

Narrative and Anti-Narrative: Televisual Representation and Non-Causal Linearity in Contemporary Drama

Roger Freeman

You wouldn't really believe that there were altercating versions of that event. The narrative tells a story into which it is impossible to enter or introduce any questions at all.

—Stuart Hall¹

The fullest form of what Althusser calls 'expressive causality' . . . will thus prove to be a vast interpretive allegory in which a sequence of historical events or texts and artifacts is rewritten in terms of some deeper, underlying, and more 'fundamental' master narrative.

—Fredric Jameson²

The topic of this paper is the partial rejection of causal narrative and the use of a televisual dramaturgy by several contemporary playwrights. Two concerns that will be crucial to this project are, first, the ability of narrative to construct a non-contradictory account out of potentially contradictory events and, second, the role that television plays in (re)presenting reality to its viewers. I am especially interested in how the adoption of a televisual style may reinforce the "logic" of television, which often seems one of randomness and chance. My principal thesis is that while concern over the naturalizing effect of traditional causally-based narrative representation is apt, less causally-oriented models may not necessarily provide a more accurate picture of social conditions and may in fact delegitimize notions of the efficacy of individual human agency.

To appreciate some of the possible effects of the (at least partial) rejection of causally-oriented narrative, some initial reflection on how narrative itself represents experience or "reality" may be in order. There seems, to be sure, something faintly gratuitous in such a reflection; what's there to speak of? Narrative is largely transparent, seemingly as natural as the air we breathe. Aristotle, for instance, implicitly accepted its naturalness when he made the very common-sense observation that a story must have a beginning, middle, and end.

Roger Freeman is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Theatre at The Ohio State University. He is presently completing a dissertation entitled *Televisual Representation in Theatre and Drama in an Apocalyptic Age*.

Moreover, narrative's invisibility seems directly tied to its ubiquity; Roland Barthes observes that, under an "almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative."³

Still, while its familiarity may give it the appearance of naturalness, narrative is a form of representation and thus a construction. As Sarah Ruth Kozloff points out, a series of experienced events is not a narrative; the narrative moment occurs only when those events are arranged into an intelligible representation.⁴ In the broadest sense, it is only through representation--the ordering of external stimuli into symbolic patterns--that the world is experienced. Whether consciously or not, individuals are continuously constructing representational narratives as they filter and arrange their experiences into recognizable patterns. The notion of representation becomes increasingly complex as the world experienced through representation is figured into a representation of that experience (say *A Doll's House*), and as that representation is experienced by an individual reader⁵--in the most basic sense, I experience *A Doll's House* as a representation of a representation of a representation. Throughout this paper, the terms *representation* and *narrative* refer principally to the second type of these representations, which might be termed *artifactual representations/narratives*. Specifically, the terms refer to playtexts and their associated performance texts. It will become clear, however, that much of my concern lies also with the third of the representational moments cited above, the reader's experience of the artifactual representation. At this point, I am primarily interested in observing that, like any form of representation, the narrative process involves the conscious or unconscious construction of external events into an intelligible pattern.

If the familiarity of (artifactual) narrative should not be taken as an indication of its naturalness, neither should its ubiquity be considered insignificant. It is precisely the combination of ubiquity and "naturalness" that makes narrative profoundly important. Barthes suggests that "the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narrative as what is *caused by*."⁶ It is here that narrative's seeming naturalness becomes significant and somewhat troubling. The possibility surfaces that narrative representation may render discrete events as causally linked--which is subtly but pointedly different than saying that causal connections between events generate narrative representation. By being figured into a narrative, discrete but contiguous events may assume an apparent relationship of necessary cause-and-effect that is in fact illusory--that the phrase *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* simply exists lends support to such a claim.⁷ As Stuart Hall observes,

“form is actually part of the content of what it is that you are saying.”⁸ Narrative constructions, by dint of their artifactuality, may influence the representations of “reality” that are constructed by their readers.

It is worth noting that most modern Western drama has traditionally turned on a narrative principle that assumes the equation between consecution and consequence to which Barthes refers. The representations of the world offered by most modern drama have been based on a formula of logical and necessary causality, in which events are linked together in a predominantly linear, chronological order. In many cases, of course, causal connections between events surface only retrospectively, after the entire narrative has run its course. A common method of script analysis involves beginning at the end of a play and working backwards to the beginning, retracing the causal links between events. In an abbreviated example, Nora leaves Torvald because Torvald attacks her; he attacks her because of the letter from Krogstad; Krogstad sent the letter because Torvald fired him; and so forth, through the blackmail and allusions to Torvald’s ill health, back to the beginning. Not all traditional narrative plays follow a rigidly chronological order, of course: Pinter’s *Betrayal* and Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, for example, both include several flashbacks. Yet even in these cases, causal connections between events are realized by the end of the play. Pinter and Miller merely rearrange the events and leave it to the audience to restore the chronology. As I hope to demonstrate in the following pages, the relationship of logical intelligibility and necessary causality to narrative—however defined—is becoming an increasingly problematic issue. For the moment I wish merely to note that, traditionally, narrative plays have taken necessary causality as their guiding principle.

