

Anne Runggemeier

“All one can do is tell a better story”

The Ethical Potential and the Risks of Storytelling

Hanna Meretoja / Colin Davis (Eds.): *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative*. New York: Routledge 2018. 314 p. EUR 115.99. ISBN 978-1-138-24406-1

Storytelling practices are omnipresent and pervasive – not only in literature but also in our everyday lives. In a wide range of disciplines ranging from psychology and neuroscience to philosophy and the social sciences, storytelling practices have been explored as ways of world making that not only represent but both re-construct and create the ways in which we think about reality. In the course of the interdisciplinary exchange between narrative studies and its various new fields of application, the aspect of the ethical questions related to storytelling became increasingly obvious as an urgent issue to be discussed.

With the collected volume *Storytelling and Ethics* Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis have set themselves the task to close that gap. By explicitly focusing on and enquiring about the ethics of storytelling the editors draw our attention to the practice of storytelling as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, stories offer the potential to open up, expand and refine our moral sensibilities. On the other hand, they may also function as “vehicles of simplifications, obfuscations and plain lies” (p. 1). The debate about the dangers of storytelling is as old as Plato’s condemnation of art in the *Republic* and simultaneously highly relevant in nowadays politics and with regard to the role of narrative in a ‘post truth’ world.

Basic Assumptions, Scope and Aims

Hanna Meretoja, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Turku, Finland, and Colin Davis, Professor of Comparative Literature and French at Royal Holloway, University of London, are both proven experts in the field of 20th and 21st century literature, Narrative Studies and the contested relationship between Poststructuralism and Ethics. Starting from the basic assumption that “narrative is bound up with power” (p. 2), they further differentiate that this power may be either repressive or emancipatory: Narrative “can help us to become better listeners, readers and citizens, or it can mislead, disturb and corrupt” (p. 2). To explore the ethical potential and risks of storytelling the editors rely on an interdisciplinary dialogue between contemporary literature and

the visual arts including film, photography, video art and performative arts. The individual contributors then draw on theoretical approaches that stem from trauma studies, memory studies, ethical criticism, human rights discourses and interdisciplinary narrative studies.

Concentrating on contemporary artistic storytelling the volume sets out to explore the relationship between memory, narrative and the imagination. Its aim is to examine how “culturally mediated narrative models of sense making underpin contemporary identities and memory practices” (p. 2). Eventually, the editors hope to provide analytical tools “for engaging with both the positive and the negative power of narrative” (p. 3) which can be used to illuminate “the ethical potential of storytelling in terms of imaginative reconfiguration” (p. 3).

The collection originates in the “Ethics of Storytelling and the Experience of History in the Contemporary Arts” research project at Turku University and the accompanying conference (“Ethics of Storytelling: Historical Imagination in Contemporary Literature, Media and Arts”) which took place in June 2015. Ranging from literary and cinematic narratives to photography and terrorist recruitment narratives, the volume aims to “re-orient the debate around the ethics of storytelling towards a complex, non-moralistic understanding of the inherently ambiguous role of narrative in the configuration of experience, identity, memory and culture” (p. 9).

Ethics and Narrative Studies

The editors situate their research question in the complex history of the relationship between narrative and ethics. Starting from French poststructuralism’s critique of conventional narrative form as oppressive and ethically problematic, they draw a trajectory that includes an informed discussion of neo-Aristotelian humanist traditions, rhetorical narrative theory and, ultimately, cultural narratology. Meretoja and Davis show themselves very skeptical towards recent trends in cognitive literary studies that put forward the idea that reading in general fosters the ability to empathize, and thus, to make us better persons. They rather define the ethical potential of narrative as something that “works in indirect, non-didactic ways” (p. 8) and it is thus no surprise that approaches from cognitive literary studies are conspicuously absent from this volume.

The editors themselves position their approach in the tradition of narrative hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, they argue, does not emphasize identification, but difference as a starting point of understanding. As a result, narrative’s specific ethical potential lies in the way it questions our certainties.

