

Narrative Networks: Bleak House and the Affordances of Form

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Faced with a doorknob, most of us know what to do. We turn it in one direction, and if that doesn't unlatch the door, we turn it in the other. We then use the same doorknob to pull the door toward us or push it away from us. We perceive what design theorists and cognitive psychologists call the doorknob's affordances. The word *affordance* is used to mean the range of potential actions and uses latent in different forms. The doorknob affords turning, and it affords both pushing and pulling. Objects may also have lots of unexpected affordances generated by imaginative users: we may hang signs or clothes on a doorknob, for example, and so expand its affordances beyond its intended design. Doorknobs probably seem very far from the question of the novel. But I propose to borrow the notion of affordances to think about narrative length. That is, rather than asking what features narratives *have*, I would ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in the form of narrative. Specifically, what is the long novel *capable* of doing? And how might the long narrative form be put to use in unexpected ways that expand a general sense of the novel's affordances?

In September 1853, exhausted from having just finished work on *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens wanted to take an extended break. But Dickens's magazine, *Household Words*, was struggling financially; the printers suggested that Dickens himself could boost sales if he wrote a novel suitable for twenty short installments of this weekly magazine. Now rather than be relieved to find himself working in a shorter and more condensed narrative form, Dickens figured the difficulty of the weekly number as claustrophobic, even violently constraining. "The difficulty of space is CRUSHING," he wrote in a letter to John Forster.

What I'd like to suggest is that the enforced brevity of *Hard Times* got in the way of the kind of experiment in novel writing that Dickens had undertaken with *Bleak House*. Using the expansive form of the long, loose, baggy triple decker, Dickens had tried to represent all of England as interconnected. Indeed, I argue that *Bleak House* relies heavily on the form of the network in a way that paves the way for recent narratives about political, technological, economic, and social networks, including such films as *Traffic*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*. Network theory is emergent across disciplines now, and it seems to me important to recognize that the humanities has something to offer to that theorization. But I want to make the eccentric claim that the expansive length of *Bleak House* makes the nineteenth-century novel more successful than any recent film at capturing the complexity and power of networked social experience.

"Why, Esther," says John Jarndyce, after Sir Leicester Dedlock has left the house, "our visitor and you are the last persons on earth I should have thought of connecting together!" (532). *Bleak House* is of course deeply interested in the possibilities of interconnection among far-flung lives: from haughty aristocrats to crossing sweep-

ers and bricklayers, through philanthropists, soldiers, dancing masters, doctors, suitors, and lawyers. But just what are the principles of interconnection in *Bleak House*?

The first and most obvious is the lawsuit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce itself. But there are other ways that characters are connected in the text. Disease is a prominent example: as Jo passes smallpox to Esther, the contagion itself becomes another point of contact that links social actors across groups. The network of philanthropies is a third organizing principle, bringing Esther into contact with Caddy Jellyby and Mrs. Chadband into relation to Mr. Guppy. There is the aristocratic social-political network, which links Lady Dedlock to the world of fashion and Sir Leicester Dedlock to parliamentary debates about social reform. There is "rumor," which "persists in flitting and chattering about town" (690). There is also the space of the city itself, which links characters like Charley and Gridley by mere proximity. And crucially, there are systems of kinship, the most important being the secret kinship that links Sir Leicester Dedlock to Esther via Nemo and Lady Dedlock; but other kinship networks link Trooper George to the Ironmaster and Mrs. Jellyby to Mr. Turveydrop.

In other words, linking characters in the novel are the law, disease, philanthropy, the space of the city, class, gossip, and the family tree. I myself am struck by the strangeness of this list, its puzzling incoherence: some of these are voluntary, others coercive; some follow the procedures of state institutions, others thrive on sheer proximity. Crucially, too, these principles of interconnection are not homologous, so they actually have the potential to derail and subvert one another. Mrs. Rouncewell, for example, is a point at which conflicting networks cross: loyal to the Dedlocks, she commits herself willingly to serving an aristocratic social order; and yet her own role in a kinship system links her to the bourgeois Ironmaster, who is bent on replacing aristocratic hierarchy with wealth, merit, and education, and to Trooper George, her favorite son, for whom she is willing to sacrifice the Dedlock family name.

