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*An annotation to Ursula Le Guin's essay
«The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction»*

A CALL FOR BOTULISM

Philip Einhaus

«A chain of cause and effect is an easy thing to describe: a cessation of cause and effect is not. To those who live in time, sequency is the norm, the only model, and simultaneity seems a muddle, a mess, a hopeless confusion, and the description of that confusion hopelessly confusing.» (1)

The Shobies, named after their spaceship the Shoby, had long gone beyond the model of sequency and time. They had just initiated the «NAFAL» and were now traveling through space in a mode that was faster than light. As they shot through the darkness of the far galaxy of Hain, the only thing for them left to do, was to somehow deal with the recently occurring mess of simultaneity and the confusion it posed.

The Shobies, a crew of ten, are the protagonists of «The Shoby Story», a science fiction novel by Ursula Le Guin, which tells the adventure of the first human crew to ever attempt a new mode of space travel. The only problem was, however, that a comprehensible story of their experience was needed to prove the success of their journey upon their return.

Although the quote above seems like a rather complicated attempt to describe the circumstances of just some hopeless situation, it accurately depicts the event. While the Shobies were moving faster than light, sequency as the norm for perception became blurry and time distorted. Consequently, every Shoby was left alone with their perception of reality, now unbound to the common network of time, greatly differing from the perception of the others.

«Hopelessly confused», the Shobies gathered around the spaceship's fireplace — an oddly, old-fashioned gathering spot, indeed. Though, safety measures were taken, as the fire only burned artificially on logs made of plastic.

Either way, it served its purpose. Meeting by the fire became a habit they had established as their group ritual. Now, the Shobies started telling each other the conflicting stories of what they had perceived.

««When one of you tells how they saw it, it seems as if it was that way, but then the next one changes the story and I...» said Shen, while Orate shivered and drew closer to the fire.» (2)

Written in 1990, «The Shoby Story» is a short novel within a broad collection of stories by Ursula Le Guin, one of the greats of American science fiction literature and the author of the essay «The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction».

Besides authors like Philip K. Dick or J. R.R Tolkien, Le Guin marked a shift from the «Golden Age» of fiction, typified by writers like Asimov or Heinlein, to the «New Wave» of fiction. After somewhat similar occurrences in French cinema and British sci-fi, writers of the New Wave began to form characters of a deeper psychological sophistication and investigated topics of sexuality, feminism, anarchism, socialism, and politics. (3)

As many of her most influential science fiction novels, such as «The Dispossessed» and «Left Hand of Darkness» have been published between 1960 and 1980 (4), the essay «The Carrier Bag Theory of fiction», written in 1986, can be seen as a result of an exploration on the craft of storytelling itself.

Le Guin depicts the influence of stories on our common reading of history. She uncovers the limited ability of the established narrative of the hero story to convey the complexity of the past, present, and future. Arguing for an alternative approach to storytelling, she proposes to use the story like

a bag that holds pieces, thoughts, and ideas, rather than a spear that, in its straight trajectory, carries one argument which claims to be omnipotent.

«History is one way of telling stories, just like myth, fiction or oral storytelling», Le Guin writes. As such, it is fitting that in German, the word for story and history both go with the same translation of «Geschichte». «Over the last hundred years, history has preempted the other forms of storytelling because of its claim to absolute, objective truth. Trying to be scientists, historians stood outside of history and told the story of how it was. All that has changed radically over the last twenty years. Historians now laugh at the pretense of objective truth. They agree that every age has its own history, and if there is any objective truth, we can't reach it with words. History is not a science, it's an art.» (5)

It is noticeable that, within the stories through which history is told, certain actors and characters reoccur. Carl Gustav Jung describes these actors as «Archetypes», to whom he assigns certain characteristic traits. Born from the «collective unconscious», which is formed from the sum of human experience throughout history, these characters are reflected in human behavior. This is what makes these Archetypes so relatable to the reader. (6) And this is why we like to listen to stories about the fool, the rebel or the hero so much.

