

Constructing Narratives as Becoming

Construyendo narrativas para llegar a ser

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Abstract:

Construction of a personal narrative is key in the creation of identities, but it is even more relevant when considering radical processes that imply the assumption of a completely new identity. In the cases of the academics Bernard Stiegler and Jay Prosser, both not only analyse how their transformation into philosopher/man has been possible due to their ability to develop their own narrative, but also use this personal process as the basis for their academic reflections.

Keywords: Becoming, transsexuality, narrative, identity, *anamnesis*, *hypomneses*

Resumen:

La construcción de una narrativa personal es clave en la creación de identidades, pero aún lo es más en el caso de procesos radicales que implican la asunción de una completamente nueva identidad. En el caso de Bernard Stiegler y Jay Prosser, ambos académicos no solo analizan cómo su transformación en filósofo/hombre ha sido posible gracias a su capacidad de desarrollar una narrativa propia, sino que también utilizan ese proceso personal como base de sus reflexiones académicas.

Palabras clave: Llegar a ser, transexualidad, narrativa, identidad, *anamnesis*, *hypomneses*

In 2003, the philosopher Bernard Stiegler delivered a talk at the Centre Georges Pompidou at the request of Marianne Alphant in which he explained how he became a philosopher during his 5-year stay in prison starting from the age of 26.¹ This speech was later published in his book *Passer à l'acte*, translated into English under the title *Acting Out*. His autobiographical reflections and his process of becoming a philosopher gives us a hint into his way of life in prison and his overcoming the dreadful situation in which he was living at that moment. In 1998, Jay Prosser wrote his book *Second Skins* in which he analyses how transsexual narratives help to articulate the transformations a transsexual experiences in order to become a man/a woman, paying special attention to the body changes and how these changes mould the feelings, emotions and expectations of transsexuals. Prosser, having experienced himself the process of becoming a man previously embodied in a woman's body, speaks not only about others' autobiographies, but also about his own life: "Without doubt, my turning as critic to write on transsexual narratives represents a displaced autobiographical act."²

It might be said that both experiences are completely different, but at the same time, they are linked by the idea of becoming: Stiegler and Prosser are not only a philosopher and a man, but they have become a philosopher and a man, a consequence of their thoughts and the result of their will of changing, of becoming someone different than society may expect from them, originally a delinquent and a woman. The main goal of this article is to examine how the creation of narratives helped Stiegler and Prosser to change, to act out, to become philosopher (mainly through an inner transformation) and man (mainly through an external transformation). Although it might be argued that the changes they experienced were completely different, both in nature and outcome, these changes were possible through (or supported by) the construction of their own personal narratives employing their autobiographical experiences as the "bricks" to achieve their goals: becoming a philosopher/a man.

¹ Stiegler, Bernard, *Acting Out*, trans. by David Barison, Daniel Ross, and Patrick Crogan, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 9, 32.

² Prosser, Jay, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 4.

These narratives were used not just as a way to reinforce in themselves their new personality/embodiment, but as an example to be used in their academic works. In this way, Stiegler in *Acting Out* and Prosser in *Second Skins* remember the transformations they have suffered and use them to support their arguments. Although Stiegler and Prosser's becoming implies the discussion of concepts like individuation, locality, truth, embodiment, gender or skin, the aim of this paper is to show how narrative is used by the authors; therefore, these notions might be discussed only if they are related to the construction of narrative.

Before examining Stiegler and Prosser's works, it is especially relevant to address the concept of narrative and what is implied by the idea of creating a narrative. According to Kubiak, narrative "is a structuring principle that precedes language."³ In this way, language is the result of the need of human beings to organize their minds, being narration first, and language an outcome of this first principle. Kubiak is following the argument of Barthes, who said that "narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself."⁴ It has even been suggested that the creation of literature, a term that includes the narrativization of memories,⁵ was one of the features of early humans which gives them advantage in the evolutionary competition.⁶

