

# An Anthropological Perspective On The Origin and Character of Fiction

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# An Anthropological Perspective On The Origin and Character of Fiction

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*William MORGAN & Per BRASK*

The purpose of this essay is to present and substantiate the position that fiction, as the term is used most centrally in the Western World with usual application on the content of literature and theatre, is not the product of an activity housed in "the arts" and peripheral to essential human activities. Rather, consciously constructed fiction is an iterative expression of the most fundamental activity differentiating humanity and non-human animals, the creation and manipulation of symbols as the basis of communications of information between individuals, groups, and generations.

A "symbol" is something which stands for something else, something to which meaning is arbitrarily attached. The "thing" to which meaning is attached may be a shape, a colour, a gesture, a sound or series of sounds, or any other manipulable phenomenon. Non-human animals recognize species-specific meaning attached to certain sounds produced by members of that species under specifiable conditions, certain body postures and gestures, even bodily displayed colours and bodily produced odours which communicate essential information important to the immediate and long term survival wellbeing of the members of locally representative groups of that species. These non-human animal modes of learning are based upon biologically inherited or genetically programmed behaviour. The communication system is not "open" to the creation of novelty, of new, never before communicated messages. These are "closed" information systems, based upon the static use of a biologically programmed ability to use "signs" to transfer information.

In the case of the human animal, what is biologically inherited is a neurological system which facilitates the arbitrary assignation of meaning to something which then comes to stand for something else, something minimally or expansively conceptual, from a simple for-

ward wave of the arm symbolically communicating the concept "further" or "far away" in some (but not all) cultures, to the simple sequence of sounds in the English language speech utterance represented in written form as "cause" (.koz), a sound sequence which has attached to it meaning of an extreme range of complexity.

The arbitrary assignation of meaning which characterizes human symboling activities produces an "openness" to the creation, expression, and communication of novel information. The adaptively crucial behaviour of the members of all animal species is based upon the transmission of information. In closed communication systems, information is of a static kind which cannot be amended to relate the idiosyncratic or novel experiences of individuals or groups to other members of the species. That is to say, non-human animals cannot communicate, in any complex way, learned experience of daily living to other members of their group or species, even where that experience has provided the basis for some behavioural change which would represent an advancement in the potential for survival and wellbeing for all members of the group. The communication system is closed and static, and as a consequence, so are the behavioural patterns which are importantly based upon information transmitted by that system.

The inherent flexibility in communication, the potential for creation of novelty in content of transmitted information which is provided by symbolic communication, has long been viewed by many anthropologists as providing the basis for the acquisition by the human animal of a body of "learned" behaviour. Where behaviour is based upon symbolic communication and is learned, rather than biologically inherited, behaviour patterns may be readily and abruptly changed in response to any significant change in conditions of life encountered by members of a species. This potential for relatively rapid adaptive response to changing environmental and social conditions seems to have characterized the prehistoric and historic development of the genus "Homo". The palaeontological, archaeological and historical records testify to this. Human behaviour, based upon symbolic communication and involving the transmission of accumulated information always undergoing novel emendations and additions, is highly adaptive in nature and underlies the successful adaptive radiation of the species into all world biomes and the dominance of the human species on earth.

The "symbol", it will be remembered, is something upon which meaning is arbitrarily bestowed and which stands for something else.

This very process of the creation of symbols for communication carries with it the capability of having the referent located in a place and a time other than the here and now. There are clear adaptive advantages to this capability of "displacement" of referents in time and space. A sense of past and of future is created in human cognition. Individuals and groups can communicate about past activities, and learn from those activities in the sense that present action and future plans for action are now predictable upon experience which can be communicated to members of a human group. Group members can, in concert, figuratively displace themselves in time and place into a range of potential scenarios and agree to what concerted group action will be undertaken should a given situation crop up. The adaptive advantages of such abilities to, for example, hunting/gathering groups of early Homo, were enormous. The selection for and perpetuation and intensification of even the minimal presence of such abilities requires no further explanation.

