

# **Narration in Various Disciplines**

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## **1 Definition**

Whenever we discuss the meaning and function of narrative in the academic disciplines, we need to distinguish between two main aspects. On the one hand, narratives are the subject area, or at least an important issue among others, in many disciplines, without this being explicitly thematized in every case. Here, one would have to distinguish whether these disciplines find their “narrative objects” more or less ready-made, or whether they themselves create these totally or at least partially. On the other hand, implicit references to narratives have sparked a growing tendency towards explicit reflection upon various aspects of narration. In conjunction with this reflection, the phenomenon of narrativity (Abbott → Narrativity [1]) itself is thematized, and with it content- or methodology-oriented concepts of narrativity are developed within the varied frameworks of the disciplines in question.

## **2 Explication**

Narrative as a phenomenon has a pivotal role in literary studies and history, for narratives have always formed a key subject of these disciplines. In the field of literature, narrative objects are fully formed from the outset (at least if one excludes interpretation and historical contextualization from the concept of the literary text), whereas the historical disciplines need to construct these objects, if not completely, then at least to a large extent. Accordingly, it is in these two disciplines that we find the first fundamental theoretical discussions of the concept of narrativity, making them the leading disciplines in the study of narrativity. Further important impulses have come from psychology, philosophy and the philosophy of science. Even beyond these disciplines, we not only find narrative objects which are to a large extent unspecified, but also explicit content- and methodology-oriented discussions of narrative in sociology, theology, pedagogy, ethics, psychoanalysis, art, and art history as well as law studies (Mitchell ed. 1981; Polkinghorne 1988; Nash ed. 1990; Müller-Funk 2002). It is therefore justified to speak of a “narrative turn” (Kreiswirth 2005) with its underlying assumption that the narrative paradigm may serve to reformulate the scientific and rational nature

specific to the humanities (Meuter 2004). Today, the varied approaches to the theory of narrative in the humanities constitute the interdisciplinary study of narratology (Prince 1997; Phelan & Rabinowitz eds. 2005; Herman et al. eds. 2005; Kindt & Müller eds. 2003). In the natural sciences, however, the study of narratology (Meister → Narratology [2]) remains to a large extent a desideratum. So far, it is only in medicine that rudimentary attempts have been made; however, these concern aspects of the doctor-patient relationship rather than the core problems of narrative. Systems theory might prove an innovative approach in that it presupposes such a high level of abstraction as to enable a shared sphere of reflection for both the natural sciences and the humanities.

## **3 Concepts and their History**

### **3.1 Literary Studies**

Literary studies deserve to be called the leading discipline in the study of narrative, with Aristotle's *Poetics* constituting a seminal source. The triadic structure of classical tragedy, based on the terms "beginning," "middle" and "end," can be applied to any kind of narratable material (Straub 1998). Significant beginning- and end-markers make the totality (*holos*) of the story emerge from the sequence of experiences. A story only becomes meaningful through the selection and combination of happenings and actions (*mythos*). These do not follow one upon the other in a random sequence or simply "one after the other" (*meta*), but rather "one out of the other" (*dia*), so that an intrinsic connection is made between them. Seen as a whole, there emerges a suspenseful trajectory or development from beginning to end with one or more disruptions and moderate or radical changes in direction (*peripeteia*). For Aristotle, a narrative is constituted by establishing a meaningful, cohesive, probable, and possibly even necessary order out of dissonant, fragmented, merely episodic, accidental or contingent elements (Halliwell 1987; Ricœur [1983/85] 1984/88). Thus, any sequence of actions and happenings which is discernible as a unit and has a temporal organization as well as being perceived as meaningful can be called a narrative.

In the 20th century, the German hermeneutic tradition, harking back to Aristotle, formulates "elements of narration" (*Bauformen des Erzählens*, Lämmert [1955] 1991) which are then reformulated as a general "theory of narration" (*Theorie des Erzählens*, Stanzel [1979] 1984). The focus is on the relationship between narration and temporality, on the significance and function of the narrator (Margolin → Narrator [3]), and on inquiries into the elements and structures of the narrative (Martínez & Scheffel [1999] 2007). (Regarding other traditions, e.g. formalist or structuralist, cf. Herman 1999; Nünning 2003.)

