

## TIME, FEELING AND ABDUCTION: TOWARDS A NEW THEORY OF NARRATIVE

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*Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a US comedy series produced by HBO and approaching its seventh season, was created by Larry David and stars David as (a version of) himself, the multi-millionaire producer/writer of *Seinfeld*, a Jewish New Yorker relocated to Los Angeles and embroiled in—but at odds with—the political correctness and general absurdity of the contemporary social world. This essay will select just one scene from the end of Series 3 (2004) in order to make a relatively small point about narrative theory and the future of semiotic analysis in relation to the phenomenon of time. In short, the sequence in question is what would be called, in conventional narratology (see Genette 1980) an ‘analepsis’. Here, an interest in relation to a ‘deeper’ time and its imbrications with both feeling and the extra-textual world will be invoked.

Like the narratives of many contemporary television series, *Curb* incorporates a series ‘arc’, a narrative which traverses all the episodes in the series (and beyond) whilst leaving individual episodes intact and susceptible of discrete enjoyment. In Series 3, the ‘arc’ concerns the development of Larry’s restaurant, managed by a consortium which involves himself, his agent and best friend Jeff Greene (Jeff Garlin), along with Ted Danson (who, ultimately, drops out of the venture), the British actor, Michael York, and others. In the final episode, episode 10, ‘The Grand Opening’, the restaurant finally commences business with a high profile opening night attended by friends, family, local luminaries and restaurant critics. Some of the relationships in the series come to a head or are made manifest in this episode. Larry and Jeff, of course, are good friends. But Larry and Susie Greene (Jeff’s wife, played by Susie Essman) have a very fraught relationship, the latter being absolutely fierce and totally foul-mouthed (in a fashion characteristic of numerous HBO-produced TV series). However, Susie is usually good friends with Larry’s wife, Cheryl (Cheryl Hines), but in this episode they have silent grudges, on the one hand about Susie’s limp excuse for failing to make a lunch date with Cheryl because of a “dental appointment” and, on the other hand Cheryl’s failure to make a subsequent date because, as is shown, she is in the unlikely scenario of being trapped in a car wash (all Larry’s fault, of course).

Most important in the sequence under analysis is that, earlier in the episode, and for complicated plot-related reasons, Larry visits a high school with Jeff. Whilst there, he sees a boy with a bald head, along with a number of

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other boys, also bald. Somewhat shocked, Larry asks whether all of the boys are having chemotherapy. Jeff explains that only one of the boys' hair has fallen out as a result of chemotherapy but that the other boys have shaved their heads in order to demonstrate solidarity with the cancer-stricken boy. The camera zooms in on Larry's face and he says that he hopes he would be able to do something so selfless for somebody in his life. Meanwhile, Larry has hired an ageing French chef (Paul Sand) for the restaurant who, it transpires, has Tourette's syndrome and is shown subject to a number of involuntary outbursts of profanity in the kitchen. However, as far as Larry is concerned, despite the fact that the kitchen opens on to the seating area of the restaurant, the chef cannot simply be fired because he is a holocaust survivor: Larry has seen the concentration camp serial number tattooed on his forearm.

At the beginning of the sequence under analysis here, Larry is at one end of the restaurant with his fellow owner-managers, including Jeff, calmly but confidently discussing how well the opening night seems to be going. The chef is mentioned and Larry resolves to go and talk with the chef to pass on the encouragement. Larry asks him how things are going with him, but the chef says they are not so good. He says that he was just one number away from winning the lottery and points to the (previously assumed serial) number on his arm which he then proceeds to rub off with his thumb and some saliva, declaring the lottery to be fixed. Larry stares into space for some time before recovering from seeing the number erased. He then circulates in the restaurant, chatting with friends, family and other customers to the tune of an extract from Johann Strauss' overture to *Die Fledermaus* on the soundtrack which seems to indicate the flowing success of the restaurant. The flow, however, is broken by the sudden involuntary shouting of the chef: "Fuckhead, shitface, cocksucker, asshole, son of a bitch!"