As a final observation on the force of narrative as a mode of representation, I would like briefly to note that discussion surrounding narrative has in recent years been expanded to examine notions of “master narratives” and their role in explaining existence and legitimating cultural practices and institutions. As Fredric Jameson describes it, master narratives are legitimated by notions of “expressive” causality, whereby historical events or narrative instances are figured as effects or reflections of a necessary and prior cause or Prime Mover (God, “political necessity,” “manifest destiny”). Analyses of notions of master narratives have proceeded under the assumption that master narratives are, almost by definition, regarded (if only unconsciously) as primordial and immutable. Furthermore, in a passage the significance of which will shortly emerge, Jameson notes that the more basic “mechanistic” conception of causality, “exemplified in the billiard-ball model of cause and effect . . . is associated with the Galilean and Newtonian world-view, and is assumed to have been outmoded by the indeterminacy principle of modern physics.”⁹

NARRATIVE, MASTER NARRATIVE, AND TELEVISION

We have become so accustomed to [television news'] discontinuities that we are no longer struck dumb, as any sane person would be, by a newscaster who having just reported that a nuclear war is inevitable goes on to say that he will be right back after this word from Burger King. . . . I should go so far as to say that embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news show is a theory of anticommunication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction.

—Neil Postman¹⁰

People without an internalized symbolic system can all too easily become captives of the media. They are easily manipulated by demagogues, pacified by entertainers, and exploited by anyone who has something to sell. If we have become dependent on television, on drugs, and on facile calls to political or religious salvation, it is because we have so little to fall back on, so few internal rules to keep our mind from being taken over by those who claim to have the answers. Without the capacity to provide its own information, the mind drifts into randomness.

—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi¹¹

It goes without saying that television is among the most pervasive of all contemporary Western cultural institutions. It is also one of the most prolific purveyors of narrative in the modern world. From miniseries to situation comedies and even to commercials, television engages in a constant dissemination of narrative accounts. News programs likewise regularly consist of a series of mini-narratives, tightly-knit sequential accounts complete with exposition, points of conflict, and resolution. It is this concentration of narrative representation, coupled with narrative's naturalizing influence, that prompts Hall to comment,

When a medium like television has such a powerful, realistic or naturalistic charge to it, people then do need to have those narratives interrupted and questioned in order to understand that they are a result of a social and historical practice; they aren't just given.¹²

In a very real sense, of course, those narratives are constantly being interrupted, though not often questioned, by commercial breaks, news updates, and station identification pauses. The concern over televised narratives is well-placed but in addition to specific narrative instances, another point of interest is how these instances are combined together into the larger field of televised images and messages, sometimes referred to as “flow.” Though most individual programming segments rely heavily on a causally-oriented narrative model, flow is largely arbitrary. Rarely are attempts made, for instance, to suggest causal relationships between the events of one program and the commercial breaks that interrupt it. What appears on the screen is rather a mostly random succession of self-contained messages. This sequential arbitrariness may be further enhanced by remote control, which allows viewers to “surf” across channels.¹³

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman offers some sobering reflections on the random quality of television flow. Postman suggests that our culture has become so thoroughly conditioned to television news (and television generally)—“a world of fragments, where events stand alone, stripped of any connection to the past, or to the future, or to other events—that all assumptions of coherence have vanished.”¹⁴ To support his claim, Postman cites a 1983 *New York Times* article that notes waning public interest in then-President Reagan’s “misleading accounts of his policies or of current events in general.” Postman asserts, “Many of the President’s ‘misstatements’ fall in the category of contradictions—mutually exclusive assertions that cannot possibly both, in the same context, be true.”¹⁵ He argues that these contradictory claims may have escaped scrutiny not simply because of public apathy, but because of a growing incapacity even to recognize contradiction. Discontinuity and incoherence being once legitimated as accurate representations of the world—which legitimation, Postman argues, television has effected—the ability to recognize contradiction fades.

Postman is principally concerned with whether and how the conditioning effects of television may defuse the capacity of viewers to intervene rationally in the representations to which they are exposed. These effects may in fact extend beyond the ‘purely’ rational level. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s research into states of happiness and the conditions that produce it suggests that the illogic of television may have further detrimental effects, contributing to a sense of apathy, resignation, or anomie within viewers.