In the course of this development, narrative theorists in literary studies have increasingly had to grapple with the fact that the authors of Modernism and Postmodernism tend to break down the classic Aristotelian structures in order to construct “anti-narratives.” This tendency manifests itself for example in the refusal to meet such structural requirements as including a beginning and an end except on a purely formal level and, more importantly, in the destruction of a suspenseful fable (*plot, story, intrigue*) with a clear climax or anti-climax. In the wake of this development, the sovereignty of the narrator, even of the author (Schönert → Author [4]) (Foucault [1969] 1987), is regarded as increasingly problematic. Still, much controversy surrounds the debate as to whether the postmodern practice of narration really constitutes the demise of the Aristotelian theoretical tradition or whether it is simply an extension and reformation of this tradition (Gibson 1996; Currie 1998).

### **3.1 The Arts**

In the context of the arts, the study of narrativity can turn to Lessing’s famous *Laocoön* ([1766] 1984). According to the definition proposed by this essay for demarcating the fine arts from the literary arts (Ryan → Narration in Various Media [5]), painting and sculpture are marked by spatiality and synchronicity, whereas temporality and diachronicity are the features of poetry. The simultaneous arrangement of shapes and colors depicts objects or bodies, while the successive arrangement of articulated sounds results in the narration of actions. The visual arts can mediate actions only indirectly through the depiction of bodies, whereas in poetry a body can be portrayed only through the narration of actions. According to Lessing, the painter or sculptor must therefore find the “pregnant moment” that condenses the temporal movement in contrast to the poet, who must integrate the “defining trait” of a body into narration of the action. Moving beyond Lessing, other narrative means that allow the visual arts to depict temporal sequences might be taken into account (Pochat 1996).

### **3.2 The Historical Sciences**

Traditionally, the literary and historical disciplines are distinguished from each other on the basis of the different relationships of their subject area with the reality of what is represented. Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Halliwell 1987) already formulates the assumption that the role of fiction—in contrast to historiography—is not to convey what really happened, but rather what, under the given circumstances, could happen. At the same time, fiction has a generalizable, representative quality: the “actual” (*ta genomena*) of history vs. the “possible” (*ta dynata*) of fiction. Still, the question remains whether it is actually possible to differentiate clearly between

historical or factual and literary or fictional narratives (Schaeffer → Fictional vs. Factual Narration [6]). Goethe's categories, poetry and truth (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*), might well be more closely linked than they appear to be at first glance. As for philosophical contributions to this debate (Ricoeur [1983/85] 1984/88), they presuppose an ontological and epistemological cross-over relationship between history and fiction (cf. also Danto 1965; Veyne [1971] 1984).

Any methodology of the historical sciences must therefore also examine the question of how and to what extent its object can or must be represented by narrative means. Many authors contend that narratives are a suitable and even necessary medium for recording, describing, and explaining historical developments (Rüsen 1986, 1990). Others suggest a type of "historical argumentation" that in logical terms is independent of any form of narrative (Kocka [1980] 1989), an argument supported by the positions of the *Ecole des Annales* (cf. Ricoeur [1983/85] 1984/88). White (1973) formulated the critical position that the great historians of the 19th century modeled their works on the pattern of certain narrative genres (romance, comedy, tragedy, satire). According to White, the *real* events of the past are molded into an *artificial* narrative form, giving them a certain meaning they did not inherently possess. Since every narrative form inevitably transports certain normative statements and value judgments, White (1987) regards this molding of reality to create narrative patterns of meaning as a potentially totalitarian act.

It cannot be denied that *grands récits* (Lyotard [1979] 2003) are potential instruments of power. However, any critique of history as narrative from the position of ideological criticism as a principle is a questionable exercise (Straub 2001). Such is the case especially if this critique relies on a contestable dualism between "artificial forms" and "real events," as argued by White and others (Mink 1978) who posit that human experience and actions do not have inherent narrative qualities but are reshaped through narrative after the event. Consequently, the concept of narrativity should be limited to explicit forms of (oral or written) narration, such that the existence of "untold stories" is negated: stories are never lived, but told. Life itself is seen as without beginning, middle and end, nor is it tragic, amusing, suspenseful, etc.

