



## Breaking The Frame: Aesthetic Encounters with Narrative Practices – Part One

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As a painter and collage artist, I have spent years wondering if the word “narrative” limits what narrative therapy can be about. My background in artmaking has opened new perspectives for my narrative practices. In art, a change can be as simple as a crumpled paper, a repositioned image, or a few brushstrokes. I hope to bring that same freedom to the imagined frames of clients’ accounts. Whether through painting, installation, or performance, art offers opportunities to depart from the story metaphor and discursive systems that have felt restrictive and binding. Aesthetics help me reach beyond words in ways that differ from art therapy and somatic healing. Through art, I have learned to unsettle a narrative’s regular usage and to challenge conventional views of space, time, language, and identity. Artmaking has taught me to create openings for unique outcomes.

This article will share some examples and concepts as I continue experimenting with bringing art ideas into my practice in usable, shareable, and helpful ways for my clients. This activity doesn’t detract from my love of stories or my commitment to collaboration with clients in re-authoring their lives. On the contrary, I aim to see if aesthetic retellings can enliven narrative conversations and narratives’ ordering of knowledge.

David Epston recommends that we approach narrative therapy using our “ethnographic imaginations.” His keynote speeches at Therapeutic Conversations (2015) and in San Diego (2018, 2019) appealed to us to be “mavericks in an age of branding.” We are asked to reply to Michael Whites’ question about narrative practitioners, “Why don’t they sound like themselves?” To respond to this question, I felt compelled to untangle the notions of art and narrative in my head. Through art, I learned the ideas of Deleuze, Foucault, Bakhtin, and Derrida. I was introduced to postmodern concepts from this different medium of thought, so the ideas overlapped within narrative therapy in some ways and collided in others. Sometimes, I have felt jarred by narrative teachings and compelled to experiment with an interdisciplinary dialogue between these two worlds.





I was excited by narrative therapy before I knew what it was. There are glimmers of narrative in my thesis from my MFA art show in 1992. Describing my artwork, I wrote, “History, released from being a resolved consensus, becomes a resonant multiplicity of perspectives, plots, and paths. Swarms of fragments and memories can be catalyzed into new fictionalized events ... I attempt to awaken a sense of heterogeneity that breaks our assumptions of order and logic.” Through art, I could visualize the poetics of Christo’s green hills dotted with blue umbrellas or get lost in Twombly’s scribbles and erasures. I learned of shifts in space and time in paintings of the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime. Artworks like these have expanded my ways of seeing and thinking.

What we look for, we tend to find. At times, I’ve questioned if narrative therapy is at risk of being a canonized system, a naturalistic account of a storied world. I consider the constraints of ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ as our primary metaphors for narrative therapy. I am not alone.

Michael White (2011) wrote:

Although I continue to have a strong appreciation of the narrative metaphor, and expect that this will be an element that continues to shape my explorations of practice, this metaphor can never incorporate all of the considerations that are expressed in these explorations (p. 6).

John Winslade (2016) said:

“And in your comments about social constructionist epistemology I was left wondering about the word narrative. I find it useful sometimes and at other times find it limiting. Narrative practice seems to me to encompass much more than the word narrative suggests. Do others find this?”

(E-mail exchange between John Winslade and Elmo Pienaar on the Narrative Educators Network – June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016)

Of course, narrative, therapeutic conversations are discursive, rooted in text and emplotment. We can never know the whole story, and meaning is socially constructed, mediated by language, and circumscribed by discourses. Narratives are fluid and multistoried, holding new potentials in every retelling. Yet, for decades, my art background had me consider whether emplotment defaults to



cohesion and reason at the expense of the contradiction, partiality, and disorder needed for more radical change. I became curious about what art could teach me about using space in clients' stories. Imagery involves us with place, shape, positioning, and media. Each artwork shifts our ways of seeing, interactions, and places to stand. Art can provide options to counter the dualistic division of self and other, internal and external space. I create with the literal and figurative, with concrete form and the ineffable within abstraction. In contrast, the linearity of emplotment may be hazardous as a discourses, dominant social practice for structuring knowledge.

