

Narratives and Narratologies*

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Prologue, or: Narratives Matter!

One might as well begin with the observation that narratives matter because they do very important cultural and political work. Narratives have always played a key role not only in politics but also in such different domains as the economy, education, law, and society at large. Therefore, the title of this essay should actually be “Narratives Matter,” but since the format of the glossary suggests that it is more appropriate to add another word beginning with the letter “n” we decided to choose either the term narratology, i.e. the logic of narratives, or “narratologies” as the umbrella term for the great variety of approaches that have been developed for the study of narratives.

We would like to hasten to add that cultures and narratives are closely intertwined, although the complex ways in which narratives shape cultures, just as much as cultures shape narratives, have not yet received as much attention as they deserve. While the developments of “narratology in the age of cross-disciplinary narrative research” (Heinen and Sommer 2009) include debates about the uses and abuses of contextualist approaches like historical, intercultural, and “postcolonial narratologies” as well as programmatic outlines of “cultural narratologies” (Nünning 2009), such approaches have neither been fully developed nor have they had much impact in the field of the study of culture.

* In this essay, we have adapted ideas and passages from some of our earlier articles on narratives and the worldmaking work that they do. The articles in question are listed in the references for anyone who might be interested in more detailed and elaborate versions of the ten hypotheses presented in this essay. We would very much like to thank our colleague and friend Susan Arndt for her kind invitation to contribute an essay on this topic to this glossary, for her contagious enthusiasm and generous feedback, which provided the necessary inspiration and motivation to write this essay.

Within narratology, there has been an ongoing diversification of approaches, concepts, and models. This has resulted in both the development of fully-fledged theories of e.g. cognitive and feminist narratologies and an increasing interest in studying narratives within cultures (see e.g. the articles in Erll and Sommer 2019). While classical (i.e. structuralist) narratology used to shy away from the study of cultural, ethical, historical, or ideological concerns, dismissing the notion of contextualist or intercultural narratology outright, more recent developments include such approaches as cultural, ethical, historical, and intercultural narratologies. Although there has been a narrativist turn in the humanities and even in the social sciences, neither has the impact of narratives on cultures and mentalities been fully explored, nor has there been comprehensive and sustained research on how cultures and ethics shape narratives and vice versa.

The broad and all too general title of this text might lead readers to expect an encyclopaedic survey of the two concepts of narratives and narratologies, but limitations of space preclude the possibility of providing such an overview here. Moreover, several handbooks and volumes on what have been dubbed “postclassical narratologies” have done an excellent job at charting and mapping a blossoming inter- and transdisciplinary field (see e.g. Heinen and Sommer 2009; Alber and Fludernik 2010) that even experts find increasingly difficult to get their heads around.

Instead, the focus of our contribution will be on two questions that promise to shed light on the ways in which narratives and cultures mutually shape each other: Why do narratives matter? Why are postclassical narratologies important and useful for understanding the cultural work that narratives do? We have decided to couch our reflections in the somewhat apodictic, but hopefully clear, form of ten theses. We are painfully aware that we are making rather sweeping claims that would have to be discussed, explored, and substantiated in greater detail and depth for which we unfortunately do not have the space here. Therefore, we have taken the liberty of referring interested readers to some of our earlier articles and books on the topics at hand, from which we have adapted some ideas and formulations. We have modelled our hypotheses on two brilliant books, viz. Jaron Lanier’s *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (2018) and Timothy Snyder’s masterwork *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017/2021), two thought-provoking essay-pamphlets that everyone living in the twenty-first century should read.

As the repeated use of the word “make” in the ten theses below already serves to show, we should particularly like to draw attention to the performa-

tive power of narratives and storytelling. That is, we should like to emphasize that narratives generate or produce phenomena that would not exist without them. As Susan Arndt (2024, 11) poignantly observes, in the human realm “nothing happens, everything is made.” John L. Austin’s and John Searle’s work on speech-act theory and Austin’s seminal book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) have taught us to critically examine what people do with words. In this digital age of “alternative facts,” “fake news,” and “post-truth” we would be well-advised to ask the same question with regard to the stories that people tell. What do people like journalists, politicians, spin-doctors, and writers of fiction do with the words they use when they tell their stories? So, let us take a closer look at the cultural work that narratives do.

1. Narratives Make Worlds

Although it may sound counter-intuitive, the first thing we should notice is that narratives make the worlds that many people believe to be “the real world.” Anyone who might be inclined to think that talking about the world-building or world-making power of narratives might be a mere metaphor would be well-advised to pause and ponder the issue for a moment. What would the world look like if George W. Bush and his cronies had not concocted and disseminated their ideological narratives of “weapons of mass destruction” that they used as an ideological pseudo-legitimation for what they decided to call “war against terror,” which were in fact wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq? What would the state of the United Kingdom and the European Union look like if the reductive mini-narratives issued by the Leave-Campaign that led to Brexit had not prevailed over the Remain-narrative? What if the backward-looking and megalomaniac MAGA-narrative had not prevailed in 2016 and, tragically again, in 2024? These three random examples show that pseudo-factual narratives can turn even “convenient untruths” (Al Gore 2008, 104) and “bullshit” (Harry G. Frankfurt) into widely accepted (pseudo-)facts which have an enormous impact on the making of future worlds, while many inconvenient, but true narratives are either not acknowledged as “facts” or, all too often, go largely unnoticed.