Other authors (MacIntyre [1981] 2007; Carr 1986; Bruner 1990; Gergen 1998) take a diametrically opposed view. For them, narrative structures are not the product of literary writers or historians. On the contrary, stories are already formed in actions and life cycles: stories are lived before they are told. Therefore, narrativity is not primarily an aesthetic category, but is rooted in practice. This means that the historical sciences are not merely allowed to resort to narration, but are required to do so if they are to do their subject matter justice. A simple chronicle in which

events are simply linked together by dates may be more objective, but this cannot generate understanding because such understanding can be achieved only if a specifically narrative connection is established between the recorded dates.

The configuration of this connection—and the selective process behind it—will inevitably be influenced by the “master plots” (Schwemmer 1987) of the cultural environment in which it is created as well as by the individual personality of the historian and the scope of his knowledge, interests, etc. White seems justified in his contention that narrativization of historical events comes at the expense of objectivity, but one has to take into account that historical events fundamentally differ from the natural events that occur in physics, for example, since such events possess no ontological or epistemological objectivity outside of a frame of reference. A historical narrative and its portrayal of a sequence of events do not form a mimetic relationship but a “metaphorical relationship” (Ricoeur [1983/85] 1984/88): narrative makes visible something that would otherwise remain unperceived (cf. also Jaeger 2002).

### **3.3 Psychology**

The concept of narrativity is increasingly being used as a key not only in the historical and literary disciplines, but also in (hermeneutically-oriented) psychology. Narrative psychology has emerged as an independent discipline, emphasizing—in contrast to the dominant objectivist and positivist orientation in the field—the significance of forms which are meaningful for human experience and actions (Sarbin ed. 1986; Polkinghorne 1988). Narrative psychology regards narrative forms as a genuine focus for psychological research in so far as the cognitive and emotional processes of consciousness are generated on the basis of and through these forms.

Bruner (1990) has influenced the debate with his distinction between paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought. In the paradigmatic mode, individual events or objects are linked with conceptual categories during the thought process, while in the narrative mode, events are perceived as elements of a story which contribute to its development. This concerns the cognitive ability to configure diverse events and actions into larger temporal and meaningful units—a capacity for narrative structuring (*emplotment*) which is obviously one of the fundamental capabilities of human consciousness. Bruner also examines the question of whether this ability is genetic and universal or acquired and learnt, i.e. shaped in different ways by the cultural environment. His position is one of compromise: according to him, we all have an innate predisposition for telling and understanding stories, but this must be developed through cultural models and social interaction into an active competence.

A number of studies in developmental psychology on the formation of narrative competence have been published (e.g. Wolf 2001). These studies examine the ability to perceive a range of temporally disparate events as a meaningful and progressive series and also the ability to construct such a meaningful series (Hühn → Event and Eventfulness [7]). The focal point here is not well-constructed literary tales, but simple everyday stories. In such studies, the Aristotelian “middle” represents the turning point of the story in which something surprising, unexpected or interesting constitutes the center around which other happenings are grouped. Empirical studies show that children generally acquire the competence that enables mastery of this basic narrative model between the ages of seven and ten. This is preceded by a development which begins with the ability to string together events in a merely linear fashion, followed by an increasing use of temporal and logical or content-based links and meaningful grouping into episodes until the stage is reached where genuine narrative plots are understood and actively mastered.

One specific focus of psychological studies bearing on narrative is the significance of narrative forms for the understanding of emotions. In these studies, emotions are not regarded as isolated and disjointed phenomena but as situationally and socially contextualized. We are able to understand emotions only if we can relate them to our own behavior and experience and to that of the people we interact with within a narrative frame of reference (Sarbin 1989; Gergen 1998), a finding that appears to be a cultural universal (Hogan 2003). Emotions are made understandable through stories and in turn, stories also generate emotions, making us feel angry, sad, happy, etc. This is due to the fact that stories are “presentative symbolizations” (Langer 1948). Even though they rely on the discursive medium of language, stories speak to us on a far deeper emotional level than discursive symbolizations such as abstract argumentation or scientific theories can ever do.

