

What is Your Story Now? Life Narrative under Threat in Douglas Coupland's 'Extreme Present'

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Abstract

The article explores the interconnected issues of identity formation and life narrative through an interdisciplinary lens in order to grasp the influence played by the Internet and digital technologies on the way we construct ourselves as a story. In particular, the erosion of the concept of the self as closed system or, rather, as coherent text or bounded book, in the frequent analogy with literature, is increasingly observed. As well, a progressive de-narrativisation in the process of identity (re)presentation online is being seen as a result of the additive logic (typical of databases) with which we plaster the web with our own personal data. But while some authors welcome the new forms of self-construction as more performative and agential, others, such as Douglas Coupland, on whom the article is focused, fear that we are gradually being stripped of our own story, individuality, and humanness.

Key-words: Douglas Coupland, life narrative, digital identity.

1. Once upon a time... one could be read like a book

A love letter to stories and storytelling. This is seemingly what Douglas Coupland aimed to write when he based almost the whole story of *Generation A* on a main theme: the need to rediscover and restate the humanising power of narrative in the digital era¹. The very first words of the novel talk loud in this regard (Coupland 2009: 1):

How can we be alive and not wonder about the stories we use to knit together this place we call the world? Without stories, our universe is

¹ The Canadian writer, made famous with *Generation X* (1991), has often focused on the way digital technologies impinge on our culture. In *Generation A*, he tells the story of five characters that, due to particular circumstances, are led to leave the complexities of the digital world in favour of a simpler life on a remote island.

merely rocks and clouds and lava and blackness. It's a village scraped raw by warm waters leaving not a trace of what existed before.

Narrative's role in giving shape and memorability to what we would otherwise perceive as untamed and oblivious is affirmed here; its relevance to the way we build our own life as a story, selecting facts and weaving them together, is passionately argued soon afterwards: "What is a prayer but a wish for the events in your life to string together to form a story – something that makes some sense of events you know have meaning?" (p. 2). Further on in the novel, this last concept is reinforced: "Every word we speak is autobiographical! [...] Your left brain is a potent tool. It forces you to create stories in order to make sense of information. Without enough information, it will create information to fill in the blanks" (p. 278).

Indeed, since the narrative turn, which some scholars such as Jerome Bruner (1991) date back to the early eighties, not only has the power of storytelling been abundantly discussed, but its correlation to identity formation has been often assumed. Sociological, psychological, autobiographical studies, all tell us that our very selves are *storied*, thus implying that humans are not only storytelling creatures, but essentially *self-telling* ones, and that, as Paul John Eakin (2008) puts it, we live "autobiographically". In addition, stories

are not only the way in which we come to ascribe significance to experiences, they are one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves. [...] We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell. (Andrews 2000: 77; 78)

Especially with regard to time and temporality, the explanatory role of narrative has been widely recognised. In Paul Ricoeur's essay "Life in Quest of Narrative" (1991), self-narrativity is seen as having the function of giving meaning to the past and shape to the future at the same time. Analogous is the "tick tock" explanation provided by Frank Kermode: "The clock's tick-tock I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organisation which humanises time by giving it a form; and the interval between tock and tick represents purely successive, disorganised time of the sort we need to humanise" (Kermode 2000: 45). Kermode's argument is that to make sense of the multiple and desynchronised streams of life, we impose a coherent pattern on an otherwise incomprehensible

eternity. We tend to create fictions “which unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning” (p. 190). The scholar calls them “concord-fictions”, taking them to be “like the plots of novels” (p. 190).

As is often assumed, especially in autobiography studies, the way we cognitively perceive and construct our life story is mainly affected by the cultural and formal models that are deeply rooted in our own socio-historical milieu and, therefore, in our own consciousness. It may be for this reason that, notwithstanding the more flexible, plural and unstable models of identity proposed at least since the postmodern turn, the centuries-old model of a linear and sequential story, as emphatically celebrated by the realist novel, still seems to be the privileged one. Self-coherence narratives have even become, in Eakin’s words, an established system of knowledge formation, or a “narrative regime of identity” (Eakin 2015: 21), very hard to disrupt.

