// DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly
2011
Volume 5 Number 2

Theorizing Connectivity: Modernism and the Network Narrative

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Abstract

Introduction to the “Theorizing Connectivity” cluster.

The network narrative, as a genre, is a young phenomenon – at least insofar as it has only recently received scholarly attention. The predominant scholarship on the genre takes its cues from two recent narrative trends: the six-degrees-of-separation films like those that rose to prominence as major studio releases in the middle of the 2000s – e.g. *Crash* and *Syriana* (2005), *Babel* (2006)[1] – and hypertextual narratives of digital environments.[2] But these modes of examination confine the genre both to a narrow investigation of form and to a period that cannot reach much earlier than the 1990s. It is, if we read this genealogy of criticism correctly, as if the network narrative genre – and, one might infer, the figure of the network itself – had spawned autochthonously somewhere within the last twenty or thirty years. 1

Drawing together studies of Sherwood Anderson, the collective novel, John Dos Passos, and Gertrude Stein, this cluster of essays seeks to locate the origins of the network narrative in the period of modernism, and particularly in that aesthetic movement’s manifestation in American literature. These essays challenge traditional scholarship on American modernism by situating the network as an alternative to tropes of fragment and totality – not only mediating that dialectical tension, but also providing the moderns a figure by which to represent their complex milieu. The goals of this collection are therefore twofold. First, we want to challenge the conventional limitations of the genre’s form and period by demonstrating the widespread use of both formal and diegetic networked dynamics in modernist American fiction. Second, by taking these literary formulations as markers of intellectual history, we want to argue that the moderns’ network thinking originated with a set of material conditions that contributed as substantially to the rise of network theory as would those of the digital revolution. In other words, the network narrative genre and the widespread ideology of networks that we recognize today are not the exclusive domain of a digitized society, but they are also part of a trajectory that reaches back into the earliest decades of the twentieth century. 2

The genealogy of network thinking extends beyond the birth of digitized society, most notably in the pre-digital poststructuralist effort to theorize non-hierarchical modes of representational and political connectivity. One has only to look at the theoretical grounding of network narrative discourse and criticism in the early 1990s to see that the models of connectivity most influential to the burgeoning field of hypertext studies were derived from mid-century critical theorists. While their work animates different archives, they share a commitment to non-linear, horizontal, multi-centered modes of communication and agency in literature, historiography, and knowledge production. Indeed, it would be an understatement to say that critics like Stuart Moulthroup and George P. Landow relied on poststructuralist concepts like Kristeva’s “intertextuality” and Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome” and “nomad thought” to articulate hypertext theory. 3

But while Landow et al. have often been praised for the prescient connections they made between contemporary poststructuralist thought and the young field of hypertext, less conspicuous has been the way in which hypertext theory, in the process of adapting literary and cultural theory, elided the non-formal aspects of the poststructuralist interest in horizontal modes of connectivity. For instance, in the introduction to his watershed collection, *Hyper/Text/Theory* (1994), Landow plays down the political context of poststructuralism, explaining that both its concepts and the idea of 4

hypertextuality grew “out of dissatisfaction with the related phenomena of the printed book and hierarchical thought” [Landow 1994, 1]. Thus, he writes, “even thinkers like Hélène Cixous, who seem resolutely opposed to technology, can call for ideas, such as *l’ecriture feminine* , that appear to find their instantiation in this new information technology” [Landow 1994, 1].

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Landow’s new-media-friendly Cixous suggests that the digital network constitutes (unbeknownst to the poststructuralists) the culmination of much poststructuralist thought, rather than merely a productive model for the new forms of connectivity theorized by poststructuralists in aid of articulating feminist and postcolonial forms of agency. The problem we find here is not in associating hypertext with “intertext” or *ecriture*; it is in omitting the point that Cixous’s objection to technology was to its alignment with masculinist and dehumanizing practices in the production of knowledge. What we mean to emphasize here is that the apparatus of the digital network became a fortuitous, but certainly not teleologically necessary or even preferred, figure of the modes of connectivity being worked out by mid-century thinkers trying to theorize non-hierarchical agency. Conceding this point helps turn our gaze toward conditions conducive to network thinking that existed well before the digital movement.

