

# THE CHANGING FORM OF FICTION: NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN CHART KORBJITTI's *TIME*

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper<sup>1</sup> I have used some of the methods and findings in my study of narrative techniques in the novels of American writers conducted earlier.<sup>2</sup> I could trace a continuous development in the influence that the writers received from the predominant media of their time. I followed up on my research with a novel by a Thai writer. I will be looking for explanations in the critical works of David Lodge, Frederick R. Karl and Marvin Magalaner, Robert Martin Adams, Jose Ortega y Gasset, but most of all, Marshall McLuhan. My earlier research revealed that writers have always endeavoured to emphasize the pictorial aspects of their fiction; and the age of modernity gave them an impetus to try modes of representation, which imitated not only art but

also the newly discovered technologies. It is possible to trace an interrelation between man's encounter with these discoveries, and his concept of reality and the changed world on the one hand, and the emergence of modes of writing, which reflect these changes in the world at large on the other hand. In fact, a progression in the development of the novel has been discerned by carefully studying how writers have employed new techniques and devices borrowed from non-literary models in the popular culture, such as newspaper layout, advertising, photography, film and television to renew worn fictive forms.

The writers need not necessarily be conscious of the impact of modern technology. Writers are thought to alleviate the media's harmful impact as they incorporate them in their

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<sup>2</sup> My thesis entitled "The Emerging Form of Fiction: Some new trends in the fiction of Faulkner, Bellow and Heller"

own medium, the written word. This mode of representation is more subtle than direct, and scholars interested in the changing form of fiction have searched for the phenomenon in the works from Joyce to Heller. A recent novel by Chart Korbjitti, however, shows how the Thai writer makes a more conscious effort to incorporate the genres of drama and film to arrive at an innovative narrative technique. Readers are alternately leafing through the pages of a play, or following a shooting script, but they seldom perceive that they are reading a novel. The title page, however, which says, *Time, a novel by Chart Korbjitti*, constantly reminds them.

## FICTION AND THE MEDIA

If we had to define a novel, we would more or less agree that it is a fictitious narrative of considerable length with possible people doing possible things in a possible world. Although the novel is a comparatively recent literary form, the genre has undergone vast changes practically every few decades. As a realistically perceived form, novelists invariably strove to represent reality. In particular, in the last 80 years or so, writers have experimented with the novel by introducing new ways of writing. In his book, *The Modern Modes of Writing*, David Lodge points out that the novel, for a greater part of the last three centuries, has approximated historical writing rather than any other literary form. He views the novel as a chiefly realistic form which “from the beginnings in the eighteenth century modelled its language on historical writings of various kinds, formal and informal: biography, autobiography, travelogue, letters, diaries, journalism and historiography.” (25)

Lodge describes the quintessence of the realistic novel thus:

This rendering of an individual experience of a common phenomenal world, whereby we share the intimate thoughts of a single character while at the same time being aware of a reality, a history that is large and more complex than the individual in the midst of it can comprehend – this is the characteristic achievement of the nineteenth-century realistic novel of Scott, Jane Austen, Stendhal and Flaubert. (38)

The traditional novel, perhaps until today, resembles history or rather the biographical representation of its protagonist’s experiences in life. Both history and fiction perceived thus are a linear representation of reality.

But the novel is by no means a fixed form. The changes that led to man’s understanding of reality are the same changes that bore down on the novel. Critics of the novel never fail to cite the influence of Bergson, Freud, Einstein, Darwin as well as socio-political changes as the cause for finding new ways to represent the new reality of the world in fiction. Authors Frederick R. Karl and Marvin Magalaner in their introduction to *Great Twentieth Century Novels* explain:

As a social and moral document, as well as a contained art form, the novel, from Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* through Joyce’s *Ulysses* has responded more quickly and fully to new ideas than any other literary genre. Accordingly, the twentieth-century novel, following the rapid introduction of new models of thought in psychology, natural science and

sociology, has reacted boldly to absorb this material into literary communication.

