into sequential moves as if following a logical argument. However, by choosing to refer to one of his heroes as K., the author wants to initiate a chain reaction inviting parallels with the misfortunes of the famous Kafka's hero. The reader familiar with the *Trial* (and the *Castle*!) can engage in a sophisticated game of parallel pastiche readings. But no Casey "place" (Casey, 1998) for his story! The uncertain origin and metric of the space in which Sebald's narrative fragments move create a sense of vulnerability, of gentle traumatic openness to

misadventure. He wants the reader to know that his is a kind of pseudo-probabilistic outlook (Merrell, 1998). In his words, "...the more images I gathered from the past...the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that way".

The reader whose education resembles that of Sebald's—i.e., someone who had been taught about the importance of visiting Italy and seeing its treasures a la Goethe's *Italian Journeys* (Goethe, 1980) and Hegelian *Kulturgeschichte*—will recognise and identify with at a very different level of appreciation, e.g., the twenty pages of accurate geographical and art historical tour from p.69 of *Vertigo of Verona, Milan, and Venice*, and again *Verona*—only to end up with a reminder of Franz Werfel's gift to dying Kafka. Hence Sebald's text offers several different levels of reading, each with hints at its peculiar class of inscription in which the concrete material artefacts forming the backbone of the text and the virtual strings connecting them may invoke different metrics.

This structuring disregarding the usual literary practices spiced with top-down patronising invite a comparison with Benjamin. Indeed, another common aspect is the atmosphere of spectacle, of hyper-reality, be it of travel, city architecture or human thoughts and encounters. There are also places in the *Arcades Project* and, say, in Sebald's *Austerlitz* (Sebald, 2001) where lives of techno-scientific models become visible. They manifest themselves through mirror reflection, photography, systems of lighting, sparks and rays, transitional character of colour and shapes. Austerlitz the adult specialises in monumental architecture of capitalism. His interest in grand railway stations and fortifications is highly technical as is Benjamin's interest in the Eiffel tower, applications of iron and glass, atriums and street lighting. Both Benjamin and Sebald dwell at length not only on the qualities of materials and structures but particularly on the process of using them in arts and literature. In *Austerlitz* there are again maps and descriptions exceeding in detail and scope many a tourist or technical guidebook. Even the account of torture in the Terezin concentration camp appears as if factual. Yet neither Benjamin's nor Sebald's work can be compared with that of authors who use scientific experiment or documentary argument to inform and to educate or simply to hold reader's attention. The reference to mathematical or physical models or effects only appears indirectly via their manifestations; they stand as it were in the background and yet in the text, as inscriptions to be felt behind the lines. They create an atmosphere of possibility of order, of an unfulfilled promise of organisation far exceeding in importance the visible object and its features. For example, Austerlitz "...was obeying an impulse which he himself, to this day, did not really understand, but which was somehow linked to his early fascination with the idea of hardware network such as that of the entire railway system...", and a little later, "he...found himself in the grip of dangerous and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion in the Parisian railway stations which he said he regarded as places marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune". Just as the *Arcades Project* is a patchwork of disparate fragments arranged into collector's boxes, so is Sebald's novel. It makes the resulting openness even more both promising and traumatic.

This reduction of systems to their "local" manifestations breaks down the authority of speculative