So *Bleak House* represents social relationships not as static structures but as constantly superimposed, conflicting, and overlapping relational webs. Some of these—like the law and class relations—are hierarchical, while others—like rumor and urban space—are more fluid and egalitarian. In the process *Bleak House* imagines society itself as a network of networks. Indeed, what defines the social in *Bleak House* is nothing other than the superimposition of the law, disease, philanthropy, kinship, and the city. These various principles of interconnection are both separate and overlapping: each has its own logic, its own way of organizing and linking the social world, but each is also capable of connecting the same groups of characters as the others.

Contemporary network theorists in the social sciences (such as Newman, Barabási and Watts) call these webs of interconnection *distributed networks*. A distributed network is one in which any point can connect to any other point without needing to go through any central site or in any fixed order. In *Bleak House*, each character acts as a node in a distributed network; and to make things more complicated, most characters in the text act as nodes in two or more different distributed networks.

On the face of it, narratives wouldn't seem to lend themselves to the representation of networks at all. While narratives are organized around diachronic unfoldings, networks are composed of constant crisscrossings among nodes in a system, best represented, at least traditionally, by synchronic forms like charts and maps. Yet *Bleak House* structures the unfolding of its plot around multiple conflicting and competing webs of interconnection—and so, to return to my doorknob analogy, it suggests that one can hang narratives on networks, and specifically on multiple sprawling and overlapping distributed networks.

But this is no easy task. I think in fact that it represents a radical expansion of the usual affordances of narrative form. *Bleak House* is obviously remarkable not least for its sheer number of characters: depending on how you count them, there are between fifty and seventy. In order to represent the extension and overlapping of multiple distributed networks, you need lots and lots of nodes. So if we take Dickens to be experimenting with the representation of society as a kind of meta-network, it's clear that he needs significantly more than the usual number of novelistic characters—the three or four families adopted by Jane Austen, for example, or the marriageable woman caught between two suitors in the marriage plot. If we think of *Hard Times* as another Dickensian attempt to represent not individuals but the social itself, I think we can begin to see why Dickens was so frustrated with its size. Given its compressed numbers, *Hard Times* could yield only a few major characters, and in order to represent a whole society these few major figures must function as representatives of large social groups: Stephen Blackpool the honest laborer; James Harthouse the dissipated aristocrat, Thomas Gragrind the utilitarian bourgeois, and so on. Character is perhaps the easiest and most traditional way of conveying the social: heroes or representative types stand for the community; outcasts and foreigners mark the boundaries. But while *Hard Times* depends on this relatively conventional use of characters as representatives, *Bleak House* refuses it. Though characters do represent social groups, the novel actually goes to some trouble to stress that characters are less important because they are exemplary or synecdochical than because they play crucial roles in social, economic, and institutional networks.

For example, the novel introduces us to Jo for the first time at the inquest into Nemo's death, and he is called to testify because a witness claims he is the only person Nemo has been seen talking to. So he first appears in *Bleak House* not because he is an abandoned urban child forced to work on the streets but because he is a point of contact between a dead man and the law. Jo then reappears in the text, over and over, not because he represents poverty or childhood or social marginality but because his literal location in the city at specific times and places makes him relevant to a murder investigation, efforts at urban reform, and even the institution of marriage. Jo emerges, then, as a node in multiple social processes.

I'm tempted to say that by organizing itself around networks rather than persons, *Bleak House* does for character what Marx did for commodities: casting narrative persons less as powerful or symbolic agents in their own right than as moments in which complex and invisible social forces cross. Characters are not centered subjects but points of social intersection. By hanging his novel not on individuals but on networks, Dickens is able to undermine the usual novelistic reliance on

individual agency. Narratology, as Marie-Laure Ryan has argued, has traditionally understood narrative actors as intelligent agents with purposeful actions. In other words, narrative action has seemed to afford something like persons—deliberate, conscious individual agents. But a habit of thinking about plot through character, through individual persons, may have prevented us from seeing how a novel like *Bleak House* painstakingly works out the importance of impersonal (and transpersonal) networks over personal agency. It also prevents us from seeing how ideologically unsettling the networks of *Bleak House* really are.