Csikszentmihalyi examines a state of optimal psychological experience that he calls “flow.” In my use of the term to this point, “flow” refers simply to the sequence of images and messages that make up television programming in the aggregate. For Csikszentmihalyi, “flow” is a state of intentionally-ordered consciousness marked by a singularity of concentration and interest. His research

has shown a positive correlation between psychological flow and a sense of happiness, vitality, and purposefulness. Csikszentmihalyi observes that the experiences to which one attends play a powerful role in determining the contents and ordering of consciousness. Any number of activities can help to produce psychological flow—sailing, reading, even assembly line work—provided the individual engaged in those activities has a sense of control over them. Of those activities that work against a sense of mastery, television viewing is one that Csikszentmihalyi regularly cites: “TV watching, the single most often pursued leisure activity in the United States today, leads to the flow condition very rarely.”¹⁶

Postman and Csikszentmihalyi thus raise serious questions about television’s potential effects on the perception of the capacity and even the possibility of individual human agency. Here, the issue of master narratives and Jameson’s comments regarding the “indeterminacy principle” become especially significant. Jameson cites the indeterminacy principle to support his (and Louis Althusser’s) refutation of the notion of mechanistic causality.¹⁷ Is it possible, in light of Postman’s and Csikszentmihalyi’s arguments, that Jameson has precisely identified a new master narrative, one that is being reinforced by television and which paradoxically dispenses with the very notion of narrative as it has been traditionally regarded? Are we seeing the emergence of a master “narrative” in which sequentiality and consequentiality are sundered from each other, and in which chance and indeterminacy function as “organizing” principles?

If so, it seems that the perception of human beings, whether regarded individually or collectively, as effective agents of change may be seriously undermined. The potential consequences of such a perceptual shift are, clearly, distressing. Equally disturbing is the possibility, suggested by Csikszentmihalyi’s research, that such a shift may not take place on a rational level alone. Postman is concerned about how the epistemological shift that he believes television is producing may affect our cognitive apparatuses. Csikszentmihalyi’s research suggests that the effects may be even more profound, affecting us on a deeper psychological level. Given such possibilities, some examination of whether, and how, modern theatre practice is implicated in the generation of such a master (anti)narrative seems in order. The pages that follow are intended as initial steps towards such an examination.¹⁸

NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION AND THEATRICAL PRACTICE

As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in

such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgment.

—Bertolt Brecht¹⁹

You know what? Things just happen. People die. And bus drivers don't always look where they're going, even if they should, even if they're driving a school bus. Even if you love somebody they can still take a contract out on your life. And if you try to help somebody because they've been kind to you when you needed them, they can *still* refuse to eat and drink nothing but champagne, *champagne*, that's all they'll drink, and if you ask them to please, *please* take off their Santa Claus suit, just when they go out, just when you go to the store, they won't. So? Things just happen!

—Rachel, in Craig Lucas's *Reckless*²⁰

One of the most aggressive campaigns against traditional linear narrative in the drama was that waged by Bertolt Brecht. Convinced that there were immutable social laws that could be discovered and represented on the stage, Brecht championed a theatre that would “make use in its representations of the new social scientific method known as dialectical materialism. In order to unearth society's laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies.”²¹ One of the principal dramatic techniques that Brecht proposed as a means to unearth society's laws of motions was an episodic play structure that would encourage the audience to intervene and interpose their own judgments on the events depicted. In short, while Brecht accepted the validity of a (Marxist) expressive master narrative, he nevertheless (or more precisely, therefore) attempted to subvert traditional narrative representation. With Brecht, the assumption that traditional narrative(s) accurately reflect reality came into question.

Over the past few decades, the rejection of traditional narrative in the drama has gained momentum. An extreme example may be the highly fragmentary work of Heiner Müller, acknowledged by some as Brecht's “legitimate heir.”²² In a less extreme form, however, the same impulses can be felt in the works of several playwrights in the United States. Paul Castagno notes a relative absence of linear, causal continuity in the work of Len Jenkin, Eric Overmyer, Mac Wellman, and Connie Congdon. He also suggests a connection between these writers and Brecht in his comments on the similarities between the “new dramaturgy” and the Russian formalist device of *ostranenie*: “*Ostranenie*,

which influenced and is related to Brecht's conception of alienation, suggests a dislocation in agreement, function, or context."²³

Castagno is most interested in how language functions in the "new dramaturgy." The examples of "dislocation" that he cites are thus primarily verbal, as in relationships "between the word and object—as in Overmyer's *On the Verge*."²⁴ This concept can be expanded to consider how such dislocation functions in the very structure of some recent American plays. The rest of this paper focuses on works by two of the writers Castagno discusses—*Gogol* by Len Jenkin and *In Perpetuity Throughout the Universe* by Eric Overmyer—as well as a third, *Reckless* by Craig Lucas, which is structurally similar to the others. These plays are not as fragmentary as many of Müller's, but they are often marked by a dislocation more pronounced than that found in any of Brecht's.

