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### By Way of Introduction – Reflections on Narrative and Values, and the Value of Narratives

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*Published in:*  
 Narrative Values, the Value of Narratives

*DOI:*  
[10.1515/9783111440804-001](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111440804-001)

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

*Document Version*  
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
 2024

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
 Korthals Altes, L., & Moenandar, S.-J. (2024). By Way of Introduction – Reflections on Narrative and Values, and the Value of Narratives. In S.-J. Moenandar, & B. Van Heusden (Eds.), *Narrative Values, the Value of Narratives* (pp. 1-21). (Narratologia; Vol. 91). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111440804-001>

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Liesbeth Korthals Altes and Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar

## **By Way of Introduction – Reflections on Narrative and Values, and the Value of Narratives**

In the past decennia, the intersection between narrative and values has proven to be a rich topic for research. The insight that narrative not only functions as “a basic human strategy for sense making” (Herman 2003, 3), but that it is also a means to convey world-views and values, as it almost naturally engages audiences in imaginative and affective adhesion, has been the starting point for inquiries into the negotiation of both the value of narrative in society and the values that are circulated through narrative fiction (Korthals Altes 2014; Meretoja 2017). Approaches to such inquiries have ranged from mapping or assessing the moral ramifications of certain narrative features or techniques (Berning 2013; Alber 2017), to attempts to unite “narrative analysis with political analysis and activism” (Olson and Copland 2016, 215).

Studies of the intertwinement of narrative and values have gained an urgency beyond the study of fiction, as our public spheres become ever more story-saturated, and storytelling is instrumentalized to persuade people of the value of a political message or commercial product, to present news stories (real, fake, or something in-between), or to back up accusations. In this volume, narrative ethics and the broader issue of narrative and values are considered from a variety of theoretical, analytical and practical standpoints.

Before introducing the contents of this volume, we will propose some thoughts on – and pose questions about – the ways in which this research on the intersection between narrative and values is currently taking form. We will discuss in particular research in literary, media and cultural studies with a focus on literary narrative fiction. However, as some of the contributions to this volume show (most notably the ones by Meretoja, Iversen and Harbers), these developments have relevance for a much broader range of narrative practices.

Indeed, in departments of literary, cultural and media studies, students are no longer just trained in teasing out the edifying or unwelcome and disturbing value positions expressed by the types of narrative that are their traditional ob-

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**Note:** We wish to express our debt and gratitude to the co-editor of this book, our colleague Barend van Heusden, who has given such a generous support, in terms of time and stimulating exchanges of ideas, to the intellectual climate in which the idea for this volume sprouted, and to the process leading to its publication.

ject of study: literary texts, and other works of narrative art. They learn to turn their analytical gaze towards other sorts of narratives as well, from Putin's speeches about the historical grounds to wage a war against Ukraine, to the way in which tech companies such as Meta promise to solve the world's problems (Moenandar et al. 2022). It is therefore hardly surprising that the current active, at times activist (Olson and Copland 2016) critical engagement with narrative is having an impact beyond specialized academic journals (Mäkelä and Meretoja 2022). Cultural and social institutions, as well as certain groups among the general public, are being sensitized to the ways in which representations, and narratives in particular, convey values and world views with potentially enabling or oppressing effects; they are also effectively pressured to act upon this increased awareness.

Not seldom, narrative criticism and theory take the scholars' own (e.g., moral, social, aesthetic, and epistemic) values as their starting point.<sup>1</sup> And despite its undeniable successes, there are downsides to such activist critical work. Most notable, to us, is the reduction of hermeneutics to moral and political judgment. Historically, such a normative orientation, stipulating how to engage with texts and other cultural artifacts in order to achieve reasoned, supposedly legitimate interpretations, was only one dimension of the hermeneutical project within the humanities. It needs pointing out, therefore, that hermeneutics has also always included a philosophical and phenomenological reflection on interpretation itself: a meta-hermeneutics (Korthals Altes 2014). The humanities faculties at universities throughout the world constitute, arguably, *the* institutionally protected place where culture reflects upon itself, and hermeneutics, traditionally, is one of the most prominent forms this reflection takes.<sup>2</sup> It encompasses an understanding of how meaning-making is both affected by, and shapes these values.

This hermeneutic self-awareness and self-reflexivity is lost if the scope of the academic engagement with narrative is restricted to criticism based on specific, value-laden frameworks. In our times, in which the mechanisms and the diversity of meaning-making and value transmission have become a central concern of the social sciences and humanities, hermeneutics should aspire to more than merely refining criticism as a critical negotiation and transmission of values. What needs to be taken seriously, is the opportunity for a *meta-hermeneutic* reflection, which takes the diversity of interpretative and valuing practices as its object. This requires the framework of a general theory of culture, conceived as a dynamic sys-

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<sup>1</sup> On this notion of negotiation of values, see e.g. Herman and Vervaeck 2017; Korthals Altes 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See Van Heusden 2016 (an English translation of this timely article is available through its author, under the title "Threefold Humanities.")

tem of sense making-processes. We expect that a better understanding of the fundamental role of values – in narrative, in interpretation, and in theoretical and interpretive theories and approaches – can enhance scholarly self-understanding, which, in turn, should offer more clarity in interdisciplinary collaboration, in particular with the sciences.

