The Book of Ours: Consumption as Narrative

Dr. Robert Grafton Small

‘Although exact, the translation is far from literal.’

(Bowles 1987: 5)

‘...it’s always wise to make sure that you do actually belong to one group. Otherwise you are a pariah. For myself, I seem psychologically attracted to losing factions: the literature brigade in a university that is fast becoming a marketing school,’

(Parks 2002: 329)

This culture of subcultures is the story of our own telling, and how we relate to each other. It’s also an everyday resolution to an enduring paradox: maintaining our individual identities in a society of shared signs and objects, settlements and values (Douglas and Isherwood 1980: 67-68). So private lives are lived in public, the product and the process of endless exchange on an industrial scale, our systems all converging in a desperate effort to escape the radical uncertainty, the inevitable impossibilities, of meaning and commercial equivalence (Baudrillard 2001: 14).

Beside me in a Glasgow coffee house, two estate agents are discussing a golf course in Spain. Each has a hot drink, one with an iced toffee muffin, the other ideas of a diet. The first eats barely half his cake then insists, the rest is to be shared. It splits, though, before the cut is made, and the lesser piece held back - big enough, apparently, yet not what's asked for. Friendship demands something more deliberate, and the cutting is a sign, a proof, of concern as being cut is a mark of contempt. Finally content, they drive off together in a Porsche Cayenne.

Happy ending, or merely office romance? Outcome apart, those narrative conventions that make the episode whole are also the means for us to make it accessible, a grammar that describes and determines our consumption of text and meaning (Harré 2004: 1445). Our production, too. We’re pleased by - good? - stories, as we are by stores full of goods, when, because, they evoke an immediate, if limited, sense of order that removes us, briefly, from the larger disorders of everyday life. We’re equally at home, in every sense, with the intertextualities of brand names and cultural tropes, the familiar flux that enables both my account and any understanding of it. From this stance, the estate agents’ pitch puts golf a fair way behind travel in a tale of their own telling, their own relationship - Scotland has links, surely, with and for the game.

Of course, we recognise the artifice, and welcome the play it gives us, the holes, the lacunae, we can fill with our various imaginings. How, for example, do we read that reluctance to eat muffin? A measure of social distance perhaps, and self-awareness, like the Porsche but
more intimate, a hunger to be seen in some better light - lighter. Alternatively, might talk of
going without outweigh any cake, a public gain in symbolic terms - health, our taste for diets,
you know - more satisfying than the comfort of crumbs? There’s denial also, an absence
present, in my suppression of the other, the gender of the second estate agent.
And omissions lead to emissions - that Cayenne again. A one-time, long-time dead, graphic
artist draws our attention (Warhol 1996: 20):
‘Sometimes I picture a botany book in the future saying something like “The lilac is now
extinct. Its fragrance is thought to have been similar to - ?” and then what can they say?’

As pictures consume reality - shades of another shade - the realities of consumption mean
Andy’s aphorisms, his vast estate, reduced and reproduced in a handy little pocketbook, the
visual equivalent of a nosegay fittingly, flowers, rather Flowers, Flowers, Flowers (Warhol
1996) in his memory. He’d appreciate the multiple, and the zombie commerce…. The death of the author wrote that book: my interment here is similar yet not so grave, a
further form of commodification, a commodification of form, self-description that may
describe a self and does an ethical impasse. Eavesdropping might be expected from the
ethnographer I used to be but now I’m retired and besides, would any of us want our own lives
sampled and recycled so casually? Orthodoxies are hardly helpful, though, when my labour-
power is still valued as - in - social and cultural capital. Pharmakon, or the modern
overcoming of older market contradictions? Signally, narratives nowadays, about ourselves
and each other, are usually too subtle to be consistent. Instead, they’re ‘multiple, ruptured,
recursive and diffuse’ (Eagleton 2004: 127) yet ours even so, and us, if never quite The
Periodic Table (Levi 1986), say, nor Chroma (Jarman 1995), its spectral isotope.
Shared or singular as a madeleine - more crumbs - our histories are emergent, discarded
and distorted, our accounts unsettled to meet the moment, fictive but functional as any other
consumer product. These layerings, interleavings, of past and present allow us room to
suppose our futures, through ceaseless reassessments of what we buy, or might, what else
we believe and whatever we inter, leave behind. A last, lost, aftertaste of the Glasgow coffee
house - bittersweet, gooseberry? - reminds us how acceptable order everywhere is
underpinned by anomalies and ambiguity (Douglas 1984: 38-40), the unspoken, unspeakable
signs that matter out of place, pollution, matters, and community values maintain.
Quite how is apparent from a series of eighty self-portraits by Andy Warhol, his many heads
hung in a capital city (Edinburgh 2005). As works of art, these are narrative commodities, an
individual under erasure, using other commodities - clothes, wigs, even surgery - to become
himself, revelatory make-up, literally (Camouflage Self-Portrait 1986) and by inversion - false
hair baldly stated. Each image over four decades reflects the doxa of its day, ours to admire
and desire, an object we can hardly object to without faulting ourselves. His own blemishes,
the scars, the pocked skin, are peeled away in the process, leaving instead layer after layer of the artistry that masks him yet makes him, every face another sponsor of Andy the brand, framing a raw original not fit to hang.