All goes quiet and, following mid-shots of a number of the shocked people in the restaurant, there is a close-up of Larry staring into the middle distance. He pauses. For a second or two, an image of the shaven-headed High School boys is on screen and Larry's words at the scene are repeated in echo: "Maybe one day I'll get a chance to do something good for somebody like that". The image of the boys fades and there is a further pause; something appears to dawn on Larry's face. He then shouts "Scum sucking motherfucking whore!" There is a massive, uncomfortable silence in the restaurant. The diners are now doubly stunned. Yet, just as Larry turns round to Jeff, the latter shouts, but is only able to come up with "Cock! Cock! Jism! Grandma! Cock!", perhaps raising memories of previous episodes when it has been revealed that Jeff is a consumer of pornography. He gestures to Larry helplessly, but he is then assisted by Michael York who shouts "Bum, fuck, turd, fart . . . cunt, piss, shit, bugger and balls!" The restaurant manager (Jim Staahl), previously portrayed as totally insipid, merely shouts (with some evident effort) "Dammit, hell, crap, shit!" Cheryl David then shouts "You goddamn motherfucking bitch!" but does so just as Susie Green is entering the restaurant. Naturally, Susie gets the wrong end of the stick but inadvertently contributes to the spirit

of the exercise by bawling back, in her characteristic fiery manner “Fuck you, you carwash cunt. I had a dental appointment” and exiting the restaurant forthwith. However, laughter starts to erupt throughout the restaurant as the customers join in: “Pussy pigfucker”, “Girl cock, boy cock, ee aye ee aye oh”, etc. In seconds, everyone is bawling profanely. At the close of the episode Larry stands, with folded arms, proudly surveying the scene as every customer yells obscenities at each other.

Undoubtedly, the scene is a hilarious send-off to the rest of the series. Yet, it is precipitated by something more than a mere flashback. Of course, Larry’s vision of an earlier part of the narrative can quite easily be designated an ‘analepsis’ in the traditional narratological fashion (Genette 1982). As such, it is a textual and narrative device which has a lineage traceable back to Homer. However, the flashback itself is heavily invested in terms of the narrative and in terms of the audience. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* might be labelled ‘cringe comedy’ because of the way it compels the audience to feel when Larry makes comments or interventions which are logical and honest but are socially inappropriate. A notable contribution to the same genre is the UK comedy, *Extras*. As cringe comedy, *Curb* is also an example of the ‘comedy of recognition’, depending on a fair degree of identification with the protagonists’ plight and identification of the situations in which he finds himself. Significantly, the strapline for publicity for Series 6 – usually featuring a picture of dozens of men and women in different outfits, all with Larry’s head rather than their own – was “Deep down, you know you’re him”. There is a need, then, to consider this text in terms of the possibility it allows for the audience’s personal and emotional engagement.

Part of the audience’s emotional engagement, as with all comedy, is to do with timing. In *Curb*, the naturalistic style of the comic timing is enhanced by the large extent to which the scripts are driven by improvisation and the skill of the main players (Larry David and Richard Lewis, for example, were established stand-up comics). The final broadcast episode in each series has therefore been edited from dozens of hours of improvised footage (see Dolan 2006). Comic timing requires time – in the sense that it requires the passage of time in shorter or longer periods in order for things or events to happen at the ‘right’ moment to provoke mirth. During that elapse of time, it would be wrong to say that there is merely a void. Instead, there is a ‘history’: that is, on the part of the protagonist in the comic moment of the narrative, the time elapsing allows an investment of all that has passed before, as well as some indication of what will be the outcome; on the part of the audience, there is something similar, except that the investment is also personal, social, extra-textual and involves a ‘guess’ at the punchline or comic peroration. Time and the experience of it are inseparable from emotion. It is for this reason that this essay suggests that the example from *Curb* illustrates how the idea of Peircean ‘abduction’ can cover what is at stake here whilst also heralding the way forward for a narrative theory which is able to handle the relation of time and affect.