### **3.4 Psychoanalysis**

The realization of the importance of narrative in the field of psychology has generated therapeutic, and especially psychoanalytical, concepts which interpret the therapeutic process in its entirety with the help of narrative categories (Boothe 1994). Accordingly, neurotic conditions are rooted in untold, repressed stories, which in the course of analysis need to be transformed into an explicit story in order for the subject to come to terms with past events (Schafer 1992). This being the case, narratives have not only an informative function, but also a presentational one. The analyst must thus take note not just of *what* is told but also *how* it is told, taking into account both the content and the style of narrative self-presentation and its performative or theatrical manifestations (Lorenzer [1973] 1975, [1979] 1997),

since this is precisely the area where the patient's unconscious identity and personality traits are articulated. There appear to be increasing discussions of the active role of the analyst during this process. Initially, the analyst must record the free associations of the patient with "evenly-hovering attention" (Freud [1912] 1975), after which this material is condensed into narratives thanks to the focus provided by the analyst. These narratives in turn can become paradigmatic case studies and, as a possibly problematic result, may influence the analyst's focusing acts (Thomä & Kächele 2006).

### **3.5 Philosophy**

Plato refers to stories and myths that serve as a point of departure and exemplification for his abstract teachings, a tradition that continues in philosophy even today. Underlying this practice is the idea that the function of narrative is to provide concrete examples in support of conceptual arguments. Hegel formulates the insight that philosophical concepts can themselves only be understood as the end result of their own story (Plotnitsky 2005a).

Husserl's disciple Schapp ([1953] 1985) was the first to develop a distinctive "philosophy of stories." According to his main thesis, the human being is not the autonomous subject of his own constructions of meaning, but throughout his life is inextricably "entangled in stories" which are the prerequisite for the formation of his identity and subjectivity. Since, according to Schapp, stories are the fundamental medium without which we would not be able to perceive meaning, one is justified—with reference to Heidegger—in speaking of a "narrative being-in-the-world."

This philosophical point of departure raises questions concerning the constructive character of narrative. Explicitly told stories are symbolic constructions. The question is whether, and in what way, these constructions are connected with the experience and behavior of the individuals concerned. From a philosophical perspective, an assumed dualism of artificial form and real events (cf. 2.2 above) appears equally contestable. Human experience and behavior do not show well-organized narrative patterns comparable to the careful compositions of fiction and history writing. Rather, the identifying and shaping of a narrative structure of a certain complexity, with a clear point of view, an individual line of suspense, a characteristic peripeties, etc., is always the result of an active endeavor. On the other hand, experience and behavior cannot exist without some kind of structure. If, for example, one presupposes that to act means (at least partly) to follow a project, this already constitutes a complex achievement, even on the level of action. There is constant interference in and interruption of the project in hand by other

experiences, actions and projects. In addition, it is often not clear from the beginning whether one is actually engaged in a project at all. Without at least a rudimentary narrative structure, it would not be possible to find one's way even on the level of action (Danto 1965; Carr 1986). The idea of a single act seen in isolation is therefore a false abstraction, and for this reason, the concept of story is as fundamental a philosophical term as the concept of action (MacIntyre [1981] 2007; Schwemmer 1987).

With Ricoeur, who has put forth what is perhaps the most comprehensive philosophical theory of narrativity ([1983/85] 1984/88), it is possible to argue a case for a kind of compromise. Ricoeur draws on the classic philosophers that are relevant here (Aristotle, Augustine, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Schapp) as well as on literary and historical theory, integrating them into a comprehensive narratological hermeneutics. Its key theoretical concept is the three-part *mimesis*, the aspects of which are not seen in a hierarchical relationship, but in an integrative one. Accordingly, the composition of an explicit story (*Mimesis II*) is always a creative act that provides a new and unique view of reality, but at the same time, this always follows on from something that has gone before this process. Every story points to a "before." The referent in this relation (*Mimesis I*) is the "lived world," which is itself already organized as narrative, at least in part. Because of their symbolic and temporal aspects, real-life actions have an inherently pre-narrative structure. Every explicit story, on the other hand, meets its intended target only when it is perceived by a recipient (*Mimesis III*). Reception is made possible because of the inherent openness of the explicit stories in general terms. These stories—regardless of how precisely and concretely they might be told—contain no truly individual events, but simply schematized conceptions that have to be concretized by the recipient. The three types of *mimesis* form a temporal unit as a circular cultural process that is constantly evolving: through reception, the explicit narrative configuration once again becomes part of the real-life experience of the experiencing and acting recipient who can expand, confirm or vary the pre-existing pre-narrative structures. Such a newly and differently (re-)configured real-life situation in turn forms the basis for the next explicit configuration. Narrative therefore involves mediation between common cultural standards and exceptional deviations from these standards, hence a complex interplay of tradition and innovation (Alber & Fludernik → *Mediacy and Narrative Mediation* [8]).