The man in his multiples can mean soup, of course, though the Campbells aren’t coming. They’re still waiting to be served:

“Ooh, Tomato and Basil, or ... what’s Lemon Chi?”

“It’s Lemon Chicken, really, but there wasn’t room.”

“Filling, then....”

Consummate rather than consommé, a cue like the menu for the queue to consume: private choice, public force-feeding, the politics of community in a small café. Beyond the salt, there’s a similar flavour to our lives. We take what we may from a common stock - a pot of message, Jacob - acknowledging each other by sharing, however unequally, all that’s available: the latest comforts, the latent anxieties, the oppressive wealth of signs.

Satellite-spun, Web-spread, this Orwellian oversupply, indigestible amounts of information easily - a fast-food notion of enlightenment - masks an endemic malaise, its marks still manifest in the now familiar excesses, the surplus of surpluses. There are always losses in adapting text to a receiving culture (Eco 2004: 34-35), yet when we are both source and readership, editing our times not just *The Times*, some sense of collective self is sacrificed to narrative form, the integrity of the story. In cultivating a download dependency, we’re trading depth, often access, for breadth and breathless telling, a loose-woven and rootless present, where transience consumes traces, artifice is erased. Objects, too, lose their significance; we can scarcely relate to anything we can’t relate, that lacks a tale, the alchemy of transmutation (Eco 2004: 2, 158-159).

Recently - can autobiography ever be once upon a time? - I was bought an elegant leather-bound notebook, its facing an early Warhol, reproduced in miniature. The print says ‘GIANT SIZE’ in big letters, but it’s no more than A5, and the cover price - literally - is $1.57 yet the gift cost about $38 - the semiotics of market-based society a given, familiar as the non-negotiable increase. Andy’s signature isn’t cheap, of course, our ersatz guarantee of the genuine original and a knowing gloss on his trademark blend of commerce and art. Ironically, though, the notebook is almost too much an artwork in its own right to be used for its express purpose, to be rightfully filled with writing, expressly expressions of me. Perhaps that’s the point; the acid-free paper is also implicitly pen free, the potential’s enough. It’s a present, after all, and that matters more than any encouragement, however oblique, to scratch or stain the exchange, the relationship, in future.

Alternatively, the emptiness may be a suitably Warholian reminder of the work to be done in creating a self, the variations, the multiples, needed to maintain an identity. The void is ever-
present, even so, as he (Warhol 1975: 91-92) knew better than most, amassing objects and images as everybody does, because being nothing, the littlest sign of life, is that much more than not being at all, and we use these comforts to make ourselves matter, to give us a presence. Unused, the notebook is a record of deferral, a fermata where I am immanent, bespoke in ink and industrial products. Never used, it’s an adaptation, of someone losing themselves to a receiving culture, suppressing difference and denying their singularity, erasure as existence. My shoes are handmade, however; nothing else will fit. I’m a metonym, my life the text of a footnote. This is inevitable: a momentary order to the turbulence of longing and belonging, appetite and fear, that ordinarily consumes us, and sustains us (Roth 1998: 64):

‘The picture we have of one another. Layers and layers of misunderstanding. The picture we have of ourselves. Useless. Presumptuous. Completely cocked-up. Only we go ahead and we live by these pictures. ‘That’s what she is, that’s what he is, this is what I am. This is what happened, this is why it happened - ‘ Enough.’

Except it never is; excess wears away with everything else we produce, and choice spoils. Our social structures are similarly undone, by the disorders they define, the exclusion of whatever we don’t want. Trading patterns for desire and decay, we generate deficiencies, too, the lack that dare not speak its name. And cannot (Bataille 1985: 118, 128-129), an aporia under any circumstances, Marcel, more so in an economy of signs like ours. Equally, and for similar reasons, every attempt at a self, every declaration of ownership and obligation, will be somehow incomplete, contingent, a need and an opportunity to try again. So acquisition cultivates us. Our culture, our cultures, shift and change with the stories we tell ourselves, about what we are still to be.