It therefore seems important to acknowledge that narratives or stories are indeed one of the most important “cultural ways of worldmaking” (cf. Nünning, Nünning, and Neumann 2010). The renowned cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner was particularly interested in the role of narrative as a cognitive

tool that constructs reality and shapes cultural models, concisely summing up the constructivist idea of narratives as means of worldmaking: “narrative, including fictional narrative, gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality” (Bruner 2002, 8). The Austrian cultural theorist Wolfgang Müller-Funk goes so far as to argue that narratives are “a very powerful – maybe even the most powerful – symbolic ‘weapon’ in structuring a world that is always, in the end, a cultural one” (Müller-Funk 2012, VIII). While the worldmaking force of narratives resides in their capacity to shape cognitive processes and to construct cultural and mental models of the world, the performative power of storytelling includes the capacity to make events, facts, and indeed worlds (cf. A. Nünning 2010, 2022).

Narratology can help us to come to terms with the forms and functions of cultural ways of worldmaking in this age of cross-disciplinary research surrounding narratives and cultures (cf. Heinen and Sommer 2009; V. Nünning 2010). Narratological concepts like point of view, focalization, and plot, to name but three, shed a great deal of light on how narratives make events, facts, stories, and the worlds they present (cf. A. Nünning 2010, 2022). If we want to know more about the cultural work that narratives do, however, we must move beyond structuralist narratology and avail ourselves of approaches that are better equipped to tease out the ethical and ideological implications that narratives in general and narratives of superiority in particular entail. By doing so, narratology, itself, is not just an attempt to describe and analyse the structure of narratives. It becomes a partner in narration’s modes of word- and world-making.

2. Narratives of Superiority Make Colonialist, Imperialist, and Racist Mentalities, Poison People’s Minds, and Can Turn Them into Asshole

As we have elsewhere argued, the factual and fictional narratives associated with the rise of European colonialism and imperialism not only reshaped the world, resulting in e.g. the British Empire, they were also instrumental in the making of colonial worldviews and imperialist mentalities (see Nünning and Nünning 1996). The discursive practices of colonialism and the fictions of British and European imperialism did not objectively reflect preexisting geographical or political facts. On the contrary, the narrative fictions of em-

pire and Rudyard Kipling's ideological notion of "the white man's burden" constituted the very reality they purported merely to record.

The world-making performative power of the narratives of imperialism is particularly obvious in that they really created their own cultural, geographical, and mental worlds, while also giving meaning to the imperialist project which the fictions served to legitimate. The ideological fictions that the narratives of empire entailed generated what the English poet William Blake famously called "mind-forged manacles," i.e. psychological self-limitations and denigrations of the human imagination. In doing so, they served as a shield and a sword, acting like cheerleaders that did not mind the call for political domination or the use of violence. As Blake famously stated on the relationship between art and the empire: "The foundation of empire is art and science. Remove them or degrade them, and the empire is no more. Empire follows art and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose" (Blake 1966, 645).

Moreover, narratives of empire disseminated imperialist ways of thinking, structures of feeling, and hierarchies of values that fostered the erroneous belief in the ingrained superiority of the British colonizers and the concomitant assumption of an alleged inferiority of the colonized peoples. On the one hand, narratives of empire served to emphasize one's own superiority and enhance Britain's self-pride in its colonialist expansions and alleged achievements. On the other hand, such narratives were instrumental in denigrating the colonized nations as the foreign "Other." These narratives stereotyped Africans, Arabs, and Asians, who were generalized as "Orientals." As opposed to the civilized Occident, the colonial term describing "Orientals" was intended to convey a sense of backward exoticism, intellectual inferiority, and infantilism in the colonized nations.

Stories of colonialism and imperialism are thus not only fictions in that they do not correspond to facts or reality, but they are also paradigm examples of "narratives of superiority," to adopt a felicitous term coined by Susan Arndt (2024, 12, 20ff.), albeit in a very different context. As she manages to demonstrate, it was the highly contradictory narratives of superiority that were disseminated in the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR, respectively, that constructed the prevailing notions of West and East Germany as well as West (Wessis) and East Germans (Ossis). This is not just another case in point supporting Benedict Anderson's famous observation that nations are basically "imagined communities." It demonstrates that they are also "narrative communities," i.e. communities forged and held together by the

stories the members tell about themselves and their cultures as well as by conventionalized forms of storytelling and cultural plots” (Nünning 2012, 163).

Although the political party in question eminently deserves to be ignored or given short shrift, the nationalist and populist narratives of superiority that the notorious AfD has disseminated, and which it continues to propagate, provide case-studies in how ideologically charged stories can poison people’s minds and turn them into assholes. Like the apodictic format of our ten theses, this particular thesis is indebted and inspired by Lanier’s essay, particularly by his third argument, which claims: “Social Media is Making You Into an Asshole” (Lanier 2018, 39). Being one of the celebrated pioneers of digital innovation, Lanier is especially well equipped to throw light on what he calls “The Mysterious Nature of Asshole Amplification Technology” that so reliably brings out all too many people’s “inner asshole” (Lanier 2018, 44).

