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Ronald Sukenick and the Rhetoric of Truth: Narrative as Argument in Fiction

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Abstract:

This article analyses Ronald Sukenick's *Narralogues: Truth in Fiction* (2000), highlighting how his text blends storytelling with rhetorical argument. Sukenick rejects conventional, mimetic realism—which he dismisses as commercialised fiction— and instead views narrative as an active tool for philosophical inquiry and persuasion. By placing his theories in conversation with scholars like Emerson, Burke, Bakhtin, White, and Walsh, the study shows how experimental writing transforms readers into active participants. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that Sukenick's framework elevates postmodern fiction into an essential medium for societal critique, ethical reflection, and creative independence.

Keywords: Narralogue, Postmodern Fiction, Experimental Narrative, Rhetoric, Truth in Fiction, Reader Participation, Literary Theory, Fiction

From the mid-1960s through the late 1990s, Ronald Sukenick stood as a pivotal force in American literary postmodernism. Alongside contemporary innovators like Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover, Sukenick rejected conventional realism, straightforward storytelling, and the expectation of literal mimicry in art. However, while his peers frequently drifted toward detached cynicism or insular linguistic puzzles, Sukenick championed a constructive, hands-on model. In his view, a novel should never function as a passive reflection of the world; instead, he treated it as a dynamic tool built to spark intellectual discovery, challenge dominant ideologies, and unlock personal freedom.

For more than twenty-five years, Sukenick drove the vanguard of experimental writing. Working simultaneously as a fiction writer, scholarly theorist, and systemic reformer, he dismantled conventional language patterns to fuse intellectual critique directly with the fluid nature of daily life. He articulated these philosophies in his 1985 essay collection, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (1985). In this work, he advocated for a spontaneous



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style of prose that demanded active reader participation. Sukenick firmly believed that instead of merely copying outside occurrences, literature must directly step into and transform the audience's perception. He championed these creative boundaries not only through his personal bibliography, but also by dedicating his life to guiding the next generation of *avant-garde* authors.

In his later critical work, *Narralogues: Truth in Fiction* (2000), Sukenick introduced the concept of the *narralogue*—a hybrid literary structure that fuses narrative storytelling with explicit rhetorical pleading. Unlike classic theatrical dialogue, the narralogue relies fundamentally on the temporal progression of prose fiction. It captures the human mind actively meditating on temporal reality, steering what Sukenick described as the imagination's structural conflict with time. Because this form unfolds sequentially, it naturally accommodates diverse, competing voices (heteroglossia) and avoids neat, absolute resolutions, rendering fixed dogmas obsolete. Under this framework, fiction functions as an adaptable, evolving instrument of understanding capable of capturing the chaotic flux of reality and human engagement with art.

Sukenick's theoretical framework targets the foundational conventions of Western literature, specifically accusing the linear finality of Gutenberg print structures and traditional Aristotelian plot mechanics of reinforcing institutional power (Sukenick 12). According to Sukenick, contemporary culture mistakenly views artists as creators of aesthetic beauty rather than investigators of truth, a shift in perspective that has led to the widespread belief that fiction is merely an imaginative exercise completely detached from factual reality. Sukenick argues that this definition of *fiction* is a relatively modern invention, emerging only within the past two hundred years. Before its rise, human storytelling relied on foundational narratives like myths, epics, religious texts, and oral traditions that did not draw a sharp line between imagination and literal truth. Instead, these older narrative styles communicated deep insights into the human condition and core societal values without ever claiming to be factually accurate. Sukenick contends that acknowledging this older, richer tradition makes the modern view of fiction—as nothing more than invented stories—completely unsustainable. By comparing the deep roots of ancient storytelling to the shallow definition used today, he argues that the contemporary view is highly fragile, metaphorically asserting that the weight of historical narrative would *crush the whole concept of fiction*. He suggests that modern fiction is fragile and insignificant when compared to narrative's enduring role as a tool for discovering truth. He says:

That's why we have come to believe that artists of all kinds are purveyors of beauty, not truth. That's why what we call fiction, though it's only existed for two hundred years, is considered our basic narrative form, deny-ing the existence of a much older