The notion of a unitary and unique individual is also strictly linked to this model. As Lance Strate brings to the fore, written literature allowed for more information to be communicated about narrative characters, making the latter more historically accurate and more humanised. They were so lowered in relation to ourselves that our identification with them was made much easier, and, with the apotheosis of the novel, this gradually allowed the individual to reach “the age of celebrity” (Strate 2014: 14). Yet, this long-lasting model of the individual is now under threat. In one of the many works in which he deals with the issue, Coupland exposes the deconstructive effects of digital technology’s ceaseless flow of images and data on it:

How does [technology] affect one’s sense of self? [...] People who came of age in the twentieth century most likely grew up with a sense of the noble individual – the *literary sense of self* [...] in which one sees *one’s life as a story, a grand narrative*. For an ego created in this system the assault on the self that is triggered by the Internet is extreme. One is no longer an individual; one is now merely one unit among seven billion other units. (Coupland 2013: 60-61; my emphasis)

The belief that the self is being de-individualised and de-narrativised in the age of the Internet – a belief which is already, and quite

obsessively, exposed in his previous works, such as *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996), among many others – is reiterated in *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present*, a collection of definitions, aphorisms and illustrations created in collaboration with Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist. Specifically, Coupland uses the term “denarration” to define the process “whereby one’s life stops feeling like a story”, in contrast with the basic belief “that a life without a story is a life not worth living” (Coupland 2015: 43). Due to the complexities and simultaneity of the digital world, he also detects a “sequencing dysfunction” in the inability to look at one’s life as a meaningful, linear sequence of events and memories (p. 36).

In *Generation A*, the question is mainly focused upon in one of the short tales included in the novel: “The man who lost his story”. The tale is about a man called Craig that “somewhere during his life [...] lost his story. [...] he lost the sense that his life had a beginning, a middle and an end. [...] he got to a point – thirty-eight, say – when he realized that none of his dots connected to make a larger picture” (Coupland 2009: 219-20). Feeling frustrated, Craig approaches a leisure centre in search of a meaningful experience capable of returning a sense of individuality to him. Its director, a woman called Bev, explains to him (and us) the reason why he feels this way:

[...] our modern culture, with its real time 24/7 marinade of electronic information, demands a lot from modern citizens and poses great obstacles to narrative. [...] To survive, people need to become self-branding charisma robots. [...] So, in a nutshell, given the current media composition of the world, you’re pretty much doomed to being uninteresting and storyless. (pp. 221-22).

Craig tries to protest: “But I can blog my life! I could turn it into a story that way!”, but the woman disillusion him:

Blogs? Sorry, but all those blogs and vlogs or whatever’s out there – they just make being unique harder. The more truths you spill out, the more generic you become. [...] Did you read a lot of books growing up? [...] Books turn people into individuals, and once that’s happened, the road only grows rockier. *Books wire you to want to be Steve McQueen*, but the world wants you to be SMcQ23667bot@hotmail.com. (p. 222; my emphasis)

The argument that the author makes is that, once, books produced individualisation and uniqueness (to such an extent that one felt like a “celebrity”), as well as a high degree of *interiorisation* as an effect of silent and solitary reading. In the world wide digital environment, instead, not only are our identities being flattened and depersonalised to the extent of being *cartoonified* (as is brought to the fore by one of the tales included in the novel), but they are also being fragmented, distributed and dissolved in the process of extreme *exteriorisation*, or “deselfing” (Coupland 2015: 100), in which we are involved. This process, which consists of the voluntary diluting of our sense of self and ego by spending too much time online and disseminating too much of our persona on the web, is turning the book of our life into a multiple-entry, never-ending and ever-shifting hypertext, while rewiring our “20th-century linear mind” into “a 21st-century lattice” (p. 87).

Indeed, the reason for Coupland’s anxiety about the loss of the book-*cum*-loss of the self may reside, in Christopher Keep’s view of the matter, in the “border experience” provoked by the extreme proximity that humans now have with technologies. For the scholar, it is the “moving back and forth across the lines which divide the human and the machine, culture and nature” that “refigure[s] our perception of ourselves as closed systems” (Keep 1999: 165). Accordingly, Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2002: 523) argues that, “as our cultural experiences become more technologized, they seem to many to become less human”. Therefore, “the anxiety of obsolescence of books”, linked to the emergence of electronic substitutes, actually reveals a contemporary anxiety about the contemporary state of humanism: “The computer age thus seems to offer new potentially dangerous threats to the category of the human itself” (p. 523).