In The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction, Le Guin identifies the Jungian Archetype of the hero, embodied by the cavemen that hunted down the mammoth, as the strongest and most memorable figure in storytelling. The hero, glorified by his historic role of the protector and nourisher, though, Le Guin flags it as broadly misunderstood, is not only the most relatable character, in



(fig. a) This image is part of Tatjana Blaser's free diploma «Loose Screws», on the topic of architecture and care, written at the ETH chair of Jan De Vylder and Philip Ursprung. 2022. Image: Tatjana Blaser

fact, it is also the easiest to tell about. How; «I thrust my spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while Oob, impaled on one huge sweeping tusk, writhed screaming, and blood sprouted everywhere in crimson torrents, and Boob was crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him as I shot my unerring arrow straight through eye to brain.» (7)

The story of the hero is as simple and one-directional as the trajectory of the arrow that kills the foe. «A chain of cause and effect», «starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark, (which drops dead).» (8) It is easy, comprehensible, and entertaining. Full of bloodlust and action. The longer the night, the more glorious the adventure, the more heroic the hero. Until eventually the fire burns down. It is the hero who is the nourisher, it is his actions that sustained life. So it is his story that we should always tell, have always told, isn't it?

Elizabeth Fisher's description of the «Carrier Bag Theory of Human Evolution» (9), referred to by Le Guin, strongly opposes this way of narrating. The myths around the hero and his companion, the spear, a phallic tool that «ape man first bashed somebody with» (10), is in fact greatly misunderstood to be the one and very first tool, that led us to where we are today.

Le Guin refers to Fisher that in a species deriving from hunters and collectors, it is rather the plant, that was the prevailing source of food, consequently, it is the tool of the container, the bottle, or the Carrier Bag that enabled life in the first. How else would we have collected the «seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains.» (11) In fact, nine out of ten days the heroic male did not come «staggering back with a load of meat». (12) One could argue, that the spear was much more a toy than a tool. «The Carrier Bag Theory of Human Evolution» is a revealing anthropological equation! (13)

Referring to her predecessor Virginia Woolf, Le Guin concludes to now rephrase the word heroism to «botulism», an idea that Woolf proposed in the glossary for the book «Three Guineas».

This reinvention hits the point! It is anthropologically plausible and proposes a shift in the perception and narration of human evolution. Also in a matter of language and storytelling, it is intriguing. There is a connection between content and storytelling, between what we tell and how we tell it. Referring to Le Guin's essay, Donna Haraway wrote, «it matters which worlds make worldss [...] which stories tell stories». (14) The rephrasing suggests a departure from the term «hero», which is bound to a binary narrative of conflict and domination to «bottle or bag», which rather speak of collecting and gathering and as such demands a more polyphonic narrative.

In storytelling, according to Le Guin, the novel is such a type of story, as it is «fundamentally unheroic». (15) Like the rags of Walter Benjamin's Ragpicker, it is about stories of frayed beginnings, ends, and in-betweens. But in contrast to the lone outcast who is searching for value in the debris of the modern city, the Carrier Bag story is a much more collective endeavor. One that in its meandering narrative, leaves no space for the hero. (16) «You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, a potato.» (17)

Though, for us, as for the Shobies, «simultaneity seems a muddle, a mess, a hopeless confusion, and the description of that confusion hopelessly confusing.» (18) True, it does not come easy to tell a story of loose threads that find their beauty in complexity. A story that takes on the simultaneity

of different moments or the trivia of the day-to-day. Le Guin admits: «It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrestled a wild-oat seed from its husk, [...]». (19) To tell it excitingly is even harder.

In a media fueled by the desire for spectacle, the linearity of the hero story — a very modernist idea — that aims for an all-answering argument, is not easy to replace. Although the novel is neither about «resolution or status, but a continuing process.» (20) It allows frayed storylines but does not mean neglecting a clear message or concept. It is a chance to rather simultaneously than successively explore complexity, without the request to fully comprehend and resolve it.