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tradition of narrative which, when recognized, will crush the whole concept of fiction like the flimsy butterfly it is. Narralogues, (12)

Sukenick contended that a strict reliance on unchanging, rigid narrative structures alienates creative literature from genuine human experience. Though detractors often labelled this emphasis on subjective perception as basic solipsism, Sukenick countered that meaningful modern writing must liberate genuine human consciousness from the grasp of exploitative political and economic rhetoric. A foundational element of this mission was his fierce opposition to heavily commercialized, corporate-backed pop fiction and the deceptive spectacles driven by consumer media. Drawing thematic parallels to the critiques of cultural simulation championed by theorists like Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, Sukenick framed the novel as a defiant statement capable of challenging artificial realities with critical, moral gravity.

Sukenick maintained that contemporary shifts—such as the evolution of digital technology, postmodern philosophy, and advanced linguistics—naturally justify moving away from transparent representation in favour of an adaptable, highly rhetorical application of language.

In his experimental collection, *Narralogues: Truth in Fiction*, Sukenick demonstrates a novel genre designed to dismantle the barrier separating creative storytelling from philosophical discourse. He introduced the designation *narralogue* to define this blended category, arguing that vital creative prose must not be restricted to theatrical mimicry or passive reproduction. Sukenick used the dismissive term *fictition* to characterize traditional realist novels that rely on formulaic storytelling and imitate outward reality solely to satisfy popular commercial appetites. In stark contrast to these commercial templates, Sukenick viewed authentic expression as an unfolding journey of intellect and persuasion that develops progressively over time.

Sukenick maintained that narrative constitutes a vital tool of human cognition, uniquely equipped to mirror the fluid, unpredictable course of everyday life. To build this theoretical framework, Sukenick integrated varied intellectual traditions, combining Ralph Waldo Emerson's views on a fluid, open imagination, Kenneth Burke's assessment of language as a form of symbolic action, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, which highlights the active tension among diverse, competing voices.

In his theoretical commentary, Ronald Sukenick challenges conventional assumptions about storytelling by arguing that creative prose should serve as an active vehicle for intellectual debate rather than a vehicle for passive amusement. A cornerstone of his literary philosophy is a firm rejection of traditional realism. He argues that this mimicry



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reduces the novel to a mere consumer product engineered for mindless consumption. In its place, Sukenick champions avant-garde structural frameworks that intentionally dissolve the historical boundaries separating short stories, personal essays, and biographical memoirs. By reframing narrative as an unfolding intellectual journey rather than a transparent reflection of the external world, his work treats creative writing as a highly flexible rhetorical instrument designed to dissect intricate human experiences.

Sukenick maintains that literary truth is uncovered through relentless formal experimentation rather than literal factual accuracy. By utilizing self-reflexive language and breaking down rigid genre expectations, experimental fiction transforms the text into an open, collaborative dialogue. Within this paradigm, meaning is never static or predetermined by the author. Instead, the reader must actively interrogate, interpret, and shape the narrative. For Sukenick, this interactive dynamic elevates the novel from a tool for simple escapism into a sharp, critical weapon for investigating reality and interpreting human life. Through this conceptual fusion, Sukenick discards static abstractions along with the restrictive structural unities of traditional Aristotelian plots.

Sukenick aligns his creative methodology with a self-aware, highly rhetorical counter-tradition populated by figures like Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett, who routinely disrupted narrative action to introduce philosophical arguments. For Sukenick, literary insight is never a fixed destination; it is an improvisational, cumulative breakthrough achieved by intentionally resisting quick resolutions. Ultimately, the true objective of fiction is to awaken individual consciousness, liberating both the writer and the reader from institutional programming and social containment. The pivotal section titled *Narralogue on Everything* serves as the definitive case study for Sukenick's hybrid aesthetic. This work functions simultaneously as an artistic manifesto and a live creative performance, shifting effortlessly among personal anecdotes, aesthetic philosophy, dense theory, and absurdist humour to physically execute his concepts.