3. Narratives Foster Polarization: Pitting ‘Us’ Against ‘Them’ and Intensifying Conflict

As we have already seen in the previous thesis, narratives of superiority always foster polarization by establishing alleged opposition between random groups, pitting “us” against “them” and usually turning the latter into scapegoats for anything that is believed to have gone wrong. This strategy is usually not an end in itself, but part of a cultural and political process of transformation. Anyone who seriously doubts that narratives transform the world should just take a brief look at either the overarching MAGA-narrative that has flooded the media and American minds with shit for ten years, or at almost any of the executive orders that the current POTUS has issued since January 2025. The MAGA-narrative fulfils an important legitimizing function in that it provides pseudo-justifications and alleged rationalizations of drastic measures against anything, or anyone, considered “leftist” or “woke.” Moreover, many of the executive orders are framed in terms of being alleged means of “restoring reason and sanity,” thus implying that everything done by the Biden and Obama administrations was, by definition, unreasonable or insane.

Moreover, narratives make conflicts and crises, which do not merely exist or happen but are rather created by politicians and other human beings telling stories. The dissemination of the powerful political narrative that has come to be known under the shorthand of “America’s War on Terror” provides a case-study in both truth-bending, a.k.a. “lying,” and in how narratives can produce

the conflicts and crises that they purport merely to describe or reflect. As we tried to show through a narratological analysis of selected speeches of former President George W. Bush (cf. Nünning and Nünning 2016), the performative quality of the narratives disseminated by him and his administration consisted in literally creating or inventing the cultural, geographical, and political conflicts that resulted in the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. Although the dissemination of patriotism and xenophobia has a long and obnoxious history, especially in what used to be called “Great Britain,” hardly anyone ever managed to pit “us” against “them” quite as bluntly as Bush did when he described the choice that every nation allegedly had to make in 2001: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbour or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime” (Bush 2001, 69; qtd. from Nünning and Nünning 2016).

Bush’s narrative and rhetorical inventions of an “axis of evil” and of “America’s War on Terror” provide paradigm examples of the ways in which narrative constructions can be endowed with performative power, actively constructing or even creating the cultural and ideological conflicts that they seemingly aim merely to describe or represent. In an article published in *The Guardian*, Julian Borger observed that the phrase “axis of evil” “has not only defined the battle-lines of the 21st century, it has helped shape the world we now inhabit” (Borger 2002). Bush even went as far as to call the conflict that the narratives of his administration had made “the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century.”

With the benefit of hindsight, one can observe that such a statement is a performative speech-act if ever there was one, in that it creates a conflict that it claims only to describe. The invention of “America’s War on Terror” not only served to promote a highly biased and partisan political agenda, but it also forged a collective we-narrative that pitted the American “us” against an ill-defined group dubbed “the terrorists.” Instead of merely referring to actual conflicts, such metaphors and narratives as those disseminated by the Bush administration arguably play an active role in generating these conflicts and in producing a hegemonic discourse that serves to interpret events in a patriotic and propagandistic way, thereby shaping a shared cultural understanding of the world as projected in the official narrative of “America’s War on Terror” (cf. Nünning and Nünning 2016). A recent unspeakable example includes the German Chancellor’s use of the metaphor and mini-narrative of “Drecksarbeit for all of us” as a despicable euphemism for throwing bombs not just on nuclear

processing plants in Iran, but also on civilians in Teheran, which the author Navid Kermani sharply criticized.

4. Narratives Can Be Weapons of Mass Destruction

As the preceding thesis has hopefully shown, anyone who doubts that narratives can indeed have performative power and worldmaking potential only needs to recall the ideologically charged stories that the former American President George W. Bush or the current Russian President disseminated in order to provide pseudo-legitimizations of their wars of aggression against Iraq and Ukraine, respectively. The Bush administration couched their narrative in the form of what has come to be called a mininarration, i.e. the story encapsulated in the metaphorically loaded concept of “weapons of mass destruction.” Although George W. Bush or the current POTUS are unlikely ever to be ranked among America’s great, greater, or the greatest storytellers, one cannot help admitting that Bush and his comrades-in-arms displayed a certain degree of creativity, ingenuity, and success in conjuring up and disseminating a number of stories that turned out to be both conflict- and worldmaking in a very literal sense, despite being largely fictions or lies.

As we have tried to demonstrate in detail in a fully-fledged article (see Nünning and Nünning 2016): Although the weapons of mass destruction which Bush and Colin Powell claimed to be in Iraq’s possession were never found, the stories generated by the Bush administration turned out to be not just propagandistic mass deception, but weapons of mass destruction themselves in that they provided the rhetorical justification for wars in which hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians lost their lives. Like the narratives of superiority disseminated by British imperialism, the political narratives that the Bush administration concocted about the weapons of mass destruction that Iraq allegedly possessed turned out to be rhetorical weapons of mass destruction in their own right. Another case in point is the historical narrative that the current Russian President concocted and disseminated to provide a pseudo-justification for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and for waging a brutal war of aggression against a democratic and independence-loving country. In addition, the plethora of conspiracy stories or conspiracy theories also show that narratives can be weapons of mass destruction in that they destroy people’s mental sanity, reason, and sense of what is right or wrong. As the leading authority and expert on the topic, Michael Butter (2023 [2018]), has shown, conspiracy theo-

ries are both a symptom of a deep crisis of democratic societies and a means of disseminating anxiety, doubt, and paranoia, thus poisoning people's minds and worldviews.

Narratives can thus be weapons of mass destruction because they provide false forms of justification and legitimatization for acts which can never be legitimized, i.e. the killing of people. Furthermore, they can also poison people's minds and destroy their mental sanity. In short, narratives can indeed be one of the most powerful ways of making conflicts and crises as well as weapons of mass deception designed to foster crises and provide mental preparation for invasions and wars. Perceiving imaginary weapons of mass destruction seems to consist in producing not only weapons in the mind but also stories that can change reality, having far-reaching consequences for a potentially great number of people.

