

Note: Frustrated with the different meanings of the words "story," "plot," and "narrative" among different critics, I have resorted to using italics when employing a critic's technical implementation of any of these terms. If the word appears without italics outside of a quotation, it signifies nothing more than its denotation.

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Interesting Nothing

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1. Introduction to Boredom

There are some works of film or literature that barely have stories. Sometimes, things happen; more often, nothing happens. When they do, it doesn't really matter. There are characters, freed from the tyranny that E.M. Forster sees in *plot* yet hardly taking advantage of that freedom. They interact with each other, usually producing nothing new through their interactions. The same conversations take place, the same procedures are repeated, the same scenery is depicted. Time passes. The reader, at the end of a chapter or episode, might not be able to recount its contents.

As there is no proper, adequately specific name for them, let me call them here "boring" works, so as to distinguish them from the rest of the slice of life pack. "Slice of life" was originally a theatrical term used to denote naturalistic representations of life. In film and literature, the meaning is different. Eschewing the emphasis on naturalism, slice of life in the literary context indicates that a work focuses primarily on a cut-out segment of its characters'

lives, with narrative form taking a backseat. Slice of life therefore comprises a broad category of mostly modern and postmodern titles, counting among its members works ranging from the comedic (*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*) to the morbid (Stephen King's "Premium Harmony"). The boring are less easily classified, but I would like to draw a line between nerve-racking boredom (Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*) and soothing boredom ('healing' works such as *Bartender* and *Yokohama Shopping Log*). *Jealousy* I feel is fundamentally a different beast from what I want to examine. Its boredom is derivative of the literary project rather than the content; a lot happens, we are merely immersed in banana tree arithmetic instead of dramatic conflict because that is what the author desires.

When I first brought up the issue of boring, 'nothing happens' works, it was suggested to me that I work with *Seinfeld*. "It's a show about nothing," someone said. "It is a nothingness that is transformed by making it interesting and by making it funny," writes one reviewer (Miller). I am not interested in comedy; comedy is funny, not boring. The "nothing" which *Seinfeld* marketed itself as being was, like the rest of the show, a joke.

Rather, I want to look at these boring works, one prototypical exemplar in particular, and decrypt their appeal—for the boring has its appeal. We just don't seem to have an established vocabulary with which to discuss it. How does one vet the boring—how does one convey interest in it to an interlocutor? *Aria*, a Japanese sci-fi/fantasy slice of life television show, is a paragon of the boring, and following is a typical interchange regarding it:

Person A: So, what is *Aria* about?

Person B: Not much.

Person A might press on, asking what happens in the show, and Person B almost always resorts to waffly statements about *Aria*'s themes, character-drivenness, or artistic merit. He comes off as

an apologist, unable to answer the seemingly simple question ("what is it about?") and unwilling to admit that it is about nothing. Another frequent response is that it is boring, and that that is its appeal. "Nothing in life is better than sleeping," begins one review of *Aria* (Baka-Raptor). But both of these responses raise eyebrows—"is there no plot?"—and produce sparks when introduced to E.M. Forster's understanding of stories.

The layman's single question of "is there no plot?" is split into two issues for Forster: that of *story* and that of *plot*.

2. Forster's *Story*

In *Aspects of the Novel*, a *story* is defined as a sequence of events "arranged in their time sequence" (24). *Stories* are nothing more or less than this, Forster says, the "lowest and simplest of literary organisms" (25). *Stories* operate by creating suspense, and they fail when we either can guess the rest of the events in the sequence or are no longer interested in learning them (Forster 24).

"We are all like Scheherazade's husband," Forster writes, referring to *One Thousand and One Nights*, "in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal and that is why the backbone of a novel has to be a story" (24). My first impulse here is to hand-wave away the word "novel" by invoking a cross-school consensus that *everything* tells a story (Roland Barthes would be on board, Mark Turner as well—even Peter Brooks, with whom I will deal later), but it happens that *Aria* is a "fiction in prose of a certain extent," so we can glibly reuse Forster's glib reuse of Chevalley's definition: *Aria* is a novel (Forster 4). Accordingly, *Aria* must tell a *story*.