For the Campbells waiting to be fed, and typically, these are also blood relations, their family an intertextual form so familiar, despite its exclusive binding, it’s usually misread by the rest of us. Their tartan - I’ve checked - is blue and green, not the Tomato and Basil they’ll adopt among themselves or the red and white we’ve come to associate with can rather than clan gatherings. We’ll never know, though, why the Lemon Chicken wasn’t up to scratch. Did its shortened spelling smack too much of short measure, or suggest some similar carelessness in the kitchen? A soup beyond the pale, perhaps; who’d find room for anything not found room on a blackboard? Erasure as eating out…. So we make space for ourselves, shaping ends in a material way. Our social structures, from present company to global corporations, are prefigured and fleshed out by these concerns, these choices, by cultured readings of goods and information, each as the other, interchangeable and exchangeable. These translations of words and things echo an earlier alchemy, every one of us having our say in a babel of commerce, some dialect of desire. At a
city-centre branch of *Costa Coffee*, the baristas regularly buy food for themselves from *Greggs* the bakers, and drinks from *Burger King*. They’re off-duty, visibly, but off-message? Might swallowing what they serve signal a worse inversion, being worn by the uniforms they have to wear? Or blur the boundaries - the trade barriers - between customers, consumers who can afford to choose, and hirelings, bottom feeders on the minimum wage, priced, not valued.

A telling display of branded products by the relatively poor? Surely, and economical. Their unspoken story is evoked, even so. Plural readings (Barthes 2004: 25-26) are hardly denied either: yours or mine, what the baristas might say were their *logos* not suppressed, overwritten by a company logo. This reflexivity, the results of consumption as proof of its process, is a trope of our social discourse, commonplace yet vital. Truly, pop will eat itself; Pop too. Andy apart - wasn’t he always? - we’re swept along with the broad brush of exchange, impressed - Crumbs, Robert! - and comforted by the stock of the ordinary.

Even unbranded goods, generics, are memes, means of cultural reproduction, symbolically through shared understandings, and as personal property. Own-label products develop their own identities along with ours, because we own them, every use and abuse an interpretation, a reworking of our desires and disorders, in those dialectics of imagination and the industrial that enable each of us to form a self from the mass-produced, and remain distinct. The baristas’ appetite for, say, sausage rolls and *Sprite* is seasoned by their own sauciness, the debt to pleasure that respect they owe themselves. My relish in the writing’s - more crumbs about them - a matter of taste…oh, please!

The pecking order implied here is itself pieced together from fragments of everyday stances and understandings (Debord 1994: 150-151), yours as reader, as would-be witness, mine in a wooden chair, hard by those rebels with a pause. These glosses - Warhol’s bright and shiny fascination (Berg 1989: 60) - are dulled, worn away, by the demands of the moment as we see them, and similarly remade, our urge to be new and still ourselves as much a spur, *un éperon*, as our ache for the securities of what we know, *nostalgie du bricolage*, to track Tom Wolfe (1971: 48-51, 109), himself after a fashion. And fashioned to suit: whatever the genetic font, there’s no reference text or definitive reading, rather a writer in galley proof, subject to constant correction and amendment.

This combination of inventory - taking stock of ourselves - and invention allows us a certain cultural continuity while being flexible enough to appear free-form: it liberates us from the need to imagine more than is necessary (Rem Koolhaas, in Sudjic 2005). Reassured, then, by the unsaid - the lie of the land, so to speak - we tell stories because we must. They’re episodic, all the same, not epic, accounts of difference, however slight, and the relatively unremarkable; brand loyalties and habitual buying put - read - dull before sales of the
unexpected. Forced choices are unavoidable even so, the occasional suppression of self and individuality an obligation in any society where debts are paid, trades made, Marcel's gift a given.

Presents, Alice rabbits, are special, un-birthdays how we expect to grow old. Not quickly, though; our most basic purchases, a place to live, things to eat and drink, embody an industrialised denial of passing time. We assume light and heat on demand, so night and day mean - sorry, Cole - less than they did. Our diets involve entire technologies, of food science and storage as well as world-wide systems, sources, of supply that distance us from seasonal change, daily decay. The niceties of rot are a defining exception that comes with maturity: cheese is wholesome, blue profane...Stilton almost sacred.

This fetish for freshness reflects our all-consuming neophilia; what isn’t new is repackaged to seem so, the brand refreshed or at least restocked - in bulk. Our own implicit renewal has an older, imperial subtext: those market mechanisms that give us force, that act as our agents, our surrogates, in a global economy. Here, even generics are positional goods, separating us from our original suppliers, them from their domestic trade. These structures of dominance offer us more than we could wish for, whenever we might want it, yet there are hidden costs; choice makes ours a dependency culture. We can stomach trouble in Sudan, not Sudan 1 or 4.