Le Guin's novels «The Dispossessed» and «The Left Hand of Darkness» imagine worlds inhabited by cultures that are described with an anthropological precision, where gender is not fixed but rather fluent, and neither prisons nor property exists. «Ambiguous Utopias» she subtitles them, as she does not avoid greed, envy, or conflict in her stories. She adds them as all the other pieces to the bag. (21) Inside the bag, much like in Haraway's Cyborg manifesto, the dichotomy between the genders becomes blurry, a clear distinction obsolete. Even language is not always comprehensible.

This approach was a milestone in postmodern feminist theory as it does not try to invert the hero story by staying within the binary reading of gender, but proposes to confuse its identities. (22)

These progressive works of literature convey the power of the genre of science fiction. As the terminology implies, science fiction plays out a moment of imagination based on present scientific knowledge. Alienated by fiction the present is abstracted, which creates a distance and allows to critically reflect on it. This hybrid storytelling of empirical, scientific, and imaginary possibilities thereby has the potential to guide fears and hopes about the present and its future development. As Le Guin describes in the «Operating System», «Imagination is the single most useful tool mankind possesses.» (23)

Often in today's approach to science fiction, technology is used as the contemporary spear of the caveman, a tool that alone will sustain life, against all future threats — a logical conclusion to the trajectory of the hero story. But facing complex challenges on a globalized level, where one cannot achieve anything without the other, the hero becomes a bull in a china shop — heroic dominance self-destructive. Science fiction's tech- solutions become utopian or apocalyptic.

However, Le Guin argues, that if science fiction is not reduced to the «techno-heroic», and duality is replaced by the plenty, it allows the genre to be more closely connected to reality, less mystical, and more hopeful. (24)

As the present scientific knowledge is the base for a future imagination of the world, yet again the need for re-narration is pressing. Donna Haraway's terminology of the «Cthulucene», a term that rethinks the definition of the Anthropocene, seems like an adequate shift. Unlike the Anthropocene's focus on human exceptionalism and technological dominance, the Cthulucene argues in favor of multispecism, inviting a plurality of actors into the bag. (25) A call for botulism — once again!

Similar in meaning, the anthropologist Anna L. Tsing uses the phrase «aesthetics of the Anthropocene» (26) to describe storytelling that makes a cross-species cohabitation tangible.

In her book, «The Mushroom at the End of the World», she deploys a mushroom as a protagonist and uses multiple approaches to depict its diverse relations to its environment — nature, culture, and capital. Tsing emphasizes that embracing a certain plurality within a story also involves extending one's scope of observation. Studying a fungus, for example, means using smell as a method of observation. It is a «great asset to unlearn a particular set of modernist visual prejudices.» (27) Something to consider when thinking about a Carrier Bag Story.

To me, the essay «The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction» is so intriguing, as it is a call to embrace complexity and reclaim the communal, an encouragement to alter prescribed archetypes and rethink what we tell and how we set the focus. As the bag is a non-binary understanding of relations, arguments do not need to be resolved, ideas can be tested. Discussion is neither only conflict or harmony. It can be an exploration of the topic, rather than a resolution. Eventually, there is room for failure and confusion.

Still sitting around the fire, the Shobies finished telling their stories. Although they still could not grasp every aspect or process every moment, they somehow managed to weave the frayed ends of their stories together, forming a whole, a Carrier-Bag kind of story. After all, this story established a common understanding on which they could rely upon as a reality, and prove to the world the success of their journey.

«They got lost. But they found the way» said another voice, soft above the hum and hushing of the ship's system, in the warm fresh air and light inside the solid walls and hulls. Only nine voices had spoken and they looked for the tenth; but the tenth had gone to sleep, thumb in mouth.» (28)