But exactly how the novel has changed and why writers look for new ways of writing is one of the questions touched on in this study. Marshall McLuhan believes that man changed his perception of reality by the media surrounding him. In his book, *Understanding Media—The Extensions of Man*, he asserts that man is influenced by the media he creates or his extensions, and includes such items as language, the alphabet, the written word, the wheel, the printing press, the telephone, the photograph, the automobile, movies and television, to name a few. Each of these not only alters man's life but also transforms man's understanding of reality, he asserts.

It is, therefore, that the inventions and new technologies when they came, had a profound effect on writers, and with the advent of photography and later film; writers began to raise questions about reality itself and turned their backs on traditional modes of representation. Marshall McLuhan explains thus:

Perhaps the great revolution produced by photography was in traditional arts . . . . The painter could no longer depict a world that had been much photographed. He turned instead to reveal the inner process of creativity in expressionism and abstract art. Likewise, the novelist could no longer describe objects or happenings for readers already knew what was happening in photo, press, film and radio. The poet and the novelist turned to those inward gestures of the mind by which we achieve insight and by

which we make ourselves and our world. Thus art moved from outer matching to inner making. (194)

Research conducted on how the media have influenced the novel, the written word, would have us believe that these changes are necessary for the survival of the writer's art, because the poet or writer must adopt his medium, as it were, to a new mode of expression, or let us say language, that can best be understood by the people of his age.

### **CHART KORBJITTI'S CRAFT**

Chart Korbjitti, who writes in Thai, has experimented with a new form with almost every book he published. It is as if he held his fingers on the pulse of society to find a way to speak through the most suitable medium. A powerful storyteller who explored the theme of guilt in his novel, *The Judgment*, he soon used his camera-sharp descriptions in "The Personal Knife," an extended metaphor of cannibalism to hold a mirror up to our own dark inner selves. By the time Chart Korbjitti writes *Time*, the novel I wish to discuss here, he uses cinematic technique more consciously and unabashedly than any other writer has done before. He deliberately breaks up the surface of the narration by the protagonist and inserts what looks like shooting scripts as well as stage directions and actual dialogue of a drama performance.

*Time*, then, is the story of a movie director who sits in a theatre witnessing a stage performance put on by people all in their early twenties about the feelings of the elderly. As the movie director waits for something to happen on stage, he is thinking about time. The time on the stage is 4:45 a.m. But the action does not start deliberately before the clock on the

stage strikes five times. The performance he is attending is the 7 o'clock show in the evening. The play depicts one day in the life of the inmates of an Old People's home. When the play ends it is 7 o'clock in the evening. The day's events begin with waking up in the morning, bathing, giving alms, taking breakfast, receiving visitors, etc. until the inmates go to sleep. Chart Korbjitti exploits not only the unusual angle: young people performing a play about old people, but also uses an inverted time sequence, which makes readers wonder about time. While in his plot the writer dwells mostly on the quotidian, he is able to convey to his readers the philosophical underpinnings of the Buddhist way of life with its preponderance for thinking the unthinkable.

To show the power of Chart Korbjitti's writing, here is the description of the clock that the protagonist sees on the stage as the curtain rises:

... The clock does not merely look old: its wood is worn-out and you can see the chips and cracks of its enamel, frittered away by time. The accumulated grime and dust also testifies that no one takes care of it. But its pendulum still moves from side to side, as it must, unconcerned by the marks of deterioration on the body of the clock. (5)

Integrating his narrative technique with artistic coherence, Chart Korbjitti uses the mask of the movie director occupied with his thoughts in the darkness of the theatre and his imaginary camera to explore transcendental truths. The universal themes of old age and sickness, life and death, time and reality are not new, but the ways they are brought home are. Ever so often the movie director's musings go off at a tangent.