Let's investigate that *story*.

The year is 2301, the planet a terraformed Mars. A trio of girls is training to become

gondolier tour-guides in New Venice, a replica of the long-sunken Italian city. The main character, Akari, is an immigrant from Earth, and most of *Aria's* fifty-two episodes revolve around her exploration of the city: its inhabitants, its traditions, its history, its landmarks. Occasionally, New Venice 'opens its heart' to Akari, and she has a fantastic encounter with the ghost of one of Mars's terraformers, or with the spirit of a decommissioned gondola. The tale begins *in media res*, with Akari already on Mars, already working as a journeyman for the titular Aria Company, and it wraps up with her promotion to a full employee (*Aria the Animation* 1, *Aria the Origination* 13). Aside from this development—introduced in the penultimate episode, resolved in the final episode—nothing of plot importance occurs, merely a lulling string of events arranged in their time sequence. The viewer is curious to learn more about New Venice, perhaps, but never curious about the events themselves. He is hardly held in suspense.

Each episode follows the previous chronologically, and each individual episode has its *story*. Take *Aria the Natural* episode 2, "Looking For That Treasure":¹ Akari and friends find a treasure map; they decode its hint and follow the map to find another; this one leads to yet another, and so on; they stop along the way for a spot of latte; eventually they reach the endpoint of the treasure hunt—a breathtaking vista of New Venice; they enjoy the scenery; finally, they retrace their steps and put the maps back where they found them, discovering as they do so that they were not the first to replace the maps. The process of decoding the maps is not particularly interesting; the trio's dynamic is not particularly comedic; the episode consists mostly of the girls drinking coffee and walking. So we have a *story*. But it does not whet our appetite for the next episode through suspense.

The question poses itself: are *Aria's* episodes meant to stand alone, to be consumed as

¹ *Aria* is split into three television runs, each with its own title. *Aria the Animation* comprises the first 13 episodes; *Aria the Natural* provides the next 26; *Aria the Origination* gives us the final 13. "Looking For That Treasure" is thusly the fifteenth episode of *Aria*.

separate stories? Forster distinguishes between *story* and *plot*, and his distinction moves the investigation forward.

3. Forster's *Plot*

Plot for Forster is "the novel in its logical intellectual aspect" (78). A *plot* is, like a *story*, a series of events, though the emphasis is on causality rather than chronology (Forster 78). A *story* has us ask the question "and then?" while a *plot* makes us ask "why?" (Forster 78). *Plots* require intelligence and memory on the part of the reader, as opposed to curiosity with *stories*, which Forster says is in fact a baser human faculty (78-79). "The plot-maker expects us to remember, we expect him to leave no loose ends. Every action or word in a plot ought to count" (Forster, 80). As stated earlier, *Aria* is full of actions and words that do not contribute to its plot; moreover, being, as before, lulling, it discourages synapse activity in its audience rather than demanding it. At first blush, the lack of *plot* seems to be a bad sign for *Aria* and its ilk; after all, Forster's initial treatment of *plot* seems to privilege it over *story*—in addition to dissing the curiosity associated with *story* ("inquisitive" people "always have bad memories and are usually stupid"), he notes that there is beauty in a *plot* that the novelist who doesn't plot doesn't achieve (79-80).

But later in his chapter on *plot*, Forster excerpts the following particularly relevant passage from the French novel *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*:

"And what is [your book's] subject?" asked Sophroniska.

"There is none," said Edouard sharply. "My novel has no subject. No doubt that sounds foolish. Let us say, if you prefer, that it will not have 'a' subject... . 'A slice of life,' the naturalistic school used to say.² [...]"

