

Caesura in *Marina's Garden* : Interactive Narrative as a Drama of Responsibility and Interruption

Title	Caesura in <i>Marina's Garden</i>
Subtitle	Interactive Narrative as a Drama of Responsibility and Interruption
Lead-in / Abstract	Not provided.
Participants and speakers	Pelo, Riikka (FI)
Short biography of participants	<p>Pelo is a digital media screenwriter and a researcher working on the poetics of interactive narrativity in the Medialab, University of Art and Design Helsinki, currently working with her interactive installation Marina's Garden. The screen writer in a virtual tv production and in the documentary on media arts. Her collaborative artistic work consists of interactive installations, cyberpoetry and hypertexts, narrative experiments with virtual communities, chatterbots and chat-environments, radiophonic poems and poetic short films .The collaborative works of her, recently the installation Game of Imaginary Beings, were shown in the Salon de Arte Digital in Cuba, Cambridge University Moving Image Studio, England, Participatory Design Conference in Sweden, in Lume-keskus, Finland and in the Interactive Frictions, University of Southern California, USA. Published articles are in the Digital Creativity (becoming), Avek, Mediumi and Arttu. Contributed in the Practice-based Research -symposium in the Cambridge University (2003), in the Preceedings of the Participatory Design Conference in Malmö (2002) and in the Cultural Usability Conference in the University of Art and Design Helsinki (2001). Will present a paper in the Research Symposium of Mind Trek 2003, Tampere. Has</p>

Full text

a background in literature in the University of Helsinki, where she now teaches digital narrativity. The manuscript of her first novel won two literature competitions during 2002 and will be published in the near future.

In my presentation, an interactive installation, *Marina's Garden*, which is currently in its development phase, is studied as an example of research-based practice -case focusing on narrative, poetic and dramatic aspects of interactive design. *Marina's Garden* is a multilayered narrative space, physical as well as virtual, following an associative poetic structure. The work challenges the participant viewer to become a subject of responsibility in an intimate relationship with the poet, Marina. In my presentation **Emmanuel Levinas's** thoughts on dialogue and responsibility and poetic notions on caesura are looked at as conceptual background for creating the conditions for an intimate narrative experience in the art work. With my presentation I want to emphasize, that in the interactive drama the role of the participator should be considered as a position enabling such an agency, which can lead the person to become aware of his or her responsibility for the development of the narrative and its characters rather than just creating a sense of heroic freedom in a fictive world.

1. Introduction

"When somebody dreams of us together, then we will meet". Russian emigrant poet **Marina Tsvetaeva** wrote this sentence to **Rainer Maria Rilke**, the German poet, in the summer of 1926¹. These two poets never met in the reality but they wrote to each others deeply emotional and spiritual letters during six months. In the end of the same year the correspondence was interrupted by death of Rilke. This correspondence, which resisted any third party, even the fellow poet **Boris Pasternak**, suggests, anyhow, that a very special encounter took place - in another time and place - in the poetic time, infinite time of the souls, in poetic imagining.

My story, *Marina's Garden* is about the encounter that never happened in reality. It is about imagining and about all those things that prevent from it. It is a story about a poet, a mother and an emigrant, a woman who starts her poems on high c. It is about writing a poem out of loss.

As a writer and a storyteller in the digital interactive media my aim has been to find the right form for the story I wanted to tell. The reason for mediating the story with means of interactive media and as an installation in a physical space, was demanded by the story itself: I was not only narrating the story of the poet but narrating the space for the reading and for the reader, dramatizing the encounter in the scene of poetic imagining. The story about the poet is about the relationship between the reader and the poet. It is about writing a poem with the poet, in dialogue.

After several phases of scriptwriting *Marina's Garden* it became clear, that the story of the lover's who will only meet when somebody will dream their encounter, can't be told by means of conventional cinematic narration of linear cause and effect. The narrative has to be built on an intimate and affective play between hiding and revealing, hearing and whispering, presence and absence, the dreamer of the dream and Poet of the dream. For me the interactive media 's claim for presence and the agency of the viewer gives possibility to sculpt time to be able to work with what seems non-representable, but is in the reach of experience - loss, absence and trauma,

In addition, through the physical structure of my story I wanted to make visible the media, which were also part of the space imagining in the summer of 1926, when sending and getting letters was a slow and complicated political process. By bringing the history of poets's correspondence and relationship, which developed through them so intensively, into a certain space and symbolic media environment I have wanted to challenge the viewers so used the fastness and realtimeness of our mediaculture to experience very different temporal communion and the miracle of imagining.

2. Agency and responsibility

The early critical context for the development of *Marina's Garden* was offered by those theories of interactive narrativity which emphasize the designing of the role and the experience of the interactor as a meaningful element of the narrative world.

Well known writings of **Janet H. Murray** and **Brenda Laurel**, offer a primary basis

for dramaturgical practices in the field of digital media, both focusing on the questions of agency in the symbolic worlds of digital media and basing their ideas on the traditions of literature and drama. Anyhow, there is still room for critical questioning and rethinking of their theories. I will refer here to Murray's notions² concerning the dramatic agency in digital narrative environments as a basis for my own arguments developed through the studying philosophical writings of Emmanuel Levinas³ and my own experience of writing for the interactive media.