Whenever narratives are used as a means of conjuring up an epic conflict or a crisis in Iraq, Ukraine, Iran, or any other country, for that matter, what we are witnessing can be very much a matter of inventing the conflict or crisis in question. Once the diagnosis that there "is" a conflict or a crisis comes to be regarded as a political or economic reality, culturally available crises-plots are activated, assigning not only roles to the participants involved but also a particular meaning to the events thus designated (see A. Nünning 2010, 2012; Nünning and Nünning 2020). The activity of narrative conflict- or worldmaking, including the choice of a particular kind of metaphor and story, is not so much a matter of recognizing actual conflicts, crises or historical changes "out there," but of imposing order and meaning on a sequence of happenings that could also be emplotted in quite different ways. All of this should give anyone interested in narrative reasons to pause, and to take a fresh look at the ways in which events, conflicts, and crises are created or made through the complex processes involved in narrative worldmaking—and the critical narratological observation thereof.

5. Narratives Make Identities, Selves, Communities and Cultures

Let us now turn our attention from the dangerous power and perils of narratives to their positive affordances and qualities. By pitting "us" against "them," narratives also construct both a sense of collective or national identity and an advantageous self-image, while unfortunately denigrating foreign "others" at the same time. The factual and fictional narratives of empire, for instance, were

closely bound up with the forging of 'Great' Britain's cultural identity. Narratives thus play an important role in the making of identities, selves, and communities. There is general agreement, for instance, in autobiography studies, that narratives and storytelling are key to making selves, as the felicitous subtitle of Paul John Eakin's seminal monograph *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) has it. By forging selves, life narratives serve as a compass that gives us a sense of orientation: "Telling ourselves stories helps us navigate our way through life because they provide structure and direction" (Loehr 2007, 4).

However, narratives not only make personal identities and selves, but also larger communities and cultural identities of collectives on various scales, ranging all the way from families and clans to nations and peoples. Many anthropologists, historians, sociologists, cultural and narrative psychologists, as well as researchers in literary studies and cultural memory studies, tend to agree that storytelling plays an important role in the creation of cultural communities and that collectively shared narratives serve to shape cultural identities. This seems to confirm an observation made by the Austrian cultural theorist Wolfgang Müller-Funk:

That which seems to be obvious often runs the risk of being overlooked. It would be obvious to consider the constitutive relevance of narratives for cultures and to possibly understand cultures as more or less (hierarchically) organized clusters of explicit and also implicit, of expressed, but also of concealed narratives. For it is undoubtedly narratives that are central for the representation of identity, for individual remembering, for the collective mental state of groups, regions, nations, for ethnic and gendered identity. (Müller-Funk 2002/2008, 17; translation AN)

Although it is well known by now that a people's collective identity, just like personal identity, is neither natural nor stable, but discursively constructed, the functions that narratives can fulfil as a cultural way of self- and community-making have only recently received the attention they deserve. Nations can thus be conceived not just as "imagined communities" in the sense of Benedict Anderson, but also as narrative or narrated communities. Similarly, narratives create or make cultures (cf. Nünning 2013) and cultural communities in that they disseminate the stories and values that people live by.

6. Narratives Disseminate Norms and Values, and They Can Undermine Decency and Truth

Narratives and values are not only closely intertwined, but they arguably shape each other. On the one hand, norms and values affect and influence the ways in which we tell stories (cf. Loehr 2007, 107) as well as the kinds of stories we prefer. On the other hand, narratives are an important medium not only for representing cultural norms and values, but also for disseminating and constructing them (cf. Erll, Grabes and Nünning 2008). In addition to being an important means of identity-, self- and worldmaking and of making sense of our lives, narratives also play a key role in constructing, mediating, and reinforcing the norms and values we live by (cf. Baumbach, Grabes and Nünning 2009). Moreover, in the context of cultural learning, narratives that make it into the canon not only shape what people read and will have read, but also the norms and values transmitted by what are considered to be the great works of literature.

The approach most closely related to the study of values in fiction is arguably rhetorical narratology, developed and championed by such luminaries in the field as Wayne C. Booth and James Phelan, who have always acknowledged the close link between narratives and ethics. Phelan has shown how narrative techniques influence reader's aesthetic, interpretative, and ethical judgments. However, rhetorical narratology has been less concerned with the ways in which factual and political narratives construct and disseminate norms and values, and with the cultural work that they do.

As we have tried to show above, narratives have been instrumental in shaping collective worldviews and making colonialist and imperialist mentalities. On the other hand, narratives have also played an enormously important role in the establishment of all the positive norms and values we associate with e.g. the Enlightenment, science, social movements, and human rights.

Acknowledging that narratives always—either explicitly or implicitly—disseminate norms and values implies that we would be well-advised to critically explore which social norms and more values and ethics particular narratives endorse and propagate. What we have recently witnessed in e.g. Russia and the USA can safely be described as an assault on what used to be regarded as human decency and “normal” moral standards. In his thought-provoking book *What We Owe the Future*, the philosopher William MacAskill makes an observation that should give anyone reason to pause in that it reminds us what is at stake in the present conjuncture: “We are currently in a period where the values that guide civilisation are still malleable, but I’ll argue in Chapter 4 that

those values could ossify, constraining the course of all future civilisation. If so, changes we make to today's moral values could have indefinitely long-lasting impacts. (MacAskill 2022, 43)" The wide-ranging assault that the new POTUS has already made, and continues to make, on hitherto widely accepted ethical and moral values may well be a case in point in that his executive orders and policy could indeed "have indefinitely long-lasting impacts."