While not long ago, as Sherry Turkle observes, people used to “cycle-through” between their online and offline lives, now the virtual has become so ubiquitous in our physical and mental environment – thanks to handheld devices such as tablets and smartphones – that we are “always-on”, and the boundaries between human reality and simulation are being eroded (Turkle 2008: 121-22). Coupland (2015: 81) has coined the term “cyphoria” to indicate “the belief that the internet is the real life”, which he considers as potentially damaging our long-term memory, or what basically constructs us as *us* (p. 84). In his opinion, the more we are online the more

our memory “becomes, in a very real sense, *artificial*. Technically, someone who spends all day in front of a screen has no memories of their own except for going to the fridge for a Coke...” (p. 90; my emphasis). Indeed, what the author seems to fear most is that humans themselves, as he is not afraid to stress (p. 179), have created technologies that are gradually effacing what originally separated us from intelligent machines, and our own language from digital code (the language spoken by computers). As N. Katherine Hayles puts it, for someone, the increasing “interpenetration of life and code” may trouble “the quotidian assumption that there can be life apart from code”, thus causing a “disease”, which “consists of nothing other (or less) than collapsing the distinction between artificial and human cognitions” (Hayles 2006: 154-155). In fact, if code itself is thought to infect us like a virus, the ability to understand and narratively control our new information- and computation-intensive “cognisphere” may be dramatically weakened. In other words, our technologically interpenetrated cognitive and affective world may be seen as “too dense, too multiply interconnected, too packed with data flows to be adequately represented in narrative form” (p. 154).

Hence, the need to find an antidote to the shift in cognitive modes catalysed by today’s daily barrage of information and exponential exposure to digital technologies. In *Generation A*, Coupland wishes for a return to the ancient habit of composing and telling stories and, thus, for the reactivation of that creative part of the brain that we have almost forgotten to use. In the second part of the novel, the five main characters of the story, originally isolated and digitally-absorbed, are brought together on a remote, disconnected island, and involved in a storytelling experiment. At the end of it, all of them decide to keep living there and to carry on that experiment forever, because, as they feel, it has proven capable of turning back their own code-infected selves into rounded individuals, and the chaos they lived in into a coherent and readable text². As one of them finally recounts the experience: “I began my trip as a lost soul.

² As Andrew Tate (2007: 41) reminds us, the finding of an “emancipation or healing via acts of narration”, leaving life behind, is a recurrent trope in the author’s works. In *Generation X*, for instance, the narrator states that he and his friends took refuge in the desert “to tell stories and to make [their] own lives worthwhile tales in the process” (Coupland 1991: 10).

I was a bar magnet with only one pole, a number divisible by zero. [...] We cut away those bits of ourselves that had become cartoons. And *we turned the world back into a book*" (Coupland 2009: 297; my emphasis).

2. What the book was, the performance and the database have become

Notwithstanding his declared feelings of resignation-*cum*-fascination towards new technologies (Aitkenhead 2009), Coupland might appear as an unredeemable nostalgic of book culture in a context in which new models of being and of self-thinking and writing are gaining supremacy over the literary one. Recognising the role of electronic media in radically "transforming what it means to be literate", Richard Schechner, for example, observes the way in which books as print "are being replaced by interactive e-forms", which he defines as "highly performative" (Schechner 2013: 5): they encourage "senders and receivers to use their imaginations, navigating and interpreting the dynamic cloud of possibilities surrounding each message" (p. 5). Thus, the scholar points out, we are "increasingly finding the world not a book to be read but a performance to participate in" (p. 25).

Indeed, if we take a moment to profile the backdrop against which Coupland projects his loss-of-the-book fears, we should consider the way in which more-performative-than-narrative selves are actually emerging and being described in digital culture. Confirming Schechner's view, Sherry Turkle (2008: 129) observes the way we commonly use the phrases "doing my e-mail" or "doing my messages", emphasising action and performance, rather than reflection, when we enact our online personae. As well, the way the self (and its status) is constantly renewed, updated and reframed when presented and narrated online testifies to the performance-like identity work, play and practice of becoming which is involved in the process (Turkle 1995). Therefore, in Laurie McNeil's words, instead of autobiographies we rather compose "auto/tweetographies": "short installments of life narrative which share moments, experiences, and lives in miniature, and which will be updated and replaced regularly" (McNeil 2014: 149). This aspect is also underlined by the latest studies on the authoring of

personal home pages or profiles in social media and blogs (Walker Rettberg 2014, among others). They all foreground the never entirely finished process of “identity composition” (Kennedy 2006: 869), as if the *site* of our identity were constantly “under construction”³, in accordance with the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett’s idea of human consciousness as made of multiple and rewritable drafts (1991), and, in more ample terms, with Schechner’s description of all performances “as provisional, in-process, existing and changing over time, in rehearsal, as it were” (Schechner 1998: 361).