models of the world—as well as of those originating in the closure characteristic of the Newtonian mechanical universe and of the scientific models it has inspired—without excluding any possible benefit they might bring to any of us. It scatters their fragments across the boundaries of science and technology and into aesthetic and social domains. When Benjamin writes about colour, he is informed by Goethe, not Maxwell or Einstein. Like Goethe, he can only “marvel at the knowledge of colours displayed by scientists”. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, an orphaned child of WWII, is keen on artefacts, but his interest is almost entirely consumed by monumental architecture of late capitalism such as the colossal Central Railway Stations of Antwerp and Brussel; also, this fascination appears to end at about 1900! Indeed, many a Sebald traveller had been educated very much like Benjamin, or better likes to think he had been educated that way, e.g., to want to follow the example of great men of Western culture like Johann W. Goethe, in order to instil in the mind the spirit of Renaissance as a measure of the enlightened way of living whose meaning is universal. That is why when a hero of *Vertigo* goes to Verona he does follow in footsteps of Goethe to enter Verona the “right way”—that is from the railway station to Giardino Giusti! But when it actually happens, Sebald’s hero does not gaze studiously at the architecture and paintings as a romantic wayfarer would have done any time between 1600 and 1900, may be even in 1950. It is as if the treasured buildings and paintings were a mere background, often only assumed to be known. What makes his journey worth the effort, apart from the idea of reliving a grand narrative, are the bits of food, of the bodies and dresses of lovely people, the tickets and other marks of life everywhere, anecdotal details that can be extracted during visits of a house or cemetery here and there, only to move on to another such encounter. There is no explicit mention of great stories of cultural history or models of the world, something a University Professor like Sebald must have been saturated with in the course of his career. Yet without the gymnastic of historicism and philosophy, he manages to hint effectively that there is more to this than meets the eye! But if there is in it a way of reaching treasures of the past, it is via the steps reminiscent of Benjamin’s ideas informing his *Arcades Project*!

Any similarity between Benjamin and Sebald has interesting limits quite telling about the gap separating their respective generations. Unlike Benjamin, Sebald does not write about utopias. He does not show any signs of an active worldview or strong ideas about how to change this world. His *Austerlitz*, though a child of victims of Nazi camps, lives a life of an abstract intellectual and even after his “awakening” behaves like a recluse; he retires in order to find out about the fate of his parents but again purely as a personal obsession. He is not an engaged citizen with rights and responsibility. Things happen and that is that. Even any distant echoes of the Kafkaesque are broken into fragments loosely held along the lines of forces whose direction and energy supply come only virtually, via habitual expectation of rational manifestations of order via repetition, dissipation, symmetry, (de)composition and shocks, i.e., not via Nietzschean Will to Power, Benjaminian Rabbi Marxism, or Kafka’s “unfinished” still as if with a hope to free themselves from the clutches of the impenetrable System—as

if, since according to Kafka there is hope but it is not for us...! Here then is another example of a text free of systemic impositions of esteemed views about life offering to an interesting inquirer several levels of reading of ascending sophistication—a welcome gift of tutorial material; for in skilled hands, it can serve—and has already done so on many an occasion (Jaros, 2014a, 2014b)—as an excellent educational tool for initiating and developing further a bottom up, unassuming, personalised way of acquiring a method of learning about the world much better suited to the needs of citizens of the 21st century. The methodical, gradual un-concealing of layers of meaning potentially contained and hinted at in such texts illustrated on a few samples from Benjamin’s and Sebald’s works may open the door to what is now an increasingly popular way of building up narratives in just about any context; even for the spokesman of the anti-extinction movement mark 2020 the declared objective is to move from data to story-telling!

This shift in narratology now also includes topics that have traditionally justified the format of a specialist monograph. Like Walter Benjamin in his *Konvolutes of the Arcades Project* and Max Sebald in his travelogues, Suzanne Stewart the Poet Laureate and Ivy League Professor chooses what she considers to be iconic nodes marking the territory of interest—in this case Italian or rather Roman ruins—and builds up their being out of material, constructional, and architectural-social qualities constitutive of their appearance and location (Stewart, 2020); Aristotle with his four cause canon would have applauded—not to speak of the visibility of archaeological-genealogical instincts in the Benjaminian mode! But there is no dream of reaching Ur-history, no Nietzschean zest to beat Evolution by the Will to Power, nor any mention of systems of thought, styles or *Zeitgeist*! And we are told “There is a homology between the reification of monumental forms and the unquestioning acceptance of ideology”. How does one read that if not as hinting, in a “meta-Nietzschean” move, that there *is* an ideology but it is not for telling? For surely a Princeton poet publishing a generously produced in-depth study of Roman Ruins with the Chicago University Press places the most monumental of monuments—those of the Roman Empire—on the pedestal for all to worship?