If we want to come to terms with the present conjuncture where conflicting narratives, irreconcilable ways of sense- and worldmaking, and diametrically opposed sets of norms and values seem to be at loggerheads, it might be helpful to conceive of what is going on in terms of a narrative dynamics perspective. Being one of the chief proponents of this concept, the narratologist Roy Sommer defines the term as follows:

Narrative dynamics is here understood as an umbrella term for all kinds of relationships, hostile or symbiotic, competitive or complementary, local or global, between narrative phenomena. A narrative dynamics perspective views the public sphere as an environment, ecosystem, or market place where ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, worldviews, and norms are circulated, modified, negotiated, and exchanged in complex transactions that can't be reduced to a binary logic of narrative and counter-narrative or to the simple antagonism of 'story wars' (Sachs 2012). (Sommer 2023, 498)

Even though such a binary logic of narrative and counter-narrative often prevails in today's politics, the concept of narrative dynamics allows for a much more nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which competing narratives are intertwined. The metaphors of the public sphere as an environment or ecosystem in which "ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, worldviews, and norms are circulated, modified, negotiated, and exchanged" captures the complex dynamics and entanglements much better than any binary model ever could. If we want to get to grips with the current complex conjunctures of narrative dynamics, we also need to take the historical dynamics of the narratives that compete for power in today's "ecology of attention" (Citton 2017) into account.

Therefore, it is high time to heed the *Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* that historian Timothy Snyder has brilliantly summed up in his book *On Tyranny*. These include defending democratic institutions and truth, listening for dangerous words, and taking responsibility for the face of the world. What we are currently witnessing could indeed be "the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century" that George W. Bush tried to conjure up twenty-five years

ago, but this time it could be for real. Everyone who cares about freedom, truth, and humane values, should dare to stand out and speak up against the ongoing attacks against human decency, science, truth, and the universities. Everyone who is worried about the rise of autocracy, hypocrisy, oligarchy, racism, sexism, and totalitarianism, should also read Snyder's brilliant book *On Freedom* (2024), which is a compelling and passionate clarion call to defend such essential values as factuality, honesty, solidarity, and truth.

7. Cultural Narratives Provide the Stories We Live By and Shape Cultural Notions of the Good Life

Narratives are arguably not just the most powerful cognitive tools we have for making sense of our lives and of cultural transformations, they also provide us with models of how to live a good life. Like metaphors, narratives not only serve to shape prevailing cultural models, but are also shaped by the cultural contexts from which they originate. On the one hand, narratives project forms and structures onto cultural phenomena and processes. On the other hand, they are also shaped by cultural models and prevailing cultural notions of identity and the good life. Either way, narratives provide a form for coping with personal experience as well as for making sense of cultural phenomena and cultural transformations.

By disseminating social norms and ethical values, narratives provide the stories we live by. In what is arguably one of the best books on the topic at hand, the renowned cultural psychologist Dan P. McAdams observes that we know surprisingly little about the cultural models and narrative templates that shape our notions of how to live a good life: "Beyond making vague references to things like 'my religious heritage' or 'the American Dream,' we tend to have remarkably little insight into the ways our lives are framed by cultural categories, values, and norms" (McAdams 2013, 271). We should like to add that we know even less about the hegemonic master-narratives that shape prevailing cultural models of the good life, although "we draw some of our best material from master cultural narratives" (McAdams 2013, 84). Life stories also show that cultures and narratives are closely intertwined, with narratives shaping cultures just as much as cultures shape their hegemonic narratives:

I would submit that life stories are more reflective of and shaped by culture than any other aspect of personality. Stories are at the centre of culture.

More than favored goals and values, I believe, stories differentiate one culture from the next. I have argued throughout this book that the stories people live by say as much about culture as they do about the people who live and tell them. Our own life stories draw on the stories we learn as active participants in culture – stories about childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and aging. Stories capture and elaborate metaphors and images that are especially resonant in a given culture. Stories distinguish between what culture glorifies as good characters and vilifies as bad characters. (McAdams 2013, 284)

Although it is common knowledge that narratives are subject to both cultural variation and historical change, the degree to which they vary across and within cultures is just one of the many fascinating research questions that narratology and cultural studies have thus far failed to address, let alone answer. Although we know quite a lot about e.g. the “Stories Americans Live By,” to quote the subtitle of Dan P. McAdams’ pioneering monograph, we know relatively little about the dominant master-narratives that other cultures, nations, or narrative communities live by. Similarly, we need to learn more about the interdependence between cultural changes and the preference for certain cultural master narratives.

Literary narratives not only provide an invaluable archive of models of how to live a fulfilling and good life, but they also serve as important means of critique of hegemonic master-narratives, e.g. those associated with late capitalism and neoliberalism. In its capacity as a rich repository of cultural memory, literature has provided humanity with an ethical and moral compass in that for “thousands of years stories have served to pass down lessons in how to live from one generation to another” (Storr 2019, 211). Moreover, literature can metaphorically be seen as a laboratory of forms of the good life in that literary narratives explore alternative forms of life (A. Nünning 2021). Last but certainly not least, literary narratives can function as “valorization laboratories” (Citton 2017, 150), which can entail revalorizations of prevailing notions of the good life. In short, narratives, like literature in general, can function as a mind changer, valorization laboratory, and cultural resource of resilience (cf. Nünning and Nünning 2021).