Although it is still difficult to produce a straightforward definition of narrative, it is vital for human beings to build up a personal narrative. Genette attempted to characterize narrative as "the representation of an event or of a sequence of events", but this might seem a very simplistic definition that needs more semiotic, cognitive, syntactic and pragmatic amendments. According to Ryan, a complete definition of narrative should account for issues as problem solving, conflict, interpersonal relations, human experience and the temporality of existence.⁷ Despite this vagueness of the term "narrative", there seems to be an awareness from scholars of the importance of a narrative personal construction. Citing from Brooks, Ryan says that "narrative is one of the principal ways we organize our experience of the world".⁸ Human beings must build a story of one's life which can provide meaning to the experiences undergone, link events from the past and the present, and permit to accept one's life as the one which one can live.⁹ It is not only a matter of creating a framework in which one's life can fit in, but it is also a way of understanding oneself, of becoming oneself; as Bruner says: "Self-making is a narrative art."¹⁰ Considering all this, it is appropriate to examine how Prosser and Stiegler employ narrative as part of their processes of becoming.

³ Kubiak, Anthony, "Spelling it Out: Narrative Typologies of Terror", *Studies in the Novel*, 36 (3), 2004, p. 295.

⁴ Barthes, Roland, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives", in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath, London, Flamingo, 1984, p. 79.

⁵ Hernadi, Paul, "Why is Literature: A Coevolutionary Perspective on Imaginative Worldmaking", *Poetics Today*, 23 (1), 2002, p. 29.

⁶ Hernadi, Paul, "Literature and Evolution", *SubStance*, 30 (1-2), 2001, p. 56.

⁷ Ryan, Marie-Laure, "Toward a Definition of Narrative", in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. by David Herman, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 23-24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹ Fludernik, Monika, "Identity/Alterity", in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. by David Herman, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 262.

¹⁰ Bruner, Jerome, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, Cambridge-MA-London, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 65.

In Prosser's analysis of the different essays and autobiographies dealing with transsexuality, it is possible to observe, whether explicitly or not, the presence of the author. Although he does not explain the surgery process which he overcame, he speaks about the hormone treatment he underwent while teaching a summer course at university. He speaks of this as the beginning of his transsexual transition from female to male.¹¹ Up to that moment, it might be appropriate to say he identified himself (or he was identified by others) as a transgender, understanding gender as "the cultural expression or interpretation of sex."¹² Being transgender for Prosser meant that the roles, attitudes and behaviour expected in the Western culture from a woman were not the ones displayed by him in his relations with students, family, colleagues or friends: he says of himself that "I had been known as a butch woman for five years."¹³

Transsexuality is a very different issue, it is a "lengthy, formalized and normally substantive transition: a correlated set of corporeal, psychic, and social changes."¹⁴ But, as a transition which happens at different levels, it is always a narrative work,¹⁵ in which the body might be the most conspicuous element, and the plot of the narrative is the change of sex, from male to female, from female to male. It is relevant to point at the transsexual narrative as a narrative of transition. Important as it is, narrative provides a sense, a meaning to the process between sexes. It is the bridge to embodiment and it gives coherence to this transformation.¹⁶ However, as a narrative of transition, its goal is not to establish the uniqueness¹⁷ of being transsexual, but the uniqueness of being a man or a woman. The condition of transsexual is temporary, a condition in between two points that has to be sorted out when the transition is complete. That explains the attitude of Prosser with his students, not wishing to address the issue of his transitional condition: "In this gendered nonzone, I felt too embodied (only body) yet also disembodied; for what on earth did I embody?"¹⁸

The transsexual narrative is not one of being, but of becoming, of struggling to become man or woman "in spite of not being born one."¹⁹ As it has been said, transformation of the body is vital in order to become; one of the main features of transsexual narrative is the transsexuals' thought of being trapped in the wrong body and the desire of getting rid of their own skin.²⁰ Prosser expresses himself when he says: "If I feel confined in the wrong body on a fundamental level, it must be said that I fail to own my skin, to accept it as my own."²¹ Not accepting their skin is the trigger to start the process of passing to the act, of becoming, of doing what is needed in order to accept a second skin, the skin of a new gender as a man or as a woman.