There is some linearity to all three playwrights' works, in the sense that they present sustained depictions of particular characters through continuous courses of action. In *Gogol*, Inspector Bucket maintains a search for Dr. Mesmer, who is also being sought by Gogol. The characters who occupy the vanity press in *In Perpetuity Throughout the Universe* pursue steady lines of action: Lyle Vial busies himself with reworking a manuscript or reading chain letters, and Mr. Ampersand Qwerty²⁵ pops in regularly to check up on the ghostwriting of his latest conspiracy theory book. And *Reckless* is a chronologically-arranged picaresque that follows Rachel's adventures after she flees her home to escape from a hitman hired by her husband.

Despite this surface linearity, however, the progression of events in these plays seems much more arbitrary than is typical of traditional, well-made play structure, and linearity is often dissociated from causality. To borrow from Barthes, consecution and consequence are here drawn apart. Rather than seamless webs in which every event is linked by apparent necessity to every other event in a coherent whole, these three plays are more often sequences of apparently random events that are often only tenuously related to one another. The plays, in short, are roughly analogous to television flow.

Len Jenkin's *Gogol, A Mystery Play* centers on Dr. Mesmer, a self-admitted charlatan whose healing baths have made him famous from Paris, France to Grand Island, Nebraska. Mesmer is reviled by his fellow medicos, three of whom retain Inspector Bucket and his "windups," Tarr and Fether, to capture him. Meantime, the play's title character is himself pursuing Mesmer. Gogol invites Mesmer to his home for an evening of theatrical entertainments. Accepting the invitation reluctantly (and mostly by chance; he ducks into Gogol's theatre to escape Tarr and Fether), Mesmer gets caught up in the theatricals and at one point fatally shoots an actor playing Pontius Pilate with a gun that he had been told was loaded with blanks. As the play ends, Gogol, convinced that he is

dying, asks Mesmer to cure him. When that fails, he convinces Mesmer to kill him. Bucket enters seconds later looking for Mesmer and is shown the body of Gogol by the newly resurrected Mesmer-Gogol. The Resurrection Man, who appears sporadically throughout the play, tries to set Bucket right, but Bucket ignores him and tells his windups to take the body away.

Gogol is both an entertaining mystery play and an intriguing exercise in metatheatricality and intertextuality. Characters and situations are lifted from such disparate sources as *Taming of the Shrew* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Body Snatchers*. There are allusions to Beckett, Aristophanes, Wilder, Dickens, Genet. Curiously, most of the allusions to dramatic literature are to plays with noticeably metatheatrical qualities. It is a rich play, and to attempt to offer a definitive interpretation would be foolhardy. Yet the metatheatrical quality of the play, coupled with its focus on death and regeneration, suggest a concern with the regenerative capacities of theatrical forms.

The play in fact seems to function as a critique of the theatre's capacity for self-perpetuation and its potential as a vehicle for social change. Gogol greets the audience as the play opens and establishes the metatheatrical tone immediately. After sharing some information about himself and the production, he says, "I wish you an enjoyable evening. I shall have one, one way or the other."²⁶ At one point, Gogol interrupts his Mistress's "geography lesson" (directed towards the audience) and asks, "Meanwhile, have they [*gesture toward audience*] learned anything?" She responds, "Don't make jokes. I refuse to let you be the only one playing comedy."²⁷

The play contains a number of striking images. As the opening scene ends, Gogol smears the blood which begins welling through his coat over his face before exiting on a large turtle that slowly crosses the stage. Other scenic demands include a transparent globe which contains the (speaking) head of Magellan and which can be dispelled instantly; two bears who serve as Gogol's assistants; and scenes depicting simultaneous actions in different locales. Like its verbal allusions, the play's visual elements are dense with signification and rich with ambiguity. Image follows image in what often seems an arbitrary sequence.

Much of the play, in fact, seems arbitrary. Many scenes have little bearing on the primary plot line. Many of these contribute to the theme of regeneration that I am arguing runs through the play, but the ambiguity is apparent and presumably intentional. It may be that much of the imagery is itself included as a critique of the hypnotizing potential of sheer spectacle—Mesmer himself is mesmerized by Gogol's theatricals—which would be in keeping with Brecht's critique of "culinary theatre." In any event, many scenes are linked solely by consecution, and even those that are linked consequentially often carry a pronounced degree of ambiguity and randomness.

Eric Overmyer's *In Perpetuity Throughout the Universe* revolves around the Montage Agency, a vanity press that provides ghostwriting services to such aspiring authors as conspiracy theorist Ampersand Qwerty, whose works include *ZOG*, an expose of the "Zionist Occupation Government." To give its clients a sense of continuity, Montage's ghostwriters work under pseudonyms. Lefkowitz, for example, is actually Christine Penderecki, Montage's newest employee and the latest in a long line of Lefkowitzes. Most of the play revolves around Qwerty's latest book, but there are several subplots, including a love affair between Christine and Dennis Wu, who doubles as Tai-Tung Tranh, a Fu Manchu character who figures back into the conspiracy theories at the heart of the play. Another subplot involves Lyle Vial, who, besides vetting the manuscript for *Geronimo*, busies himself with tracing the provenance of a chain letter.