Murray explains in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*⁴ that in the digital interactive environments users, for example players of computer games, gain sense of agency through the meaningful actions they are allowed to make through the interface of the game. Consequently, through this power to take action in the representational worlds of computer the interactor symbolically becomes an agent, the actor, a character even. Murray challenges digital media artists that by empowering the sense of agency and participation, the power to take action in digital narrative environments, it is possible to develop as strong first person narrative experiences as its is to experience in games. In the computer game genres the sense of agency is very often challenged as the sense freedom, ability to move and act as a hero of the game, or in its most dramatic mode, as sense of fear and suspense: "moving through a space can therefore feel like Gary Coopers's striding through the town in High Noon", Murray writes. To fulfill the narrative pleasures of the participators," she continues, "we need to find ways of drawing the player so deeply into the situated point of view of a character that a change in position will raise important moral questions" .

As its best interactive art creates dialogical and dramatic, morally and ethically puzzling situations between the work of art and participant viewer by dramatizing her role and position as an experiential or even a physical subject. Finnish media-artist **Heidi Tikka's** installations' are a very special examples of this. In Her installation *Mother, Child*⁵ dramatic situation is created between the visitor and the virtual child, in the need of nourishing and caressing. When the visitor fills the empty space of a parent, mother or a father on the stage, she becomes aware of her responsibility for the development of the scene and the wellbeing of the baby in very affectionate way. As is **Margaret Morse's** early writings on the videoinstallation art⁶, *Mother Child* challenges interactive narrativity and subjectivity by emphasizing the bodily, not cognitive or moral, presence of the interactor. As a physical part of the installation the visitor becomes responsible for the video image as it were a real human being. She performs the piece in her body, not by identification but as its experiential subject. What I think is most important, in Tikka's work is that it dramatizes for the visitor an intimate ethical experience, not just a personal satisfaction of a winning game and solving a problem.

3. Ethical encounter in *Marina's Garden*

For me as scriptwriter the main question in the development of *Marina's Garden* has been, how to conceptualize a dramatic interface, which would enable an affective relationship between the poet, the character in the story and the participator of the interactive work. How to set up an ethical interface and to create a dramatic encounter, a moment of dialogue, a relationship revealing a secret embedded in dozen of letters.

Very often when I have talked about the ethical interface of *Marina's Garden*, I have been asked if I am working with a moral simulator game, or with a narrative game where the participator has to do choices between good and bad, virtue and evil, light and darkness for the main character. This is not what I am doing in my story, when I talk about as being ethical, and having an ethical interface.

The purpose of the interactive work is not to ask the visitor to judge Marina, but to come face to face with her even in the moments of her senselessness, selfishness even evilness. The interactive narrative of *Marina's Garden* is not for defining the the morals of poets love but creating a possibility for her reader of becoming aware her own responsibility face to face with Marina.

Marina Tsvetaeva wrote about morals and ethics in art in her essay *Art in the light of conscience* saying that "artistic creation is in some cases a sort of atrophy of conscience – more than that: a necessary atrophy of conscience, the moral flaw without which art cannot exist. in order to be good (not to lead into temptation the little ones of this world, art would have to renounce a fair half of its whole self. the only way for art to be wittingly good is – not to be. it will end with the life in the planet." ⁷

In *Marina's Garden* I also want to make visible the artistic creation, writing a poem,

which is never just series of moral choices, but much more ambivalent process.

The narrative structure of the story is built up as an dynamically functioning installation in physical space. It consists of the poets writing desk with a touch screen interface animated, reactive fragments of letters and poems flowing on it, four speakers and two white sheets with videoprojections. The visitor enters an intimate space of the poet, Marina, in her moment of loss and oblivion -- after death of her lover. Marina addresses her words to the person sitting by her desk begging her to help her to get back her lost words and memories of her loved ones. In participating Marina's "memory work" by her desolated writing desk the reader can follow the whispers of her loved ones creating an interactive radiophonic play activating the memory images and cryptonymies in the landscape of oblivion. Gradually, in the dialogue with Marina, in restructuring her inner landscape, she will also become part of the poetic work -- creation of a poetic image. The deeper she follows the sound of her poetry, she will become the subject of dreaming, fulfilling Marina's wish: "When somebody dreams of us..."

The research question which has given me a certain experimental direction for writing *Marina's Garden* and considering the agency of it's reader, dreamer, arose originally in the context of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy⁸. In Levinasian ethical phenomenology being and language are defined as relationships between the subject and its Other, between two human beings. Levinas defines ethics as an "encounter" with the Other. This moment of encounter is a relationship which cannot be reduced to a symmetrical "relationship" between the two. This encounter is always an interruption in the rhythm of linear time of the Same. The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans. Time can be thought as a dynamic relationship towards "the irreducible other. What interests me also is that, Levinasian phenomenology emphasizes a concept of pre-cognitive and non-intentional subject where as the techno-social subject, for example in Brenda Laurel's writings on agency in interactive environments⁹, in her aristotelian dramaturgy for interaction is mostly defined as cognitive and intentional.