The grounding line informing the approach to the Lessons—as well as to the *Arcades Project* and *Vertigo*—is that appearances of the past and present depend on never ending processes of translation between the past and the present. More than that, in Stewart’s words “...It is only in the continual transmission of our values, in the life of thought, language, and critical consideration, that we can find any permanence”. Yes, adds Robyn Creswell in his insightful review of *The Ruins Lesson*, but which texts and which values shall we transmit to find any “permanence”? And who is we (Creswell, 2020)? What is or should be the transmission path along which making and naming takes place, and how can it be made transparently definable and retrievable? These are not just the customary academic jibes. There is a long way from paragraph fruit pickings, whose authority in such a rendering rests chiefly on the notoriety of names like Piranesi, Winckelmann or Goethe, to the conceptual foundations of their oeuvre and its position in the historical, philosophical, and linguistic idioms. Only then might, say,

Winckelmann's claims about the nobility of Greek profiles or Goethe's reasons for elevating to the status of Divinity certain Italian artefacts and landscapes, change the colouring of their aura born out of such splendid textual isolation, and reveal some of the vectors lost in this format, e.g., those famously leading to pro-slavery engravings of the reputed development from apes to Africans or to the notion of people without art and Aryan aggrandisement!

Creswell laments about lack of structure and misses the logic of sequential reasoning normally expected from research monographs authored by Ivy League academics. Citations too are chosen with unorthodox selectivity—be it with great generosity! What comes to light by dint of careful observation and scholarship is composed so as to express what is and what its value is by skilfully employing prestigious value judgements lifted, as much as possible without spoiling their brilliance, from imposing frameworks of high-minded critics, so as to inscribe connectivity and meaning without having to declare allegiance to any particular style or system of thought—not to speak of offering a new one. It is, as we are reminded here and there, to find an alternative to the hated paths filling the Cyberland by “reducing everything to bits”. Yet while the structure or rather its absence in the usual sense of the term in this genre certainly does serve the declared objective, it would be very difficult to benefit from so ambitious an account of, say, composition of materials used in craft and architecture many centuries ago, unless one can make good use of internet-assisted access to the relevant sources without which it is just a piece of trumpery—or one has a seat in the senior common room next to the right Professor! The same goes for unlocking the rich content hinted at every now and then and hidden behind dates and locations mapping the author's personal patchwork of favoured pieces of development and decay, not only of ruins and ruin-ness of artefacts but also of all those people who inhabit collapsing physical and social structures wittily described in *The Ruins Lesson* as “lost in place”. Alas! The loss-ness never touched on in this book but lurking behind just about every little item on the huge agenda, and one more formidable than any of its precursors afforded so generous a treatment there, has been given novel actuality by taking the inscriptive design of narration into the digital age. The loss-ness that emanates from every screen which—apart from a few quixotic characters—must be indispensable for everyone's thoughtful if not critical readings of such texts! For when in an unguarded moment we lift our tired eye from the shiny flat surface before us and begin to think about what it has brought to our attention, the trauma of facing the abys presented by the open system on whose interrogation the success of our effort depends but one that we can never fully control or critically assess, is bound to overwhelm us.