In this model, the narrative "seeing-things-together" (*prendre-ensemble*) can be understood as the construction and establishment of a meaningful and more or less coherent or probable order created out of dissonant, scattered or random elements. The important point is the ontological distinction between event and incident (Ricoeur [1965] 2007). An incident is defined by its complete contingency, as

something that occurs in a certain manner but could equally occur in a different manner, or not at all. A story transforms a series of heterogeneous incidents into meaningful events within a diachronic structure. The composition of a story is a process that organizes various components into a whole in order to produce a single meaningful effect. The narrative seeing-things-together transforms the irrational contingency of non-contextualized incidents into an intelligible contingency of events. In the tradition of Kant, this seeing-things-together can be described as a “synthesis of the heterogeneous.”

Inquiry into the personal identity of the individual is a further philosophical area of research in the field of narrativity. Narrative approaches to this issue (Ricœur [1983/85] 1984/88, [1990] 1992; Kerby 1991; Meuter 1995; Brockmeier & Carbaugh eds. 2001; for further discussion, see Strawson 2004) assume that personal identity is formed and stabilized only through the telling of stories (Bamberg → Identity and Narration [9]). The identity of the individual person differs fundamentally from the numerical identity of individual objects. Personal identity rests upon a self-image that is physical, emotional, mental as well as practical, and this self-image is internally reflected and externally communicated in the narrative process. Corresponding to these two forms of usage, it is possible to distinguish two types of identity (Ricœur [1983/85] 1984/88, [1990] 1992): on the one hand, identity as “sameness” (German: *Selbigkeit*; Latin: *idem*; French: *mêmeté*); on the other hand, identity as “selfhood” (German: *Selbstheit*; Latin: *ipse*; French: *ipséité*). Narrative identities are invariably *ipse*-identities which are constantly reconfigured through the telling of stories.

### **3.6 Ethics**

The concept of narrative identities has a genuine moral or ethical dimension (Korthals-Altes 2005). In relation to neo-Aristotelian concepts, authors such as Taylor (1989) and MacIntyre ([1981] 2007) examine narrative identities in connection with the search for the “good life.” The writings of Nussbaum (1990) highlight this aspect in that they emphasize the significance of narrative fiction in the formation of values and, generally speaking, moral awareness. The stories of the literary canon provide a rich source of alternative forms of the “good life.” But there is an even deeper structural interrelation between narrative identity formation and the moral dimension of human existence. The formation of narrative identities is identical with the development of a set of values that are independent of any given situation and which lend a whole life—or at least certain stages of a life—moral meaning and stability. This is a genuinely social process in the sense of interaction with others to accomplish shared projects. Thus the narrative process also serves to generate forms and expressions of mutual respect. In this context,

Ricœur ([1990] 1992) speaks of the “complementary dialectics” of identity formation and respect for others. The other individual represents the moral imperative to take responsibility for his potential suffering. However, in order to be able to reflect critically on the relationship with the other, the self must define its own position. Forms of “self love,” or at least of “self esteem,” are thus essential for moral behavior with regard to the other, and these constitute the reflexive moment in the orientation towards a good life. This dialectic of identity formation and respect takes place in and with the stories we live through and tell each other (Meuter 2007).