We see, in the development in our genus of this time and place displacement behaviour, that "reality" takes on for a human group the aspect of a creation. The fundamental characteristic of arbitrariness in the creation of symbolic meaning which becomes the mode of communication and basis for behaviour of all Homo groups leads logically to diversity in the creation of "realities". These diverse constructions of a reality, the fundamental precepts of which are subscribed to by all members of a given human group, encompass what anthropologists term the past and present variety of "cultures".

If a culture is created reality, it is also an adaptive construct. The traditional, patterned behaviour of members of a given culture is based upon a shared agreement as to the nature of reality. Within that agreement, culturally organized behaviour serves to articulate the society with the living and non-living components of the ecosystem in which that society resides. The traditional behaviour of any culture must take cognizance of basic biological exigencies of members of that culture. No matter what the content of the creation of reality which underlies the behavioural traditions of a culture, that perception of reality must be serviceable in organizing individual and group behaviour meeting such biological requirements of the human condition as the provision of: food, shelter, regulation of reproductive processes, channelling of intra and inter-group aggression. Insofar as the creation of reality departs in its direct import from the immediate needs of human biology, free ranging variability in the creation of a cultural reality is made possible.

It may very well be that the "filtering effect" of language is greatest in respect to domains of phenomena that are definable, not in terms of physical properties, but in terms of attributes that are culturally specified. One thinks of such domains as social roles, for example; attributes defining categories of people (unlike those defining colors) are assigned by culture not nature. Or consider the area of ideology or theoretical work in general, where concepts largely acquire their meanings through their being embedded in explanatory verbal networks. It is here that language may play the greatest role in shaping the person's view of reality, in influencing his memory and thinking processes, and in contributing to his understanding or misunderstanding of other cultures.<sup>1</sup>

A great number of understandings of human condition may give rise to a commensurately great number of corresponding traditional behaviour patterns and manifestations of particular cultural beliefs as long as they meet reasonably well the fundamental materialist exigencies of the human condition.

The human condition has always been one in which the basic social behaviours of humans living in groups stem from an adaptive, historically created, and culturally specific perception of reality, and of the behaviours appropriate to humans in the context of that reality.

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future project, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed.<sup>2</sup>

This process, fundamental to the origin and perpetuation of humankind, is of the same character as the process of creation of "fiction" as we in the Western World use the term. Where in Western cultures there may be a perception that "fiction" making is a departure from the realm of "reality", this is in truth a misapprehension of the nature of human "reality" and how it is brought into being.

In the traditional, smaller scale societies which are the usual focus of attention of anthropological studies, such performances as storytelling, and the enactment of ritual and ceremony, are ways of directly communicating to the members of a culture the perceived

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1. Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner, "Culture and Language" in *Issues in Cultural Anthropology: Selected Readings*, Eds. David W. McCurdy and James P. Spradley, Boston and Toronto, Little, Brown and Company, 1979, p. 90.
  2. Peter Brooks, *Reading For the Plot*, New York, Vantage Books, 1985, p. 3.

nature of reality, the structures and controlling forces of the universe as it may be conceived and the behaviours consequently appropriate to the members as individuals and in groups. These activities however do not necessarily involve the deliberate construction of a fiction which is not intended to be believed, nor considered “factual” or directly representative of how things “are”. We therefore propose that what we choose to call the “consciously fictional”—the story, the poem, the novel, the play, the short story, for example—where the recipient of information is not intended to accept the message as a direct description of reality, is not a departure in any absolute sense from communicating about a conventional reality, but is a comment by one or more members of the culture of concern upon that reality—reinforcing it, explaining it, justifying it, illustrating it, criticizing it, denying its efficacy, or other. The function of the construction of conscious fiction is to provide reflective commentary on the “reality” in which the constructors are involved or, uncommonly, on the reality of some other culture.