He not only watches the performance on stage with a critical eye, but also describes how he would have shot such a scene. Readers are constantly aware of the two different art forms, film and drama. Film, for the movie director, is a more superior means of representation; because the camera can zoom, or close up to highlight visually what actors on the stage have to spell out, or rather act out.

Here is an excerpt from the novel (42-43):

I think if this were a movie, things would go faster than this time-wasting ladling out of food to tray after tray. Before the patients got their trays and walked back to their beds and finished eating, people would long have fled the movie house. I think we should back a little and start like this.

### **Close up**

(High-angle shot.) Of bits of shallots and fried garlic spread over the surface of the water, steam drops clinging to the inside of the pot. A dark podgy hand holding the ladle stirs the whole. The ladle takes gruel and dumps it in the main compartment of a tray. One sees the rice gruel and morsels of pork all over the section. The picture slowly fades away.

### **Close-up**

(High-angle shot.) The picture slowly comes into focus. Of Old Yoo's parched lips opening up. Inside there are not teeth left. Her pale pink tongue is seen moving a little. Ubon's hand slowly drives a spoonful of gruel into the gaping mouth. It takes a long time for the gruel in the spoon to slide into

the mouth. Finally, the spoon leaves the scene. Only the mouth remains, with gums patiently munching—to make you feel there are no taste buds left to savor the food.

**Voice over (Ubon)**

“Is it good?” /Cut (46)

What the movie director sees on stage has not only a profound effect on his readers but also on himself. Although he is our eyes, so to say, he is also that protagonist who is actively participating in the events on the stage.

I sit watching the three of them [nurses] going about their work. It looks no different from feeding babies, having to feed them food as well as water, to threaten as well as entreat. The only difference is that the babies we see here have big desiccated bodies and are close to death. They are not an appealing sight, unlike little babies who will grow up by the day and look so cute, a treat to the eye and the heart. (47)

Description, narration and dialogue in traditional novels have been replaced in the novel *Time* with movie scripts and bits from a playwright's manuscript, all of which help create a visual impact similar to that of film and TV.

Here is an excerpt from what is part of the stage performance.

“At the same time the other nurse (Ubon) is wiping the body of the old woman on Bed 4 of the right row. (Counting from Old Yoo's bed). . .

**Radio**

‘Good morning, my dear listeners. We meet as usual in the country news report. Today we start with the most important national item, which I think all of us Thai brothers and sisters all over the world are already aware of, that is that now our country has another new Miss Universe, Miss Phornthip, the second for Thailand. The first was Miss Aphatsara. I'm certain you all remember her very well, because she brought fame to our country by making it known to the nations of the world. Even though at the time our country was poor and few people in the world knew of it, Miss Aphatsara stunned the world with the beauty of Thai women. She made people all over the world realize that, though our country was poor, it was rich indeed in terms of the beauty of its women. And now Miss Phornthip is living proof again of this in the eyes of the world. She was crowned Miss Universe unanimously, to the delight of all of us, Thai brothers and sisters. This is no small feat, my dear listeners, because few countries in the world have as many as two Miss Universes. . . . What does this mean, if not that the beauty of Thai women is truly world class and that it's hard to find women anywhere who can compete with our Thai women as far as beauty is concerned’.

**Lamjiak**

(Grabs the naked body of the old woman of Bed 1 and turns it over on its side, presenting the bottom to the audience, then proceeds to wipe her back.)

**Radio**

‘—and I strongly believe that in future contests Thailand will have yet more Miss Universes...’ (52-53)

It is often said that the new generations raised on daily exposure to sound and sight of television have lost their verbal imagination. Chart Korbjitti’s technique simply imitates, through the power of the word, what modern media can present, namely actions to be seen and words to be heard. In short, the author uses what modern audiences like best to send forth his message.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

Now the question remains that having gained a receptive readership, how does the author’s narrative technique add to the significance of his message? The play on the inner feelings of the elderly that the movie director sees on stage is nothing but a picture of life in old age. The movie director, aged 63 becomes aware, perhaps for the first time in his life, of what old age really means. Although he knows the natural truth of sickness, old age and death, which he too has experienced in his life, seeing these conditions on stage strikes him like a revelation.