### **3.7 Sociology**

Studies on narrative in the field of sociology (Morrison 2005) also focus on the problem of personal identity. In the sociology of knowledge (Luhmann 1989), this problem is regarded as a feature of the modern functionally differentiated society which, unlike pre-modern societies, no longer ascribes a fixed identity to its members on the basis of birth, class, etc. Identity thus becomes an accomplishment for which the individual himself is responsible. Society no longer provides an answer to the question “who am I?”, but leaves it to the individual to find his or her own answer. To do so, the modern individual must have a very clear idea of which of his behavioral traits are relevant to his participation in the various sectors of society (politics, academia, education, the economy, the arts, etc.). Nowadays, the necessity of having multi-layered identities that enable participation in various social environments is a given. Consequently, the modern individual can only resolve the problem of his (all-embracing) identity by adopting a self-image as an “individual individual,” i.e. an individual with a unique, distinctively individual life story whose decisive meaning resides in its distinctiveness from other life stories (Meuter 2002). Accordingly, the modern concept of the identity of the individual is articulated mainly through narrative. Narrative forms, with their inherent structures of temporality and meaning, indeed appear to lend themselves particularly well to questions concerning one’s own (individual) identity: it is possible in a story for one to change, develop, and integrate sudden changes (*peripeteia*) while somehow remaining “the same.”

The question is, though, whether and to what extent concepts of identity based on an idea of the narrative unity of human life can be upheld under the social conditions of late modern and postmodern times (Kraus 1996; cf. Salmon 2007). Critics regard such categories as continuity, consistency, and coherence, which are inherent in narrative and biographical identity, as a fundamentally totalitarian coercion into regarding one’s own life as an integral unity which must be realized. They claim that the way of life of the individual in postmodern societies can no

longer be adequately described in the classical narrative sense as “I-identity,” but at best within the conceptual framework of a “patchwork-identity” (Keupp 1996).

### **3.8 Theology**

All religions rely on narrative myths of foundation which have subsequently acquired canonical status. Theological studies with a narratological orientation (Goldberg 1982 ; Sternberg 1987; Hauerwas & Jones eds. 1989; Cornils 2005) have picked up on this connection and can be understood as reflections on the narrative practices of religion. It must be borne in mind that theology has always been rooted in narrative practices with which it is inextricably linked (in the sense of Schapp [1953] 1985). There is no isolated plane of pure theological abstraction, since theological discourse has always been a part of religious practice. On this basis, the matter in hand is the development of a theology through narration which defines the genuinely narrative dimension of religious belief (Wenzel 1997). However, the question remains as to whether there are inherent limits to a narrative theology, since theology centers on faith which, by its nature, cannot be narrated. Even so, narrative has an immense significance for theology with respect to ethics. Christian ethics in particular must be seen as rooted within a specific religious community, the church. This community derives its identity from the fact that all of its members see themselves as part of a shared narrated story: the story of God’s relationship with the beings he has created (Hauerwas 1983).

### **3.9 Pedagogy**

Narrative pedagogy implicitly criticizes the abstract structural analysis of institutions, systemic constraints and patterns of interaction, focusing instead on the concrete situations in which teaching and learning take place. Gaining insight into the real-life experience of learning from stories is the point of departure for an inquiry into the narrative sources of pedagogical knowledge (Baacke & Schulze eds. [1979] 1997). Where this is applied to concrete didactic problems, school lessons and the teaching of content-oriented knowledge can be analyzed with regard to narrative forms (Krummheuer 1997). Narrating in this context means describing a specific phenomenon in everyday classroom communication. Narrative pedagogy is focused in particular on the argumentative content of narrative-based learning and teaching processes: a story-oriented argumentation will invariably appear more realistic and convincing than the presentation of purely theoretical knowledge. In order to understand experience, and particularly the experience of the self and its identity, pedagogy requires narrative elements that supplement academic knowledge with narrative knowledge. The inclusion of narrative paths to the acquisition of knowledge is a prerequisite for the processes of identification that are

necessary for an effective learning experience (Neubert 1998).

### **3.10 Law Studies**

Law studies have a strong affinity with the concept of narrativity, especially in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of “case law” based on precedent (Lüderssen 1996; van Roermund 1997; Bruner 2002). All laws can be understood as abstractions of individual cases. Individual cases, in turn, enter the legal system by way of narrations. The prosecutor, defendant, defense counsel, counsel for the prosecution, witnesses, and experts tell the court their version of events relevant to the case. Judge and jury then select—or adequately transform—the one version that in their judgment corresponds to what really happened, a procedure that presupposes a high degree of narrative competence. In particular, this involves the ability to actively employ and analyze as well as to criticize the rhetorical devices and narrative strategies resorted to by the witness in order to lend plausibility to his version of events (Brooks & Gerwitz eds. 1996). Another characteristic central to narrative competence in legal contexts is the ability to compare and evaluate stories in view of their legal relevance. Here, the legal sciences can resort to literary renderings of legal problems (Gearey 2005; Brooks 2005; Sternberg 2008), a connection that represents one aspect of the “law and literature movement.”