No longer comparable to a fixed and closed text, the new web-based *non-fictional narratives* of the self are rather very much like *fictional transmedia storytelling*: open-ended, interactive, process-oriented, disseminated across multiple platforms, and randomly distributed across time and space. In her study on the role of selfies in the process of digital identity formation (which includes autobiographical acts of any sort, such as posts, images, pictures, videos, preferences, interests, and so on, spread across different sites and blogs), Hannah Westley underlines both the liberating potential of these unregimented acts of self-presentation and the possibility that the very term and concept of narrative, as well as that of identity, may be considered inapplicable to them. In fact, as she reminds us, the problem with the very term narrative is that it traditionally “implies a text, a certain causality, the imposition of sequence on an otherwise disconnected series of events” (Westley 2016: 374). On the contrary, it is hard to discern causal connections or sequences between images, selfies, posts, or updates. Hence, the end of narrative identity as we knew it.

Indeed, according to the autobiography scholar Philippe Lejeune, narrative’s purpose has always been to harmonise past and present, retrospectively reconstructing and suturing the events of one’s own life; in contrast, the ultra-speed of the digital world is

³ As Kennedy argues (2006: 865-66), if, on the one hand, the processual nature of the digital self has led cultural studies to see it as an expression of the fragmented and fluid postmodern identities, on the other hand, the shift of focus away from what the self as a cultural object *means* (“which has been the central concern in cultural studies to date”) to “what such objects are and *do*” has been fully encouraged by performance studies and by the latest surveys on affect, emotion and the experiencing subject.

collapsing past, present, and future in a de-historicised real-time (Lejeune 2014: 249). As a result, online life narratives more and more look like a series of synchronic and episodic *scenes* with no evident chronology: they focus on the present and rarely use the past tense or deal with long-term memory; they are basically aimed at *presenting*, not at *representing* us (Han [2013] 2017: 16).

Of course, while there are enthusiasts of the possibility of performing several kinds of identities by randomly generating new data and updates, there are those – such as Coupland – for whom the circumstances and effects of this practice, rather than liberating, may be cause for concern. Yet, a necessary clarification about the kind of alternative he advocates when he insists on books and narrative must be made.

As I said in the opening of this section, confronted with such a performative scenery, he *might* appear as an unredeemable nostalgic of *book culture*, yet, his equal enthusiasm for *oral culture*, that is to say, for the *practice* of storytelling, so much glorified in his novels, puts him in a different position from that of a book fetishist. In *Generation A*, for example, there is a moment in which reading is said to generate “microproteins in [readers’] bloodstreams” (2009: 251) that provide them with a sense of beneficial solitude and “calm individualism” (p. 255); however, there are also moments in which, as in the tale called “The man who loved reading and being alone”, a totalising passion for books is mockingly shown as triggering hyper-individualism. In looking for the right balance, Coupland actually opts for the recovery of Decameron-like communal storytelling, such as the one the five characters are engaged in at the end of the novel. When one of the characters asks the scientist why, based on the experiment, they have to tell stories out loud, the reply they receive is that, doing so, their “bodies make a corrective molecule, one that brings people together” (p. 284).

In the light of these and other statements, the writer’s position might appear quite ambivalent in this arena. While showing a clear penchant for books (after all he is a writer), he also seems to go as far as to value the performative power of ancient story-telling (an emphatically *bodily* vs. virtual performance) over the power of story-writing. Indeed, by posing and intermingling both possibilities, the author is shown to be interested in restoring the power of the *story-*

qua-story, whatever its form is (written or oral), as a means of re-asserting and anchoring identity against the depersonalising storm of digital self-presentations (against the barrage of signs in which they are enmeshed).