Perpetuity is an engaging play, and one in which form and content are skillfully merged. Scenes are arranged in a complex pattern that reflects the labyrinthine conspiracy schemes at the heart of the play. Of particular interest here, *Perpetuity* dismantles various master narratives, interrogating notions of transcendental signifiers and singular sources of authority and meaning. One humorous example involves the Joculatrix, a quasi-medieval jester-like figure who carries the original chain letter, a parchment progenitor of Lyle Vial's. Lefkowitz, Montage's most highly regarded ghostwriter, is simply an elaborate construction, and the ghostwriters working under his name mere simulacra. And the conspiracy theories generated by Qwerty produce constructions like "ZOG" or the "Yellow Peril," transcendental signifiers offered as explanatory schemata for the way the world functions. Toward the end of the play, Lyle Vial, who believes that "Everyone has a conspiracy theory," ruminates on the possible consequence of a reliance on expressive master narratives:

I think the human need for linear narrative, and narrative closure, coupled with our physiologically determined dualism which dictates our childishly Manichaeian world-view—good guys, bad guys, Empire of Evil, Free World—plus our innate inability to tolerate the tensions of ambiguity, as a species, I mean, will bring on World War Three. We'll blow it up just to see how it ends.²⁸

Craig Lucas's *Reckless* follows a central protagonist through the hazards that she faces after her comfortable suburban life is disrupted. The play opens with Rachel chattering happily away until her husband Tom tells her that he has hired a hitman to kill her. Rachel escapes and embarks on a series of bewildering and sometimes terrifying adventures. Taken in by Lloyd and Pooty Bophtelophiti,

Rachel gets a job with a humanitarian organization, discovers the secret computer files that her coworker Trish keeps, appears on a game show with Lloyd and Pooty, flees with Lloyd when Pooty and Tom are poisoned by champagne left on the Bophtelophti's doorstep, falls into depression after Lloyd drinks himself to death, visits six different therapists, is taken into a homeless shelter, attends a talk show where she is shot at by a masked gunman, and finally becomes a therapist herself in Alaska.

Reckless is more causally-oriented than either *Gogol* or *Perpetuity*. Most of the major plot developments, initially introduced as chance events, are explained or at least tied together by the end of the play. The poisoned champagne was presumably left by Trish, who was embezzling funds from the humanitarian group, in an attempt to silence Rachel. The masked gunman was Rachel's younger son, who blamed Rachel for abandoning her family. And the last patient to visit Rachel is her older son, whom she recognizes, though he merely comments on the resemblance between her and the pictures he has of his mother. Still, while some explanation is given for the events depicted, such explanation emerges only retrospectively.

Still, causality in *Reckless* is of a generally tenuous sort. Even when events are linked by consequence rather than mere consecution, there is no clear necessity or principal motivating factor behind those events. There is at best only the sense of some interconnection between them. Tellingly, the event that sets the whole process going is never clearly explained. Tom may have hired the hitman because of Rachel's incessant chattering (to which Lloyd also reacts adversely, albeit not as violently), but this can only be inferred; the text offers no explicit reasons. In fact, despite the association between otherwise discrete events, Rachel herself sums up what seems to be the major point of the play: things just happen.

What is apparent from this survey is that all of these plays focus on significant social issues. *Reckless* functions partially as an expose of an ignorance or delusion about real social conditions (Rachel discovers the real material conditions that exist beyond her comfortable suburban home only after she flees it). *Perpetuity* suggests the potentially destructive results of blind adherence to such expressive master narratives as Qwerty's conspiracy theories. And *Gogol*, though the most ambiguous of the three, critically examines the theatre's capacity for self-regeneration and interrogates its ability to foster change.

It is also apparent that Brecht's rejection of traditional narrative has been continued by some of the newest American dramatists, some of whose works bear structural similarities to television flow. Each consists of (mostly) relatively short scenes; some scenes in *Perpetuity* and *Reckless* last only a few seconds, roughly the length of a brief television commercial. To varying degrees, but especially

in *Gogol*, the plays are quite spectacular, filled with highly-charged and swiftly-changing imagery. And the plots are relatively disjointed, proceeding in arbitrary fashion; many scenes, such as those in *Perpetuity* in which Christine and Dennis burn matches symbolizing things and people they hate, are only vaguely related to other scenes and contribute little to plot advancement, in the traditional sense. In short, the plays often possess contiguity without continuity.