7. Conclusions

Today even topical interventions in physical and social sciences enter the public space as “narratives”. They are almost as a rule no longer grounded in open allegiances to systems of thought or worldviews brought to perfection by the great novelists and commentators of the 19th and 20th century. Nietzsche's

technique of inscription re-emerged as a source of major social challenges when it was adopted in recent decades as a mainstream narrative practice grounded in “inscriptive connectivities” and cemented by the unlikely alliance of emergent tools of networked communication and technophobia of the large section of the humanities. “Inscribed” into even some of the most common of messages, the intended connectivity is hidden behind a pseudo-travelogue of a manipulative tale. Its signature is invariably an atmosphere of open-ended “punctuated equilibrium”, full of pointers to spicy novelty; it is as if it were to lead to salvation—without ever delivering it. Its aims are achieved by tangential hints, witticisms, and arrows to would-be desired objects, events, and meanings apparently outside the text. They are bound to create misleading impressions; no wonder if they turn the bewildered reader to seeking help in the overkill of messages offered at the click of a mouse by the Cyberspace—its ease only amplifying the sense of personal insecurity! For the regime of “anything goes” in public communication fatally weakened credibility of direct intervention in the social even when beefed up with allegory unhinged by ephemeral crypts. Anything from pata-physics of development and conspiracy theories to “deep fakes” has been polluting the public space and undermining the confidence in rational access to causal forces already diminished by the neo-liberal division of labour and wealth.

However, in spite of or rather because of this way of structuring and its programmatic detachment from explicit allegiances to top-down systemic impositions, there emerged a sub-class of narratives that may serve as a welcome pragmatic platform for delivering competences fit for informing judgement in the challenging narrative spaces of today. Even texts steeped in scholarly accounts of cultural traditions like *The Ruins Lesson*, unfolded in the manner demonstrated here on examples from Benjamin’s and Sebald’s oeuvre, may be instrumental in lifting from under the veil of cryptic pointers a fresh route to meaning making, and to taking the level of ambition to new heights. The chief aim here is not turning people into walking encyclopaedias but to instil an attitude fostering habitual deferrals of hasty conclusions in favour of iterative loops of meaning making, gradually clarifying the relevant assumptions, causes, variables, and limits of applicability—surely the only sane way of countering the colossal misuses of emergent technologies and of the social structures that promoted them or were created in their wake. Without developing effective means for delivering personal confidence in making sense of the narrative space, leading to a credible form of emancipated citizenship, it is unlikely that the current challenges resolve themselves in consensual making of a just society. The state-of-the-art studies (Piketty, 2020) do support this outlook. In particular, it is argued that although economy is inseparable from governance and citizenship at large, inequality is neither economic nor technological but first and foremost a product of the ideological and political, grounded in educational structures. History seen in the light of empirical, quantitative results “...shows that economic development and human progress depend on education and not on the sacralisation of inequality and property” (Piketty, 2020, p. 1007). Though evidence, the “facts”, can only be transmitted in a system of

signs whose form reflects the social norms as they are held at the site of action, and the quantitative data are always subject to inherent methodological limitations, so long as their finitudes are known they can inform our judgment about specific contextual meanings.

It is for the tutorial skill to position the learner so that he or she can, at the rate and depth matching their ability and resources, acquire an attitude equipping the mind with confidence and tools fit to take it through ascending stages of critical reading. When the routine delivery of the factual content of the curriculum is left to interactive software, it will release tutorial time for personalised engagement with the content of the programme (Jaros, 2014a, 2014b, 2020b). Recent experience shows that no amount of good will, revolutionary fervour, or top-down directives can replace the power of personal ownership of work and value, and of the social content of products of creativity and sweat. Also, the competence in critical un-concealing of meaning making in disparate forms of narrative production dominating the public space is the necessary condition for bringing it home to citizens that the personal independence making it possible for them to do what they are good at, in a shared public space, is the ultimate measure of value. Only then can people consensually choose and bring about structural social reforms that have a chance to stick. The mass disenfranchisement heightened by distortions of access to rational meaning is recognised as a major source of instability of contemporary democracies. It was also the disenfranchisement of individuals in all walks of life that accounts for the depth of the collapse of the post-war “East European socialism”; it failed to deliver personal ownership of meaning making and work in spite of giving everyone free education, health service, and the right to work—and making us school children memorise comrade Lenin’s advice “learn, learn, learn”!

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