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Staging Patti Smith: (Un)reliable stories, identity, and the audience-text-reader relationship

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Abstract

Humans are the only animals that use stories to help make sense of the world. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues that 'we lead our lives as stories, and our identity is constructed both by the stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves and by the master narratives that consciously or unconsciously serve as models for ours' (2002:11). An inquiry into how humans construct stories is also an inquiry into reliable and unreliable narration, into identity, and into the relationship between author, text and reader. It goes to the root of what it means to be human.

In this paper these three aspects – (un)reliability, identity and the author-text-reader relationship—form a constellation that I trouble at. Specifically I'm interested in occasions when a narrator reliably tells a tale but suggests there are other versions of the same events that could be told, (by them or by other narrators), thereby adding complexity (unreliability) to their telling. If a story about a single event is 'staged' several times, in differing ways, does this mean the narrator is unreliable? Is there another way to categorize such stories other than through the binary categories of reliable and unreliable narration?

I use two texts to tease out my argument, one non-fictional—Patti Smith's *Just Kids* (2010)—one fictional—a collaborative writing project, *Strange Attractors*, a post-dramatic theatre piece, written by sixteen Wollongong University students and myself. What links these two projects, apart from the subject matter, is an approach to staging story that calls attention to narrative purpose.

In this paper I argue that in our complex contemporary environment some writers and writing projects confound the notion of reliable and unreliable narration, intentionally shifting focus onto the purpose of a narrative and calling attention to the way identity is brought into existence through storytelling. An approach to narration that highlights narrative purpose and the way purpose shapes telling is important for understanding who we are as human beings but also goes some way to questioning the claim, prevalent in many civil institutions, that there is always a single true story to be told

Keywords

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Staging Patti Smith: (Un)reliable Stories, Identity, and the Audience-Text-Reader Relationship

If I wanted a one-sentence definition of human beings, this would do:

humans are the animals that believe the stories they tell about themselves.

Humans are credulous animals.

(Rowlands 2009:2)

Humans are the only animals that use stories to help make sense of the world. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues that ‘we lead our lives as stories, and our identity is constructed both by the stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves and by the master narratives that consciously or unconsciously serve as models for ours’ (2002:11). An inquiry into how humans construct stories is also an inquiry into reliable and unreliable narration, into identity, and into the relationship between author, text and reader. It goes to the root of what it means to be human.

In this paper these three aspects – (un)reliability, identity and the author-text-reader relationship—form a constellation that I trouble at. Specifically I seek to deconstruct texts where the narrator reliably relates a series of events, a tale, but suggests there are other versions of that same tale that could be told, (by them or by other narrators), thereby adding complexity (unreliability) to their telling. If a story about a single event is told (staged) several times, in differing ways, (and with differing elements to make up that event), does this mean the narrator is unreliable? Is there another way to categorize such stories other than through the binary categories of reliable and unreliable narration? What does multiple storytelling about the same event by the same narrator suggest about the way we stage identity? How do such narrations contextualize the relationship between author, text and reader?

Why is it important to revisit unreliable narration? Important because despite narrative theorist Bruno Zerweck stating that in a modern Western society there is a ‘growing awareness of a lack of an ideologically and socially accepted counterpart of an unreliable teller, a “reliable” reporter of events’ (2001: 162), there is, still, a prevalent cultural belief that with any set of events there *is* a single true (reliable) tale that *can* be told. This belief has currency in our civil services, in our legal system, in our publishing world. A clear and almost daily display of this cultural conundrum occurs every time a courtroom witness is asked to place her or his hand on the bible (that book of stories) and claim to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.¹ Therefore, we Australians might heckle, distrust, abuse our politicians for their unreliability, doubting they ever tell the truth, but deep down we yearn for truth. We yearn to listen to that person who reliably reports. Part of what I argue here is that writers can play a part in shifting the focus of the reliability question.

