Narrative Analysis

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1. Preliminary Remarks

While narratives and storytelling are closely intertwined and have contributed to the "story turn" or "narrative turn" in Urban Studies, it remains difficult to delimit the terminology that has emerged in this context. There is as yet no comprehensive theory on the use of story and narrative in Urban Studies.

Following an approximation to the terminology shaped by its understanding in the Humanities and Social Sciences, narrative will here be discussed in relation to the urban arena. Examples are taken from Europe as well as from the United States, where the idea of foundational cultural narratives shaping the nation and its identity as well as the citizens' understanding of their role in it via these narratives is rather established. The outlook points out further potentials of an engagement with narrative in urban research, in urban practice as well as in teaching.

2. Narratives: An Approximation

In recent years, the term "narrative" has become rather fashionable – it is used in many different contexts, and it is also attributed more than one meaning. Bearing this in mind, it is unsurprising that a discussion about "narratives" has also gained foothold in Urban Studies, Metropolitan Studies and other fields engaged with the construction and analysis of urban spaces. In the literature, there are several instances where the term "narrative" is used interchangeably with the term "story" and where it appears that storytelling is the same as constructing a narrative, which contributes to the dilution of terms, and to the difficulty of finding a comprehensive and precise working definition for these and other fields of research and practice.

A narrative, briefly defined, is a collection of stories. It is the result of processes of storytelling, a kind of discourse that can contain several different medial forms and several different storylines. It is a significantly larger entity as compared to a singular story – a collection of stories builds a narrative, and not the other way around.

Here, a "story" does not necessarily have to be a written text or the kind of story that is told at the dinner table in a family. Media reporting also engages with storytelling, as does film, as do processes of mapping, and so on. A narrative is the result of such different stories merging with each other and shaping into a new 'whole.'

It is possible to differentiate story from narrative on the basis of the different degrees of complexity offered by a story versus a narrative. A singular 'simple' story, while it is, in terms of its literary properties a 'narrative' text – meaning it represents "*an event or a series of events*" (Abbott 2002, 12, italics original) and moves through them – is usually limited in outlook. It has a defined set of characters that remains the same throughout. These characters, in the world of the story, do certain things to achieve certain ends, lending closure to it. A story can be generic, especially when this is a 'functional' story such as the kind often used in planning proposals or marketing brochures. Here, a 'story' would be a short narrative text that is included in a hand-out for the public to advertise a certain plan, for example. In this generic form of a story, an urban area could be introduced, including a problem such as pollution, or an abandoned structure. In the course of the storyline, the positive consequences of remedying the problem could be pointed out – for example, the neighborhood becoming a healthier place to live for families. This is the process that is usually termed "storytelling" in urban planning (e.g., Throgmorton 1996).

On a textual level, a 'complex story' – for example the storylines told in a novel, a film, or a comic – would not be as generic as the 'urban planning story' framed above. First, it would add in more characters. It would address not just one but several hindrances to overcome for the characters, and contain several storylines overlapping with each other (Ameel 2021, 78–79). A complex story can also move back and forth between different layers of time, or different spaces, or both. It may contain flashbacks or fast forwards or other devices generating suspense; it may open up more layers and more options for characters to interact with each other. It might not be linear, either.

Still, by contrast to this kind of story, even if it were a complex one, the 'larger' category of the narrative is closely intertwined with the idea of myth. It produces a larger meaning beyond itself, beyond its 'story.' The American Dream is a powerful cultural narrative, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) – likely the most famous novel about it and its failure – is a story contributing to its construction and perpetuation as well as negotiation in the public arena. Narratives certainly do not only arise from novels, or fictional genres, but reporting, art, activism, and even statistics all feed into them. Since narratives are larger entities, they can have significant authority in a society, or among members of another group, and significant reach and power.

In Literary and Cultural Studies of the Anglophone world, it is rather common to work with the idea of the so-called cultural narratives, which can be defined as the narratives a culture perpetuates about itself – such as the American Dream already mentioned, or the idea of being able to rise from 'Rags to Riches' in the US context. These cultural narratives share their visibility both within the culture in which they originated and beyond. For the United States, these two cultural narratives have been and continue to be powerful forces in relation to immigration, but also in the context of the ideas of social mobility and progress.

Narratives of this kind lend stability and a common orientation to a community and continue to do so in the face of difficulty. They can be a powerful source of motivation. In this regard, the crucial factor is not whether the narrative at large or any of its singular constituents is objectively true or attainable, but rather that it has the power to fuel the imagination of a group.