Sometimes, I find myself complying with the spaces and times that stories include as part of narrative logic. I am curious about the effects of sequencing and framing on the meaning potentials of clients' accounts. I am particularly suspicious of space, time, and sense-making that are reduced to what is functional to a story as a system (Morson, 1994). As an artist arriving at narrative practices, emplotment seemed to privilege "narrative necessity" and rationalism over alternative forms of sense-making (Bruner, 1991, p. 4). We defer to the thoughts that "can most easily be grasped" and placed within discourse (De Certeau, 1984, p. 20/ Bolt, 2004, p. 4). My clients benefit from cohesive narratives that plot their values, purposes, and hopes through time, but emplotment can also curtail meaning based on its 'logical,' linear requirements.

These questions made my practice more invitational to a different kind of sense-making and ordering of experience. For me, a narrative's organizational properties naturalize the story frame and prioritize the legible and familiar. I wanted to learn whether customary notions of causality elicited response biases based on emplotment. It seems that my clients and I inadvertently favored what was most readily accommodated by language and plot. In addition, our stories give authority to the omnipotence of text over imagery's ambiguity. I am uncomfortable with therapy's privileging of concrete, quantifiable language over meaning that hovers in the potentials of uncertainty. It has made me wonder what categories and divisions of experience, in the first place, I have succumbed to for work in the field of psychology.

Here is a segment of a conversation with a client. She struggled to get beyond the constraints of discourse to describe experiences that, rather than being rescued





by embodiment or art therapy, require aesthetic, non-discursive modes of expression that defy conventional categories.

Lucy: Is it okay if I ask what you meant earlier about random thoughts? Did you value the randomness of the thoughts?

Ava: When young or now it was kind of like different from where my parent's thoughts were coming from. For me it fit logically, it wasn't random.

Lucy: Was it a different kind of logic?

Ava: Yes.

Lucy: Is that something you still value?

Ava: I do. Working in that kind of thinking is really, really creative. It works in what I do but it doesn't always work in verbal communication. It's in leaps, patterns, deeper meanings. For me, I need to make those leaps.

Lucy: Does language feel restrictive?

Ava: Yeah.

Lucy: That makes you sad, that question.

Ava: Yeah (tears). It's frustrating because, yeah, it's sometimes hard to... Definitely what I'm strongest at. Getting it all into language, it frustrates me.

I know the challenge of translating ideas into words. My language has always been visual, and as an artist, I learned how to create space through imagery for new kinds of representation and perception. At Otis College of Art LA in 1990, my greatest mentor Simeon Wade introduced me to many of Giles Deleuze's concepts as they applied to artmaking. These ideas continue to enrich my narrative practices. Simeon was a brilliant scholar and teacher, best known for his book *Foucault in California* (2019), which documents his infamous 1975 trip with Michel Foucault in Death Valley. His work as a psychiatric nurse with the





schizophrenic population inspired him to embody the ideas he taught. Simeon mentioned Deleuze's celebration of the schizophrenic, not as it is known within the pathologies of modernist psychology but rather as a position of multiplicity. He spoke of alternative orderings of space that confront and undermine our conventional organizational systems. Through art, we learned to question the aesthetic arrangements of individualism, dualism, and linear histories. Using multiple locations and creative imagery, he explained the dire necessity for plurality and difference.

Simeon taught about diversity using images of heirloom beans and seeds. Ever since, I have seen wild colors and speckles in my mind's eye. If we traveled back one hundred years, we would find a world with beans and seeds of every imaginable variety. Simeon shared this as a call to arms. We must see rescuing difference as a philosophical and political imperative. Without heterogeneity and genetic variability, one wrong fly or atrophying disease could destroy the seed and bean populations forever. Like beans and seeds, multiplicity and difference are critical to people's survival. Simeon spoke to the need for variability in our understanding, seeing, and imagining. We are to play with perception, and through it, we are to gain diversity in how we conceive of representation and thought. I have come to understand the power of Deleuze's concept of multiplicity as it applies to reauthoring. There is a need for multiple places to stand in telling our stories. Every spatial arrangement must stay open to the additional potentials of less dominant meanings.