In current narrative theory there appears to be a lacuna in respect of time

and the associated issues addressed here. What makes contemporary narrative theory so vibrant is that it is led by cutting-edge work in three areas: narrative in social science (investigating 'naturally occurring narrative'), neo-narratology and cognitive science. Neo-narratology tends to promote a 'static', text-based approach to narrative, as in the relatively straightforward idea of 'analepsis', above. Social science and cognitive science, on the other hand, are compelled to be more dynamic. However, social science approaches seldom seem to approach head-on the issue of time whilst cognitive science approaches seem to miss the mark. For example, Gerrig and Egidi (2003) discuss 'resonances' in narrative and time, but these are only cues to 'long-term' memory which exist in story and discourse time. They do not consider the emotional co-ordinates which may be called up by narratives in order to place events and feelings about them in time. On the other hand, Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) influential 'double-scope' story – a blended, large story, ranging over time yet cut down to conceptual human scale – refers only to narratives in respect of other narratives. It does not embrace the relation of text and reader, time and emotion in anything but the most general way (cf. Turner 2003).

The alternative proposed here is a semiotic approach to narrative which incorporates the insights of biosemiotics in a fashion that enables analysis of the relation between text and audience. Modelling Systems Theory (and its analytic arm, 'Systems analysis') was introduced by Sebeok and Danesi in 2000 (cf. Danesi 2003, 2007, 2007a). For the present purpose, it allows the putative subjective/objective features of narrative, plus story/discourse time to be rethought by figuring cultural formations as evolutionary developments of ontogenetically and phylogenetically 'earlier' uses of signs (forms of meaning). It does this by identifying (after von Uexkull and Lotman) 'Modelling systems'. Following Sebeok's (1988) recasting of modeling systems, Sebeok and Danesi identify

Primary Modelling  
Secondary Modelling  
and  
Tertiary Modelling

Primary Modelling is concerned with the fundamentals of modelling in Uexkull's formulation of *Umwelt*: the root ways in which a species models the world. In humans, as Sebeok (1988) has made clear, this is not just through the syntactical organization resulting from the evolution of innate 'language' but also the human's propensity to model *nonverbally*. Secondary Modelling is concerned with the processes of communication used by a species and systemic determinants of them: in the case of humans, this is predominantly 'verbal communication' and all its tropes, often confusingly named 'language' in common parlance. Tertiary Modelling is concerned with a higher level of tropes, based on Secondary Modelling (and, ultimately, Primary Modelling), which characterizes what might be called 'cultural production' (including things like

narratives). Modelling activity, for Sebeok and Danesi, produces ‘forms’ or, traditionally in semiotics, signs. At each level of modelling, there are

singularized forms (signals, signs)  
 composite forms (texts)  
 cohesive forms (codes)  
 connective (metaphors or meta-forms).

The last of these occur in humans only (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980) while, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, composite, cohesive and connective forms will appear in Secondary and Tertiary Modelling. The list of *four* forms, here, is a blip in the symmetry of MST, for, in addition to modelling, Peirce and triadic thinking is its cornerstone, and it is this which is especially pertinent for the relation of time and affect in narrative.

Peirce’s categories, Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness broadly map on to Primary, Secondary and Tertiary in MST. Yet, what is of most importance is the movement between each realm of the triad. In this instance, attention is drawn to Firstness, the realm of qualia and feeling. One of the most incisive, but neglected, commentators on Peircean categories in relation to narrative, Sheriff, emphasizes that “Peirce, though no artist or art critic, saw the significance of art to be its quality of Firstness, not its conventions of Thirdness” (1989: 86). Sheriff adds (1989: 89):

Without denying that we cannot escape from language, from Thirdness, Peirce shows us that Thirdness (linguistic, symbolic signs) can symbolically represent Firstness. According to his theory of signs, literary art is language (Rhematic Symbol) used to show, picture, symbolize the quality of immediate consciousness that can never be immediate to consciousness.