As Andrew Tate points out, “if the Western world [...] is now a ‘laboratory of denarration’, Coupland’s fiction becomes an equally experimental arena to test the possibility of renarration” (Tate 2007: 68), which is to say, of restoring, through any viable variation, an idea of the self as a full-optional story: with characters, a setting, a theme, and, above all, a coherent plot. In fact, he is well aware of the technology of the novel – or the “bookkeeping device”, as he calls it in *Life after God* (Coupland 1994: 217) – as a means of transforming the potentially chaotic experience of time and memory into a linear sequence of cause and effect; however, he is also convinced that the *storyboard* approach to life (the search for a coherent life story), aimed at making sense of it, is a distinguishing characteristic of the *human animal*. It is a core element of our identity as a species, impossible to be eluded (or repudiated): “agonizingly endless clock time” is our “curse”, acknowledges one of the protagonists of *Life after God*, as is remembering experiences through sequences and patterns (p. 223).

Contrarily to this innate need of narrativising our self and memory, the new modalities through which we tend to present (and perform) ourselves on the web are de-historicising us also according to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han. While history “means *recounting*”, neither information nor tweets “yield a whole, an *account*” (Han [2013] 2017: 35). Thus, in contrast to those who believe that social networks’ timelines or reverse chronologies can be considered an alternative kind of temporality in the permanent present of social networks, Han argues: “A timeline does not recount the story of a life, either; it provides no biography. Timelines are additive, not narrative. [...] The digital age is totalizing addition, counting, and the countable” (p. 35).

The cumulative self-presentation we make of ourselves by scattering atoms of our own life all over the web (merely *storing* our self, instead of *storying* it) follows the computational logic of the database, not of narrative. In relational databases, efficient correlation among always retrievable identical data takes the place of causality and time-wrought layering. This is why Ed Folsom considers the

database as a “viral pandemic that threatens to displace narrative, to infect and deconstruct [it] endlessly” (qtd. in Hayles 2012: 175). In fact, even a much less catastrophic critic such as Hayles points out that in today’s information-intensive environment, databases, with their immense storage capacity, have gained dramatic advantage, to the point of becoming perhaps the dominant cultural form. Hence, “narrative is more and more infused by data” (Hayles 2012: 182), as if needing database “to enhance its cultural authority and test the generality of its insights” (p. 176).

Where life narrative is concerned, the perturbing idea of identity as a mere complex of digitally searchable, countable and relatable data content is consequently coming up beside the traditional concept of the self as time-based consciousness that Coupland misses and longs for. On this subject, he gloomily asks himself: “what happens when the story is eclipsed by raw data? Travel patterns, shopping habits, search histories, and response times and everything else we generate?” (Coupland 2013: 90). In trying to provide an answer, he ends up predicting that after a lifetime of “filling the Cloud with volcano loads of [...] personal information, all of that data will aggregate together to form a meta version of [our]self”: a “*cloudgänger*” (Coupland 2013: 87-88). We will be duplicated, we will become an app: an “app called yoo”, he specifies in *Bit Rot* (2016). “Yoo” will tap into our streams of personal data spread across all kinds of sites and networks. Thanks to “an infinite process of algorithmic association” (Coupland 2016: 413), it will find connections in our life that we didn’t know were happening. It will blend into our own experience an overwhelming quantity of fragments (minutiae, details and tangential idea threads) by “displaying similar or related content” of which we were not aware. Basically, we will have our “subconscious played out directly before [our] eyes” (p. 413). But, in the end, wonders the author, will we be able to make sense of it? As Jill Walker Rettberg (2004: 11) underlines, “quantitative” self-representation is actually “pre- or post-narrative. [...] We may infer causality but this requires interpretation. [...] We fill in the gaps [...] that are not explained in the story”, which is typically, and traditionally, the task of human consciousness. Yet, as Coupland gloomily foresees, in the future the superefficient data-mining app “yoo” might even take on itself our left brain’s task of filling in our “biographical

blanks”, performing “a scale-perfect mimic of our life” (Coupland 2013: 90).

As a result, with human action yielding to operation, and plot-generating algorithms displacing the power of intuition, it might be the case that the all-human value of narrative will not be replaced by the efficacy of *embodied performance*, such as that advocated by Coupland, but by the efficiency of *technological performance*. And, to the author’s eyes, this will finally lead to the “death of culture [...]. The death of books. The death of the individual hero. The death of the individual period” (Coupland 2009: 170).

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