I use two texts, one non-fictional, one fictional, to tease out my argument. The first is Patti Smith's *Just Kids* (2010), a memoir about the time—late 60's and early 70's—when Smith and her friend, then lover, Robert Mapplethorpe, were living in New York. The second is a collaborative writing project, *Strange Attractors*, a post-dramatic theatre piece, written by sixteen Wollongong University students and myself as a response to the many narratives written about the young Smith and Mapplethorpe. What couples these two projects—apart from the obvious, Patti and Robert—is an approach to staging story that draws attention to narrative purpose.

Rhetorical theorist James Phelan describes the rhetorical act as 'somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened' (2007a: 3). In fiction he postulates a double purpose: the narrator's purpose in relating her tale to the narratee, the author's purpose in communicating with the reader (3-4). In nonfictional narrative Phelan suggests the doubling effect could be said to depend on 'the extent to which the author signals her difference from or similarity to the "I" who tells the story' (4). In Patti Smith's *Just Kids* the "I" who tells the story is an older wiser version of young Patti, the subject of the story. Age and perspicacity gained through experience, particularly the experience of grieving the death of loved ones, defines the gap. In *Strange Attractors* there are five fictional Pattis and a shared authorship that befuddles Phelan's model of unreliable narration—a model that assumes there is 'one text, two speakers (one explicit, one implicit), two audiences, and at least two purposes' (2007b: 224).² *Strange Attractors* has many speakers, explicit and implicit, two audiences and at least two purposes.

In this paper I argue that in our complex contemporary environment some writers and writing projects confound the notion of reliable and unreliable narration, intentionally shifting focus onto the purpose of a narrative and calling attention to the way identity is fashioned through storytelling. An approach to narration that underscores narrative purpose and the way purpose shapes telling is important for understanding who we are as human beings but also goes some way to questioning the claim, prevalent in many civil institutions, that there is always a single true story to be told. Perhaps writers who remind authorial audiences that it is human to tell a story in different ways, also give breath to the idea that in a forever changing and uncertain world continuity of story, like continuity of identity, is constantly being renegotiated. The two texts examined here both attend to the authorial-text-audience relationship in ways that seek to emphasize these points.

Staging Reliability: Patti Smith's *Just Kids*

Patti Smith's *Just Kids* is a poetic account of two young people full of idealistic dreams, who through a mixture of persistence, passion and talent become famous artists. The story, reliably told, is part love story, part coming-of-age narration. Throughout the book Polaroid pictures, notebook writings, images of artistic drawings

add authority to the fashioning of a reliable memoir. Smith, however, frames her story with the equivalent of a prologue (Forward) and epilogue (Notes to the reader) to guide the reading experience. In addition, in a few italicized words, written on a blank page before the Forward, Smith says:

Much has been said about Robert, and more will be added ... He will be condemned and adored. His excesses damned or romanticized. In the end, truth will be found in his work, the corporeal body of the artist. It will not fall away. Man cannot judge it. For art sings of God, and ultimately belongs to him.

(2010: n.p.)

For Smith what is most significant in the story of an artist's life is the artwork he or she creates. It's the art that should be judged not the life. Thus, she stages the entry point for readers into her story. Like Prospero, the wise voice in the epilogue to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Smith suggests that for art and artists a higher spiritual force 'frees all faults' (1964: 121).

In the Forward to *Just Kids*, Smith describes how in the last hours of Mapplethorpe's life she listened to his breathing over the phone. Mapplethorpe was unconscious but Smith deletes from her story the character holding the phone to Mapplethorpe's lips. Instead, she narrows the focus to the tale's twin protagonists. Smith then describes her movements the following morning: she wakes, her intuition tells her Mapplethorpe is dead, she descends the stairs listening to *Tosca*, opens a book of paintings by Odilon Redon and receives the news of Mapplethorpe's death at exactly the moment the 'great aria "Visi d'arte" *I have lived for love, I have lived for Art*' plays (2010: n.p.). This opening narration (penned like a Hollywood romance) stages the finale to the tale of the young Patti and Robert before the actual tale is told, and marries it to other great artists, other great love stories.