"My poor man, you will bore your readers to death," cried Laura, unable to restrain her mirth. (Forster, 90)

² Commenting on *Yokohama Shopping Log*, one reviewer said "This is not so much a story as it is a slice of life." (Upatkoon)

André Gide, author of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, is attempting to make an argument against the necessity of plot in novels through his main character Edouard. The reaction within Gide's novel is similar to the standard reaction to boring works such as *Aria*: suspicion of boredom. But Gide doesn't find it problematic, and neither does Forster, who scrambles to enlist Gide in his own attack on *plot*. Disillusioned with *plot*, calling it a "fetish, borrowed from the drama," Forster asks if there is not a more suitable framework for the novel (88). Suddenly *plot* is nothing special, despite its ability to grant beauty; "to pot with the plot," chants Forster, excusing Edouard and giving a free pass to all those novelists willing as Gide to throw themselves into "confusion" (93).

"Confusion," however, seems to be where novelists end up when they attempt to stand narrative tradition on its head for the sake of some innovative novelistic experiment. *Jealousy* comes to mind. But simply excising character development, exposition, conflict, and dénouement is not the same as blending them in interesting ways. And *Aria* certainly is not confused. The creator of the original graphic novel work, Kozue Amano, wrote in an afterword that her goal was to show her readers the little happy things in day-to-day life, and given *Aria's* utopian feel and soothing qualities this is not lost on the audience (Amano). Whether it is boring as Laura accuses slice of life of being in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is the question.

4. Brooks's *Plot*

Here, Peter Brooks steps in with *Reading for the Plot* and calls Forster on his definition of *plot*. "Plot is, first of all, a constant of all written and oral narrative, in that a narrative without at least a minimal plot would be incomprehensible. Plot is the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements—incidents,

episodes, actions—of a narrative" (Brooks 5). Suddenly *Aria* has a *plot* once more: the internal logic stringing its episodes together. Unfortunately for Person B, this more lenient version of plot does not give him new answers for Person A. It merely patronizes the boring, patting it on the back and telling it not to worry, it has a plot.

The interconnectedness Brooks mentions points us toward a potential answer to the question raised earlier: are *Aria's* episodes meant to stand alone? No. Though no events (or actions, to be Aristotelian) across episodes are linked causally, the experience of each episode is predicated on all previous. Over the course of fifty-two episodes, the audience cares more about the characters and the world. Someone thrown into a random episode of *Aria* wouldn't necessarily find the work "incomprehensible," but there would be much not understood, and contemplating these things highlights which threads form the Brooksian *plot*.

There's world-building: a casual observer of the aforesummarized *Aria* episode, "Searching For That Treasure," might be onboard with the whole thing, noting only that the uniforms seem different from the traditional gondolier's, until the moment a spaceship takes off near the Piazza San Marco.

There's characterization: though character development is minimal, dynamics no matter how mundane are cemented and codified by the audience's exposure to them. Akari is prone to making sentimental pronouncements regarding the wonderful things she discovers, and her best friend calls her on it time and again. When this occurs for the umpteenth time in episode forty-seven, it means something different to someone who has watched forty-six episodes than to someone who has seen zero.

Though they are in stasis, the fictional world and characters are established over time, and that gradual process seems to be *Aria's plot*. The problem of Person B's dialogue options

remains, and Brooks might happily leave it hanging. Though he grudgingly accepts *plot* as prior to "those elements most discussed by critics," he makes it clear early on that his titular 'reading for the plot' is something the masses do with trashy literature (Brooks 4). Because the boring has plenty to be discussed by critics—the choicest samples, among them *Aria*, *Yokohama Shopping Log*, and *Bartender*, are all suffused with the aesthetic of *mono no aware* ('the pathos of things'), fodder for endless discussion, but also for a later section of this paper—Brooks would doubtfully be bothered by the question of how one member of the masses might convey interest in the boring to another. Leave the literary to the literary, and let the masses have their *Jaws* (Brooks 4).

For now, Person B still needs to tell Person A what *Aria* is about, and Brooks, spending the rest of his book on psychoanalysis and erotics, has little to offer aside from what we've culled thus far.