### **3.11 Medicine**

In the field of medicine, questions relating to narrative have been explicitly thematized for some time now (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz eds. 2005). This results from an understanding of medicine that regards the discipline not primarily as a natural science, but as a behavioral science: scientific knowledge of the human being is necessary, but in the end it only serves to enable the medical practitioner to heal the patient or provide palliation for his ailment. Stories are generally a central factor in the doctor-patient relationship, particularly where anamnesis is concerned. Before a doctor can begin treating the patient, he must learn as much as possible about his supposed condition on the basis of what the patient tells him. In this situation, linguistic, empathetic and interpretative faculties are required. The doctor needs to “translate” the stories told by the patient into narratives with a medical focus without moving too far beyond the sphere of the patient’s real-life experience, but at the same time providing a structural basis for the next steps in the professional-medical treatment (Hydén 2005). The doctor’s medical training, however, will in no way have prepared him to meet these requirements. As a medical student, he will have been confronted with a number of significant case studies, but at present there is a lack of systematic socio-cultural training of narrative competence. This is relevant because such stories provide the meaning, context and perspective for the

specific problematics of an individual patient's case. Stories explain how and why someone has fallen ill. By evoking as many subjective aspects of the illness as possible, they make possible a holistic approach to diagnosis and therapy. Periods of sickness are important peripeties in life and often figure prominently in life stories.

### 3.12 Philosophy of Science

Starting with Danto (1965), the concept of "narrative explanation" (Roth 1989) in the philosophy of science has emerged as a critical position that challenges the influence of positivism and logical empiricism on the philosophy of science in the humanities. According to the positivist-nomological position, the humanities, too, are governed by a process of logical deduction whereby individual events must be *explained*, i.e. the event to be explained (the *explanandum*) is deduced from certain a priori conditions and empirical laws which, together, constitute the *explanans*. A critique of this model hinges mainly on the concept of "cultural laws," although these laws are not to be understood as analogous to the laws of nature. In the humanities we do not expect explanations to be founded on laws, but on motives, reasons and aims, in other words, on the intentions of persons who take part in given scenarios. Furthermore, there are many other factors that lead to cultural events taking place such as the behavior of other people, circumstances and coincidences, etc. Still, the question remains as to whether one is justified at all, and if so, to what extent, in speaking of intentions in relation to actions that are manifest before and independent of the process of their realization. It is therefore clearly insufficient to explain action—and even more so, complex cultural processes—solely, or even predominantly, on the basis of the intentions of acting subjects (Schwemmer 1987; Meuter 2000). Instead, it is necessary to reconstruct the individual story of which the action in question forms a part.

Furthermore, the purely nomological philosophy of science ignores the fact that the *explanandum* does not constitute just an event, but a transformation. It is therefore wrong to regard the former state, in the sense of initial conditions, as part of the *explanans*. On the contrary, the beginning and the end of a process of transformation both form part of the *explanandum*. On this basis, it is possible to construct the basic formula for a narrative explanation (Danto 1965): a narrative explanation is arrived at by filling in the middle between the temporal starting and ending points of a transformation. A story is the explanation of how a transformation took place from beginning to end:

(a) x is F in t-1;

(b) H happens in conjunction with x in t-2;

(c) x is G in t-3.