Consider, for example, how multiple networks find and interpellate Jo: caught up in the passage of contagion, legal inquiry, and urban space, he is shocked by his own apparent importance on the one hand and his total insignificance on the other. How can he be both entirely neglected by the social world and yet also unable to escape the webs of interconnection that necessarily link him to that world?

Network theorists argue that in most networks there are some nodes that are more highly linked than others; while most nodes cluster together around shared functions and purposes, a few important nodes are simultaneously part of many large clusters. These are called *hubs*. It's not hard to identify the hubs in *Bleak House*: Jo, Esther, Woodcourt, Tulkinghorn, Bucket, and Miss Flite all appear in multiple clusters and provide links between clusters. But again, this seems to me a surprising and strangely incoherent list: it doesn't name only the most central or the most powerful figures: those who are the sites of the most substantial traffic are not necessarily sources of either agency or authority. But this is no accident: as the example of Jo makes clear, it is perfectly possible to function as a crucial point of social intersection without having any control over the social oneself.

Bleak House undermines the usual sense of narrative's affordances by replacing the centrality of persons with the agency of networks, and in doing so, it seems to me, *Bleak House* turns out to be more disconcerting than many contemporary representations of social networks in narrative, including the spate of recent films that struggle to represent globalized networks of politics, economics, and technology: *Traffic*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*, to give a few of the best-known examples. These films connect clusters of characters to each other across vast distances through movements of money and power. But the sheer length of *Bleak House* allows the Victorian novel to do two things that the feature film cannot. First, the filmic narratives tend to rely on what theorists call chain networks, where one event prompts another in a sequence of effects—more like dominoes than like the Internet. *Babel* might look like an exception at first, but it pretends to be more complex than it is by telling three of its four main stories as if they were simultaneous when they're in fact sequential: reordering the plot gives you quite a straightforward cause-and-effect narrative. *Bleak House*, by contrast, relies on the more complex model of distributed networks, where the links between nodes arise in any kind of order—anyone can run into almost anyone else on the streets of London, for example—and this complicates and multiplies not only the possibilities for causal relationships but for social relationships altogether, including unlikely ties among members of apparently far-flung social groups. After all, any number of distributed networks, from gossip to disease to urban space, can end up linking someone like Jo the lowly crossing sweeper to someone as remote as the haughty Sir Leicester Dedlock.

Which brings me to the second thing that the long narrative does that the shorter ones cannot: the films typically rely on a single principle of interconnection, like the drug trade or the oil industry, to undergird their plots, whereas Dickens layers on multiple principles of interconnection, linking the same individuals and families over and over again through different channels.

By expanding the sheer number of networks and the sites of their crossings, *Bleak House* unsettles the primacy not only of individuals but also of families. *Syriana*, *Traffic*, and *Babel* all imagine the breakup of the family unit as the worst kind of violence wrought by networks. The restoration of the safety and integrity of the family becomes the primary source of both plotted action and thematic meaning. By contrast, consider the biggest secret of *Bleak House*—the link between Esther and Lady Dedlock: this is the secret of an intimate, family relationship. But by revealing it gradually over the course of the novel, Dickens exposes not so much the oppression of families *by* networks but families *as* networks. We might also think of Mrs. Badger, whose absurd pride in her three husbands emphasizes that husbands are not primarily persons; the husband is a position in a kinship network, a replaceable node in the family system, and as Mrs. Badger makes clear, each husband is also a node in other systems, professional and social. Replaceability also describes Esther's two husbands, one of whom replaces himself and his house with another husband and another house in one of the most unsettling moments in the text. So just as *Bleak House* reveals characters not as centered subjects but as nodes of social traffic, it exposes the family as neither primary nor private but as itself a networking principle with implications that reach as widely as the Courts of Chancery or the transmission of smallpox.