To be sure, the plays do not replicate flow precisely. They all keep a tighter focus on particular characters and situations than is typical of television flow in the aggregate. But the arbitrary arrangement of scenes and the absence of clear causal connections between events make the plays appear as adjuncts to that most pervasive of cultural forms, television. It is also true that the plays have formally similar predecessors. After all, there were subplots before television. But the term *subplot* must be used loosely when applied to plays like *Perpetuity* or *Gogol*. There is plenty of ancillary action, but little apparent effort to arrange that action into linear, causal patterns. Even when causal connections emerge, as in *Reckless*, they do so only after the fact, suggesting that cause-and-effect relationships can be seen in hindsight but cannot be anticipated or predicted.

Mac Wellman describes this random generation of plays as an assault on the American well-made play, which, he argues, is marked by a “perfect reality of content, a reality whose perfection resides chiefly in the fact that it does not exist. What gets left out is the gritty, grainy truth of the world.”²⁹ Against the structure of the traditional well-made narrative play, Wellman sets the use of what he terms “affective fantasy”:

the spinning out of fantasy in a stream of images, daydreams or night-, and other kinds of non-consecutive episodes, is a favorite dramatic device. . . . [T]he best playwrights of our time pursue an edgy, intuitive path to explore the full damage done by the onslaught of political lies, right-wing hucksterism, and general consumer-society madness, on the inner person.³⁰

The use of non-consecutive episodes would seem to satisfy Hall’s wish to see narratives interrupted and questioned. It is also in keeping with the episodic dramaturgy proposed by Brecht. Wellman, who holds that Jenkin is “probably our best playwright,” clearly accepts the agenda that Brecht and Hall espoused: the disruption of naturalized constructions of reality in order to expose the contradictions contained within them. Still, he notes that “such writing, no matter how highly loaded with images of profound import *for the writer*, is no more sure a vehicle for effective, affective communion than is a laundry list, a page from a telephone book, or any ‘found’ text.”³¹

The danger may be greater and more subtle. Wellman wonders how well highly imagistic writing can convey an intended meaning to an audience. He seems mostly concerned with content. Yet we should remember Hall's suggestion that form is part of content. We might consider whether the use of "affective fantasy" may, because of its apparently chaotic nature, inhibit the intentional ordering of experience that Csikszentmihalyi regards as necessary to a sense of control over consciousness and life. Further, the televisual quality of the plays in question returns us to Postman's claim that television fosters an epistemology that takes randomness as an organizing principle. Overmyer, Lucas, and Jenkin all address serious issues in their plays. The discontinuous frameworks that they employ would seem to work to reveal the phenomena they treat as products of social contingency rather than necessity. Yet the form of their plays, which recapitulates on stage the arbitrary stream of images that flow from the television screen, may reinscribe a master narrative that posits chance as the basic governing mechanism of social activity and thus delegitimizes human agency.

This is the crux of the argument. In traditional causal narrative, human activity produces distinct results as characters pursue sustained courses of action over which they have at least some personal control. Wellman scorns the well-made play because it leaves out the obvious fact that the best laid plans of real human beings oftentimes do go awry, and often for reasons beyond their comprehension or control. His is a sound argument, but it is worth noting that one of the distinguishing features of Nora and Willy is that they do in fact *act* (as best they can), in measured fashion and with definable outcomes. Whatever social construction Ibsen or Miller may reinscribe, they at least depict figures who attempt to intervene in the events around them.

In fairness, it should be noted that the final scenes of *Perpetuity* and *Reckless* contain episodes of human intervention: Christine and Dennis burn the manuscript of *Yellow Emperor: The New Dr. Fu Manchu*, and Rachel takes (apparent) control over her life and becomes a therapist. Still, these are the concluding scenes of plays that depict a world seemingly governed by chance. In fact, Rachel only becomes independent after she tumbles to the knowledge that "things just happen." Furthermore, it is unclear whether she will ever have any *control* over her life, rather than just a retrospective understanding of it. Throughout most of the plays, in fact, human agency rarely seems clearly to be a major contributing factor to the events depicted.

This radical reevaluation of necessary causality indicates a clear departure from Brecht. While Brecht rejected traditional narrative form, it is always clear in his plays that events have real and definable causes, even if the characters are ignorant of them. In Brecht, there are reasons for the way things are, and someone or something is behind those reasons. (Brecht may have often been

deterministic and reductive, but this is no proof that he was wrong on all counts.) By contrast, in the plays discussed here, it is not always clear whether anyone is actually in control, or whether the events depicted follow an inscrutable pattern that precludes the possibility of effective intervention.