(a) and (c) form the *explanandum*, and (b) the *explanans* of the narrative explanation. Together, the three steps delineate the relevant transformation in keeping with the triadic structure: the explanation has a beginning (a), a middle (b), and an end (c). One must bear in mind, though, that this basic schema is an oversimplification. Many transformations, especially those which the historical sciences seek to explain, are far more complex and incorporate numerous factors that have to be integrated into the narrative explanation. The complexity of factual processes cannot serve as an argument against narrative explanations *per se*. On the contrary, a narrative, by definition, is a symbolic form of representation that is flexible and malleable enough to make possible the integration of (relevant) complex factors into the explanation. In any case, the specific rationality and scientific nature of explanations in cultural studies are directly linked with the narrative formula. In cultural studies, narratives are not regarded as a deficiency—something that one has to fall back on in the absence of alternatives due to a lack of insight into “cultural laws,” for example—but rather a genuine means for formulating insights and research findings.

## **4 Topics for Further Research**

### **4.1 Natural Sciences**

Despite the fact that on occasion narrative elements are used in explanations in the natural sciences (e.g. the narrative of “Schroedinger’s cat”; cf. Plotnitsky 2005b) and that certain narrative backgrounds exist (e.g. in the term “natural *history*” in the theory of evolution and in paleontology), a specifically narratological inquiry in the natural sciences remains a desideratum. In the philosophy of science, this involves the concept of meaning and the related classic dichotomy of “explaining” and “understanding”: the world of nature is devoid of meaning and must be explained through laws and the establishment of causal connections; by contrast, the world of culture and human understanding is rendered meaningful and can be understood through stories (among other means). An application of the concepts of narrative would therefore presuppose a revision of fundamental precepts in the natural sciences: it would be necessary to understand nature as something that is not (or at least not entirely) governed by laws and causal connections, but primarily constitutes a dynamic and creative process. This calls for philosophical paradigm shifts, the beginnings of which can be found in Whitehead’s ([1929] 1978)

cosmology. In the tradition of Aristotelian physics, being is conceived as a complex interplay of processes of becoming, each having their own structure. Every occurrence in nature begins with an event which becomes part of a creative process oriented towards the final outcome. From this point of view, it seems possible to describe processes in nature with narrative categories (Lachmann & Meuter 2011).

### 4.13 Systems Theory

A systems theoretical approach, which encompasses the difference between nature and culture, might prove productive with regard to potential studies on the role of narrative in the natural sciences. Independent of this, however, systems theory has the benefit—in contrast to the classic theories of behavior, for example—of reaching a level of abstraction that makes possible a discussion of all areas of culture in a single unified theory. As a first step, a narrative can be understood as the “systemic self-organization of meaning and time” (Meuter 2004).

Traditional approaches posit that meaning comes into the world through subjects who act intentionally; systems theory, by contrast, argues that the identity of subjects and actions is formed first of all through processes that produce meaning by means of selective reductions.

From a phenomenological perspective, these processes of meaning appear in the form of stories. A narration is not the realization of a plan, but rather a dynamic series of events that follows its own logic, and because of its peripeties cannot be mastered from without. Subjects are therefore not the sovereign masters of their own stories, but—similar to their actions—must be regarded as their effects. The systems theoretical term “self-organization” lends itself to describing precisely this situation.

The decisive factor for a narrative-oriented systems theory is the high improbability of factual events. The reason why a certain event takes place instead of another, equally probable one can only be explained if one regards events as elements in a meaningful systemic process. From a systems theoretical perspective, any experiential meaning is based on the difference between actuality and potentiality: only one possibility can ever be realized out of an abundant potentiality. Under this condition, meaning is by nature experienced as a reduction of complexity, as an inescapable *necessity for selection*. Here, one has to take into consideration that it is a specific characteristic of a system operating with meaning that it not only reacts to the selections that have *de facto* just taken place, but also to the selectivity of these selections. Meaning is therefore inextricably linked with the *experience of contingency*: systems of meaning select differently due to the experience of being able to select. A systemic process, therefore, is not just a formal “row” or “chain”

where identical parts are simply lined up according to a never-changing principle. Rather, every part of the process “leaves its legacy” of selectivity to the one following it, and in the course of this process, ever greater improbabilities accumulate through recursive loops. Phenomenologically speaking, this, too, manifests itself in narrative form: whenever one is entangled in a story, one quickly—after only very few peripeties—finds that one has arrived at a point that initially one would never have thought possible. Thus, narrations explain reality to us, or at the very least, they can help us understand why something is the way it is, even if it is improbable and not created by subjects: what is, is the result of a self-organizing systemic process.

(Translated by Nina Stedman)

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