To this end, we will use this introduction to briefly examine the concepts of narrative and value(s), before reflecting on how their intersections are studied in a number of theories and schools of criticism. Particular attention goes to narratology, as it manifests some tensions that are, we believe, characteristic for this kind of approaches in the humanities: wanting to be an empirical science on the one hand, and wanting to offer a theory and tools for relevant interpretation, and even for social intervention, on the other. We will end with a plea for universities, and humanities faculties in particular, to take responsibility in developing what could be called narrative literacy: the capacity, not only to interpret narratives, but also to reflect on *how* we interpret these; to not only investigate how narratives are the expression of, and convey certain meanings and values, but also to take into consideration, and question, what leads someone to conclude that a narrative means and values one thing or another.

## 1 ‘Narrative’ and ‘Value’: Baggy Concepts

The scholarly focus on narrative, which in our times seems so evidently relevant for our understanding of culture and ‘the human,’ is in fact a rather recent phenomenon. Roughly speaking, it is only since the 1960s that narrative was discovered to be a key phenomenon in all domains of culture. Since then, however, the interest in narrative has exploded, both across the social and human sciences as an object of inquiry, and among a plethora of professional practices, from journalists and politicians to entrepreneurs, and even among the military, interested in its communicative and rhetorical qualities. The term’s semantic diversity, as well as its metaphorical uses has been thoroughly mined both within and beyond the academe. Academic definitions of narrative evolved from structuralist enumerations of the properties of a clearly delimited textual ‘object,’ to more flexible and context-sensitive semiotic and cognitive descriptions in terms of a “mental construct” (Ryan 2007, 28; Herman 2009) and a “tool for thinking” (Herman 2003). Folk understandings of the term made it a synonym to argument, belief, propaganda, ideology, or manipulation, in a shifting distribution with the notion of story (Ryan 2007; Mäkelä and Björninen 2022).

The question, then, becomes whether it is desirable, or even possible, to come to a precise definition of the term. There are certainly benefits to doing so, as this may help to conceptualize narrative as one form of communication among others within more general theories of human communication and sense-making (Herman 2009). Marie-Laure Ryan, however, has a point when she downplays the need for a strict definition, arguing that narrative is “less a culturally recognized category that influences our choices of reading, viewing, or listening materials,” than, for instance, “judgments of fictionality”, which affect reader’s belief or interpretation (Ryan 2007, 32). Instead of regarding ‘being a narrative (or not)’ or ‘possessing narrativity (or not)’ as a binary feature, Ryan characterizes narrative as a “scalar” phenomenon, a “fuzzy set, allowing variable degrees of membership, but centered on prototypical cases that everybody recognizes as stories” (Ryan 2007, 32).<sup>3</sup>

For our purposes in this introduction, three points stand out. First, the acknowledgement of the semiotic nature of narrative, which implies that it is only through interpretative work that (narrative) meaning is established. Second, on a more general level, the awareness of the somewhat confusing elasticity which narrative theories, also those about the cognitive, moral or social functions of narrative, tend to display regarding their object. The suggestion is often a broader validity than is warranted: are these theories referring to all narratives, or to one or more particular genres? For instance, some narratological theories that, given their exclusively literary examples, seem to pertain to literary fiction, tend to be extended without further ado to any narrative.<sup>4</sup> Yet, what about issues of literariness and fictionality, which are so evidently important in relation to the values ‘perceived’ in the story-world or in its telling?<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, the analysis of current uses, understandings, and connotations of the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story,’ as well as their distribution in the world outside academia, reveals how deeply the notions of ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ are themselves entwined with implicit, heavily

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3 A prototypical narrative, in Ryan’s analysis, comprises eight conditions, distributed over four dimensions (spatial, temporal, mental, and formal/pragmatic), including among others: “Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents;” “this world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations which must be caused by non-habitual physical events;” and “some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world” (Ryan 2007, 29); see also Herman’s similar notion of prototypical narrative, and his scalar model of narrativity (Herman 2009, 16).

4 The extension of narratology to narratives in other media has received ample attention in the past two decades, e.g., Ryan 2004.

5 See e.g., Dawson 2015; Nielsen et al. 2015; or Korthals Altes 2014, 112–119, which discusses the importance of fictionality as a framing, particularly in the case of disturbing narratives and art works which suggest a strong autobiographical or documentary dimension, which often raises readers’ expectations as to an author’s responsibility and ethos.

value-laden, expectations as to matters of (post)truth, ethos, and strategic manipulation (Mäkelä and Björninen 2022), as well as with a more or less justified academic authority. These points should work as a caveat, a reminder of the limits, as well as the often implicit values and ethos, of much narrative theory, and of all criticism.