This, I would argue, is largely expressed through the televisual structure of the plays. Events follow each other with no apparent rationale, and it rarely appears that the characters have much power over their fates. Far from sustained depictions of characters working towards attainable goals, the plays are mostly multiple exposures of figures caught in inexplicable and unanswerable circumstances. Wellman, of course, is largely right: the traditional well-made play often fails to account for the effects of contingency and chance on human affairs. Yet there seems to be some danger in replicating a form that takes contingency as a standard. It could be said that the playwrights in question encourage individual spectators to develop their own explanatory schemata to order the events of the plays—in a sense, to make their own narratives. The hazard is that some spectators may see no order at all; they may merely see figures trapped in a chaotic world in which agency is a foreign idea and intervention is futile. Moreover, Csikszentmihalyi's research suggests that such a random arrangement of events may foster among some viewers a sense of a lack of control over external conditions and events, and thus discourage them from entering into the "narrative" at all.

Of course, not every reader may be subject to such effects. The use of such devices as affective fantasy may in some cases encourage an intentional ordering of consciousness as the reader works to arrange the events into intelligible patterns. The plays discussed here exhibit many of the traits of what Barthes termed the "writable" text, which Catherine Belsey describes as a "wholly plural text [in which] all statements are of indeterminate origin, no single discourse is privileged, and no consistent and coherent plot constrains the free play of the discourses."³² Such a text is "open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning."³³

By the same token, we should not assume that audiences are generally incapable of intervening in even the most traditional of narratives. Surely some spectators will not be deluded by the "perfect reality of content" that troubles Wellman. The well-made play is clearly an example of Barthes's "readable" text, one that limits the play of discourse and leads the reader passively along from beginning to end. Still, as Belsey points out, even the most readable texts contain points of contradiction that can be sought out and identified by readers.³⁴ In any event, it seems unlikely that any one model can thoroughly account for all the ways in which any particular work or form may be received.

In sum, while causal narrative representation may present a distorted perspective on the world, there seems no guarantee that less causally-oriented forms can offer a more accurate depiction. Indeed, Postman's precautions suggest that rejecting traditional narrative in favor of a form more akin to televisual flow may produce a perspective every bit as misleading. It may be that television and other vehicles that replicate its logic contribute to the generation of a new master narrative that might for the sake of paradox be termed an anti-narrative. The potential naturalizing effects of representations built on notions of necessary causality have long since been acknowledged. It seems worthwhile to consider whether representations built on simple contiguity may be similarly naturalizing, fostering a master narrative that reinforces the rules of chance. Those who wish the theatre to contribute to positive social change may wish to reflect on how plays like the ones discussed here may contribute to the naturalization of such an (anti-) narrative, and what the effects of such a naturalization might be.

To sum up, this essay is not meant to suggest that these plays should be driven from the boards. Overmyer, Jenkin, and Lucas have produced works marked by rich dramatic situations, powerful language, and tremendous theatrical imagery. Their plays are among the most exciting on the horizon. What this essay *is* meant to suggest is the need for continuing critical appraisal of the adoption of televisual form in the theatre and the effects it may produce. No single representation of a condition ("Things just happen") will of necessity naturalize that condition, but if the theatre is seen as both a reflective *and* a productive medium, then any major shift in how it represents experience would seem to merit attention. The concern over the naturalizing effects of traditional narrative is clearly valid, but we may also wish to consider the potential naturalizing effects of anti-narrative. Such may help us to keep the master narratives that condition us in view.³⁵

Notes

1. Stuart Hall, "The Narrative Construction of Reality: An Interview," *Southern Review* 17.1 (March 1984): 4.

2. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981) 28.

3. Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," *Image, Music, Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 79.

4. Sarah Ruth Kozloff, "Narrative Theory and Television," *Channels of Discourse*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1987) 55.

5. Throughout this paper, the term *reader* applies to both readers of playtexts and readers/spectators of performance texts.

6. Barthes 94.

7. This is not to say that any given narrative account is inaccurate simply because it is a narrative account. That Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is written in narrative form does not by simple virtue of that fact discount any of the causal connections that Gibbon postulates; Rome may have fallen for the very reasons Gibbon offers. I wish only to restate the observation that narratives need to be constantly reevaluated in the light of their naturalizing capacity.

8. Hall 7.

9. Jameson 25.

10. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985) 100.

11. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) 128.

12. Hall 100.

13. It is worth noting that some individual programming segments exhibit a total or near-total rejection of causally-based narrative. While some music videos follow causal narrative form, most consist of a stream of disconnected images. A similar rejection can also be seen in commercials consisting of a series of images with presumably positive associations but no apparent connection either to each other or to the product advertised. I do not wish to linger on this point, but wish merely to observe that this rejection of causality simply replicates on a "local" level the general arbitrariness of television flow.

14. Postman 110.

15. 108, 109.