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Indeed, when it comes to the question of where theories of network narratives and hypertext came from, criticism has been slightly amnesiac. While electronic computer circuitry and hyperlinked texts represent the most fully-fledged expressions of the network, the conditions for network thinking extend not only into the theoretical revolutions of poststructuralism, but also into the social structures and lived cultures of the modernists. Poststructuralists and postmodernists seeking modes of knowledge production and interpretation immune to totalizing “master” narratives and hierarchical frameworks of power were responding to situations first recognized (even if not fully resolved) by experimental modernist writers. Michael Bell has tried to reconcile the sometimes problematic similarities between formulations of postmodernism and modernism by arguing that while “a new cultural movement and new forms of artistic expression have undoubtedly come into being [….] they are inevitably still working out the inner possibilities of the earlier period” [Bell 2002, 10].

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These “inner possibilities,” which the modernists only partly unpacked in their experimental forms of artistic expression, reflect a new territory of human connection and knowledge shaped, in turn, by changing social, economic, demographic, and technological situations during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. New practical and ideological environments made it necessary to rethink human connectivity. Marconi’s famous 1901 wireless broadcast, for instance, confirmed the imminence of global wireless communication. The suffrage of women, first in Great Britain and then in the United States during the teens and twenties, altered the political demographics of both a declining and an emergent empire. Similarly, increased mobility and urbanization altered the face of both of these nations, bringing over twenty million European immigrants, many of them non-Protestant people of color, to the United States. Indeed, the city became a powerful modernist trope for the need to re-conceptualize the parameters of community, often along the lines of cultural pluralism and regionalism – ideational formations that today we might consider proto-network thinking. Following World War I, moreover, destabilization of global trade rendered a new world economic order an exigency, which could not, unfortunately, be addressed adequately without recourse to another world war.

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These contexts and others suggest a nascent ideology taking hold in the imagination of social space, and given the prevalence of the network as a model of social organization today, we can look backward to see how that organizational figure was developing during the modern period. It is not simply that the network produces an easy form of coherence out of the chaotic disaggregation felt by many in the period. Rather, the network performs an important mediation of the period’s impulses toward totalization and dispersal, unity and fragmentation that typify the period’s tensions in, for example, the U.S.’s changing demographic makeup – impulses that were so endemic that they may well be understood as constituting the very cultural logic of modernism. And in negotiating the dialectical tensions of the period, the moderns often drew upon models that were distinctly nodal in character, decentralized and interpenetrating, networked.

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Some of these dialectical tensions stem from the ideological and epistemological failures that shaped the lives of intellectuals and artists during the period. While a popular understanding of evolution had prompted religious crises and anxieties about cultural “devolution” during the latter 19th century, the dissemination of Einstein’s theories of relativity and the emergence of a post-idealist version of the discipline of anthropology, which had been forged in the hearth of

colonial expansion, turned anxieties about Western culture into an appreciation for global cultural diversity. With the rise of relativistic thinking and the waning of scientific chauvinism, philosophers and artists made the startling discovery that myth and history might be simply two versions of human knowledge, rather than different degrees of epistemological sophistication. Thus, modernists began to relinquish, and in fact critique, the status of scientific progress and conventional chains of custody in recorded history as universally supreme forms of knowledge; science might be one myth among many, used to interpret the world around us.

In the modernist critique of Enlightenment epistemology, we begin to see artists attempt to convey the human condition in spatial rather than chronological narrative structures. For instance, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) experiments with myth, stream-of-consciousness, and surrealism to deconstruct binaries like master/servant and countryman/other in aid of articulating the increasingly visible connections between classes, religions, sexualities, and national histories. A desire to conceive of human knowledge as the result of synchronic webs of connectivity rather than one-way, linear chains of cause and effect prompted Joyce and many others to search for new ways to represent experience. These new representational strategies often reflected a sense of societal fragmentation that is central to modernist aesthetics, and that is typically understood to be balanced by a competing impulse toward totalization. But this dialectic, fragment/totality, does not fully address the complexity of many modernist experiments in form, which often involve dynamic interchanges that function more along the principle of networks. 10