Within literary, media and cultural studies, the *narrative turn* soon became entwined with that other fashionably labeled *ethical turn*, which since around the 1980s put issues of ethics and values back into the center of scholarly attention (see e.g., Müller 2008, Korthals Altes 2013; Dawson 2017; Meretoja 2018). Like ‘narrative’, the concept of ‘value’ has a broad range of meanings and numerous popular and specialized uses. But unlike the still expanding notion of ‘narrative’, it seems to have undergone a process of shrinkage within the humanities, and, more generally, in contemporary culture. The broad understanding of ‘value(s)’ as the range of potential ‘desirables’, which had been adopted in literary theories with a sociological or anthropological orientation, was narrowed down to an understanding of ‘values,’ in the plural, as moral principles, circumscribing a *presumed* shared notion of *the good*. This narrowing down resulted, in many respects, in a return to the traditional moral disciplining of literature, art, and thinking, after some two centuries in which the idea of their autonomy had progressively gained some acceptance.

## 2 Theories and Criticism of Narrative and Values

Roughly speaking, within theories of (literary) narrative and schools of criticism, the connection between narrative and values has been conceptualized along three partly overlapping tension lines, each with its own epistemic and ethical dimensions. There is, first, a line between hermeneutics and science; second, one between ‘humanism’ and formalism, and, thirdly, one opposing moralism to a more neutrally analytical approach.

The first tension line is apparent in the ways in which, for instance, (Neo-)Marxist and other sociological or anthropological theories approached discourse, text and literature as vehicles for world views and ideologies. On the one hand, the aim was to deliver a *scientific* analysis of cultural expressions as the product of their socio-economic conditions, On the other, however, criticism inspired by these theories became a form of social hermeneutics, clearly rooted in value-laden political and social theory. As such, the arts and the narratives they conveyed were also considered to be potential factors of critique and social change, as was the case for scholars inspired by the *Kritische Theorie* of the Frankfurt School. As discussed above, in such criticism, the concept of value would refer to a broad va-

riety of ‘desirables’ and to criteria underlying preferences, choices and judgments. For the study of literary narrative, this meant that research tended to focus on both formal and thematic dimensions of literature (mostly drama and the novel), analyzing the ways in which a particular text dialectically ‘reflected’ the opposing values in its socio-economic historical context through homologies (Goldmann 1955), “dialogism” (Bakhtin 1986), or tensions (Macherey 2006 [1966]; Althusser 1970). Much of this work is now forgotten, discarded because of its too crude Marxism, or simply absorbed into the academic discipline that came to be known as cultural studies.<sup>6</sup>

Our second tension line, running between ‘humanism’ and formalism, can be seen in another orientation that, alongside socio-critical and (Neo-)Marxist schools, dominated the academic study of literature, film and theatre in the 1960s and 1970s: autonomism. Within this orientation, the tension between *aesthetic* values on the one hand, and moral-social and hedonistic or materialistic values on the other, was seen as an obvious topic of research. It was also a source of heated debate, that has since toned down significantly. We would argue that the loss of sharpness in the debates between different categories of values can be explained by the current, almost self-evident, preeminence of the moral value-frame. The vehemence is now directed at – and this is where our third tension line becomes apparent – the assessment and judgment of (im)moral stances, how these can come to the fore in the narratives that are the object of research, and the academic analysis of those objects, and, finally, how this can be translated into social-political action (Olson and Copland 2016).

Narratology came up in roughly the same period as (Neo-)Marxist theories, with similar scientific ambitions, being initially conceived as the *science* of narrative, and taking linguistics as its model. Inspired by Russian Formalism, of which narratologists saw themselves as the heirs, the aim was an analysis of the (deep) structure of narrative – setting up an approach to literature and culture that was emphatically meant to *not* be ‘humanistic’ (considered a dirty word). This meant avoiding interpretation, with its subjectivity and contingency, and staying clear from values, in the sense of shared moral principles, both as a privileged object of study, and as driving the scholar’s approach.

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<sup>6</sup> We would like, however, to single out two publications for re-discovery: Simone Winko’s *Wertungen und Werte in Texten* (1991, never translated), an impressive attempt at capturing the elusive phenomenon of ‘value’ in its semiotic, social and historical complexity; and Barbara Herrnstein-Smith’s *Contingencies of Value* (1991), whose ironic caveats about the risks of forgetting this contingency, which in fact defines a democratic culture, have not lost any of their relevance.

This is not to say, however, that the notion of value completely disappeared from the study of narrative. It formed a cornerstone in the semiotics of narrative of Greimas, a foundational figure in classical narratology, although he himself treated it as neutral concept. Greimas saw “[t]he narrative organization of values . . . [as] the basic structure of narrativity” (Greimas 1973, 35, our translation), and these values could, according to him, be accessed, or inferred in an ‘objective’, way.<sup>7</sup> In his famous definition of the “basic narrative sequence” as the pursuit, by a Subject, of an Object, the latter represents that which is desirable and of worth – a *value* – albeit only in relation to the former. In a narrative, any representation has a pragmatic dimension – the acquisition of the *competence* to act, and the action itself, or *performance* – as well as an interpretive dimension: actions are, implicitly or explicitly, embedded in a structure of intelligibility and an axiology, i.e. the *manipulation* of the Subject into action, and the *sanction* of these actions, where the values (‘desirables’) and meanings that are at stake in the action are negotiated and determined. The systematic investigation of the structures of action and intelligibility as manifested in a narrative would lead to an objective reconstruction of the underlying conflict of values as a narrative’s “deep structure” (Greimas 1973).