At the end of the memoir in 'A note to the reader' (285) Smith recounts an event from Mapplethorpe's funeral then claims:

There are many stories I could yet write about Robert, about us. But this is the story I have told. It is the one he wished me to tell and I have kept my promise ... No one could speak for these two young people nor tell with any truth of their days and nights together. Only Robert and I could tell it. Our story, as he called it. And, having gone, he left the task to me to tell it to you.

(2010: 288)

Smith makes clear to her audience that the story she has told is simply one of many (possible) stories she could tell. This is the version of events that would have pleased Mapplethorpe, the script he wanted written. In Smith's remarks there is also, perhaps, some rebuke of other published Patti and/or Robert books that describe less romantic aspects of their journey to fame. Patricia Morrisroe's biography *Mapplethorpe* (1997) and Victor Bockris and Robert Bayley's *Patti Smith: An Unauthorized Biography* (1999), both, in part, portray Smith and Mapplethorpe as unlikeable, petty criminal, fame-obsessed individuals. Smith awakens her audience to the notion that not only may one writer's take on a particular subject vary from another's, but also, that one writer may write about the same subject differently.

After 'A note to the reader' Smith sets out a coda of sorts: some poems she wrote in memory of Mapplethorpe, more photos of places mentioned in the story, a copy of a postcard she sent Robert from Paris, and an additional story that has an accompanying photo of a young girl, Delilah, sitting at Mapplethorpe's desk. Mapplethorpe bought this desk after he'd gained fame. Sometime post his death the desk was sold to Delilah's mother who had, many years earlier, met Mapplethorpe on a train. The story relates how Delilah's mother had been delighted at Mapplethorpe's 'loving connection' (302) with her infant child. In case the reader had been in doubt, Smith provides evidence not only of Mapplethorpe's loving nature but also of how his nature was treasured by others. The back cover of the memoir has a quote by Joan Didion 'this book is so honest and pure as to count as a true rapture' (back cover).

Smith stages her story as a reliable tale, providing pleasure through continuity, but contextualizes it through framing devices, as existing in a place that is beyond reliable and unreliable judgments. In this way her construction refuses a clear delineation between reliable and unreliable narration and instead asks the reader to focus on narrative purpose. Yet Phelan's unreliable model fits Smith's structure. Smith creates two voices: the now wise god-fearing mother and the younger rebellious god-smearing Patti, heard in the re-imagined scenes of the young lovers. There are two audiences—those who will read *Just Kids* as a story of youthful love, and those who will understand it as a rebuttal of authors who have written about Patti and Robert and have judged them harshly. There are two purposes: one explicit, to be true to the wishes of the dead artist and tell a romantic tale; and one implicit, to shoot down in flames those who have told derogatory versions of this tale. Through such measures Smith cleverly suggests that not only does art touch many, in differing ways, but also, an artist's life is immaterial, it is the art that is the result of that life that is important.

Staging Identity: *Strange Attractors*, a project about Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe

The *Strange Attractors* project researched the various written and recorded texts (biographies, autobiographies, interviews, press statements, media hype, documentaries) about Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe and scripted a response to

them. There were seventeen writers in all and the piece was performed in May 2012 at the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre, Wollongong. In this collaboration traditional writing methods (one or more writers sitting at a desk creating text) were employed alongside performance techniques (improvisation, character development exercises, group-devised movement pieces) to develop visual and verbal texts. The piece was comprised of a series of interview scenes, with multiple Pattis (five in all) and Roberts (three) being interviewed concurrently, small intimate scenes—between various Patti and Roberts and other narrators who told Patti and Robert stories. There were also Patti Smith songs and a framing narrator, Brainiac.