Years ago, I was attracted to ideas in Deleuze's essay, *What is the Creative Act* (1987). Deleuze writes: "Counter- information is only effective when it becomes an act of resistance," and "... there is a fundamental affinity between a work of art and an act of resistance" (pp. 312-324). Yet, as my art and narrative practices grew, I began to question the term "resistance." I thought about how resistance always assumes opposition to another implicit conceptual starting point, rather than the multiplicity of perceptual experiences. What if these repetitive origins keep us constrained in predetermined systems? Art has inspired me to look beyond the individual subject's actualized story elements. I consider whether stories and histories are based on worn, hand-me-down, frequently discursive concepts. Are the origins of our conversations tied to insidious assumptions of culture, power, and sense-making? How are we recruited into spaces that are already familiar, blinding us to the potentials of the unactualized and virtual? The





cultural studies author, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (2011), was one of the strongest influences on my artmaking. She contributed that Slavoj Žižek (2002, 2006) “... argues that true politics involves not resistance but instead an un-precedented, even un-premeditated, Act” (p. 121). She goes on, “It is an action that disrupts habitual usage or enunciation so as to unlock new potentials of a discursive system...” (p. 121). As an artist, I have the freedom to start from nothing and to imagine anything at all. I can move an image or my body from one place to another, erase, destroy, and perform anew. Art has multiple strategies to break free from the restrictions of a space’s encoded parameters. Deleuze’s (1994a, 1994b) concept of an ‘image of thought’ helped me to imagine some of these tactics.

### Storied Images of Thought

Deleuze describes an ‘image of thought’ as a space of presupposition that dictates how we form concepts (1994a, 1994b). These images determine where we are starting from and what we are allowed to think. An image of thought can use an objective or subjective frame. In either case, it imposes a differentiated, conceptual location that anchors what is to follow. Our images of thought rob us of the options of a virtual world free from the actualizations of systems and assumptions. This concept helps me look more closely at my clients’ and my shared expectations and how they might usurp the arrival of atypical notions. Deleuze includes eight postulates that interfere with creating novel encounters (1994a, p. 167). Three of these postulates, common sense, recognition, and representation, became integral to my artwork and narrative sessions.

Over years of narrative practice, I have become increasingly curious about what we include or disqualify in our inquiries. I wonder if we must always begin with a life story that maintains a logic grounded in earlier subjective experiences. If our goal is to generate new storylines, then every memory or thought may diminish what we see as possible. Our storied experiences teach us wisdom. They also create presuppositions that are hard to overcome. The narrative therapist’s ability to maintain a not-knowing philosophy (Anderson) allows us to be “learners” freed from the images of thought that block access to new visions. Jerome Bruner (2002) writes, “Why this seemingly innate addiction to story? Beware an easy answer! Even etymology warns that “to narrate” derives from both “telling” (narrare) and “knowing in some particular way” (gnarus) – the two tangled



beyond sorting” (p. 27). For me, therein lies the dilemma. How do we move between ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’? How do we challenge the “particular ways” that determine what we call ‘knowledge’ in the first place? The narrative therapist’s ability to stay tentative and in motion between multiple conceptual locations gives access to multidimensional meanings.

Art and narrative share in the allure and mystery of not-knowing. We can celebrate the suspense of life’s unexpected outcomes. In art, we refer to unplanned occurrences as “happy accidents.” We must take unknown leaps into the renegade to invent ‘form’ that evades prior history or function. I am intrigued by Deleuze’s concept of a “body without organs,” where one can inhabit a space of openness without committing to that space’s organizational system. To me, there are times when the system is the story itself. I ask myself if a coherence of genre, characters, and plot creates meaning at the sacrifice of some of the stories’ unactualized potentials. The musician Scott Wollschleger (2015) writes of Deleuze’s influence on his composition for soprano and trumpet in C, “... I personally think the goal of art should be: rendering something into existence that is inconceivable before it happens.” As a narrative therapist, I want to honor the continuity of my clients’ histories and cultures while co-creating novel events that escape predetermining assumptions and images. These surprises take us beyond representation, beyond the known.

Narrative therapists view meaning as socially constructed through language and relationships. We see “knowledge” as linked with history, culture, discourses, and power and co-create empowering descriptions that challenge the “truth claims” in clients’ stories. Yet, I have wondered if there are times we are shuffling story elements that originate from the same image of thought. Is everything new referenced back to the limits of our earlier understandings (Bruner, 1986,1991)? For me, this is the ultimate “truth claim.” An image of thought appears to be taken-for-granted ‘knowledge,’ but it is a single-storied frame maintained by power operations at the expense of insurgent, systemic change.