I, for one, am at a supermarket that was the local branch of Safeway until Morrisons took them over and sold this place to Somerfield in part settlement. There’s a similar slippage on the shelves, where convenience products promote difficult brand identities:

**Buendía**

*Completely Colombian*

The Café de Colombia logo is the symbol of the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia - and your guarantee of a pure Colombian coffee.

The Federation was founded in 1927 as a not-for-profit organisation and is entirely owned by Colombia’s 560,000 coffee growers, or Cafeteros. Its mission is to improve the standard of living of Colombian coffee growers by applying fair, equitable and sustainable policies in the coffee growing regions.

Buendía is the growers’ own brand, processed and packed at their factory in the heart of Colombia’s coffee region.

*Better value for you!*

*Better income for the growers!*

Coffee, then, but instant? With such a history? No mention of beans, either - you’re buying the politics. Aroma? Who knows, apart perhaps from a sniff of self-righteousness. Is poor taste likewise easier to swallow because it’s economical - cheap? There’s also that troublesome singularity of more than half a million, too much for any one customer though trading as an equal. The invisible hand or flattery, a sales pitch? The jar at least is transparent.
As I’ve written elsewhere (Grafton Small 2004: 9), need alone is no longer enough to order this arbitrary commerce (Derrida 1987: 134-135); our ability, our urge, to acquire has become an end in itself, reducing goods to tokens, valued for their transience, their value transient. We understand them in similar terms, making sense to suit ourselves from the swirl of signifiers we inhabit yet never settle. Our perceptions are also immediate, anecdotal rather than founding myth or metanarrative, localised cultures of resistance built and maintained by appropriation, doing damage to the images and preferred accounts of global advertisers (Virilio 2000: 17). Related tales, tales related through the Internet - equally Web and rhizome, are the mulch of green protest, a principled recycling of sokaiya, the extortionate embarrassment defacing corporate Japan, and a rallying point for activists gathering - on your Marx! - against the economics of exploitation (Klein 2001: 393-395): the sweatshops, the pollution, the abuse of every scarce resource.

Conversely, conversationally, in the virtual organisation of cyberspace, fictions are routinely refreshed, each reading another telling to be peddled and consumed, an everyday demotic of e-mail and terminal exclusion (Fortier 2001: 66-67), where even children nowadays are isolated by their access to technology. This underage overdevelopment, a Naomi no-go with MP3s and DVDs (Campbell 2005), is industrial socialisation on a domestic scale, indoors and inward-looking, a growing self-absorption written in their bodies, envisioning their future - and a past already rewritten. Franz Ferdinand, the website, represents a rock band not the Archduke they’re named after, their commodification as - in - code a commonplace of popular culture (Gibson 2005) like netiquette or - less mannered, more perverse - the grooming that refutes McLuhan (1997: 11, 35), a global village where nobody need know anybody - unless some body is needed. Otherwise, we are all invisible, written as texts or written off, the caress of laptop and mobile key in what we do, who we are.

Our more concrete forms, our public wants and desires, are addressed in a new language, the Babel, the stories within storeys, of Junkspace (Koolhaas 2001: 415), our perceptions of order and environment endlessly reworked through the aesthetics of airports and shopping malls, our perceptions of social order by those who work there. These are architectures of transition, where flux is the final product. The structures are open-ended by design and unfinished in practice, the restless remaking of their interiors a parallel to the blurring in - of - our own bodies between cosmetics and cosmetic surgery. Even MoMA, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, has been refurbished around flow (Richardson 2005: 39-40), to the point where visitors’ freedom of movement means few ever stop to look at Water Lilies, the Monet they’ll pass in the atrium, aware all the while of themselves on show.

Here, nothing and no-one can be, or remain, becoming when becoming somehow new is part of our make-up, our culture, a foundation for the beauties of the marketplace and - from
notebook to book of note - the philosophy of Andy Warhol (1975: 92): ‘good business is the best art’. Here, the spectacles we commonly enjoy as consumers are sites for the unseen, the cleaners, say, and maintenance crews, present in our absence and absent in our presence (Koolhaas 2001: 411), not just symbolically like burger flippers or baristas who are uniformly invisible, reduced to what they do, but unimagined too, gone, away when their shift is over, cleared off when they’ve cleared up. So ordinary difference is ordinarily denied, erased by those industrial goods, those services, that are made like each other, and make us like each other when we buy them - when we buy what we like, yet this same likeness, the mass-produced and the personal, is also under erasure. We like to think of ourselves as different and are industrious in making ourselves so, ordinary but not too ordinary.

‘from now on in
I’ll be writing in a vacuum about a vacuum
- there’s no such thing as society
only men and women living together
on the great open site of human freedom
so in the east midlands of England
you’ll find the first and last frontier
and then face the question - could anyone write it?’

(Paulin 1994: 18)