By focusing on the networked dynamics of these modernist experiments, we aim to rearticulate the fragment/totality dialectic with a figuration that emphasizes mediations and exchanges. Both in the form and the content of modernist narrative, this dynamism was crucial to artists who were trying to think beyond the polarities of entropy and unity. And while the logic of such networks operates differently from text to text, as these articles begin to demonstrate, the shared project of networked aesthetics cannot be ignored. In addition to articulating a common project of the moderns, one of the most immediately profitable advantages of a networked reading of modernist narrative is that it can offer resolution for the formal tensions of some of modernism's most vexing texts, as well as illuminate the model through which many moderns figured their rapidly changing social environment. 11

While narrative is, of course, only one signal that the network was emerging as a dominant figural model during the modern period, this collection focuses on modernist narrative as a marker of the intellectual history of network thought. We find one example of that ideational development in the rejection of the melting pot, the figural identity of the nation that was being challenged in the 1910s and 20s in texts like Horace Kallen's "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot" (1915), and Henry Pratt Fairchild's *The Melting-Pot Mistake* (1926). Randolph Bourne, the public intellectual and vocal opponent of the U.S.'s entry into World War I, drew on networked models in his new formulation of the nation. In "Trans-National America," published in July 1916 in response to the dissensus brewing over intervention, Bourne pronounced the failure of the melting pot and offered a new schema to replace the broken metaphor: a set of "national clusters" connecting into a "federation of cultures" [Bourne 1916, 115]. This "trans-nationality," he believed, could rectify the bitter divisions created by the war, and he even suggested that it could be a model for conflict deterrent in international diplomacy. In other words, the trans-national model of nodes and networks could salvage some kind of coherent whole from the fragmentation that threatened to shatter the nation and perhaps even human civilization – a complex reworking of social space that mediated the dialectical tension of unity and dispersal that occupied so many of the American moderns. 12

What we take away from "Trans-National America" is not Bourne's failure to position his "clusters" thesis as the immediate figural successor to the melting pot, but his reliance on networked formulations to resolve one of the most basic social and political concerns of the day. 13

Never does Bourne deploy the language of networks or connectivity as we recognize those discourses today. But in the language of "clusters," "federation," and "trans-nationality," he theorizes a framework that is, simply put, nodal – and one that is completely independent of the technological developments that are now assumed to be the derivation of network thinking. In locating Bourne as a key figure in modernist experiments with networks, we contend that the moderns' engagements with the network are not equivalent to today's informational networks, but that they established a discourse that has made today's network society articulable. 14

This cluster takes cues from what we consider to be Bourne's proto-networking tropes and terminology. His work performs two crucial functions: it represents the search (that we find by modernists more generally) for alternatives to the received paradigms of fragment vs. totality, center vs. periphery that organize much criticism, and it signals the need for the digital humanities to account for more of its earlier cultural beneficiaries. Our papers explicitly engage the nodal modalities present in the writing of modernists like Bourne, and they perform a decentralized narrative of emerging networked thinking by analyzing not only the tropes and individual texts but also the genre and historical occasions of writing in the modernist period. This cluster seeks to offer the current digital humanities an expanded archive for the conceptual evolution of its perhaps most crucial concept: the network.

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Molly Gage sees an early figuration of the modern network in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*, a text that in Gage's reading offers a contemporary view of the "ambivalent future technology promises." In groping toward that ambivalent future, Anderson's characters and plots form what can best be described by the *kluge*. The term, first defined by J.W. Granholm in the February 1962 issue of *Datamation* as an "ill-assorted collection of poorly-matching parts, forming a distressing whole," provides a helpful analogue for analyzing the early iterations of the network envisioned by modernists such as Sherwood Anderson. Admittedly, while *Winesburg Ohio* is "seldom considered a contribution to any modern comprehension of electronically inflected networks," Gage argues that the characters in the text look for resolution of technological divide not only to the "agrarian past in which relationships were dependent on proximity and information was disseminated by storytelling, but they also look to the specter of the future where relationships are more arbitrary and excessive information is routed along the information superhighway." Though it may not have been able to celebrate such information excess and arbitrary connectivity, as does much of the network theory of contemporary digital humanities, Anderson's constellar vision of the technological horizon can offer the field an expanded archive of early thought.