5. One Boring Answer (plot)

Person A: What is *Aria* about?

I established in my introduction that the boring works with which I'm working have little to nothing happen in them. Sure, things happen. Return to "Searching For That Treasure": Akari and friends go on a treasure hunt, drink coffee, enjoy a view of their city. Every episode is full of these totally mundane occurrences, and listing them in response to a question of "what happens" is not feasible. A laundry list of banal procedures, while an honest if simplistic account of *Aria*'s story, does not accomplish what Person B wants to accomplish. Selectively mentioning one or two such events is similarly ineffective. One can not say of *Yokohama Shopping Log* that "it's about a waitress slowly grinding coffee"³ or of *Bartender* that "it's about a bartender slowly

³ One chapter of *Yokohama Shopping Log* is primarily dedicated to this, according to Wikipedia. I was unable to confirm this independently, but it would be par for the course for boredom.

mixing drinks." Similarly, *Aria* is not about Akari drinking latte—nor is it about her growth as a gondolier; this is a premise, and rarely comes into focus.

The plot discovered when using Brooks's definition might help.

Person B: *Aria* is about exploring a world and getting to know a cast of characters.

Person A can still ask "so... what's the plot?" Using Brooks to look for interconnectedness doesn't really help. His *plot* allows us to take the most plot-deficient narrative and *say* that it has an overarching story, and while the interconnectedness *is* there and *does* matter, it doesn't help Person B in his quest to explain *Aria's story* (the backbone of the novel is a *story*, after all, and that is what excites the reader and keeps the reader interested). One could as easily apply the monomyth template to *Aria*,⁴ but all that would be produced would be a sign that monomyth is too easily applicable—to the point of meaninglessness.

Looking back at Forster's *story*, we see that *Aria* certainly has one—there is a series of events arranged in their time sequence—but that it doesn't really do what Forster says a *story* should do. It doesn't generate curiosity, it doesn't maintain suspense. ("Yes—oh dear yes—") The novel still tells a *story*, but do *Aria* and its boring brethren fall on their faces for not maintaining suspense, as Forster says all good *stories* must (Forster 23)? As stated in my introduction, the boring has its appeal. Though they are niche, boring works are almost always enjoyed by the

⁴ *Aria* as Monomyth:

- The Call: Akari decides she wants to be a gondolier.
- Allies: Akari's friends join her in her quest, the people of New Venice provide guidance.
- Preparation: Akari heads to New Venice and joins the Aria Company.
- Crossing the Threshold of Adventure: Akari begins training.
- Road of Trials: Akari perfects herself as a gondolier (mostly off-screen) and as a resident of New Venice, learning and improving as she experiences things.
- Belly of the Beast: Akari is suddenly faced with the exam to become a true professional.
- Saving Experience: Akari succeeds.
- Transforming Changes: Akari becomes the new head of the Aria Company, gains confidence.
- The Return: Akari rejoins her friends—now also professionals.
- Sharing the Gift: It is now Akari's turn to take on an apprentice.

audience willing to chance them.⁵ As stated in my introduction, we just don't seem to have an established vocabulary with which to discuss that appeal. Person B rarely manages to sell *Aria* or any of its ilk to Person A.

So yes, *Aria* has a *story*, and yes, *Aria* has a *plot*, but neither of these lends itself to a useful description of the show. Person B accepts that the *story* "tapeworm," while present, is clearly not the end-all of interest that Forster says it is, and therefore must look elsewhere for his answer to Person A (Forster 23).

6. Mundane Fantasy

In response to the question of what *Aria* is about, Person B could in theory sidestep the issue of plot by describing the technology level, by listing some of the bizarre encounters listed below. He might succeed in luring his interlocutor in by painting the picture of a spectacular world full of mystery and fantasy. This would simply be false advertising. For a work of science fiction, *Aria* is lackluster. Aside from the presence of spaceships in the sky, the show is more about our Venice than it is about the Martian copy; historical places (plazas, museums) are visited and discussed. In "Searching For That Treasure," the girls stop at Caffè Florian for their latte—an actual coffee house. A couple episodes devote themselves to the flooding of Mars, but they focus more on the feelings of the aquatects and not at all on the terraforming technology.