We refer to Greimas’ model in some detail because of his thought-provoking perspective on the fundamentally axiological and interpretive orientation of narrative as the representation of action. His model also illustrates an almost tragic tension between its attempt at scientific rigor and systematicity (less charitably: its scientism), the undertheorized role of interpretation, and the unruliness of the narrative material itself. Because of this tension, the model’s usefulness in assessing how narrative in general, types of narrative and specific narratives are used to negotiate the value of, and make sense of, the human experience, is sometimes lost (Korthals Altes 1992, 25–31). However, recent work on, for instance, organizational narratives and the use of narrative in counselling have shown how fruitful his model can be in this respect (e.g. Robichaud 2003; Gertsen and Søderberg 2011; Moenandar and Huisman 2019; see also the chapter by Moenandar and O’Connor in this volume).<sup>8</sup>

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7 Greimas, whose interest pertained to the “logic” and “deep structure” of narrative, was not actually part of the group of early narratologists, but as he shares with them his attempt at a scientific theory of narrative and a particular interest for plot, we present his angle of approach in this same context.

8 The two-volume *Dictionnaire raisonné de la sémiotique* Greimas co-published with Courtés reads as a desperate attempt to control, through an endlessly expanding metalanguage, the semiotic complexity of narrative (Greimas and Courtés 1979).



Determining the ‘ethical stance’ or the ‘world-view’ expressed by a narrative was not, initially, a prominent narratological concern. However, many of the identified narrative devices and typologies produced by early narratology soon became a popular ‘toolbox’ for – and, implicitly, a guarantee for the scientific soundness of – the analysis and interpretation of narrative. The tools it offered proved to be particularly relevant for describing the polyphonic interplay of value perspectives. Devices such as focalization, the choice and hierarchization of narrative ‘voices,’ their potential (un)reliability or irony, but also emplotment, or the markers of subjectivity in discourse, were singled out as particularly effective in conveying effects of perspectivation, values and worldviews.<sup>9</sup>

In its so-called post-classical stage, narratology scattered into many hyphenated narratologies, feminist, ethical, rhetorical, postcolonial, eco-, or other.<sup>10</sup> These tended to abandon not only the ideals of scientificity, but also the illusion of texts as neatly demarcated entities that are amenable to conclusive analyses, taking into account the role of readers, contexts, and (ideological) intertexts. What remained, however, was the sense that a narratological ‘formal analysis’ of narrative provides interpretation with a solid basis. This facilitated a blind spot among narratologists for hermeneutics, which is hardly ever recognized explicitly as narratology’s actual scholarly framework.

However, we would argue that it is exactly the rich *hermeneutic* potential that makes narratological concepts and models still relevant today. There is substantial heuristic value in them, as they stimulate interpretations that are attentive to the potential layeredness and value-laden perspectivation of narrative *form*. They provide medium- and genre-specific expertise about semiotic conventions, which may be culturally determined, and change over time (a dimension that deserves more attention). They make textual “analyses” and interpretations shareable and debatable.<sup>11</sup> Note, though, that a narratological ‘analysis’ remains a substantiated interpretation, and its hermeneutic nature needs to be acknowledged. As Marco Caracciolo rightly reminds us, “what makes an interpretation a

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<sup>9</sup> An overview of these, and more, ‘analytical’ concepts advanced by Genette, Bal, Chatman, Rimmon-Kennan and many others, as well as of the debates they elicited, is to be found in the online *Living Handbook of Narratology*.

<sup>10</sup> Just a few among a quantity of potential references: Gibson 1999, Müller 2008, and Korthals Altes and Meretoja 2018, on ethical criticism; Lanser and Warhol 2015, on feminist and queer narratology; Heinen 2021 on postcolonial narratology; James and Morel 2018, on eco-narratology; *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, once again, is a founding trove for all such hyphenated schools of criticism within narratology.

<sup>11</sup> For recent examples of the operationalisation of these heuristic affordances of the narratological toolkit with respect to the study of the relation between narrative(s) and value(s), see Berning 2013; Olson and Copland 2016; Alber 2021.

good interpretation is not the scientific status of the theories it draws on, but rather its meeting the three criteria [. . .]: interest, textual insightfulness, and rhetorical appeal” (Caracciolo 2016, 189). There is nothing wrong with that – except for the very suggestion that such an interpretation could be “scientific”.<sup>12</sup> And even where that suggestion is not made explicit, narratology’s tendency to gloss over its hermeneutic nature can be explained by a desire to present its analyses, at least implicitly, as more empirically grounded than they really are.