To Deleuze, our lines of flight are departures from known territories. Although our imaginations can conjure “Lines of Flight,” our stories create launching pads, the causal sites of expectation. Artists and narrative therapists often value “events” and “lines of flight” as counterplots to images of thought. Art brings us to the precipice of representation, allowing multiple escapes from the boundaries of





discourse. Indeed, art fights the very idea of the inevitable. I'm free to change mediums, contexts, and processes. I can easily pick up my pencil and move to a different territory. A joy of art is the freedom to create anything at all. This liberty is tangible when we stare at a blank canvas, empty field, or ball of clay. In art school, I was struck by Bachelard's (1969) quote, "*When the image is new, the world is new*" (p. 47). I believe an aesthetic awareness of our images of thought gives us access to new worlds. Aesthetics can help to overturn the "dogmatic images" in our narratives and the dictates of actualized story elements. By interrogating the images of thought in clients' stories, we open space for new perceptions.

### The World Picture

When Michael White writes of his enthusiasm for "other worlds," he inspires me to join my clients to explore uncharted territories (2007, p. 3). We often hear of worldbuilding in stories and imagine a sense of place, theme, history, and character development. Narrative therapists share the intention to call out the forces of power, discourses, and systems that permeate our everyday world constructs. Yet, inherited concepts limit our lives, and our fresh visions often are reconstituted within outdated representational frames. Whatever the medium, art has taught me how to create encounters. Art asks us to position ourselves in relation to the environment. We look at where we stand and what captures our attention. Artworks summon us into specific questions about how we are participating and whether these are active or passive engagements. Each work demands our awareness of our centered or decentered positions and forces us to locate ourselves as separate viewers or a part of the work.

We often relate the size of a story to the scale of the human body, and we risk getting trapped in body-sized spaces. Whether giant or small, an artwork's scale can interrupt these conventional expectations. We gaze up at Jeff Koons's giant Balloon Dog sculptures, Claes Oldenburg's enormous hamburgers, or JR's photographic overlays on buildings. Often, we can move in and touch the surface. These artworks conflate and scramble our conceptions of public and private space. If we view the tiny figures in miniature dioramas of Tatsuya Tanaka, we might delight in his whimsical use of everyday objects while being drawn to their details.





These artworks have me consider the scale of my narrative questions. As an artist, I contrast “mouse vision” to “eagle vision.” In narrative, I collaborate towards the personal and local, while considering the systemic and global. Our experience-near questions allow for rich, scaffolded stories. We can also make larger, more radical shifts towards less sanctioned or visible worldviews. On an intimate scale, I might ask, “What does your grandmother know about your love of talking with trees?” The question “Can you still hear the willows” might come even closer. A question such as, “What are you valuing when you wonder if it’s possible for a person’s greatest contribution to be leaving no footprint behind?” has us speculate from a greater distance, often outside of conventional systems.

I’m curious about our habitual grasp of scale for therapy itself. In my practice, I frequently see that the distinctions between self and other are blurred. Although therapy tends to default to the subjective, most of us share a felt sense of being part of an acute time in the world, a palimpsest of shared trauma and longing. At times it becomes hard to parse out our personal and collective experiences and therapy has lost relevance as a solely individualistic venture. I can hear the pain of the world in my clients’ words. One client stated, “I’ve been feeling the weight of the world and the weight of my friends’ worlds this week ... I’ve felt overly attuned to sadness, not necessarily just for me, but for everywhere.” Another client said, through tears, “I’m just sad about humanity. Because of how important it is for people to be kinder to one another... People are speaking from pain and they call that truth and they call that fact.” My clients’ global concerns demand that psychotherapy speaks to these challenges.

Artmaking has taught me about dominant representational assumptions in Western philosophy that divide the mind and body, humankind, and the environment. Descartes (1637) privileges man’s subjective rational experience. The philosopher Heidegger sees the human subject as dominating a world that is reduced to a fixed, framed image (Bolt, p. 17, pg. 55/ Heidegger, p. 134). Although a narrative mode of thought is a pluralistic contrast to these dualistic worldviews (Bruner), I sometimes wonder if narrative therapy still insidiously perpetuates dualism. I appreciate narrative therapy’s distinct contributions to being multi-perspectival, yet we regularly anchor our stories to the viewpoint of a single protagonist. Sometimes this is beneficial, and perhaps other times, it is to my clients’ detriment. The choice to see space as interactive or at a distance affects how we see the world and make meaning together. Art has shown me how to use



space to become a part of the larger world. I hope narrative therapy can learn to challenge conceptual images that keep the individual and the world apart.