8. Narratives can Foster Happiness, Health, and Wellbeing, but Can Also Perpetuate Oppressions

As we have tried to show in an essay on the topic of “Where Narratology and Salutogenesis Can Meet” (cf. Nünning and Nünning 2018), narratives can foster wellbeing, help us to stay healthy, and lead happy and long lives. One of the main reasons for this is that narratives foster our sense of coherence. Another reason for the beneficial effects that narratives have for our happiness and health is that they are wonderful ways of meaning-making, endowing our lives with purpose and sense. As Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross observe in their brilliant book *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us* (2025, 205), the “ability to completely fabricate stories out of the human mind in order to convey important feelings, ideas, emotions, and shared knowledge is but one of the capacities we developed in order to make sense of the world in a shared and aesthetic way.”

One might as well add, however, that even narratives which purport to promote happiness and liberty can also endanger people’s physical and mental health. The cultural master-narrative that many people in the USA have lived by, commonly dubbed “the American Dream,” is a case in point. On the one hand, this idealized story promises that the United States is a land of unlimited opportunity that allows upward mobility, equality, and freedom for people of all backgrounds and social classes who work hard enough. On the other hand, all too many people have been denied the “unalienable Rights” promised by the Declaration of Independence, i.e. “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” In two brilliant essays on the topic, the American activist and writer Mia Birdsong (2020, 1) has done an excellent job at delineating what she poignantly calls “The Trap of the American Dream,” exposing its “narrowly defined paths to happiness” (Birdsong 2020, 2) and its inherent “toxic individualism” (Birdsong 2020, 3). Demonstrating that this hegemonic American master-narrative “remains defined by whiteness and masculinity” (Birdsong 2020, 2), Birdsong argues that the “work of recognizing and excavating the toxicity of the American Dream each of us has inside us is lifelong work” (Birdsong 2020, 26). She certainly does not mince words, exposing this master-narrative for what it is: “The American Dream is white supremacy culture bound with capitalism and patriarchy” (Birdsong 2020, 30). Drawing on the invaluable insights from intersectional theory, Birdsong elaborates on what is implied in the concept by definition:

The American Dream is a clusterfuck of intersecting oppressions that function systemically and infect us individually. Capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy (all of which create offshoots like ableism, transphobia, ageism, and others) are embedded in the systems and institutions we all interact with – everything from housing to health care to media to jobs to education. But they are also embedded in each of us. (Birdsong 2020, 26)

Since the normative cultural master-narrative of the American Dream has turned into a nightmare for many minority groups, including immigrants, people of color, women, and queer people by perpetuating intersecting oppressions, it needs to be completely reconfigured and reimagined. Instead of making America great again, Birdsong (2020, 20) argues that “many of us have to make America better than intended, to improve upon what those who came before us did, planned, or even imagined – that is what we should recognize as the American Dream.”

Other narratives that are less culture-specific and psychologically peculiar than the American Dream are arguably much better equipped to foster happiness, health, and wellbeing by giving us food for thought and hope for the future. A case in point is the South African concept of Ubuntu, which Desmond Tutu explained as follows: “It is to say, my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life. We say a person is a person through other persons. It is not I think therefore I am. It says rather: I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share” (Tutu 2009, 31). Although many people in the West will probably think that the word ‘ubuntu’ refers to Linux’s open-source operating system, it is the ethical concept and philosophy of life that can inspire new narratives and give us hope for a better future. Other narratives that can foster happiness, health, and wellbeing include e.g. the Ghanaian notion of “*Biakoye*”, which can be translated as “all together” or “unity” and the social philosophy of “*buen vivir*,” a holistic and indigenous notion of the good life from South America which emphasizes ecological balance, consuming less, harmony with nature, and developing a sense of the collective and community (see Acosta 2015).

9. Narratives can Foster the Imagination and Give us Hope

Although the power of storytelling for cultural evolution has occasionally been acknowledged (cf. e.g. Krznaric 2020, 219ff.), the power of especially fictional

narratives to extend and foster our imagination arguably deserves much more attention than it has hitherto received. Outlining the premise of their thought-provoking book *Imagination first: Unlocking the Power of Possibility*, Eric Liu and Scott Noppe-Brandon make an interesting observation about the importance of the imagination for creativity and conceptual innovation: “Any conceptual breakthrough requires imagination first” (Liu and Noppe-Brandon 2009, 12). They also provide several examples that show how epochal cultural innovations like democracy, equality and a multiracial society presuppose to “have the emotional and intellectual capacity to conceive of *what does not yet exist*” (Liu and Noppe-Brandon 2009, 8). Liu and Noppe-Brandon even go so far as to argue “that a developed imagination matters profoundly to the health and promise of our society” (Liu and Noppe-Brandon 2009, 13).

The imagination is so important because it is not only involved in the creation of novels and other fictional narratives, but it is also the central cognitive capacity that shapes our cultures and our notions of possible futures. Fictional narratives do not pretend to delineate facts and to represent the real world as it exists but rather offer alternative scenarios and provide possible story-worlds, thus enriching our sense of what might be possible. As Aleo Susan Arndt has shown in a pioneering and thought-provoking essay, fictional narratives provide not only imaginary inventions of story-worlds that give us access to possible futures but should also be seen as “interventions” which “display, reflect, and reconfigure moralities” (Arndt 2021, 241)—and thereby shaping collective values, cognition, and cultures, one might add. By delineating possible worlds and reshaping ethics and moralities, fictional narratives equip readers “with the agency of in(ter)ventions, i.e. inventions that intervene” (ibid.), while also making futures imaginable and fostering dreams and hopes. Like social utopias, literary fictions not only offer “fresh pathways along which our imagination can travel,” they can also create “beacons of hope for radically transforming the future” (Krznaric 2020, 145).