We argue that a narrative text is constituted by the act of making sense of it: it is the interpretation that creates the narrative. No matter how empiricist its argumentation and procedures, however sophisticated the narratological ‘toolkit’, any narratological analysis is, at heart, such an act, and, therefore, fundamentally hermeneutic. Acknowledging this, can help to shift the attention to that act itself, as well as to the plurality of possible interpretations it may instigate. This also points at an important possible task for educational institutes where students are taught “narrative competency”, that is, the ability “to recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by” narratives (Charon 2006) – whether *vis à vis* literary texts, television series, political speeches or posts on social media. So far, such education tends to limit itself to teaching students how to find meaning in narrative, and – if a more relativist conception of what narratives can mean is embraced – to argue for one’s own interpretation through a respectful dialogue about the different meanings different people may find in narratives (“all interpretations are equal’ . . .). We would argue for a shift towards teaching the capacity to become more attentive to *how* interpretation happens, for instance by considering which frames for sense-making inform how meaning and value are attributed to a narrative (for a further explanation of this, see the chapter by Godioli, Schiller and Kiss in this volume).

Such a capacity to engage in meta-hermeneutics, we would argue, is becoming increasingly important in our contemporary societies, where democracy is ever more undermined by polarization. It could also be argued that this capacity would enable us to be *narratively literate*, rather than merely *narratively competent*. Such narrative literacy would involve not only an awareness of “how stories function and their effects at individual and collective levels” (as per the definition of narrative literacy in Dillon and Craig 2021, 162), but also a sensitivity to the implicit and explicit choices made when creating, conveying and interpreting narratives, and the meanings and values involved in, and established by making these choices – including one’s own.

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<sup>12</sup> See also Kindt and Müller 2003; Korthals Altes 2014, 91–122.

The suggestion that engaging with narrative, and often more specifically, with *literary narrative fiction* makes us better persons, is certainly not new. There has long been the assumption that literary fiction offers us models for how to live, and presents values or virtues worth striving for (e.g., MacIntyre 1984; Taylor 1989; Ricoeur 1983; 1990), that “[s]tories are our major moral teachers” (Booth 1988, 20). Narrative literary fiction would foster our moral imagination (Johnson 1993), and work as a “moral laboratory,” and “mental experimentation” (Ricoeur 1990; Hakemulder 2000; Meretoja 2017). As Meretoja writes, “[n]arrative imagination crucially shapes what we value” (2018, 128). These claims all highlight the ‘human’ narrative capacity for meaning and value attribution, celebrating the specific qualities of narrative fiction. Against such idealizing conceptions of the value of narrative, a number of scholars have rightly argued that narratives can be used for good or for evil (e.g., Meretoja 2018, 89, *passim*; Mäkelä 2021), and that empathy is not necessarily always positive, nor ethical (Keen 2007; Nussbaum 2013; Small 2016).<sup>13</sup>

In a promising joining of forces, cognitive scientists are examining some of the claims made by philosophers, psychologists, and (other) narrative theorists. However, even in these more empirical approaches, there is a risk of confirmation bias, of an experimental set-up more intent on providing empirical evidence, than on just testing a particular claim, and of overhasty and over-generalizing conclusions. On closer inspection, the idealizing conceptions of narrative mentioned above may implicitly be the starting point of such research, which then ends up expressing the same generous wishful thinking as hermeneutic theories, inspired by the same ‘humanistic’ values. A good case in point is an article, published in the prestigious journal *Science* (Kidd and Castano 2013), that created quite a stir about a decade ago. The authors claimed to have empirically proven that, as they phrased it in the title of their article, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind”. In their discussion, they suggested some explanations for this, many of which will sound familiar to a narratologist or moral philosopher. Literary fiction – which here, judging from the texts referred to, meant literary *narrative fiction* – can, as the authors argued, function as a training ground for moral imagination, increasing our capacity for deliberation and critical judgment, as well as an exercise in perspective taking and empathy. Basing themselves on these explanations for their empirical findings, they concluded that more, and more intensive, literary reading in schools was justified. Unfortunately, attempts

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<sup>13</sup> The ‘empathy’ argument has come to belong to what Helen Small, in her book *The Value of the Humanities*, calls the “democracy-needs-us” line of defense of the humanities. Mäkelä’s article refers to a substantial research project she directed, focused on *The Dangers of Narrative* (2017–2020), which analysed the uses of narrative across the public sphere and professional contexts.

to replicate their experiment failed (e.g., Panero et al. 2016). This, however, should not deter scientists and scholars from pursuing serious research of this kind. As argued above, there is a real need for the intellectual and social capacity to handle diversity. The understanding of how narratives can be at the center of clashes of interpretations and valuations is an important asset if we want to make our societies more sustainable. Continued research on narrative within, or at the crossroads of, the humanities, cognitive science, psychology, and sociology remains necessary to improve this understanding.

## 2.1 Criticism and Values

As mentioned above, narratology has split up into a host of specialized schools of criticism, leaving behind its aspirations of being one overarching scientific theory of narrative. In the ever-expanding range of schools of ethical, feminist, queer, postcolonial, eco- and other narratological criticisms, political and ethical dimensions often merge, releasing new potential for societal impact. In these critical schools, more or less systematic *theories* or assumptions about narratives as privileged vehicles for value representation and transmission, are combined with the narratological ‘toolkit’ (or other methods of analysis), but most of all with a specific *interpretative framework* resting on a limited number of core values. Depending on the particular school, these may be – to name but a few – autonomy, authenticity, respect for the Other or Otherness, respect for Nature, or social and cultural equality. Alongside these interpretative frameworks, ethical frameworks and values also inform the analytical work within these schools of criticism, ranging from “constructive” ones, based on the presumption of a common Good, such as Nussbaum’s or Booth’s (Neo-)Aristotelian virtue ethics, or Felski’s “affective hermeneutics”, with its Gadamerian faith in dialogue (Felski 2015), up to deconstructivist understandings of ethics as the disruption of moral deontologies and the suspension of judgment, inspired by Levinas or Derrida (e.g., Miller 1987; Gibson 1999).