Conceptualizing Narrative Ethics

The book is divided into three main parts that organize the sixteen articles into a rather loose yet consistent trajectory. The first part “The Ethical Potential and Limits of Narrative” gathers six articles that are connected by the endeavor to theoretically conceptualize narrative ethics. Their readings of contemporary cultural artifacts are particularly inspired by notions of the archive, trauma and the non-human.

In the first chapter Colin Davis takes us back to Plato’s condemnation of art in Book 10 of the *Republic* and points out in how far the centuries-old accusation, that art “appeals to the lower powers of the human soul” (p. 24) is still valid today. Discussing Heidegger, Levinas, Nussbaum and contemporary trauma theory, Davis comes to the conclusion that Plato’s ancient suspicions are ultimately hard to defuse. Instead of defending art as *per se* “morally improving” (p. 35) he conceptualizes it as “a domain where we play out the dramas of right and wrong [...] without any guarantee that what we understand or hope to be the good and the right will win out” (p. 34).

Mieke Bal also takes the ancient debate about the ethics of art as a starting point and, just like Davis, refuses any simple affirmative position. Instead of stressing the dangers of art, however, Bal convincingly works out the nature of art which she defines as “a need to (imagine in order to) know” (p. 39) that is best accommodated by a modesty that acknowledges its own limitations.

Robert Eaglestone follows up on the intersection between trauma, narrative and ethics. In learning stories, he states, we learn not only what happens, but we especially learn “narrative order and narrative ordering” (p. 59) and develop a predilection for completeness and rounded stories. Following Wittgenstein, Eaglestone draws our attention to the “mismatch between narrative and life” (p. 61); while narrative is especially prone to roundedness, the actual stories that we inhabit are “jagged and incomplete” (Wittgenstein). This “jaggedness” (p. 65) of stories triggers their ethical potential. As they defy simplification (and very often also identification), they make us think about the precariousness of life.

Ernst van Alphen starts with an introduction to the concept of archival identity. Discussing artworks of South African artist Santu Mofokeng and Lebanese artist Walid Raad, he depicts how histories excluded from the archives can be reanimated. By gathering and fictionally re-working material that was formerly excluded such as photographs from black working and middle class families, these artists use what was excluded from the old archives to build a new one that makes visible, engages with and rewrites the ideology of the old one.

Examining non-human primates in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee, Franz Kafka and Karen Joy Fowler, Danielle Sands works out different narrative strategies (e.g. collaborative cross-species authorship) of engaging with the relationship between humans and other primates that potentially transcend the anthropocentric narrative. Following Donna Haraway’s argument in *Primate Visions* she suggests that fiction can offer a mode of storytelling that does not misrepresent or

ignore nonhuman others: “Fiction – unbound by fact, and free to perform, invent and recreate – can negotiate human-nonhuman relations in ways which science, restricted by the myth of its own neutrality and compelled to conceal its performativity, cannot” (p. 89).

Hanna Meretoja’s chapter, the last one in the first section, offers not only a theoretical frame, but also an analytical tool for evaluating the ethical potential of narratives. Relying on philosophical hermeneutics, Meretoja differentiates between subsumptive and non-subsumptive conceptions of narrative understanding. She contrasts an ethos of appropriation with an ethos of dialogic exploration which she traces in a very convincing reading of Jeannette Winterson’s dialogical novel *Lighthousekeeping*: “Instead of subsuming the singular under general concepts, in genuine understanding the singular has power to transform the general!” (p. 104) Meretoja rightly observes that, eventually, a work of art can only offer the *potential* to function non-subsumptively, if the readers are willing and able to read it in a way that challenges their beliefs and certainties.

Narrative Temporalities: Imagining an Other Life

The second part of the collection gathers five chapters that explore the ways in which the processes of remembering are intertwined with imaginations of the present and engagements with futurity.