¹¹ Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, p. 66.

¹⁸ Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

In the transsexual narrative there are always elements which configure an archetypal story, a pattern that most of transsexual narratives follow: the suffering and confusion at the beginning; the epiphany of self-discovery, of knowing that one has been born in the wrong body; the corporeal and the social transformation and, at last, the reassignment, seen as an arrival home.²² It is significant how in these narratives the moment of surgery is considered not only a healing, but also a restoration.²³ However, the body constructed through sex reassignment never existed in the past, so it cannot be said this is a real restoration. For the transsexual this is not a problem because the new body is the one that should have always existed. In a certain way there is a feeling of nostalgia, of yearning for the body always dreamed, the body in which he/she feels really at ease, at home. Memory and imagination work together to recollect fragments from the past and create an imaginary whole in which the body is, at the same time, new and recovered.²⁴ As Bruner says: “Through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow. Memory and imagination fuse in the process.”²⁵

A special feature of the transsexual narrative and one that makes a difference with other narratives of becoming is the necessity for transsexuals of narrativizing themselves in order to tell their biography to others. The creation of narratives does not imply the existence of an audience apart from oneself; as it has been said, the main goal of narrative is to confer sense on the different events of life and “to domesticate human error and surprise.”²⁶ However, in order to have the sex reassignment surgery, transsexual must tell their story to the doctors who have to decide whether the surgery is necessary or not. Doctors have to rely on their patients’ narrative to take decisions; in this way, “autobiography is transsexuality’s proffered symptom”,²⁷ with clinicians taking the role of narratologists. Therefore, it might be said that “to be transsexual, the subject must be a skilled narrator of his or her own life.”²⁸ For transsexuals, construction of narrative has to be coherent, not just for him/her, but also for the doctors who decide about the pertinence of sex reassignment surgery; having surgery implies being a good story-teller.

As it has been said previously, transsexual narrative is not a narrative of becoming transsexual, but of becoming man or woman. It is the narrative of transition, once finished it is only a narrative of being. Transsexual narrative accomplishes its objective of providing a framework for the individuals to understand and accept the transformation they experience. As Prosser says about himself: “I was a woman. I write as a man. How to join this split? Precisely through narrative.”²⁹

After having analysed how narrative plays such an important role in becoming man/woman, it is time now to examine how it plays a similar role in becoming philosopher. Stiegler becomes a philosopher during his stay in prison, and for him this becoming is something intimate and secret which involves “the whole of its being.”³⁰ According to him, everybody has the potential of becoming a philosopher, because philosophy is linked to desire, people are aware of their ignorance and the lack of knowledge might trigger their

²² Ibid., p.101.

²³ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

²⁵ Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, p. 93.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁷ Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 104.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 108.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁰ Stiegler, *Acting Out*, p. 2.

desire to acquire this knowledge.³¹ Until then, he did not philosophize, but his imprisonment made him change: “One day [...] this vocation common to all the beings we are in potential [...] revealed itself almost a necessity.”³² From that moment on, becoming a philosopher was not an option for him; when he became aware of it, he had to do it. In this sense, it is possible to find a parallel with Prosser’s situation: both Stiegler and Prosser do not only want, but they really need to become a philosopher/a man.

What is the first question he considers as a philosopher? Not why, nor what, but who, because “philosophy as the discourse of the philosopher is always *par excellence* the discourse of an individuation.”³³ Therefore, his initial interest rests on identifying himself, understanding himself in the process of individuation. This is the process of becoming himself, a process never completed because that would imply a finished individual, without future³⁴: “This is why they constitute histories in the course of which things come to pass and events happen.”³⁵ Thus, the individuation process to become a philosopher takes place within a time frame and articulates histories around events, that is, creates a narrative of becoming.