The term ‘school’ is indeed appropriate here: students are schooled in a mode of interpreting, receiving an education, a *Bildung*. This *Bildung* comes with a specific selection of what stands out as significant in a narrative, and it dictates how the interpreter has to proceed and to argue. As such, it includes an interpretive program, often derived from a hermeneutics of suspicion. Thus, establishing the validity of an interpretation does not happen mainly, or only, through rigorous argumentation; referring to core values and beliefs has its own force of conviction. The prime mission of ‘analysis’ in such schools, then, becomes the unmasking and exposing of undesirable attitudes such as gender bias or racism in

narratives, and often in their authors or audiences as well – it is, first and foremost, a “strategic analysis” (Moenandar et al. 2022, 128).

Unlike much scholarly research in the field of literature and culture, which remained confined to specialized journals, this current active – at times activist – criticism, with its ideological and ethical engagement, is having actual impact on society. It has led to a substantially increased sensitivity to the ways in which narratives, and more generally, our language and means of representation, convey values and worldviews, and perpetuate power relations, in particular with regards to issues such as race, gender and questions of decolonization. However, in brandishing narratological tools for analysis as weapons in cultural and societal debates to defend opposing value positions, hermeneutic researchers and teachers incur the risk of losing sight of their other, fundamental, critical role, which is *meta*-hermeneutic: the role they can play in helping understand – in at least an attempt at neutrality – what dynamics underlie clashes of interpretation and valuation. This potential, and the risk of ignoring it, needs to be at least acknowledged.

Critical debates about interpretation can be fierce, precisely because fundamental values, as well as the legitimacy of different ways of interpreting are at stake. Faced with concrete effects such as the ‘canceling’ of works or interpretive approaches that elicit moral discomfort, academics will have to take stock of their own role, and assess how their appreciation of such effects depends on their own ethical and political values, as well as their understanding of the role of ‘difference’ in democracy.

## 2.2 Why Bother? Broadening the Scope

For those who, at least in an academic context, tend to associate ‘theory’ with scientific rigor and method, with the empirical testing of hypotheses, and the elimination of assumptions proved wrong, the use of the term ‘theory’ in the schools of interpretation mentioned above must be intriguing and even provocatively *anti-theoretical*. Indeed, the meaning and associations that the term ‘theory’ has acquired throughout the past thirty years within a substantial part of the humanities, deserves to be a topic of inquiry on its own. In his *Very Short Introduction to Literary Theory*, published in 1997, Jonathan Culler, himself an esteemed narratologist, captures the gradual development of what is meant with ‘theory’ as follows:

Sometimes theory seems less an account of anything than an activity – something you do or don’t do [. . .]. A theory [. . .] can’t be obvious; it involves complex relations of a systematic kind among a number of factors; and it is not easily confirmed or disproved [. . .]. The phi-

philosopher Richard Rorty speaks of a new, mixed genre that began in the nineteenth century: ‘Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay[. . .], a new kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingled together in a new genre.’ The most convenient designation of this miscellaneous genre is simply the nickname theory, which has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong (Culler 1997, 2–3).

Imbued with a sense of prophetic clairvoyance, suggested to facilitate insight into almost mystical truths, ‘theory’ in this sense comes with a particular distrust of the idea of a shared rationality and ‘common sense’.

While we do consider critical doubt and self-reflection to be core “epistemic virtues” (De Bruin 2013), we also believe that there are considerable risks in cultivating a scholarly attitude that *primarily* demands the suspension of rationality, and instead, requires alignment with particular moral or social values. Yes, crucial work is being done by *engagé* scholars, which effectively contributes to social changes that many (including, to be clear on this, ourselves) consider highly desirable and long due. And yes, interpretation (as research method) and values (as object of research) play a core role in the humanities. But precisely because of the powerful affective and cohesion-building effect of shared values and modes of interpreting (which is symmetrical to their divisive capacity), interpretive communities have a tendency to consider themselves exempt from interpretation and critique, with the risk of creating new orthodoxies. Universities, we argue, should provide additional frameworks, beyond such particular schools of interpretation, creating a neutral ground for an open, democratic culture of deliberation.