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Gage's deployment of the "kluge" to analyze Anderson does not simply perform a novel reading of a canonical modernist text; it proposes that the text's narrative form produced the object that the later term would be able to articulate. Similarly, Wesley Beal suggests that the resurgence of critical interest in the *U.S.A.* trilogy and the turn in the humanities toward network theory has not been entirely coincidental. Though he admits that it "would be sloppy to argue for a causal relationship….the correspondence between these two developments raises important questions that could illuminate some of the trilogy's formal complexity, as well as deepen our understanding of the relationship between modernism and networked discourses." Even further from a celebratory stance toward dissolution of centralized power, and contrary to traditional readings of *U.S.A.* that discuss its formal properties in terms of dispersal and the supposedly ruinous disconnections of modern life, the paper argues that the interplay of these formal fragments results in a semiotic web that drives Dos Passos's narrative strategy toward a totalizing vision of the nation and, indeed, history. In fact, in focusing on the machinic dynamics of Dos Passos's form, the article establishes network discourses as the organizing principle of several pre-digitization modes of production, including Fordism and the modern corporation. Beal's article thus defamiliarizes the figure of the network by uncovering roots of the concept in grounds that would be considered antithetical to today's dominant ideological associations.

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J.J. Butts offers a reading of the collective novel as a generic engagement with networked aesthetics. Inextricable from modernist production, the collective novel is itself an example of the moderns' recognition of the politics of form, and it specifically highlights an awareness of the power of networked connectivity – in other words, an awareness of the politics of networks. Butts argues that the genre, identified by Granville Hicks in the 1930s and associated with John Dos Passos, Albert Halper, and Josephine Herbst, among others, offers a compelling example of modernist connectivity narrative. Collective novels proliferate character plots and utilize documentary materials to keep the focus on the social aggregate rather than individuals. These strategies make such works particularly well-suited to exploring political geographies, so much so that critics often situate the collective novel as the outgrowth of the proletarian literary movement of the 1930s. But Butts contests this origin myth, arguing that the form instead emerged as a response to broader modern contexts, namely metropolitan complexity and mass culture. The paper examines the implications of these concerns for the form's political efficacy. In other words, while expanding the spatial the nature of the networked community from Anderson's relatively confined locus, Butts also recognizes the centrality of the politics of the network as an important marker of the development of the network narrative genre in the modern period. The inherently political

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nature of this model, relatively unacknowledged in discussion of contemporary outgrowths of the genre, situates a distinctly modern voice to networked figuration that is invested in the politics of form. Butts therefore illuminates yet another archive of the moderns' early network experimentation – one that is often associated with the sociological connectivity of the digital age, but that in fact originates in the modernist milieu.

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While Butts focuses on the politics of form through narratives that collectivize individuals, Stacy Lavin accesses a modernist proto-network theory in a memoir form that individualizes the nodal, occasional, and easily invertible global politics of late World War II. This paper shows how Gertrude Stein's *Wars I Have Seen* (1945) deconstructs the ways of "seeing" characteristic of global connectivity in "the 19th century" – namely evolution and romantic nationalism – by aligning her plays on memoir conventions with the military, scientific, and technological aspects of the episteme. And it highlights moments where Stein anticipates, through formal experiment and reflective exposition, the psychological, political, and cultural dynamics embedded in emergent networks of information and international relations. In *Wars I Have Seen*, Lavin sees another important addition to the archive of the digital humanities for its attention to dynamics that have since appeared more thoroughly articulated in not only late 20th- and early 21st-century network narrative but also in strains of network theory that have been crucial to the expansion of the digital humanities in the past 20-30 years.

Notes

[1] David Bordwell's *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (2006) makes an (albeit oversimplified) attempt to identify this facet of the genre as "offbeat storytelling" according to the profusion of six-degrees film structures such as Robert Altman's 1993 film *Short Cuts*.

[2] David Ciccoricco's *Reading Network Fiction* (2007) distinguishes a strain of the genre in the digital age, identifying *network fiction* as a mode of narration that "makes use of hypertext technology in order to create emergent and recombinatory narratives" in such works as Michael Joyce's *Twilight, A Symphony* (1996).

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