### Beyond Representation

As an artist, I think about the human urge to render our lives through imagery. Whether ancient petroglyphs or memes on social media, each representational choice intertwines with its own history, culture, and beliefs. We can see the dualistic division of subject and object in the Western realist art of the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The eye level of the viewer determines the disappearing “horizon line,” or train tracks of linear perspective.

Aesthetics helps to transport psychology beyond its traditional focus on the individual subject. In time, Western art sets us free from the illusion of mimesis and art’s goal of imitating the subject’s “reality.” We are released from the seer subject as a location and source of meaning (Hutcheon, 1989). Art can help us visualize how to move through various locations of meaning and explore the multiple positions we can occupy. The Impressionists play with the dissolution of solid objects into texture, color, and light. The Cubists fracture the picture plane and the spectator’s singular perspective (Berger, 1972, p. 18). As a narrative therapist, a favorite quote from Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has inspired me. She writes that Cubism’s simultaneous, multiple perspectives demand that “any single spectator ... be in several places at once” (1992, p. 108). This is what art has done that I want to invite more of in narrative therapy.

The invention of the camera even more drastically liberates us from the individual’s position as the world’s sovereign. In the classic text, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972) describes how the human spectator is central to drawing and painting, whereas “The camera - and more particularly the movie camera” liberates us from an immobile “position in time and space” that privileges the singular, centralized view of the human subject (p. 17-18). Berger clearly states, “The invention of the camera changed the way men saw” (p. 18). I continue investigating art’s liberations of imitation and positioning within my narrative practices. As art frees us from mimesis and fixed forms, it catalyzes the virtual, less visible, unfinalizable, and migratory. The neutrality of realism and one-point perspective explode into diverse viewpoints, contrasts, and contradictions (Ermarth, 1992). We reject normative categories, and the mirroring of a

transcendent, essentialist realm and the objectified world transforms into multiplicity and dissonance. Through art, we see realism give way to invention. Artmaking assists our grasp of process over product and movement over stable structures. The act of representation becomes blatantly exposed, and the viewer engages as a vital participant (Cotter, 2005). In this way, art moves from representation to performance (Bolt, 2004, p.8), and we become interactive, relational parts of the world. These are speculative fictions of contrasting, aesthetic, and intertextual vantage points.

Postmodern artists and therapists choose to disrupt the totalizing, singular viewpoints that present as factual, coherent, and necessary (Rosenau, 1992). If realist art implies an accurate mirror for the world, postmodern art celebrates ambiguity, contingency, and indeterminacy. In literature, we see a similar movement away from realism towards fluidity, fragmentation, and contradiction. Like art, narrative therapy encourages radical innovations. Michael White writes, "It is through this unpacking of these naturalistic accounts that we come to know the history of alternative knowledges of life and practices of living ... we can engage with the unexpected" (White, 2001, p. 147). Aesthetic approaches help me to see the "unexpected" and imagine new worlds with my clients.

The following are some examples of artworks that have helped me play with concepts for narrative practices. Each artwork grapples with representation and elicits questions about space, time, ordering, abstraction, and language. These are 'aesthetic means to narrative ends' based on my own experiences rather than metaphors or illustrations. The palimpsest, the ready-made, collage, abstraction, earthwork, performance, and installation all hold various narrative potentials. I am aware that my selections are mainly from the Western canon. I hope that some of these ideas might invite dialogue with others. In this article, I am sharing the first example, from *La Trahison des Images*, by René Magritte.





### *La Trahison des Images* ~ René Magritte, 1929

René Magritte (1898 -1967) was a Belgian painter who was part of the Surrealist movement in 1920s Paris. His painting, *La Trahison des Images* (*The Treachery of Images*), also known as *This is Not a Pipe*, gave me a particular opportunity to think about Narrative Therapy and representation. *The Treachery of Images* asks viewers to consider the connections between text and imagery, reality and thought. It suggests that we are constantly negotiating language and meaning. As in narrative practices, we question how language determines our perception of reality. As an artist, I was trained to challenge representational certainty. Here, we challenge the trickery of language.

#### Image/Text

Magritte's painting is a precursor to the linguistic turn Wittgenstein wrote about in the 1920s and in full force by the 1970s and 1980s. It is an early example of an artist's look at the intersection of imagery and text. Later, contemporary artists frequently explore how language and imagery collude with the construction of identity, politics, and power. These artworks are more recent warnings to be suspicious of language as a neutral conveyer of meaning. Many artists combine photography and text in ways that increase our awareness of the schisms between representation and lived experience. Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, Ed Ruscha, Bruce Nauman, and Baldessari are classic examples of artists whose conceptual work use appropriation, juxtaposition, and slogans to produce social commentary. Like Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, their artworks warn me of language's hazardous deceptions. For narrative therapists, these works can support curiosity about how text and imagery reinforce clients' naturalized conclusions about identity and the world.





*Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground) 1989/2019*

Single channel video on LED panel

At a lecture I attended in 2007, W. J. T. Mitchell discussed Magritte's desire to "undermine the assumptions of representation" and "question the premises" that we're "operating under." (W. J. T. Mitchell, personal communication, 2-4-2007 On Magritte, LACMA). As is understood by narrative therapists, we challenge the idea of a stable system where speech, text, and images correlate with an external reality (Rosenau, 1992). We look at the ways that language derives meanings within social contexts. Instead of language being a source of empirical solidity, language is complicit with ideology, culture, and power. Magritte's painting speaks to the untethering of language from mimesis. He intimates that neither words nor images can bring us closer to an actual pipe that one can hold in one's hand. Instead, narrative therapists prioritize the socially, historically, and culturally specific, and postmodern images and texts remain delightfully problematic. I bring this inventive spirit to my collaborative work. We can embrace the gift of uncertainty and the freedom to create.

Just as *La Trahison des Images* demonstrates that there is no one-to-one correspondence between an external object and its representation, our narratives are never entirely the things they represent. Similarly, a problem's truth claims will never be equivalent to our clients' multistoried experiences. As White (2000) writes, "... the accounts of life that shape expression do not represent a one-to-one correspondence with the properties that exist in whatever it is that is being described in these accounts" (p. 36). As a narrative therapist, I find it important to interrogate any relational correspondence that totalizes the potentials of meaning and identity. Our words, maps, and stories are mere figments, mere constructs of visual and articulated vocabulary.

Most narrative therapists are aware of Korzybski's (1933) "maxim, 'the map is not the territory'" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 2). Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* speaks to a less well-known part of Korzybski's quote: "... the word is not the thing ..." (1933, pp. 747–761). There is always this gap in representation, whether a map, photograph, painting, or language itself (Bolt, p. 17). Narrative therapy uses these gaps to actively reauthor clients' storylines. When problems disguise themselves as 'truth,' they are perceived as solid and real. The practice of





externalizing creates a gap where “the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.” Likewise, unique outcomes and exceptions are a gap in clients’ dominant problem stories. These spaces in language allow clients’ experiences to be made into new constellations of meaning.

Epston & White (1990) describe Bateson’s (1972) reference to Korzybski’s maxim in writing “...the understanding we have of, or the meaning we ascribe to, any event is determined and restrained by the receiving context for the event ... the interpretation of any events was determined by how it fit with known patterns of events, and he called this “part for whole coding” (p. 2). I am curious about this and Bruner’s (1991) concept of “Hermeneutic composability” (pp. 7-13). Bruner writes of this feature of narrative that our interpretations make sense as part of a larger story. He describes hermeneutic composability in writing, “The accounts of protagonists and events that constitute a narrative are selected and shaped, in terms of a putative story or plot that then “contains” them” (p. 8). I am suspicious of Bateson and Bruner’s concepts which seem to select what functions best in a story as a system. I want to return to Deleuze’s concept of the image of thought, a conceptual presupposition that determines what is allowed to be recognized and made sense of. These receiving contexts that Bateson and Bruner describe create images of thought, or presuppositions, that constrain my client and my access to concepts outside of the story’s structure.

Both artists and narrative therapists rely on the use of context. By placing things in context, we deconstruct neutrality and see how things are made. But at times, reliance on context may be limiting. We may want to break free from how a context’s particular operating system makes things. A new context expands our meaning-making potentials. The differences in these intentions are exciting to my art and narrative practices. These are opportunities to incorporate multiple strategies. The following sections look more carefully at each approach.

### **Placing things in Contexts – Revealing their Production**

Socially constructed meanings appear to be transcendent, objective, and sourceless and notoriously disguise the mechanisms of their production. We place ideas in context to deconstruct these “truth claims,” revealing the presuppositions, mediums, and processes that make and sustain them. For narrative therapists, looking at the surrounding conditions that play a part in our clients’ accounts is





critical. We regularly question the devices, discourses, and injustices contributing to our clients' descriptions. Michael White (1992) writes of the importance of situating clients' experiences in context. He writes, "... deconstruction has to do with procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices; these so-called 'truths' that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production" (p. 121). By situating ideas and events in context, we reveal the societal, familial, and cultural environments that have influenced their construction. This context removes the "disguise" of the truth claim by revealing its "mechanism of production."