What is needed to this end is, among other things, historical and socio-cultural knowledge, conducive to the contextualizing understanding of any kind of narrative of cultural practice. Equally important is a solid insight into the nature and functions of interpretation, narrative and values in culture. In our minds, this insight needs to be *theoretical*, in the scientific sense of the word. Universities should cherish their task to *also* offer value-neutral (which, even if it is an impossibility, should still be attempted), systematic and empirically verifiable perspectives on the variety of sense making practices, among which are: narrative (which, we would argue, is itself interpretation), the interpretation of narrative, and the analysis of such interpretations themselves (Meretoja 2018, 43–87). A turn towards this *meta* in meta-hermeneutics will facilitate, we believe, the awareness that an understanding of narrative and narratives must be developed within a science of culture conceived as a dynamical sense-making process (Van Heusden 2009). To investigate narrative, then, would be to investigate the variety of sense-making strategies it entails and incites (Korthals Altes 2014, 21–50). Depending on the tenor and on the beholder, these pathways of meaning-making

may, then, be perceived as edifying, or as propagandistic and manipulative, as Hanna Meretoja argues in her contribution to this volume.

On the one hand, such a turn to the reflective dimension of hermeneutics, built on a shared theoretical and empirical ground, would contribute to an intellectual culture in which there is room for dialogue between ethically and aesthetically diverging, and daring views. On the other hand, it could also contribute to sufficiently equipping students and scholars to reflect critically on their own premises and approaches, and extend the confrontation with otherness, which is such an important tenet of the contemporary ethical turn, to potentially unwelcome interpretive frameworks, narratives or artworks.

Our plea for this turn is – let us be frank about this – rooted in values of our own, of an epistemic and ethical kind; in particular, in a commitment to democracy, and to rationality, in the lucid acknowledgment of their flaws and limitations. The debate on values, which is so vital for a democracy, should not primarily take the form of fierce contests, as is currently so often the case within the university. The analysis and understanding of this debate needs an equal playing field, where reasoned hermeneutic deliberation is confronted with scientific theory and empirical, ‘neutral,’ observation – precisely because values are *values*, not facts (Toulmin 1990; 2001), and tend to create heated affective responses, among their analysts as well as among anyone else. This stance regarding the role of theory and observation in the humanities also determines our attitude towards the sciences, which we do not consider as Other, but as part and parcel of a full-blown and encompassing humanities program.

### 3 Contributions

The contributions to this volume all investigate some facet of the relation between narrative, values, and interpretation in a variety of media and genres, tracking the mechanisms of sense making and value attribution from a meta-hermeneutic perspective.

In the first chapter following this introduction, titled “The Ethical Potential and Risks of Narratives: Six Evaluative Continuums”, **Hanna Meretoja** proposes a model for analyzing and evaluating narratives from an ethical perspective. The model draws on narrative hermeneutics and is meant to be applicable in the analysis of different types of narratives across disciplines. She first outlines some of the basic tenets of a hermeneutic approach to narrative, emphasizing how narrative hermeneutics allows us to acknowledge, first, how narratives are value-laden and, second, how narratives shape our values. Then, in the latter part of



the paper, she develops a model of hermeneutic narrative ethics that differentiates between six dimensions of the ethical potential and dangers of narratives, and provides six evaluative continuums on which narratives can be placed when we engage in their ethical evaluation. The model invites us to consider whether narratives expand or diminish our “sense of the possible” and whether they cultivate or impede individual and cultural self-understanding. Do they enable or block understanding others in their singularity? Do they contribute to inclusive or exclusive narrative in-betweens, do they develop or impair our perspective-awareness and capacity for perspective taking? Does a narrative function as a form of ethical inquiry, or does it rather reinforce dogmatism? Meretoja proposes these evaluative continuums not as binaries but as heuristic tools, to be used in context-sensitive ethical evaluation of different social and cultural narrative practices.

**Marco Caracciolo**, in “Narrative, Values, and the Place of the Human: Coordinating Anthropocentrism and Biocentrism”, argues for a cross-fertilization of contemporary narrative theory – particularly the framework developed by Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2014) – and current work in ecocriticism. Adopting a “meta-hermeneutic” approach (Korthals Altes’s terminology) can help us disclose the multiple value attributions that underpin narratives imagining human-nonhuman relations. Exploring “To Build a Fire,” a classic short story by Jack London, and two recent adaptations in comics and animation film, he shows that the narrative creates a tension between anthropocentric and biocentric values, and argues that this tension should be embraced, rather than resolved, in interpretation. He thus concludes that ecocriticism could take a closer interest in the cognitive and interpretive workings of narrative and in how narrative form can convey the complexity of human-nonhuman relations.

The novel *Pnin* (1957), by Vladimir Nabokov, evokes norms and values that derive from various periods and places, ranging from pre-revolutionary Russia to 1950s America. At its heart stands the academic experience as lived and perceived by the central character, Timofey Pavlovich Pnin, a professor of Russian at Waindell College, a not-so fictional university in the United States. In their contribution on “The Circulating Professor: Narrative Configuration in Nabokov’s *Pnin*”, **Luc Herman** and **Bart Vervaeck** analyze Nabokov’s novel as an intratextual process of negotiation and of circulation between the academic, the artistic and the psychiatric fields. They investigate how the book configures and transforms cultural templates and stereotypes and how these configurations affect norms and values, arguing that we find, in the character Pnin, a refiguration of the stereotypical *zerstreute Professor*.