In *Marina's Garden*, interactor will take active part in poet Marina's task of creating a poetic image by helping her to remember what she has forgotten by giving back her lost, fragmented words. Through this dialogue in the letters the participant viewer becomes responsible for Marina, her time and her development as a poet, mother, emigrant and lover through her dramatized actions. By wandering through the Garden, the layers of time, the interactor will bring the past, the present and the dream together -- into a poem and into a narrative experience. In this spatial and temporal relationship with the poet the participant also becomes responsible for what Marina will remember or what she will dream -- of her poetic imagining in the fictive time of the installation.

With this setting I have wanted to emphasize, that in the interactive drama the role of the participant, should be considered as a position enabling such an agency, which leads the person to become aware of his or her responsibility for the development of the narrative and its characters rather than just creating a sense of freedom and agency in the fictive world.

In writing interactive narrative the task of sculpting time is not just about emplotment, developing the continuity of plot as mimesis as in our conventional understanding of narrative. The games with the time in interactive realms are about dramatic encounters: how to design the temporal and personal relationships between the interactor and the main characters of the narrative. Consequently, it is necessary to consider how to design the temporal experience of the interactor, the presence and the present time of the interactor in the narrative world -- the narrative experience.

4. Poetics of interruption

But how to participate in Other's time, In her loss, In the Time of Fiction and in the time of Poetry and in the Time of Correspondence resisting the any third party?

Another Russian poet, **Joseph Brodsky** describes in his essay *Footnote to a Poem*, excellent rhythmic and metrical patterns of Tsvetaeva's poetry, especially in her poem *New Year's Letter*, a poem written after Rilke's death and for Rilke. Maximum range of Tsvetaeva's diction in *Novogodnee*, *New Year's Letter*, takes her much further than the mere experience of loss could. It is hard to find another poet who has made such skillful and abundant use of caesuras, Brodsky claims.¹⁰

The notion of cesura turned out to be the dramaturgical key for the non-aristotelian

poetic structure of *Marina's Garden*. I was listening to the gaps, breaks, interruptions, silences and losses in Tsvetaeva's writing. In the terms of poetics -- I started to listen to the caesuras -- the significant pauses between the rhymes. With *Marina's Garden* my attempt is to create a cesura -- a time of interruption, an empty space for dealing with absence and loss, a break in the linear time, the space for the other's time.

In the poetics of tragedy, especially considered in **Friedrich Hölderlin's** writings on **Sophocles's** plays, the caesura not only marks the disruptions in the rhythm of a tragedy but also the moments of subversive interruptions from the realm of the dead and the Gods in the time and the space of a drama. Caesura is a thematic interruption and pure presence the linear time and rhythm of tragedy.¹¹ For the German cultural theorist **Walter Benjamin** caesura is a point when "the past and the present moment flash into a constellation" -- in the experience of trauma. This moment interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, one that spaces time and temporalises space.¹²

In *Marina's Garden* the visitor is the interruption. She will open up the experience of time and experiences resisting meaning and representation, bringing two conflictual, repressed images together. By inhabiting Marina's space of memories and bringing up what Marina can not remember and what is repressed in her dreams and wishes she also sets it into motion and conflict. The visitor of the New Year's Eve in the Garden the sculpts poet's time and the time of her loved ones, the dead, bringing to it its rhythm and motion. Without her the installation is just a cesura, a gap between two impossible images, two sentences, between a dream and repression.

Notes:

- 1. Pasternak Boris, Tsvetaeva, Marina, Rilke, Rainer Maria (2001): *Letters: Summer 1926*. Ed Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak ja Konstantin M. Azadovsky. Foreword Susan Sontag. Trans. Margaret Wettlin, Walter Arendt, Jamey Gambrell. New York Review Books. New York.
- 2. Murray, Janet H. (1997): *Hamlet on the Holodeck: Future Narrative in Cyberspace*. The Free Press. New York.
- 3. Levinas, Emmanuel (1979): *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Martinus Nijhoff. The Hague.
- 4. Murray (1997)
- 5. Tikka, Heidi (2000): *Mother, Child*. Installation. F2F.
- 6. Margaret Morse (1990): "Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* edited by Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer. Aperature. New York.
- 7. Tsvetaeva, Marina (1992): *Art in the Light of Conscience. Eight Essays on Poetry*. Trans. Angela Livingstone. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 8. Levinas (1979).
- 9. Laurel, Brenda (1991): *Computers as Theater* Addison Wesley Publishing Company. Massachusetts.
- 10. Brodsky, Joseph (1987): "Footnote to a Poem," in *Less Than One*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York.
- 11. Hölderlin, Friedrich (2001): *Huomautuksia Sofokleen kääntämisestä. "Anmerkungen zum Oidipus" (1804)*. Translation into Finnish: Esa Kirkkopelto. Loki-Kustannus. Helsinki.
- 12. As referred to in Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe (1990): *Heidegger, Art and Politics. The Fiction of the Political*. Blackwell. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Related internet addresses

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