In relation to the entity of the nation as a community of people who do not know each other personally and are all different from each other but still practice solidarity and share common beliefs, the British anthropologist Benedict Anderson has shown that collective identity is supported by master narratives legitimizing it. These master narratives are not always stable, but they appear logical and useful to a community at a specific time. They also contain a story of origin that justifies the way the nation has developed. Narratives are closely intertwined with processes of identity formation and with power relations: While they certainly help people understand the past, their true power lies in the present (Humlebæk 2018) – Anderson (1983) connects this idea of power in the present directly to the rise of nationalism.

In the field of German Cultural Studies, Wolfgang Müller-Funk has contributed to the establishment of the topic of narrative in relation to questions of cultural memory and identity. He assumes that narratives render abstract units, such as the nation, the region, or a 'culture' experiential to its members (Müller-Funk 2008, 13). Those narratives which have become self-explanatory within a nation or other community are most powerful because they are part of every interaction and do not need to be made explicit at all times (Müller-Funk 2008, 14).

Narratives establish their meaning because they construct an order of events, and thus contribute to their own stability. But at the same time, because they give meaning to these events – even if they are described as negative or traumatic – they create attachments and trust (Müller-Funk 2008, 29–30).

3. Narratives and/in Urban Studies

Especially in the Anglo-American world, an interest in narratives and narrative structures is established in many different disciplines and goes beyond the more traditional fields affiliated with such inquiries, such as the Humanities and Social Sciences (Müller-Funk 2008, 17). Despite the lack of comprehensive theory building so far, questions of narratives are brought up in Urban Studies as an interdisciplinary field both in research as well as in practice.

Generally, the idea of engaging with narrative is perceived to be part of a movement towards "[being] more inclusive, democratic, more compatible with local experiential knowledge, and aware of the various layers of meaning in the city" (Ameel 2021, 16). This observation is well in tune with the perception that traditional approaches in Urban Planning will over time be replaced by new ones and will contribute to a different understanding of the role of the planner in the modern intercultural city, which has been described as the role of a "translator" (Fingerhuth 2019, 43). While this understanding takes into account the cultural factors shaping planning (Fingerhuth 2019, 43) and in fact considers the cultural responsibilities of those involved with a project, this

observation does not necessarily go hand in hand with a unified understanding of the potential roles and definitions of narrative in this context, or with the ways in which narratives can also contribute to counteracting democratizing tendencies.

At times, the term "'narrative' [is used] predominantly as a metaphor" (Ameel 2021, 17) by planners, architects and others in affiliated fields, meaning that a site speaks a specific 'language', e.g. via its structures and layouts, its buildings and their relation to each other. It is also possible to look to narrative in order to imagine the different ways a neighborhood or other site can potentially turn out following a process of transformation; or to think about how narratives relating – locally – to a site can be used in planning. This latter approach can be transferred into practice and would mean citizen participation in a project in order for planners and others involved in the process to get to know the narrative complexities of a site. This links back to the concept that, via 'stories' or 'narratives', planners, architects and others shaping the form of the city should pay attention to the social layers and human dimensions of a site (Ameel 2021, 17). Yet others ask of planners as well as policy makers – those working with the city in practice – to learn more about narrative because of the power it contains. There are warnings to be wary "[i]f we cannot distinguish policy argument from sales talk" (Fischer/Forester 1993, 3).

Certainly, there is significant interest in the idea of narratives in their relation to the city or the metropolitan region among those in Urban Studies who address these questions from a perspective shaped by Literary and Cultural Studies and/ or the Social Sciences. The approaches here also vary but are unified by their intense focus on the textuality of the city, and by the narratives which are used in order to advance specific ideas of the city in planning or marketing documents for urban areas. This kind of research is well in tune with the concern voiced above that at times plans may sound more like sales concepts, especially in instances where planning and marketing become intertwined with each other.

In the emerging field of Literary Urban Studies, which is concerned with questions of urban complexity and its representation, with urban texts and their various forms as well as interventions in the urban context. It also addresses the question of what more traditionally 'urban' disciplines can potentially learn from cooperation with scholars from fields where narratives and their analysis are central: "What literary and cultural studies […] can contribute to an understanding of precisely those elements of urban complexity that cannot be measured, modelled, classified or studied in terms of information theory" (Gurr 2021, 22) is central to this emerging arena of research. In addition, the expectation is that the inclusion of qualitative approaches into contexts that are usually approached with quantitative studies may work well in order to deal with planning under uncertain conditions, but also to forward the understanding of urban complexity (Gurr 2021, 22).

This approach and its allusion to shared properties and interests between very different fields calls for a more explicit and ground-level cooperation and a process of shared theory building. But since, despite a shared interest in narratives, these disciplines use different methods and theoretical conceptions in their focus on the city, urbanity, or metropolitan regions, such cooperation does not come easily: "literary strategies and urban planning do not coincide without conflicts and contradictions" (Gurr

2021, 142). Nonetheless, this dealing with conflicts and contradicting ideas is part and parcel of interdisciplinary research and work in practice and will likely contribute to sharpening and developing all three, (1) the understanding of and theory building in relation to narrative, (2) the parameters of successful collaboration across disciplines, and (3) the transformation of the role of planners and other practitioners in a context that is intensely shaped by cultural factors. All of these are central issues of consequence for the field of Urban Studies.