The chapter, *Narralogue on Everything* highlights this temporal fluidity through the character of Waldo, who contemplates the city skyline from Sukenick's apartment. Instead of viewing buildings as unchangeable monuments, Waldo deciphers the cityscape as a developing historical narrative of Euro-American culture. He realizes that interpreting reality as a fluid process evolving over time offers a significantly deeper understanding than unmoving, detached observation (Sukenick 52). To validate this experiential method, the text integrates vital critical theories, including Hayden White's landmark observation that analysing narrative structure is fundamentally an interrogation of human culture and humanity itself:



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To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself. So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report of the way things really happened, that narrativity could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent—absent or, as in some domains of contemporary Western intellectual and artistic culture, programmatically refused." (quoted in *Narralogues*, p.61)

This perspective aligns with Ralph Waldo Emerson's classic directive that individuals should treat their active, lived experiences as the primary text, viewing published books merely as supplementary commentary.

Concurrently, these intersecting conceptual lenses demonstrate that narrative thinking—fueled by unpredictable shifts, chronological development, and layered meanings—serves as an exceptionally powerful instrument for social intervention. Sukenick utilizes this experimental framework to launch a fierce critique against corporate publishing institutions and insular scholarly elitism. He champions an interior, deeply individualized aesthetic *mutiny* to claw back cultural independence from the pervasive corporate entertainment complex (Sukenick 71). By executing anti-formal strategies like text fragmentation, visual layouts, and a concentrated focus on the immediate present, Sukenick seeks to liberate creative art from its confinement within elite institutions and mass-market escapism. Ultimately, he reframes creative production as an open, therapeutic agency built to expand human awareness.

The *Narralogues* stylistic shifts culminate in a chaotic debate among a group of artists arguing over the merits of collage versus mosaic, and reality versus truth. This scene functions as a literal performance of narrative operating as an ongoing, open-ended argument. Sukenick concludes by arguing that any art, regardless of its perceived quality or moral standing, is fundamentally beneficial if it disrupts compliance, awakens the human soul, and serves as a vehicle for pure consciousness—a secular equivalent to the concept of *moksha*, or ultimate liberation (98). In an era increasingly managed by commercial algorithms and digital spectacles, Sukenick's defence of open-ended, exploratory narrative serves as a vital blueprint for artistic autonomy.

Sukenick stresses that truth in fiction is always conditional, temporary, and dependent on situation rather than absolute or final. The real meaning of fiction lies more in its argument than in its content. Good fiction persuades readers through the way it unfolds, gradually replacing weaker understandings of experience while also admitting its own limits. This rhetorical view is influenced by classical traditions and modern thinkers. They see narrative



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as a kind of exploratory speech that captures attention and engages all human faculties, including intuition, emotion, and intellect. Good fiction releases what Sukenick calls the *spiritual unconscious*, increases self-awareness, and promotes a sense of liberation similar to *moksha*, connecting personal experience with wider ethical and cultural concerns. To put the matter briefly, Sukenick sharply contrasts this ideal with what he calls *fictition*—commercial, imitative fiction shaped by market demands. Such writing primarily aims to entertain readers in a hypnotic manner, encouraging them to suspend disbelief. It tends to reinforce the existing social order rather than question it.

True fiction, by contrast, is self-aware, formally innovative, and committed to breaking traditional conventions. It employs graphic, sonic, discontinuous, and associative techniques to more accurately reflect the complexity of modern life. Through the hybrid form of his *narralogues*—which blend story, essay, dialogue, and meditation—Sukenick demonstrates that the highest purpose of fiction is to invite readers to actively participate in an ongoing, democratic process of discovery and meaning-making. In this way, narrative thinking emerges as a powerful and inclusive alternative to both outdated realism and elitist academic criticism.

Even in his work *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (1985) Sukenick discussed the nature of fiction and the writing process. Rather than presenting a rigid theory, Sukenick offers a series of digressive meditations that mirror the flexible, improvisational approach he champions. He argues that fiction should be viewed as an ongoing act of discovery and thinking, not as a finished representation of reality. Emphasizing flow, spontaneity, and openness to chance, he criticizes conventional realism and static literary forms that *freeze* experience, instead promoting ant formalist techniques that embrace discontinuity, digression, and personal experience.

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