This final clause in the quote from Sheriff entails what Peirceans know as ‘abduction’, the novel aspect of Peirce’s logic. What is argued in the current essay is that there is a logic in the relation of time and effect.

Probably the most accessible exposition of Peirce’s own arguments regarding logical method is the essay, ‘Deduction, induction and hypothesis’ which appeared in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1878 (reprinted in 1923 in the collection entitled *Chance, Love and Logic*). Here, Peirce summarises Aristotelian logic, using syllogisms to demonstrate different types of reasoning. One example concerns a bag of beans in which two thirds of the beans are *known* to be white; if one bean is taken from the bag there is a two thirds probability that the bean will be white. This is a *deductive inference* (1878: 133). But a deductive inference can be inverted to make a synthetic inference (*induction* or *hypothesis* [also called ‘abduction’]) (Peirce 1878: 134):

Suppose I enter a room and there find a number of bags, containing different kinds of beans. On the table there is a handful of white beans; and, after some searching, I find one of the bags contains white beans only. I at once infer as a probability, or

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as a fair guess, that this handful was taken out of that bag. This sort of inference is called *making an hypothesis*. It is the inference of a *case* from a *rule* and *result*. We have, then –

## DEDUCTION

*Rule.*– All the beans from this bag are white.

*Case.*– These beans are from this bag.

*Rule.*–These beans are white.

## INDUCTION

*Rule.*– These beans are from this bag.

*Case.*– These beans are white.

*Rule.*–All the beans from this bag are white.

## HYPOTHESIS

*Rule.*– All the beans from this bag are white.

*Case.*– These beans are white.

*Rule.*–These beans are from this bag.

As Peirce frequently points out, deduction deals with what *must be*, induction is a matter of what *is*, and abduction is about what *may be* (given the necessary conditions). Induction is a conclusion that facts similar to observed facts are true in cases not examined; abduction or hypothesis, on the other hand, involves a conclusion of “the existence of a fact quite different from anything observed, from which, according to known laws, something observed would not necessarily result” (1878: 143). Induction reasons from particulars to the general law in an act of classification; abduction reasons from effect to cause in an attempt to *explain*.

What is important for the present analysis is that there is the possibility of movement from abduction to deduction, plus the fact that abduction is risky (“There is some justice in the contempt which clings to the word hypothesis” (Peirce 1878: 146)). In MST, it is considered that abduction is a part of humans’ Primary Modelling, although it will come to be a part of other modelling, too. MST tracks the developmental movement from *feeling* to *conceptual thinking* in humans, with deduction characterizing the latter. It is a movement from Primary Modelling to Tertiary Modelling, from Firstness to Thirdness, where the act of ‘guessing’ (see Peirce 1929) becomes ever more trustworthy. Sometimes, when abductive guessing moves towards deduction it becomes institutionalized: both Danesi (2002) and Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok (1980: 66) evoke *logica utens* and *logica docens*, scholastic categories revitalised by Peirce and which are helpful in understanding this potential abduction. Danesi (2002) describes the former as a rudimentary logic-in-use which can be practised by all, as opposed to *logica docens* practised by scholars, logicians and medical doctors. *Logica docens*, Sebeok and Umiker Sebeok argue (1980: 66), is

a logic which may be self-consciously taught and is therefore a theoretically developed method of discovering truth. The scientist or logician does not, however, invent his *logica docens*, but rather studies and develops the natural logic he and everyone else already use in daily life.