16. Csikszentmihalyi 83

17. There is a curious dilemma here. Jameson allows mechanistic causality "a purely local validity in cultural analysis" (*The Political Unconscious* 25). He nonetheless refuses to recognize it as a broad and general principle of effectivity, mainly, it appears, on the grounds that it is reductive and deterministic. But by turning to the "indeterminacy principle," which obtains at the most local level known, that of subatomic activity, Jameson may simply be answering one reductive argument with another. It seems also worth noting that the Galilean and Newtonian world-view, on which the notion of mechanistic causality is held to rest, has not been entirely discredited. William Demastes, discussing the relationship between science and the arts, observes that the "pervading sense of rational, logical order and purpose" that characterized the Newtonian world-view was disturbed by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the advent of quantum physics. Yet he further notes that "it is not entirely clear to what extent either quantum theory or the absurd does or should influence daily, mundane existence. . . . When dealing with the macro-world of things and facts, the world of our daily existence/perceptions, Newtonian physics still serves admirably to explain existence." (William Demastes, "Of Sciences and the Arts: From Influence to Interplay Between Natural Philosophy and Drama," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 24 [Fall 1991]: 76.)

18. To anticipate the criticism that my argument is based on an assumed technological determinism, I wish to note that I am here typically using the term *television* as shorthand for "the mode of television *programming* most prevalent in the United States today." There is of course nothing in this programming mode that is essential to the technology; different circumstances might well have led to radically different programming modes.

19. Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. and ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 193.

20. Craig Lucas, *Reckless* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1989) 47.

21. Brecht, "Organum," 193.

22. Müller has declared, "I believe in conflict. I don't believe in anything else. . . . I'm not interested in answers and solutions. I don't have any to offer. I'm interested in problems and conflicts." (Carl Weber, "Introduction: The Pressure of Experience," in Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. Carl Weber [New York: Performing Arts Journal

Publications, 1984] 17-18.) Whereas Brecht set out to disrupt narrative representation, Müller questions the very notion of the master narrative(s) that lurked behind that disruption. It is tempting (if only for irony's sake) to suggest that the rejection of linear, causal narrative in dramatic representation helped make the larger assault on master narratives rooted in expressive causality almost inevitable.

23. Paul Castagno, "Informing the New Dramaturgy: Critical Theory to Creative Process," *Theatre Topics* 3.1 (March 1993): 33.

24. Castagno 33.

25. Typographically speaking, Qwerty himself is a linear construction!

26. Len Jenkin, *Gogol, Theatre of Wonders*, ed. Mac Wellman (Los Angeles, Sun and Moon, 1985) 6.

27. Jenkin 25.

28. Eric Overmyer, *In Perpetuity Throughout the Universe* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 1989) 65-66.

29. Mac Wellman, "The Theatre of Good Intentions," *Performing Arts Journal* 24 (1984): 64.

30. Wellman 66.

31. 66.

32. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1980) 105.

33. Belsey 104.

34. 129.

35. I wish to thank Dr. Esther Beth Sullivan of The Ohio State University, Dr. Jackie Czerepinski of Idaho State University, and the anonymous reader from *JDTC* for their helpful critiques of earlier drafts of this essay.

Victorian Studies

Donald Gray, James Eli Adams, and Andrew H. Miller, Editors

Victorian Studies is devoted to the study of English culture of the Victorian period and regularly includes essays concerning comparative literature, social and political history, and the histories of education, philosophy, fine arts, economics, law, and science.

VOLUME 39, NUMBER 4

ARLENE YOUNG: Virtue Domesticated: Dickens and the Lower Middle Class

SIMON JOYCE: Castles in the Air: The People's Palace, Cultural Reformism, and the East End Working Class

MELIN HOWARD: Comments on Susan Balée's Review of *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide*

SUSAN BALÉE: Reply to Merlin Howard

EDWARD H. COHEN, Editor: Victorian Bibliography for 1995

And more . . . Price: \$12.95

VOLUME 40, NUMBER 1

JANI SCANDURA: Deadly Professions: *Dracula*, Undertakers, and the Embalmed Corpse

ELLEN ROSENMAN: Spectacular Women: The Mysteries of London and the Female Body

PAMELA GOSSIN: "All Danaë to the Stars": Nineteenth-Century Representations of Women in the Cosmos

CHRISTOPHER KENT: Victorian Social History: Post-Thompson, Post-Foucault, Postmodern

And more . . . Price: \$12.95

SUBSCRIPTIONS (4 ISSUES A YEAR);

Individuals, one year, \$35.00

Foreign surface post, \$12.50

Individuals, two years, \$63.00

Foreign air mail post, \$28.00

Institutions, \$65.00

Send orders to the Journals Division, Indiana University Press, 601 N. Morton, Bloomington, IN 47404. Fax credit card orders to 812-855-8507, e-mail to Journals@Indiana.Edu, or call 800-842-6796.

Visit our Web site at <http://www.indiana.edu/~iupress/journals>