This discourse of individuation is not just an internal discourse, but it is performative as well: “the philosophy of a philosopher only makes sense when it is illustrated through his way of life, [...] To articulate his existence and his thought in a manner such that they don’t contradict each other.”³⁶ Therefore, becoming a philosopher is not just a mental action but a physical one; there should be no contradiction between his actions and his thoughts. He has to tell a story, to construct a narrative that can be read by the people observing him, to compare his behaviour and his teachings. The coherence between mental actions and passing to the act must be similar to the coherence of a text, of a narrative created by Stiegler. Likewise, transsexual performance and transsexual mind show a coherence which structures transsexual narratives.

Being a criminal put Stiegler in an extraordinary situation in which a “suspension of the conditions of ordinary life”³⁷ triggered his desire of becoming a philosopher. In the absence of a world, he had to resort to his memory in order to re-create the world in the cell. It was *anamnesis*, the work of reminiscence, the tool used by Stiegler to recollect material which could serve as the basis for his philosophical practice.³⁸ Like a fish out of the water, Stiegler considers his isolation in a cell as a good place to develop his philosophy: “Philosophy consisted of considering the milieu while being able to extract oneself from it.”³⁹ In this environment, Stiegler lived a disciplined life centred on language, living, as he says, only in language.⁴⁰

For him, practicing philosophy in this context was “a soliloquy sustained by the *hypomneses* of writing,”⁴¹ understanding *hypomneses* as technics of memory. Language is a tool for Stiegler, but the creation of a soliloquy implies an order, coherence, an argument which organizes the text, the construction of a personal narrative. This construction comes

³¹ Ibid., p. 8.

³² Ibid., p. 9.

³³ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 16-17.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 21.

from the silence which allows the memories to be organized, recreated and, through the process of the *hypomneses*, articulated in a significative narrative. The issue of significance is important for Stiegler, who thinks that it is his duty to find significance, that significance is not related to the things, but to the relation he has with these things.⁴² The alternative is the a-significance, the madness.⁴³ Thus, he is the owner of significance in his story, he can tell it as he likes and create meaningful links between different events; in this way, he directs his own narrative, he is the author who provides meaning to his story.

As part of his daily routine, he reads novels in the evening.⁴⁴ In the book, this sentence constitutes a paragraph on its own. In his description of his usual routine in prison, he talks about reading poetry, philosophy and about writing what other philosophers thought, but in this paragraph he exemplifies how important narrative, fiction in this case, is in order to become a philosopher. He has to work with his memories, not just his personal memories, but the memories he has acquired from novels' authors. As Sartre says: "The reader must invent them [the objects] in a continual exceeding of the written thing. To be sure, the author guides him, but all he does is guide him. [...] The reader must unite them; he must go beyond them. In short, reading is directed creation."⁴⁵ As his creations, these memories are integrated in the own narrative of the reader and, in this way, Stiegler can use them to progress in his becoming a philosopher. It is interesting to observe how Prosser, in the beginning of his becoming a man, is confused and anxious, mainly because he did not take the elements the fiction could provide to help them to create his own narrative. In contrast with this, one of his students uses the fictional texts studied during the course to support her arguments on identity. Prosser finds his body "unspeakable for me [...] in part because narratives of sexual crossing lay outside our designated subject matter."⁴⁶ This illustrates how fictional narratives are helpful in the formulation of personal narratives in which the reality and the fiction collaborates in the configuration of stories with significance and coherence.

In conclusion, Prosser and Stiegler constructed their own narratives which allowed them to overcome problems and to become man/philosopher. Narrative has been shown as a vital cognitive tool that provides meaning and understanding to one's life, domesticating human error and surprise when handling difficult situations.⁴⁷ Prosser's transsexual narrative is a narrative about transition, with the body as the main element of the story and the goal of becoming man or woman, the rejection of the original body and the sex reassignment surgery as significant features. Stiegler's narrative of philosophy is linked to the process of individuation, the performative discourse, the isolation and the search of significance in a very restricted world. The use of memories and fiction contributes to the progress of Stiegler and his becoming a philosopher. In both cases, constructing narratives was a process which implied the progress of the individuals, becoming someone new at the end of these processes.

⁴² Ibid., p. 27.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁵ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *What is Literature?* trans. by Bernard Frechtman, New York, Philosophical Library, 1949, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, p. 31.

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