The development of logic, then, is, in some ways, a process of downplaying (if not quite eliminating) the affective component of relational cognitions. In Primary Modelling, it might be argued, processes of logic and singularized forms have a potentially more discernible relation to affect. Abduction is a guess, using resources available to the human, but one of those resources is feeling, usually taken to be absent from the logical process. In Sheriff's terms, the quality of immediate consciousness that can never be immediate to consciousness is called up only by the relation of a feeling to a specific component of accumulated knowledge, a mechanism that is active even in *logica docens*. Yet what is important here is not the schooled dimension of logic which is based on rational and temporal accumulation of knowledge but the affective dimension of thinking which is derived from a temporal accumulation of feeling.

Like *logica docens*, *logica utens* works almost without the need to think. When one finds the way round a building by noting the succession of room numbers rather than finding the way as a result of repeated use and familiarity of the building it does not necessarily occur to the individual that logic is being employed. The mental means of finding the way appear to be immediate. Yet, the time of feeling is buried deep, temporally prior, back in time, not immediate. Indeed, feeling is often buried away so deeply in reasoning that it is almost as though it lends itself to the act of denying its own existence in the instance. The concept of abduction in logic, on the other hand, tends to imply the key role played by feeling in reason. In MST, the three kinds of modelling are not discrete, but inform each other, even while there is a developmental movement from abduction to deduction. Likewise, Peirce's categories are distinguished from each other by small degrees. This is the main gain of MST with its Peircean inflection: that rational and referential signification, particularly in the Tertiary sphere, can be demonstrated, without reduction, to bear close fraternal relations with the realm of qualia and affect. As such, forms (signs and their developments) are not just straightforward communicational vehicles charged with the act of representing the world, but cognitive entities within an Umwelt and always invested with affect. The analysis of Tertiary forms has been well aware of the affective co-ordinates of the 'arts' but has seldom been able to successfully appraise these in tandem with the arts' representational features. MST seems to offer a new opportunity and, in respect of the relation of feeling to time, the latter of which has had a special relation with narrative, it seems to have the edge on cognitive science and neo-narratology without proliferating concepts.

Returning to the issue of narrative time, narratology from Genette onwards has noted a separation of 'story' time and 'discourse' time, identifying a time accruing to events in a narrative and the time it takes to relate those events (in whatever mode is in use). As such, the identification of the separation points to the divergence of a textual and an extra-textual world (how long something happens fictionally plus how long it takes to 'read'). It also indicates a convergence of the textual and extra-textual in the way that there are artistic determinants which might bear on how long the presentation of an event should take.

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This is the aspect that narratology tends to focus on in its text-centred approach. Indeed, it is the grounds for the implicit criticism of the erroneously named 'semiotics of narrative' (narratology) which runs throughout Ricoeur's three-volume work on *Time and Narrative* (1984-5). In his discussion of the topic, Ricoeur (1984: 20) draws on a line of thinking which goes back to Augustine, the interpretative triad of 'expectation - memory - attention' to understand the 'three-fold present'. Ricoeur stresses the importance of the end point of a narrative, arguing that the understanding of successive actions, thoughts and feelings in a narrative is dictated by anticipation of the conclusion, and also, that reaching the conclusion enables a backward glance at the actions that led up to it (1981: 170). Narrative is therefore not just a matter of paying attention to individual incidents on the time-line; it is most importantly about 'expectation' and 'memory': reading the end in the beginning and reading the beginning in the end. Thus plot or 'muthos' or 'emplotment' is the intelligible whole which governs the succession of events in a story and thus "places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrative" (Ricoeur 1981: 167). Yet, Ricoeur's reading of Augustine tends to stress the rational-logical aspects of memory: memory within the text, mediating between beginning and end, and memory required by the reader in enacting the mediation. As such, Ricoeur ends up recapitulating the narratologists' split of story and discourse.