For a work of fantasy, *Aria* is similarly lacking. Yes, though every episode *is* full of mundane procedure, many involve fantastic happenings that are definitely not everyday. Early in the series, Akari delivers anachronistic snail mail from a ghost to the grave of one of Mars's aquatects (*Aria the Animation* 4). In one episode, she meets Cait Sith, fairy-king of Mars's cats

⁵ Unfortunately I have no idea what I could cite here to give this credence; all I can say is that I have been collecting opinions on *Aria* and a couple others for years now and the trend is clear: people who try to watch it find it fascinating, those who haven't watched it but know of it say "isn't it boring?"

(*Aria the Natural* 1). In another, Akari must retire her training gondola, and is visited by the gondola's spirit (*Aria the Natural* 16). On a cold winter day, she stumbles into the past and sees the moment when the terraformers first covered Mars with ocean (*Aria the Animation* 12). The list goes on, but all the fantastic events have one thing in common: they involve Akari seeing something most people can't.

"The world is wonderful in the eyes of wonderful people," says Aria Company boss Alicia in *Aria the Animation* episode 5, "To That Island Which Shouldn't Exist." It is intimated that Akari sees these special things because she is looking for them; combine this with creator Amano's words about finding the small happinesses in life, and the fantastic can be written off as a reassurance that there is wonder out there. (Not too different from the message of Insane Clown Posse's song "Miracles.")⁶

The fantastic in *Aria* does little to excite its audience. Inundated in the unrealistic from the beginning—we are on Mars; there are intelligent cats capable of comprehending human speech; the year is 2301, yet the New Venetians eschew motorized transport like their Venetian predecessors while spaceships touch-down between offshore wind farms in the New Adriatic Sea—the fantastic quickly becomes commonplace. Meanwhile, Akari is pronouncing everything miraculous from the spring breeze to the fact that here, unlike back on ultra-mechanized Earth, people hang their own laundry (*Aria the Animation* 1).

The commonplace thus made fantastic and the fantastic thus made commonplace, fantasy that in any other work might attract attention or drive interest here loses its significance. Anyone going into *Aria* on promises of interesting speculative fiction is guaranteed short change. Person B must, once again, look elsewhere. And this is a good thing, because not every boring title is

⁶ "Miracles" celebrates ubiquitous marvels and enchantment with the mundane:

"Niagara falls and the pyramids / everything you believed in as kids / fuckin rainbows after it rains / there's enough miracles here to blow your brain" (Insane Clown Posse)

science fiction or fantasy, much less both. *Yokohama Shopping Log* has superficial sci-fi elements like *Aria*—for instance, the main character, Alpha, is an android, but this doesn't matter at all—but most boring works are realistic to a fault (case in point: *Bartender*. Humans talk and drink, and that is all)⁷. *Aria* wouldn't be an exemplar of the boring if its unique treatment of the wondrous were its hook.

7. Another Boring Answer (aesthetics)

Forster's emphasis on *story* and Brooks's emphasis on *plot* reach out at us from a millennia-old tradition in Western culture of emphasizing conflict and resolution. Even Forster's wish for a more suitable framework for the novel than a *plot* is couched in a resignation to *plot* dominating literature. There are other traditions, obviously. In eleventh century Japan, the Tale of Genji was composed, eschewing plot in order to focus on the aesthetic of sorrow and appreciation for life's transience that would later be dubbed *mono no aware* by Tokugawan cultural scholar Motoori no Norinaga (Inouye 17, 82). The following syllogism explains the basis of *mono no aware*: "A: Life is evanescent and, as a result, sorrowful; B: Sorrow heightens the beauty of things; C: Therefore, evanescent life is beautiful" (Inouye 85).