4. Narratives in Urban Research and Urban Practice

Narratives are not only the subject of research in Urban Studies, but they are also used by practitioners in efforts such as urban redevelopment, urban greening, or planning for a more sustainable city. Here, they are especially used as part of communication strategies, meaning in the context of attempts to move urban development or planning practice forward in a particular direction.

The example of urban renewal in the United States makes clear that narratives, while they are generally associated with strategies of progressive planning at the present time, have not always been used to perpetuate ideas of inclusiveness, diversity and heterogeneity. By contrast, during the 1950s and 1960s, urban decline, fear of decaying cities and 'slums' were produced and perpetuated via narratives of decline (Beauregard 1993) that led city governments to 'erase' certain parts of cities in the interest of 'blight removal.' This effectively meant the removal of certain parts of the population – African Americans and other marginalized groups – from the city in the interest of constructing supposedly more desirable spaces, or even highways that sped up the process of suburbanization and thus perpetuated the downfall of the US inner city throughout the 70s and 80s.

Turning decline and the ongoing threat of "blight" – a term that became heavily "infused with ethnic and racial prejudice" (Pritchett 2002, 6) – into a powerful narrative supported not only via statistics, newspaper articles and government reports, but via political speeches addressing urban problems and their resolution through strategies of urban renewal, supporters of this program established and perpetuated the view that the supposed 'slums' needed to be cleared to avoid a general process of urban decline that would spread like a disease. Infused with moral arguments proposing the idea of a "finer city" by way of the erasure of certain neighborhoods as the "Black Bottom" neighborhood in Detroit, for example (Thomas 2013), urban renewal in this city as well as in many other industrial cities across the United States added to the tenuous relationship between urban planners, urban planning and the African American community in the 20th century.

Research in relation to these kinds of narratives of decline and 'blight' has led to critical views of urban renewal and its workings in the US to this day, but has also added an awareness that such kinds of processes may repeat themselves in the contemporary post-industrial city (e.g., Hyra 2012), for instance when a powerful narrative of 'blight removal' is made the primary objective of contemporary proposals to regenerate the city. Urban renewal and other experiences of 'removal' from neighborhoods and cities has by

the same token – despite the oppression and neglect that is certainly a part of it – turned African Americans into activists for building a more just city with opportunities for all residents, such as via the efforts of the National Urban League (Thomas/Ritzdorf 1997, 10–11). In cities which have gone through urban renewal, the future of the city is still a point of contention, especially in relation to necessary transformation and regeneration efforts in the context of de-industrialization. How the Rust Belt's cities will develop is certainly also a question of narratives and their use to perpetuate or fight certain ideals of what the city should be and whom it should belong to.

It is possible to trace the legacy of earlier narratives of decline into the present time. The contemporary depiction of Detroit and many other Rust Belt cities in the United States is simultaneously shaped by narratives of failure and ongoing decline as well as by narratives of rebirth, comeback and the American Dream. This is a stark contrast with one narrative, supported by statistics, newspaper articles, official reports, but also artistic formats such as ruin photography pointing to decline, and the other newspaper articles and reports, supported by yet other statistics, pointing to rebirth. Both types of narratives are not a reflection of the – ambivalent – situation on the ground but have been pushed onto the city by outsiders in the efforts to push for new investment, or, potentially, a new phase of urban renewal. Both narratives can be made useful in this particular context of de-industrialization, social challenges and a high number of abandoned properties: A declining city provides many opportunities and little resistance to unconventional ideas, and a "comeback city" is an attractive place to build new businesses – a potential site of the American Dream. Critically dealing with such narratives in the urban context necessitates "deconstructing dominant narratives through an engagement with those whose experiences do not fit neatly within them" (Doucet 2020, 635) and thus necessitates work with local communities.

The analysis of the application and role of narratives across a variety of such practical contexts as mentioned above is the subject of much research in Literary Urban Studies. Here, the focus is on such topics as the exact use of narratives of rebirth following urban decline, or on the ways in which narratives are used to change the image of a city or a region. The narrative of decline and rise via creative industries and strategies is paradigmatic in this context, especially in instances when urban planning and marketing efforts become closely intertwined. It is evident in the US Rust Belt, but also in other contexts across the Western hemisphere. It is supported by such ideas as Richard Florida's "creative class", based on the assumption that the presence of artists and other 'creatives' (entrepreneurs, investors, freelancers in the media and other sectors) will forward economic development and large-scale investment, as well as by the expected rise of property values via the impact of gentrifiers (Herscher 65). Both of these ideas of economic improvement feed into narratives of the rebirth of formerly heavily industrialized sites under the pressure to re-invent themselves. The rebirth narrative of course necessitates the earlier downfall.