In contrast to Ricoeur, MST encourages analysis to get at the fundamentals of *feeling rendered in time that is neither story time nor discourse time*. This episode from *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is an example of Tertiary Modelling—it is an enactment, it is a narrative, it is a discourse with its own time, and employs a number of forms, including connective ones. In addition, it draws on Primary and Secondary Modelling and the other form—singularized, composite and cohesive—to produce its own composite form (or text). This is obvious—any cultural artifact draws on signs that are in general use elsewhere in order to constitute itself and the matter hardly needs to be translated into the vocabulary of MST to state the fact. *Curb* is a composite form (text) with two kinds of singularized forms (signs) constituting it: signs that operate on a largely semantic basis, referring to things in the text (story); and signs which, while they refer, might also be interpreted as part of the discursive mode of the text (discourse). Yet, where MST comes into its own is in linking both these kinds of signs, in a non-reductive way, to the signs used in the extra-textual world, in particular those signs in the latter which are a part of Primary Modelling and arguably closer to affect. Put differently, within the frame of Sheriff's argument, the mystery of texts' connection to feelings can be resolved by taking seriously the movements from Thirdness to Firstness inherently possible in semiosis.

As has been noted, time and affect are inseparable in comic timing. The time elapsing for Larry after hearing the chef's outburst, accompanied by nuanced facial expressions, allows him (in the narrative) to remember an incident from the recent past which nevertheless calls up deeper feelings from yet further back in his (fictional character's) psychological development. The connections made here for the character are precisely abductive: the flashback



does not simply show the audience that the two temporally separate incidents are linked; rather, it shows that they are linked through the emotionally tinged logic by which Larry decides his next course of action. Evoking the emotions of a character by means of analepsis (and prolepsis) is not uncommon. However, the time taken to narrate Larry's pause—i.e. discourse time, which, in audio-visual narrative, is frequently the same as story time – is not insignificant. Especially in comic timing, it is directly related to the audience's 'guess' or abduction regarding what Larry will do next. Potentially, anything could happen in the subsequent section of the scene. The expected outcome in the extra-textual world might be some apology and explanation on the part of the managers of the restaurant. However, for the audience of this television series, 'Deep down, you know you're him'. Therefore, one affect immediate to consciousness in the narrative of this series concerns the feeling associated with the recurrent, and frequently inadvertent, contravention of political correctness and decorum. Even knowledge gleaned from viewing this one episode, without knowing previous episodes, could still contribute to that knowledge's status as a kind of low level *logica docens* or a spot where *logica docens* meets *logica utens*. As Larry flashes back, there is just enough time to guess what the outcome might be, a guessing that is inevitable given that the earlier poignant narration of Larry's observation at the High School is unlikely to be extraneous to the plot and, therefore, to the chain of causality that runs through narrative. In light of the abductive processes of both viewer and protagonist in this sequence, processes which are slightly different in character but more than homologous in their mechanism, it can be no coincidence that the abduction, a feature of Primary Modelling, is crowned by an outburst of singularized forms—individual swear words.

Of course, the example of narrative taken here is very particular in that it features an audio-visual text in which story and discourse time coincide. However, abductive reasoning could be quite easily discerned and identified as an analytic tool in different modes of narrative where time is rendered in specific ways such that story and discourse time diverge. In print narrative, pauses, ellipses and even chapter divisions (especially in the case of cliff-hangers) are all emotionally charged implementations of time that seem to reach beyond mere story and discourse time to the realm of the extra-textual, invoking abductive processes on both sides. In oral narrative, pauses—even for breath—and re-orientations of linear time are emotionally charged and invite abductions on the part of both listener and teller alike. What is at issue is that narrative theory has acknowledged narrative time and even the disruption of linear time as fundamental to defining what narrative is. Yet, narrative theory has been caught between rational 'objective' time and 'subjective' time, plus the world of the text and the world of the reader, in its attempts to understand temporal passage in narrative. What MST seems to offer in general is the possibility of moving relatively smoothly from textuality to extra-textuality in a way which does not set each of these at different poles but, instead, posits their relations in terms of the interaction of different aspects of modelling or semiosis. In respect of time,

MST and, in particular, the concept of abduction, brings forth an understanding of narrative time that operates not on the basis of rational cognitive connections but on the basis of qualia and emotional attachment.

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