Conscious fiction is created by individuals as an approach to the expression of personal perspectives on the convention of reality characterizing that individual’s cultural milieu. The work of conscious fiction is a contextual reflection upon that shared perception of the nature of reality. Such a work clearly emanates from the perspective of an individual, a “self” examining the cosmological constructs of its culture, at whatever level of description and analysis. Further, the presentation of the work evokes commentary and reaction from its recipients (the listener, the reader, the audience).

We would suggest that the development of a sense of “self” as distinct from other members of a local group of an animal species is a necessary precondition to a symbolically created, communicated and perpetuated reality. It is something of a commonplace to observe that, as one moves observationally up the scale of brain complexity in animal species, the behavioural attributes of individual organisms take on a more idiosyncratic cast. It would appear that retained learning, based upon the particular life experiences of the individual, becomes an increasingly important behavioural directive in those species characterized by a more complex brain. As life experiences are variable from one organism to another, some differentiation in behaviour characterizing those organisms expectedly occurs. For the human animal, it will be recalled, behaviour centrally based upon learning has been brought about by the development of a system of communication based upon symbol creation and manipulation. A logical con-

sequent or concomitant here is the development of a sense of self in human individual as a member of society.

We have indicated previously that major adaptive importance of the development of symbolic communication is that it inherently contains the seeds of displacement in time and in space of the referents of a communication. What then are the base co-ordinates when an individual communicates about something not housed in the immediate, and when human persona (the communicator or other) is the displaced referent of the communication? The base co-ordinates for such displacement can be none other than the individual producing the communication. The communicator can efficiently practice displacement insofar as he has a clear cognitive "fix" on the base co-ordinates, where that locus is himself in what we are want to call the immediacy of the "here and now". The nascent development of communication involving displacement in time and space requires a development of a sense of individual "self" operating in the context of an identified social group.

As, over the long course of human social development, symbolic communication has become increasingly the basis of the creation of particularistic conventions of reality upon which behaviour is based, a corresponding development of a cognitive sense of self seems a likely accompaniment.

Anthropologists have long noted that in the small scale, traditional societies which have been the usual focus of their study, the valuation of an individual sense of self is not as great as in the complex societies of the Western world. This is not to say that individuals in such societies are not as capable as "we" in terms of making such differentiation, but rather that the "reality" espoused by these more egalitarian societies places what is, to us, an unaccustomed stress on harmony, the subordination of individual interests to those of the society, and the sublimation of the individual persona into the identity of the group. Such activities as storytelling and ritual or ceremonial performances in traditional societies are a transmission and validation of the conventional reality of the group in question. The nature of these portrayals of the grand cultural fictive schema of reality is not reflective or questioning. It does not involve the reflective commentary on conventional reality which in many complex societies is associated with the "arts" when the vehicle of that commentary is that of "fiction". We suggest that the origin of conscious fiction is causally associated with a move away from small scale egalitarian oriented cultures to more complex social structures whose dynamics centrally

involve relations of power and authority between individuals and among groups. It seems to be under these conditions that a highly developed sense of "self" emerges, perhaps because of the observation by many members of such societies that the cultural delineation of "reality", to which the power structures of the society expect conscription by members, are of primary benefit to those structures and of less benefit to the majority of the members of society who are outside those power structures or who at least see themselves as being so. The conscious creation of works of fiction reflecting upon this proffered reality may be struck upon by any member(s) of such a society as a way of questioning or affirming (as the case may be) the validity of that view. Seen this way, the creation of conscious fiction, an extension of an innate human capacity which has become an adaptive imperative, takes on a full adaptive significance.

In order to consider further the relationship between culture as collective fiction-making and individual creations of fiction—art forms of various kinds—we will now concentrate on the latter in order to elucidate the parallels between the two kinds of fiction making suggested above.