Ethos has become an important aspect of textual hermeneutics, but it tends to be applied to cases and examples that almost naturally beg for this kind of reading:



works with unreliable narrators or works written by intrusive authors whose strong and controversial opinions purposively complicate the task of the ethically inspired reader. The twin genre of the photonovel and the film photonovel, according to **Jan Baetens** in “Multi-authored Yet Authorless Film Photonovels, an Ethical Paradox?” does not belong to these usual suspects, since at first sight it does not ethically challenge its readership. However, a closer look at the film photonovel as a special case of the photonovel invites us to question in new ways the two basic components of any narratology: the story, on the one hand, and the narrator and author, on the other. In this essay, Baetens does not propose an ethical reading of the film photonovel, but takes the genre as an opportunity to raise new questions, broadening the scope and the score of narrative hermeneutics.

In their contribution on “Schrödinger’s Duck-rabbit: Ambiguity and Metaframing Across Media”, **Alberto Godioli**, **Miklós Kiss**, and **Melanie Schiller** theorize the use and values of frame switching across media, building on the analysis of three different case studies – complexity in film, ambiguous irony in music, and dark humor in literature and cartoons. They argue that frame theory provides a useful conceptual tool to come to grips with viewers’ interpretive operations. Frames are “cognitive shortcuts” that help to set expectations, steer attention, recognize patterns, detect novelties, determine salience, evaluate available information and choose further actions. Framing then refers to the activity of selecting the clusters of knowledge and interpretive stances deemed the most appropriate in response to a given situation. Certain textual, audio, and audiovisual narratives resist the routines of framing or, better, do not allow for routinely settling on a single frame. Providing challenges that test and play on readers’, listeners’, or viewers’ reliance on their available knowledge clusters, they problematize, perpetuate or even foreground these basic processes.

In classical rhetoric, the accusation or *kategoria*, was considered tied to the act of telling a story. In accusing someone for a breach of policy or character, the narrative of how that breach came about was key. This vital connection between accusation and narrative, however, has not been developed by contemporary approaches in narrative theory or rhetorical criticism; works on how narratives negotiate meaning and value have not looked at accusations, and the surprisingly sparse work done on accusations has not looked at the roles played by narratives. **Stefan Iversen**, in his contribution titled “‘Find Me a Motive!’ Accusatory Rhetoric, Narrative and Values in Emile Zola’s ‘J’accuse’” sets out to probe the relationship between accusatory speech acts, the negotiations of values, and the telling of stories.

For centuries, the political and cultural right to speak had been curtailed for millions of South Africans. Some thirty years ago, the first democratic elections that were held in the country radically changed this restriction. In 1994, all South

African citizens older than 18 years were given a political voice in a new, democratic system. However, whom of these citizens have been able to voice themselves outside of the voting booth? Whose voices are audible in the media, in novels, films and music? What has happened to the stories of those who suffered under apartheid and experienced colonial-era atrocities? And who is telling these stories? In her contribution on “The Right to Speak: the Cultural Archive and the Public Sphere in South Africa”, **Margriet van der Waal** shows how particular voices find expression across a range of art forms. These voices are an important aspect of the South African public sphere where a polyphonic debate emerges about the meaning of “the social”: the manner in which people relate to one another and where, by means of the imagination, current relationships are scrutinized, old relations are reconsidered, and the possibility of new relationships is examined.

In “Dangerous Narratives. How Fake News and Narrative Journalism Shed Light on Journalism’s Epistemological Foundations and Self-understanding in the Twenty-first Century”, **Frank Harbers** focuses on journalism’s struggle to maintain its commercial viability as well as its authority as a trustworthy institution that offers a reliable representation of what is going on in the world. The objectivity ideal, prevalent during a large part of the twentieth century, no longer self-evidently informs professional practice. Alternatives are being formulated, by startups and new entrants to the field, in which the subjective nature of reporting as storytelling is acknowledged and sometimes even embraced as the solution for the “crisis” journalism is currently in. At the same time, journalism is struggling with the growing threat of fake news, and the current debates about “post-truth” exemplify the state of our information society. Harbers discusses the current concern and discussion about fake news and post-truth, and connects it to the growing prominence of narrative forms of journalism and the embrace of the subjectivity of the reporter. The question underlying these issues is if and how journalism can remain society’s ‘primary sense-making practice’ in the twenty-first century.

Interest in narratology from other academic disciplines and professional practices of storytelling has often been limited to what could be called an Aristotelian narrative approach, with its emphasis on coherence and closure. In their contribution, titled “Beating Illness Into Shape: Applied Narratology and the Dangers of Storytelling”, **Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar** and **Emma Frances O’Connor** critically assess interdisciplinary applications of narratological theory. They also discuss the potentials of an “applied narratology”, i.e.: the transfer of narratological methods and findings to professional practices of narrative (e.g., artists’ practices, education and journalism). Finally, they explore the dangers of storytelling. How can we address these dangers through an applied narratology that offers tools to improve, yet also to resist narrative? A case study supporting their argu-

ment involves practice-led artistic research on the value of alternative narrative traditions, informed by the experiences of one of the authors as a carrier of a genetic mutation for Hereditary Diffuse Gastric Cancer.

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