In art school, I became interested in Roland Barthes' (1972) book *Mythologies* and its descriptions of how meanings become disguised as natural and necessary. Barthes sees myth as transforming meaning into form. As a narrative therapist, I see how my clients' problems appear factual and essential until we expose the operations that give rise to them. In one example, I have seen a brilliant young woman discard her powerful voice to conform to society's gender expectations. In another, my client is called "co-dependent" for the depth of their relational caring. Another client is labeled as violent for defending an injustice or themselves. Without contexts, stories camouflage the apparatuses that support these misrepresentations. As narrative therapists, we deconstruct how stories are made by interrogating their framework, medium, and agenda.

Artists are aware of their choices of medium from the start. Particular materials will best serve their intentions. Whether video, paint, or clay, to name a few, each has an identity and life of its own. I think about how our choices of mediums are always acts of translation. In each case, something is expressed by means of something else (Bruner, 1986, p. 23). To Deleuze, each medium and genre have the capacity to produce different concepts. If this is the case, I want to consider the mediums of thought I am using as a narrative therapist. I am noticing what my client and I are paying attention to as sources and modes of expression. We might locate mediums of thought in a story, culture, art, the body, metaphysics, or philosophy, to name a few. Our therapeutic conversations are grounded within these assorted genres and means. Each is affecting our concepts and expectations. In the last few years, I have started to consider more seriously when my clients and I might be mistaking our perceptions to be objective and unmediated.





Magritte calls attention to the mediation of language. We are often blind to the signs of things being manufactured. But all representation mediates our experiences, and media is never neutral or without influence. Artists have multiple strategies to expose mediation and contexts. In art, we often “reveal the device.” We deconstruct the making of things that appear to be process free. I found revisiting the Russian Formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson helpful. Their structuralist explorations of “defamiliarization” became one of my personal and professional core values. I want to commit to a life where my clients and I can reinvent wonder and see with fresh eyes. I think of a client’s question to me, “Do you ever just feel you have this capacity, an energy that defies logic within you somewhere that’s gotten stuck within boundaries and habits?” Shklovsky’s 1917 essay, “Art as Device” (or Art as technique), has us look at how our perceptions have become “automatic.” Through art, we can disrupt formulaic thinking and our habitual ways of seeing (pp. 79-96).

Bruner (1986) reminds me that Jakobson and the Prague School urge us to stop defaulting to recognition and start to see anew (p. 22). Of course, there are times that narrative therapists may use recognition to add cohesion to clients’ preferred identity descriptions collaboratively. We can help clients reauthor rich storylines and thicken their values, purposes, and commitments. Yet, to make the familiar “strange,” we must fight against the recurrent recognition of the known. Art can problematize and enliven our “taken-for-granted” accounts. It seems integral to narrative therapy to situate clients’ experiences in context to reveal the mediums and mechanisms of their production.

### **Breaking from the Familiar- Breaching the known**

David Epston urges us to ask questions that will take us “where the buses don’t run,” reminding us of the importance of the novel. We can depart from ordinary contexts to invent new meanings and unimagined territories. Art supports my desire to break from the familiar and access the unknown. The Dadaists, Surrealists, and Formalists have taught me to welcome and celebrate the anomalous, contradictory, and surprising. I think of David Epston and Michael White’s interest in Bourdieu’s (1984) exoticizing of the familiar or the “domestic.” I recall narrative therapy’s aim to find the extraordinary in the ordinary.





Magritte is asking us to interrogate our representational assumptions and disrupt our habits of meaning-making. In art school, I highlighted the Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1992) quote, “Surrealism sought to estrange the human mind from its own conventional systems of grasping and fixing so-called reality into univocal postures and ‘meanings’” (p. 106). Surrealism brings us Dali’s melting clocks, Miro’s biomorphic squiggles, and Man Ray’s disembodied lips in the sky. Each artist overturns our commonplace visions. Art critic Dr. Jeanne S. M. Willette (2014) added to my understanding by writing that Foucault “...was interested in Surrealism and its strategies that attempted to undo narrative connections that made the world make sense.” Our narratives can be seen as arbitrary and fabricated fictions and therefore open to more far-reaching invention (Ermarth, 1992, p. 106). As a narrative therapist, Surrealism inspires me to problematize and disrupt my client and my habits of sense-making.