In contemporary Western society, characterized by its privileging of economic growth and development to validate human activity, the question is often raised, particularly at budget time, as to why we need art, and by extension, fiction. It is always assumed that we indeed do not really need it, that fiction of whatever form is a diversion, a recreational activity which does not touch upon any basic human need. The arts are considered simply pleasant to have around. From our earlier argument it should be clear that art/fiction is a necessary activity, one which exercises our ability to displace ourselves in time and place.

An individual artwork, a piece of fiction (written, performed, or otherwise manifested), allows us to encounter structures of our cultural environment and to assess our "reading" of that environment against the understanding of it as presented by the artwork. Through such an encounter we thus learn of a variety of points of view, not only those emanating from the artist(s) who create the artwork but also, in the case of theatrical and other performances, those of the characters portrayed. In addition, works allow us to confront, make visible, our own versions of "the world". For this to take place it is by no means necessary that the presented work resemble our own vision of the environment in which we live. It is not a process which



is only possible through naturalism. On the contrary any number of stylistic possibilities "allow" us entry into the world evoked in the artwork. By putting the relationship between the work and its observer in this way we mean to suggest that our knowledge of the world of the artwork is derived both intellectually, emotionally, and empathetically. Thus, the work (and our willingness to encounter it) establishes a communication which uses a range of symbols beyond the verbal.

To illustrate this we wish to draw on the example of the theatre. A theatrical performance which takes place at an assigned time in a designated space creates a relationship between an audience and a "stage". Anything which appears on this designated space, the stage, will automatically be assigned meaning by the audience, as the stage has been designed as a space in which a certain production of meaning, symbolization, will take place. One could suggest that the objective of a theatre artist is to attempt to control the meaning which is produced on the stage, and indeed one could say that as a consequence of this it is in the "negotiations" between the audience's assigning of meanings and the artists' attempt to control meaning that the agreement termed convention is reached. In the modern theatre the range of possible meanings which can be produced on a stage is greater than it was in the ancient Greek theatre, for example.

A play such as *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is usually seen as having a very wide range of possible meanings, and though one actor always communicates one kind of specificity by his/her mere presence, specific productions of this play can never be termed definitive (nor, indeed, can any production of any play). However, the safeguards on narrowing the range of possible meanings produced in a Greek amphitheatre were indeed many fold. Conventional styles of speaking, singing and dancing, the use of masks, and the relationship between characters, chorus and audience produced a situation very different from productions of *Waiting for Godot* and with a much narrower range of possible meanings.

In the production of conscious fiction we see the relationship between the individual (author, playwright or director, for example) and the socio-cultural group to which he/she belongs expressed dialectically. In the production of conscious fiction we see an individual, or a group of individuals engaged in the expression of a perspective intended to communicate or interact with a larger group. This larger group and, by slow degrees, ultimately the entire cultural group, will either reject, absorb or validate this perspective as being one which is in concert (or not) with the way the culture sees its "reality". This

process is, of course, varied and complex, but there is no doubt that the validation of certain conventions are forged in such an interactive process. This process, as stated, is dialectic. Thus, the culture in the process of establishing and maintaining itself will tend to enhance the creation of fictions, works and understandings which will reflect positively upon that culture. The individual who creates fictions is by and large imbued with the precepts of the conventional reality which drive his/her culture, but may, during the process of fictional reflection, take issue with those conventions. There are thus clearly parallel mechanisms, dialectical processes, at work in the relationship between the origin of cultural, symbolically based behaviour and the creation of conscious fiction by individuals or groups within a culture. The creation of conscious fiction is thus necessary for the maintenance of cultural groups both with respect to the vision of the world which defines them and to the fact that it allows them to conceive of certain kinds of "goals".

The kind of communication which takes place in conscious fiction, however, must not be seen as reducible to simple verbal statements which begin with "We believe that. . ." Human production of meaning, communication, and interaction are more complex than that. To begin with, a culture's perspective on the world is not seen or understood by the members of that culture as a perspective but rather as the way things are. As a consequence, all forms of interaction express the complex assignments of meaning which the culture has historically validated. And it is for the expression of this complexity that "artworks", fictions, become necessary.