“To tell you frankly, when I see something like this [the old and dying], I’m scared.

Scared to lie on a bed like this.” (47)

The fact that the movie director does not have a name is also significant. Reinforced by strong symbolisms, the players on stage represent both the local (they are Thai people in the old people’s home living out the vicissitudes of life) and the universal (they are

human beings left alone by their relatives and all on the verge of death). Other characters in the novel are named the father, the grandmother, the son, the worker, or they are called according to their chief characteristic, such as Old Nuan (a kind and gentle lady) and Old Sorn (the one who teaches). The latter woman lives up to her reputation as a wise woman in the playful banter with a visiting schoolboy. The conversation is a clear reflection of the wisdom of the old, in particular, in that they accept things as they are, which is a pronouncedly Buddhist concept.

**The son**

(Looks at the bowl.) “The ice is all melted.”

**Old Sorn**

(Uninterested.) “Never mind. It’s ice, so it melts. If it was a piece of stone, maybe it wouldn’t melt. It’s doing its duty as it is. Or what do you think?”

**The son**

(Laughs.) “You are too much, you know.”

**Old Sorn**

(Laughs.) “I’m tellin’ the truth.”

**The son**

(Laughs.) I wasn’t arguing, was I? You know if my gran was like you, I’d spend the whole day talking with her.”

**Old Sorn**

“How come? Don’t you talk with your grandmother?”

**The son**

“Not much. I don’t know what to talk about with her. She’s always grumbling and being fussy.”

**Old Sorn**

“Old people, let me tell you, can be annoyin’.”

**The son**

“But I’m not annoyed with you at all.”

### **Old Sorn**

"If you were with me all day, you would be, believe me." (Laughs.) (112)

But the most symbolical of all the characters in the play is an old man who none of the inmates has ever seen. He lives in a cell in their ward and keeps shouting periodically, "There is nothing, absolutely nothing." The stage performance often brings to mind "The Caretaker" and "Waiting for Godot."

The exploitation of the media and the deliberate mix of other forms of representation and genres have a unique effect on the reader. Robert Martin Adams in his book, *Afterjoyce – Studies in Fiction After Ulysses* noted way back in the 1970s that "artists and writers began to break the smooth surfaces of their works, and therefore were called 'non-representational' but the works in art or fiction like that of Joyce and Kafka do not fail to represent." (17) A memorable comparison between traditional and modern modes of representation was also made by Jose Ortega y Gasset. "The work of art is a window-pane," he says, "works of realism look through the glass and make it invisible, while modernist works focus on the glass instead and see only a confused blur of colour and forms." (10)

Despite all the visual elements introduced through the setting on the stage, Chart Korbjitti's narrative technique is indeed opaque. His technique calls for a heightened involvement by the reader, who has to work hard to reconstruct the novel's plot. Strangely enough, young readers, having ignored literature and novels for long, have expressed great interest in reading this novel. Perhaps not for anything else, but to solve the play's major puzzle in the plot. At the end of the play, or rather novel, there are more questions than answers. At one point of the novel the protagonist seems to arrive at a realization with these lines, something that Ezra Pound would have loved:

"It is only an empty room.  
It is only an empty room.  
An empty room." (232)

To summarize, Chart Korbjitti has experimented with the form of the novel, like other Western writers, to revive worn fictive forms for the survival of the novel. It is easy to perceive the impact that the media had on the Thai writer; it is also possible to speak of "influence", and the extent by which Chart Korbjitti appears global, but he is also steeped in the local with his themes and the Buddhist outlook on life directed to the Thai readership. But a discerning reader can easily recognize the universal truths embedded in this novel.



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