### **The Dangers of Common Sense**

For years, I’ve taught Critical Psychology and asked my students if they’ve had unusual experiences that they’ve censored from therapeutic conversations, even with a very trusted therapist. They’ve shared many of these examples in our learning community. Talks with the dead, reincarnation, and flashes of unexpected fire. Numerous accounts of telepathy beyond logical explanation. Moments of synchronicity that exceed coincidence. We’ve learned about messages from birds, dogs, butterflies, electric lights, and toasters. If there’s one thing that stands out for me, it is that my students fear being judged as crazy in therapeutic settings. They’ve keenly voiced a profound hesitation to expose these precious moments to the potential risks of a knee-jerk and dominant rationalism. I’m increasingly curious about various cultural outlooks on these less-sanctioned experiences. I’m interested in stories that are harder to validate or articulate, beyond the somatic challenges of identifying feelings in language. I invite my clients to more mysterious and other-worldly accounts and welcome the illogical and metaphysical.

Common sense is determined by dominant frameworks. Foucault helps us grasp that knowledge and power are inextricably intertwined and that control over language and meaning are the resources of those in power (White & Epston, 1990, pp. 21-22). How often are we recruited into these systems by default, and what options become available when art reminds us of the potential of what we



have deemed to be impossible? Deleuze suggests that our images of thought are predetermined by conventions of sense-making. Frequently, we see problems defined as psychological when they are political or social. They are often given truth status in the guise of sensibleness and reason (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Of course, we need common sense when it comes to not running into traffic. There are times to follow the rules and other times to break them. Yet, we don't all agree on which times are which.

It is typical for the artifices of common sense to dictate normative standards. Even as narrative therapists, we may be complicit with mental health traditions. For Bruner (1991), our narratives are versions of reality guided by the requirements of coherence and custom. Traditional psychology can be the death knell of difference, and the categorization of mental health by the DSM is a prime example. Our sense-making relies on recognizability. We see what we think we know, and this "knowledge" is already bound by power, history, and 'logic.' We are blind to our own customs, as well as to cultural variance.

Another danger of common sense can be seen in this brief example from a couple I've worked with.

Grady: "I'm good at arguing like a lawyer. I know it can be difficult for other people."

The three of us discuss that when we use logic it sometimes ignores other meanings.

Lucy: "I think you're saying that something matters, even if it's 'wrong'?"

Jake: "Yes, that really hits home. I may be justified even if Grady doesn't understand it. It's still really important to me."

It is the slippage of meaning between right and wrong that we often need to embrace. The so-called "cognitive distortions" that don't need to be changed but rather honored for the profound meanings they occupy.

Magritte's painting suggests that "common sense" is determined by what is recognizable. When Foucault (1983) discusses Magritte, he compares "resemblance" and "similitude." Whereas resemblance is based on replication and mimesis, similitude has no single item as a prototype for the rest (Foucault/



James Harkness (translator). As a narrative therapist, I want my clients' stories set free from the predeterminations of resemblances. Although resemblances appear to be necessary, generalizations and social practices sustain them. Our common-sense assumptions rely on what we have done before. Instead, Deleuze encourages us to embrace the folly of unrealized experiments. He writes, "... the diversity of nonsenses is enough to give an account of the entire universe, its terrors as well as its glories..." (1997, p. 22). With this spirit, I want my clients and I to explore the aesthetic potentials of the unactualized and virtual. Magritte has reminded me of the wonders that lie beyond conventions of representation. I aspire to capture these distinctions in my collaborative conversations.

### To be continued ...

As I decipher the intersections of art and narrative, aesthetic concepts continue to creep into my narrative practices, sometimes in surprising ways. I am grateful for decades of artmaking that have helped me to see narrative through this different medium of thought. It has challenged me to think more carefully about the story metaphor. I've learned about representation, context, and conventions of sense-making. Through the years, I have looked at many art examples to play with aesthetic ideas for narrative therapy. My main themes have been language and repositioning, space and geography, time and history, movement and performance. Next, I will share how Marcel Duchamp's and Cecil Touchon's artworks taught me additional ways to confront language, order, and the seduction of resemblance.

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