Thus, when Ionesco states that theatre "is that which can't be expressed by any other means" the statement is really a lot less cute and obscurantist than he might have intended. He is indeed expressing the fact that human knowledge and cultures work in irreducible, self-supporting, ways of fiction-making in which the smallest detail has been assigned meaning (even if it is not expressible verbally in a logical, sequential construct).

If we choose to look at a culture as a fabric of texts, scenarios, which are being told/played out in order to transmit and legitimize the "world" of that culture, then it will be clear that any text originating within that culture can only be seen as referential to other texts and narratives within it.

In his book *The Postmodern Condition* the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard uses and develops Wittgenstein's notion of "language games" in order to establish a methodological approach for

analyzing social bonds in modern and postmodern conditions. On the nature of these language games Lyotard states:

...there is no need to resort to some fiction of social origins to establish that language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist: even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course.<sup>3</sup>

We suggest that, as symbolic communication can only exist within a social context, whatever is created or symbolized is already part of an "agreed upon" system of signification within which innovation certainly can, and does, occur. But, we should hasten to add, this flexibility inherent in systems of symbolic communications has its limits. The English language, for example, is well recognized for its adaptability. However, it does in itself contain assumptions about the world which set certain limits on the ways in which it is possible to express thoughts in that language. A simple statement such as "I am" carries with it assumptions of the existence of a subject stuck in Being. Such an assumption is at odds with and makes inappropriate an alternative, short statement which would describe a person as a locus of intersecting narratives, which is forever changing, becoming, rather than an "I" enclosed in Being. All symbolically based views of reality of necessity carry with them suppositions on the nature of existence, i.e., "tell stories" about the way life is which legitimize statements via those suppositions. Symbolic communication systems thus privilege certain statements over others, and must be understood as supporting and creating worldviews which are essentially self-referential rather than referring to and objectively describing some absolute reality. Thus, human beings and their cultures find themselves in the continual process of storytelling, which we have termed fiction-making. If this is so, then we must also add that a true objective representation of reality is not a possibility, neither in the sciences nor in the arts. This statement of course includes this article. If such ultimate truth is not possible, then why bother being involved in any of the intellectual processes which since the Enlightenment we've classified in such a manner as the arts, science, the social sciences and the fine arts? After all these various areas of human intellectual endeavor are "often" announced to be predicated on the pursuit of

3. J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 15.

ultimate truth. Here we would like to simply state that once the notion of ultimate truth itself has been discovered to be the result of a cultural story associated with certain power relations the notion of the continual pursuit of a better “fit” as described by the American philosopher Nelson Goodman becomes a good deal more attractive:

... a statement is true, and a description or representation right, for a world it fits. And a fictional version, verbal or pictorial, may if metaphorically construed fit and be right for a world. Rather than attempting to subsume descriptive and representational rightness under truth, we shall do better, I think, to subsume truth along with these under the general notion of rightness of fit.<sup>4</sup>

The pursuit of the rightness of fit acknowledges the nominal character (we could even say fictional character) of all human understandings of what is traditionally termed reality.

## Conclusion

We then advocate a position with respect to the role of the “arts” in complex societies where the creation and dissemination of works of fiction are not viewed as a polished accoutrement to the main body of Western cultures, but rather are viewed as an iterative function of the symbolically based creation of reality which lies at the heart of all human cultural organizations. What we term “conscious fiction-making”, where the created work is not necessarily intended to convey and recommend the convention of reality characterizing the culture of the author of the work, but rather to reflect upon that received “reality”, may have its origin in non-egalitarian stratified societies. In such societies the nature of reality is often proffered and variously supported by the power administration of the society which, upon examination, visibly privileges in some manner one or more segments of that society. The “arts” lie at the heart of the perpetuation and the potential for change of Western, and other, complex societies, the behaviour of whose members and the structuring of whose groups are predicated upon the creation of “reality” to which they are heirs.

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4. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1978, p. 132.