The Brainiac character, a straight-laced science buff, enters the space after an opening song ('Land' from the 1975 *Horses* album) and introduces periods in history where art and science have flourished, and where the possibilities for human connection—to each other and to the environment—have broadened. Brainiac isolates the sixties and seventies as one such period, presenting Smith and Mapplethorpe, as two people who 'remind us we can pay attention to the world differently. We can stage the world differently' (2012: 1). In the final scene, a loosened up Brainiac displays her release from conventional stereotyping (echoes of Janet from *Rocky Horror*) by singing Smith's *Gloria* in Patti Smith rock star fashion (2012). Similar to Smith's memoir, the Brainiac provides a prologue and epilogue that guides the audience's view of the two central protagonists. If in *Just Kids*, artists, their art and their loves are claimed as subjects beyond mortal judgement, in *Strange Attractors*, these same artists and their art are seen as transforming the way gender identity is understood.

Between the Brainiac scenes that bookend *Strange Attractors*, the interview scenes stage the several Patti and Robert characters at once, literally presenting the idea of character as a multiple (fluid) construct. In the first fictional interview the five staged Patti characters relate a story that the real-life Patti Smith had herself told many times: how, as a young girl, she was working in a factory when one day, on her lunch break, she went across the road to the bookstore and bought a book of Rimbaud's poems. Later, reading the book, she was harassed by other female factory workers. In *Just Kids*, Smith writes, 'I was holding a temporary minimum-wage job in a textbook factory in Philadelphia' (2010: 22). Biographer Dave Thompson relates how at 'other times, she described herself as laboring at a baby buggy factory, turning out pushchairs for the glowing moms' (2011: 23), and recounts how 'other biographers have named her employer the Deniss Mitchell Toy Factory in Woodbury, where her duties apparently included assembling the boxes into which baby mattresses were packed.' (23). According to Thompson, 'Patti was never very good at keeping her stories straight' (23). The many versions of this story (including Smith's 1974 song 'Piss Factory') usually end with the other factory women calling Smith a communist and pushing her head into an 'unflushed toilet bowl' (24).

In *Strange Attractors* the five staged Pattis spoke directly to the audience, responding to questions from two different interviewers:

INTERVIEWER Y: But Patti you told me you worked in a Toy Factory in Woodbury?

PATTI 3L: Did I say that?

INTERVIEWER Y: Assembling boxes?

PATTI—ALL: Yeah. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER S: So textbook, buggy factory, toy factory, which is it?

(2012: 5)

Patti responds:

PATTI 3L: You guys always get hung up on details. This is my Rimbaud story, how I got to meet Rimbaud—

PATTI E— and how I was really into his lifestyle, and his look before I was into the words, before I even knew Rimbaud as a writer he was influential in my life. Art, Rimbaud, Picasso, these guys got me out of the factory, is what I'm saying.

(2012: 5)

Strange Attractors is not conventionally structured but takes shape like a mosaic, finding continuity lyrically, through metaphorical juxtaposition, association, and suggestion. There is a chronological strand to the narrative but sequences dance back and forth in time. The staged interviews and monologues retell stories told about (and by) Smith and Mapplethorpe in an effort to investigate how identity (for women and men) was shaped in the late sixties and seventies. As with the Rimbaud story, storytelling is accented within the telling. The authors of *Strange Attractors* collude with some members of the audience, creating Phelan's two audiences (2007b: 227), assuming the role of purpose in storytelling is understood. This theatrical strategy—'This is my Rimbaud story' (2012: 5)—calls attention to the way we humans create narratives to explain who we are to others and signals not only the way stories shape identity, but also highlights the way those stories and identities may shift depending on the purpose of the telling. But *Strange Attractors* doesn't fit Phelan's model of unreliability. Instead of single author and single narrator, there are many authors and many narrators. Instead of two purposes there are several—to tell the story of the young Patti and Robert; to comment on how other stories about Patti and Robert have been staged; to imply that storytelling is part of creating identity; and to look at how gender identity was re-imagined in the sixties and seventies.