Rather than constraining the imagination and crushing people's hope through overdosing them with backward-looking and simplistic political stories like the ill-advised Leave-narrative that led to Brexit, the megalomaniac MAGA-narrative or ever more post-apocalyptic Hollywood blockbusters, we should foster the imagination and nourish hope by teaching young readers how to appreciate complex literary genres like speculative fictions. Banning books and words means constraining creativity, which is dangerous: “In a complex world, replete with contingency and uncertainty, nothing could be more dangerous than to constrain imagination, freedom and creativity”

(Heffernan 2021, 319). What we need are better narratives that enhance our imagination and our sense of possibility.

10. Narratives Make Futures, but Can Also Unmake Worlds and Enhance or Reduce Futurability

Integrating many of the concepts introduced in the preceding sections, our final thesis claims that narratives are not only ways of community-, conflict- and worldmaking which are shaped by prevailing cultural models, but that they can also make or mar futures in that they serve to enrich, or delimit, our cognitive and cultural repertoire of notions of what the future could look like. It is arguably the uniquely human capacity of the imagination that can “unlock the power of possibility,” as the subtitle of Liu’s and Scott Noppe-Brandon’s book has it, and that can extend rather than constrain the range of possible futures.

Exploring the affordances and constraints of factual and fictional narratives as cultural ways of worldmaking, A. Nünning (2025) argues that literary fictions are much better suited to extending the range of possible futures, i.e. what Franco Berardi (2019) calls “futurability,” while factual narratives often serve to curtail the horizon of possibility. Berardi defines futurability as “the multiplicity of immanent possible futures,” arguing that the “future is inscribed in the present as a tendency that we can imagine” (Berardi 2019, 13). His observation that the “future is written, willy-nilly, in the present” (Berardi 2019, 234) pertains, however, just as much to political and other factual narratives as it does to literary fictions. While the latter enhance the imagination and extend futurability, factual narratives all too often propagate the TINA-principle, maintaining as they do that “There Is No Alternative.” By contrast, fictional narratives provide detailed representations of possible story-worlds that do not yet exist in the realm of the real world, thus reminding readers that there is also something that we might call the TAMARA-principle, i.e. “There Are Many Attractive Roads Ahead.”

If we accept the view that narratives are one of the most important cultural ways of worldmaking and of fostering the imagination, we should also acknowledge that they often do the very opposite in that they can constrain our thinking, unmake worlds. Narratives can not only create new worlds they can also severely reduce the range of possibilities. Anyone looking for an example of how a narrative can unmake worlds, turning back the clocks of civilization, history, and science, only needs to critically observe how the MAGA-narrative

and the executive orders issued by the new POTUS have been dismantling the stories on which such achievements as civilization, democracy, equal rights, freedom, and scientific truth are based. The list of words that the Federal agencies in the USA are discouraged from using under the new POTUS, published by the *New York Times* on March 7, 2025, is a particularly interesting case in point in that it reads like a glossary of the narratives that are disappearing apace under the new American administration. The latter include e.g. the narratives of activism, of antiracism, of climate change or climate crisis, of disabilities, of diversity, equality, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and of discrimination, to select only some of the narratives that are currently under attack.

Abolishing words associated with these, and many other, important narratives that testify to cultural progress is a paradigm example of how erasing words serves as a means of eliminating unwelcome concepts, marginalising disfavored narratives, making invisible inconvenient truths, and thus re- and unmaking worlds. The present American POTUS does not only seek to purge the federal government of what he and his cronies regard as 'woke' words and initiatives, his wholesale assault on language, science, and truth amounts to a megalomaniac way of ideological world-remaking.

Although banning such words as "clean energy," "climate crisis," and "climate science" will not stop climate change or ameliorate climate chaos, it can be an effective strategy of making the narrative of climate change and other inconvenient truths largely invisible. The same holds true for many other of the hundreds of words that have been flagged to avoid or limit. Abolishing words and collocations like "diverse," "diversity," "enhancing/increasing/promoting diversity," and "fostering inclusivity" is nothing but an attempt to reduce "diversity," marginalize "diverse communities," and stop initiatives that seek to promote "inclusivity" as much as possible. Other outrageous examples of disregarding facts and disallowing narratives by abolishing words include e.g. "discrimination," "gender-based violence," "hate speech," "health disparity," "injustice," "LGBTQ," "mental health," "non-binary," "racial inequality," and "vulnerable populations."

The removal of these and many other words from federal agencies, public websites, grant proposals, and school curricula is a radical form of policing and purging language that would make George Orwell blush and want to rewrite his dystopian novel *1984*, which pales in comparison to what has been happening in the United States since January 2025. This assault on language, facts, and reason is an unprecedented attempt at changing ways of thinking and structures of feeling, significantly reducing people's possibilities for even

stating what is the case. As the authors of the NYT article “These Words Are Disappearing in the New Trump Administration” poignantly observe, “the office of the presidency carries with it a tremendous power to drive the discourse. But the pattern of vanishing words established here suggests Mr. Trump and his administration may be more interested in chilling the national conversation – at least when it comes to their own disfavored topics – than in expanding it” (Yourish et. al 2025, 5).