Up to this point I have argued that *Bleak House* hangs its plot on networks rather than persons and families, and the consequences are a disruption of an ideology of individualism that usually underpins narrative and a disruption of a domestic ideology that usually underpins the Victorian novel. I wish to conclude by suggesting that *Bleak House* goes a step farther and disrupts the very possibilities of grasping the social world—that is, the possibilities of realism.

Bleak House suggests that England is composed of multiple crisscrossing networks. On the other hand, the novel also relies heavily on the techniques of plotted suspense. At first glance, these two impulses—the sprawling and overlapping network and the teleological drive of suspenseful narrative—would seem opposed. Most classic readings of detective fiction suggest that endings are deferred in order to provide the eventual satisfactions of understanding and order. This is quite the reverse of the network, which is happy to lose us in its constantly crisscrossing maze. But I argue that conventional readings of detective fiction have missed the importance of the narrative middle by too strongly favoring the analysis of closure. The suspense of the middle occurs when a narrative clearly signals that it is holding something back. These moments might indicate that we are missing a crucial piece of information—like a secret—or they might deliberately prolong an uncertain process, keeping back a knowledge of the outcome—a chase, a threat, a flirtation. *Bleak House* offers multiple sources of suspense—family secrets, a mysterious murder, a baffling lawsuit, and a frantic midnight pursuit—and so insists

that we spend hours and hours in the experience of uncertainty, the experience specifically of *withheld* knowledge.

But perhaps it's not really very surprising after all: given the complexity and enormity of the multiple webs of interconnection that make up the social, how could we know the whole? In fact, because these sprawling, overlapping, and indefinitely extensive processes of interconnectedness, from law to disease to kinship, can never be fully grasped all at once, the emphasis on withholding knowledge may actually be essential to the task of representing multiple distributed networks. But if that heaping of networks is precisely what makes up the social, then the realist novel must somehow register both the attempt to apprehend the social and the impossibility of that apprehension. I suggest, then, that *Bleak House* uses the suspense of the long middle to demonstrate that at any moment our knowledge of social interconnections can only ever be partial: we may grasp the overwhelmingly complex webs of social interconnections in glimpses and hints, but the networks that connect rich and poor, city and world, the dead and the living are never fully present to consciousness. If the overlapping of social networks approaches a magnitude and a complexity so great that their wholeness defies full knowledge, the narrative form best suited to their elusiveness may be the narrative that suggests and withholds—that is, the narrative of suspense.

By repeatedly offering and also suspending a knowledge of the networked social world, Dickens hints that his novel is not—and indeed could never be—complete or encompassing. In any network, nodes can be replaced, and they can gather links to new nodes. To capture a moment, one must struggle to grasp the multiple systems of interconnection—constantly unfolding and expanding and overlapping—that constitute local instantiations of the social. Since these different systems emerge, expand, and develop in different times and places and at different rates, any apprehension of a cultural network must be responsive not only to multiple networks but also to their multiple temporalities. Thus *Bleak House* suggests that any historically particular event or institution or person is itself found at the crossing of numerous networks. The novel's own massive scale might be necessary to the evocation of multiple distributed networks, but it still can't ever really capture the social as a meta-network, which always and necessarily extends beyond any temporal or spatial boundaries that one might set for it. While *Hard Times*, by relying on synecdoche, renders society as a finite sum of social groups, *Bleak House*, by choosing networks over representative types, constantly runs up against the limits of its own capacity for representation. Since networks expand indefinitely, the networked novel must hint at an immeasurable duration that extends even beyond its own considerable size. As Henry James put it so famously in the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere" (vii). Yet Dickens refuses to be a Jamesian artist, choosing "eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which [relations] shall happily *appear* to [stop]" (vii), and instead gestures to the very fact that relations constantly break the boundaries of representation. Indeed, rather than claiming to capture the family, the city, or the nation, Dickens points us to a model of social interconnection that is larger and longer than the novel itself could ever manage. In the end, then, the vast mimetic

project of *Bleak House* affords not individual agency, not the primacy of families, and not realism in any conventional sense, but a kind of narratively networked sublime.

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