It is also evident that some of the narratives that were in the past considered typically American, such as the idea of the *frontier* that continuously moves westward and brings new opportunities and new ways of life to the settlers, have transgressed their national context, especially in relation to post-industrial regions and the narratives as-

sociated with them. This may be because there is as yet no blueprint for how to develop these sites (Sattler 2019, 206).

In the marketing materials advertising the European Capital of Culture RUHR.2010 – simultaneously an effort at promoting the Ruhr area as well as redeveloping its cultural, social and economic infrastructure via investment – it becomes evident that the narrative of the *frontier* is internationally readable and applicable. In the material, the region, formerly shaped by the heavy industries, was described as a sort of *frontier* landscape providing new ways of living together, e.g., for those affiliated with the "creative" industries. It was constructed as a site of unlimited and new opportunities, and a place that can re-invent itself freely. One can certainly argue that, while the strategy of local redevelopments to improve the infrastructure after the decline of the heavy industry that were a part of the 2010 efforts are in line with earlier such efforts to stimulate investment in the Ruhr region, the use of these larger, internationally known narratives of re-invention and rebirth specifically point to the idea that such marketing concepts aim at global readability and visibility rather than at local development alone (Sattler 2016, 18). Such a narrative first and foremost promotes economic (rather than cultural or social) investment, and investment into particular economic sectors.

It is also evident that careful analysis of such a *frontier* narrative necessitates taking into account all its dimensions, including the imbalances of power that shaped the *frontier* dynamics and the supposed 'Wild West' of the 19th century, and which populations will suffer from these dynamics in the present time. Here, an engagement with urban activism and anti-gentrification movements is a fruitful undertaking, also to understand the ambiguities continuously shaping the role of narrative in urban contexts (Gurr 2021): The narrative of the 'gold rush' in relation to former centers of the heavy industry certainly has to be taken with a grain of salt.

5. Outlook

With regard to communication in planning, it can be argued that an engagement with narratives and narrative patterns has brought forward and can continue to bring forward new understandings of sites, but also of the workings of urbanity and its contentions at large. Urban planning's engagement with both storytelling and narratives has by now indeed become part a larger-scale effort to include not only different sites, but also different people and their knowledge and concerns, but it has at times also been used in the interest of perpetuating selling efforts alone. Thus, the turn towards more communicative approaches in fields dealing with the city on a practical level can bring forward a more progressive, socially just and open way to deal with the city, as was already suggested almost thirty years ago (Healey 1993, 243–244). At the same time, not every engagement with narrative in the context of a project is necessarily and at all times inclusive and democratic.

On a less abstract level, it could be productive to work on further ways to include narratives in planning as well as in teaching in the field. This concerns, e.g., the idea of narrative mapping as a way to explore a location in detail before projects for it become designed and are ultimately turned into reality (Ameel 2021, 114ff.). Ideally, such an ef-

fort could also turn into an arena for ground-level cooperation between the different disciplines that form a part of Urban and Metropolitan Studies. This area of planning might lend itself specifically to cooperative projects, because the result of a narrative mapping would be a multiplicity of voices; texts for those in the literary and cultural fields to analyze and make fruitful for those working with the site from the perspective of planning, designing and building (Ameel 2021, 215ff.). Spaces built bearing this polyphony in mind might then lead to structures that refer to and take into account the past of a site, but could also place these references into new contexts and thus lead to different interpretations of the past and of the present and future – a practice that is very different from the type of erasure that parts of the city of LA have experienced (Klein 2008), for example, or from the results of urban renewal in cities such as Detroit or New York in the 50s and 60s (Thomas 2013).

For planners to work with narrative and for those in the literary and cultural fields as well as in the Social Sciences to be able to cooperate with planners on the ground would, if it is to be taken seriously, have to be accompanied by implementation into curricula. If it is arguable that "literary and narrative perspectives can be much more than a vague form of inspiration for planners, but can help provide a toolbox to draw consciously on narrative and rhetorical structures when drawing up plans for the future" (Ameel 2021, 121), then narrative ideas and approaches need to be included in the planning curriculum. At the same time, students from the Humanities and Social Sciences would also profit from more explicitly learning about how to support processes of planning with knowledge about narratives and stories, but also about how they can profit from understanding the quantitative layers of cities, working with maps and plans in order to get to new readings of urban literature and other urban texts. Such classes, which can be undertaken in cooperation between instructors from different fields, can lead to new interpretations of spaces, but also to different ways of looking at the built environment for all participants (Grünzweig/Reicher/Sattler 2015).

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