It is up to each and every one of us to challenge the elimination of words, narratives, and possible future worlds, by making best use of the power of narratives and storytelling. If we want to get from *What Is* to *What If*, to quote the title of a highly stimulating and thought-provoking book written by the political activist and founder of the Transition Town movement Rob Hopkins, we must stand up for facts, science, truth, and the stories we want to live by. Taking his cue from Liu’s and Scott Noppe-Brandon’s (2009, 33) observation “that we humans have a capacity to bootstrap from *What Is* to *What If*,” and using a host of concrete examples, Hopkins outlines what we must do to revive our sense of possibility and to replenish our individual and collective imagination. The subtitle of his book—*Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want*—puts the blueprint in a nutshell. If we want cultures and societies to transform and to get the sustainable future, we all need, then we must create new narratives that can rekindle the cognitive capacity of the imagination. Even economists and politicians who want to be able “to *Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*” (Raworth 2017) would be well advised to begin by cultivating their imagination. Anyone interested in heeding Berardi’s clarion-call to fight against “the reduction of the range of possibilities inscribed in the present to a pattern that acts as a formatting gestalt” (Berardi 2019, 15) would thus be well-advised to foster the unique human cognitive capacities of creativity and imagination through complex literary narratives. Therefore, we should “come to recognize that changing the story, dismantling the stories that trap us, finding stories adequate to our realities, are foundational to finding our powers and possibilities” (Solnit 2025, 2).

Epilogue, or: New Narratives for “The Weirdest People in the World”

Although this essay does not claim to provide a complete or exhaustive overview of all the reasons why narratives matter, what we hope to have shown is that narratives indeed matter a great deal because they have exceptional

performative power. They can not only create the mental worlds we live in, but they also generate and disseminate the models, norms and values we live by. If we believe that we live in a world in which nothing but catastrophes, conflicts, and crises exist, this is largely due to the negativity bias of the news. In an essay tellingly entitled “Changing the Climate Story,” the brilliant American author Rebecca Solnit recently reminded us that one of the many crises of what has been dubbed the present “polycrisis” is the prevailing lack of awareness of the limiting constraints of the hegemonic master-narratives and the impact of the prevailing stories that the media disseminate:

Every crisis is in part a storytelling crisis. This is as true of climate chaos as anything else. We are hemmed in by stories that prevent us from seeing, or believing in, or acting on the possibilities for change. Some are habits of mind, some are industry propaganda. Sometimes, the situation has changed but the stories haven't, and people follow the old versions, like outdated maps, into dead ends. (Solnit 2025, 141)

If we want to avoid the danger of following outdated maps and old stories into dead ends, then we should acknowledge that the hegemonic capitalist master-narratives of unlimited growth and material progress are no longer sustainable, tenable and viable. These stories prevent us from seeing that we have already reached a dead end, and that it is high time to find a new values compass.

For North Americans and Europeans, it might be particularly helpful to realize, once and for all, that both our narratives of unlimited growth and progress, and our ways of being, feeling, and thinking are anything but normal or the norm that other peoples around the globe should emulate. As Joseph Henrich (2021) has demonstrated in one of the most fascinating books that we have had the pleasure to read in recent years, we are in fact “The Weirdest People in the World,” and in more ways than one, one might add. Henrich's central idea is that people who are WEIRD, i.e. “raised in a society that is Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic” (Henrich 2021, 21), are also usually weird in the sense of psychologically peculiar, i.e. “highly individualistic, self-obsessed, control-oriented, nonconformist, and analytical” (Henrich 2021, 21): “We often miss the relationships between the parts or the similarities between phenomena that don't fit nicely into our categories. That is, we know a lot about individual trees but often miss the forest” (Henrich 2021, 22).

It is arguably high time that we realize and admit just how weird we really are, both statistically and psychologically speaking, that we begin to recognize the forest and appreciate relationships more, and learn from peoples who are not WEIRD and less weird than us. If we want to meet the challenges posed by climate change, economic crises, the threats of AI, and the rise of autocracies, to name but a few of the crises we are currently faced with, we are in dire need of new stories that foster our ability of “collective reimagining of what the future could be” (Hopkins 2019, 8): “Bringing about the world we want to live in, the world we want to leave to our children is, substantially, the work of the imagination, or what educational reformer John Dewey describes as ‘the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise’” (Hopkins 2019, 9; cf. 15). Just as reading fiction can change people’s beliefs and minds (cf. V. Nünning 2014), so can new narratives that challenge the status quo change people, who then may change the world (cf. Storr 2019, 208).

What we arguably need now is better stories, new narratives, and cultural narratologies refined enough to tease out the ethical implications of the hegemonic stories many people live by. We not only need to challenge the master-narratives of late capitalism and neoliberalism, but we also have to change the stories that prevail in our media and invent new narratives. We should like to leave the last word to Rebecca Solnit because she strikes just the right balance between acknowledging that there are real challenges and crises that we must deal with, and emphasizing that we should take responsibility for both the stories we tell and the future we want to live in. She also reminds us of yet another very important aspect associated with narratives, i.e. they can empower us or disempower us, depending on who’s telling which story and who determines how visible these stories become:

In order to do what the climate crisis demands of us, we have to find stories of a livable future, stories of popular power, stories that motivate people to do what it takes to make the world we need. Perhaps we also need to become better critics and listeners, more careful about what we take in and who’s telling it, what we believe and repeat, because stories can give power – or they can take it away. (Solnit 2025, 141)

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