Perhaps the unreliable reliable model is not what is most pertinent to our contemporary culture. Narrative theorist Vera Nünning (2004) claims that the perception of unreliability depends on the period in which the text is or was read and

on the value systems and norms connected to that period. Attitudes change over time. Cultural contexts shift. Of prime importance is a reader's 'concept of what it means to be human' (237) because this forms the basis of narrator attributes they consider to be normal and '“plausible”' (237). *Strange Attractors* investigates a cultural shift, investigates the way Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, through their art, and through their experiences, became part of a generation that transformed views about gender identity. It also introduces the notion that understanding identity to be a fluid construct is part of what it means to be human. Although the project takes a different route to Smith's *Just Kids*, the play presents a similar central idea: that a particular story may be told by the same person in different ways for a different purpose and that this does not necessarily count as unreliability.

Conclusion

We live in an era where reliable tellings are in doubt. In *Just Kids* Smith attempts to provide a reliable narration that transforms how others have seen and will see her relationship with Mapplethorpe. Through her reliable telling she acknowledges the human yearning for a continuous narrative. Yet her narrative framing adds complexity to the author-text-reader relationship. Smith confides in the reader, suggesting that this reliable telling is only one possible version among many. The front and back matter, modern versions of Shakespeare's prologues and epilogues, set the stage for her story, and reveal the dual purpose of her rhetorical act: to tell the story Mapplethorpe wanted her to tell, and to refute the right of others to tell this same tale or to judge the lives of these two artists. For Smith judgment belongs with God.

Strange Attractors suggests that unreliable tellings (competing versions of the same tale told by the same author) are (reliably) different stagings of the self. There is no one (single) self to be understood as reliable but many selves. Comprehending narrations, therefore, is more about understanding purpose. Why is this person telling this tale in this way at this time? If stories are a human activity and we change the shape of a story, change its focus, change some of the events, then what is this telling us about the storyteller? *Strange Attractors* does not evoke God or a higher purpose for art but uses a theatrical non-naturalistic presentation to highlight the idea that one person telling the same narrative in different ways may offer different entry points into understanding the purpose of the story and the identity of the narrator. By acknowledging that there are multiple perspectives about a single event, even multiple perspectives told by the same teller, we acknowledge that truth is malleable and often subjective.

Through law courts and other contemporary institutions civil society sets up an expectation that there is a single true story to be told. But facts, shaped in differing ways, can impact differently on readers or listeners. Acknowledging this goes to the crux of what it means to be human. As Inga Clendinnen says, 'there is always one counter-story, and usually several, and in a democracy you will probably get to hear

them' (2006: 3). A critical role for writers might be to suggest that not only are there always several stories about a single event, but also, there may be several different ways a teller may narrate their own story. This narration may change depending on narrator purpose. By guiding the reader in this way a writer can undermine the idea that there is a single true version of events, or one single way of looking at particular events. Our work as writers might be to accent the human compulsion for a single 'true' telling and to suggest that multiple tellings of the same event, when told by the same narrator, are perhaps no less or more reliable than a single 'true' tale.

Endnotes

¹ The Department of Justice website, Victoria, Australia, under Oaths and Affirmations, states that 'For a witness appearing in court, the form of oath taken is as follows: 'I swear (or the person taking the oath may promise) by Almighty God (or the person may name a god recognised by his or her religion) that the evidence I shall give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.'

viewed 17 November 2012, at

<http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/home/courts/going+to+court/oaths+and+affirmations/>

² Phelan (once a student of Wayne Booth) re-determined Booth's model. Booth first defined the terms in the early sixties, stating: 'I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not' ([1961] 1983:158–9). Since Booth numerous literary scholars have challenged (Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Seymour Chatman 1990), argued against (Tamar Yacobi 2001; Nünning 2005), reconsidered (Olson 2003), redefined (Cohn 2000; Phelan and Martin 1999), or reviewed (Shen 2010), his terms. Others (Nünning 2004; Zerweck 2001) have questioned the notion of a reliable telling arguing that cultural and historical positioning are important components. Phelan, picking up on the work of reception theorists, defined his model by downplaying the primary role Booth gave the author and calling attention to the feedback loop between author-text-reader (2005: 18).

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