Similar sentiments dot the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and many subsequent forms of existentialism, but in *Aria* we see them in neon lights. Much of the beauty Akari finds in New Venice is in the face of parting, passing, or even devastation: ultimately, she smiles sadly and appreciates the departure of her old gondola. New Venice itself is a glorious monument erected to the frailty of human civilization: Earth's Venice is no more, and the idyllic life lived by New Venice's inhabitants is unattainable on industrious, machine-enhanced Earth.

⁷ Summary of *Bartender*'s fifth episode, courtesy of Wikipedia: "A young salesman, Shibata, is given a transfer notice from his boss after his sales figures are low. Ryū lifts the young man's spirits by telling him about Ernest Hemingway and the story *The Old Man and the Sea*. The featured cocktail is the Daiquiri."

Yokohama Shopping Log is post-apocalyptic: Alpha has been abandoned by her master, and most of the world is submerged. One chapter of *Yokohama Shopping Log* is dedicated to Alpha running around with a camera, taking pictures of the flooded landscape—finding beauty in loss.

Lest this appear a purely Japanese phenomenon, I should like to point to some examples of its implementation—perhaps via independent invention—in Western literature: Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* eats, sleeps, and breathes in an understanding that things neither bad nor good last; *Jealousy* steeps us in obsessive recounting of the narrator's surroundings, a clearly futile attempt to grasp something and keep it static. It just so happens that *mono no aware* was codified in the Tokugawa era as an aspect Japanese identity, and that open-ended works focusing on the passage of time and beauty of evanescent life have coexisted with plotted works in Japanese culture for centuries (Inouye 83).

Person B could answer Person A: "*Aria* is a showcase for an aesthetic."

Or, in less awkward terms, "*Aria* is an art piece."⁸

I believe this would be accurate, and that it would speak for most if not all boring works—certainly all those of which I can think. Perhaps there are boring works which aren't suffused in *mono no aware*—I can't claim to have an understanding of the entire subgenre, even if I am the one who set its bounds—but I imagine their main appeal would be, in turn, artistic. Roland Barthes would say that even a piece of art has a *narrative*, and sure, *Aria* does: we've shown that (Barthes 79). But its story is not its marketing arm; it is not Forster's basis of reader interest and it does not provide Person B with any suitable answers to Person A.

8. Resolution (or lack thereof)

⁸ And I do not write B's dialogue in the snobbish voice of an *artiste*: he is not using the word 'art' normatively.

I set "boring" works aside from other, more exciting slice of life, and then I set out to determine how the appeal of the boring is explained in the face of literary criticism that privileges constructs mostly absent from the boring.

"A novel tells a story." This is Forster's claim, and our exemplar of the boring, *Aria*, indeed does tell a *story*. It even has a Brooksonian *plot*, despite the commonsense antithesis between plot and slice of life invoked by Gide. Neither of these helps our hypothetical *Aria* fan answer the question of "what is *Aria* about?" Forster and Brooks both put forward lenient definitions that allow the boring to qualify, without addressing the issue that despite events occurring in chronological order with internal logic, "nothing happens."

Forster says that the *story* is the backbone of the novel, and that readers are primarily captivated by their curiosity in the *story*. But the boring doesn't use suspense. Its *story* is meager; it doesn't captivate.

Brooks says that "reading for the plot" is what the masses do, and that anything that can't be read for its plot is better left to literary critics. But the boring doesn't need to be understood or picked apart to be enjoyed, and its plot is too feeble to appeal to the masses.

Looking elsewhere to find the appeal of *Aria* in particular, I noted that some boring works employ elements of speculative fiction, but these are usually superficial, and the boring does not appeal to fans of sci-fi or fantasy genre fiction.

Finally I touched on *mono no aware*, a Japanese aesthetic prominent in the boring and similar in spirit to sentimental trends in more recent Western literature. It seems to me that the artistic quality of works employing this aesthetic could explain their appeal, but the issue of art presents its own vast field of study, and I am suddenly humbled by my limitations as a single mortal human. I take a deep breath, smile sadly, and walk on.

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