The opening chapter by Leslie Adelson discusses Alexander Kluge’s *Saturday in Utopia*. Tracing futurity in Kluge’s use of narrative form, especially in his use of narrative voice and unnatural perspective, Adelson argues that counter-hegemonic hopes become temporarily accessible to the readers through Kluge’s narrative experiments in time, perspective and voice. While Adelson explores the narrative horizons of futurity, the following chapters focus on narrating the past, especially on notions of trauma, processes of remembering and forgetting and on the intertwining of personal storytelling with more global phenomena of remembrance.

Reflecting on the narration of historical trauma on a transnational scale, Kaisa Kaakinen compares Teju Cole’s novel *Open City* with the novels of W. G. Sebald and demonstrates that even though the two authors have often been compared to one another, they crucially differ in the way in which their narratives relate to the temporality of the present. Cole’s narrative emerges as more sensitive to the demands of narrating trauma in a heterogeneous present in which multiple historical narratives come into contact.

The processes of remembering a traumatic and violent past also form the focus of Riitta Jytälä’s chapter on the contemporary Finnish novelist Elina Hirvonen. In her close reading of Hirvonen’s *When I Forgot*, Jytälä explores the ethical and political potential of imaginative memory (Braidotti 2013). In this way, she convincingly suggests that speculative fiction is not only a way of telling future

scenarios, but also a way to engage with personal as well as collective (im)possible pasts.

Molly Andrews concentrates on the question “Who owns the past?”. By contrasting the representation of East-German life in the Oscar winning film *The Lives of Others* with the critiques of the film offered to her by a small group of Germans who participated in a longitudinal study from 1992-2012, she engages with the pop-cultural commodification of the past. Pop-cultural commodifications, she argues, create polished versions of the past that hide, suppress and ultimately extinguish the multiple and enrichingly contrastive story lines that are prior to the homogenization of historical and cultural polishing.

Another contribution that focusses on film is Ilona Hongisto’s chapter on “The Ethics of Fabulation in Observational Documentary Cinema”. Concentrating on a range of canonical and contemporary observational documentaries, e.g. Jean Rouch’s *Moi, Un Noir* and Roberto Minervini’s *The Other Side (Louisiana)*, she notices a transposition in the work of documentary cinema. No longer limiting itself to the capturing of marginalized people’s voices, these films engage with “realities in the making” (p. 197) by offering glimpses at the social frames and contexts that are not directly observable through the lens of the camera.

Narrative Engagements with Violence and Trauma

The chapters in the third part engage with the ethics of storytelling in various modalities and media ranging from literature to photojournalism, theatre performance, video art and recruitment narratives of the terrorist organization ISIS.

Starting from the observation that the future of Holocaust memory is precarious because primary witnesses disappear as a living resource, Aleida Assmann’s most pressing question is: How can the Holocaust not just be transmitted as isolated knowledge, but how can we find forms of memory that create an “affective link” (p. 214)? Primarily relying on literary memoir (e.g. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*), Assmann analyzes the shift from the testimonial context into works of art and draws our attention to the figure of the empathetic listener: a secondary witness who deals with testimony as a part of his own memory and thus functions as a link (and not as a mere guard of the past) in the chain of transmission.

Relying on her own work as a playwright, Anna Reading discusses the ethics of storytelling in the theatre and its potential and limits for restitution. She stresses that restitution can never be a restoration (a return to what was) nor a transition to another future state, but rather an ongoing historical imagination of the self and society. Reflecting on the preparation, the performance, the reviews and the political contexts of her own play *Kiss Punch Goodnight* (1987), Reading describes what she terms “restitutional assemblage” as the collective transformation of symbolic, spiritual and emotional capital in a process that takes place across various temporalities, through different casts and in exchange with the audience.

Mia Hannula examines how traumatic colonial violence and its aftermath are addressed in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's multi-layered film *Where is Where?*. She investigates Ahtila's artwork as a potential intercultural encounter that instrumentalizes audio-visual narration in a way that throws light on the linkages between intertwined and related histories.

Cassandra Falke compares some very different ways of narrating and reading terror by drawing on a range of material as diverse as terrorist recruiting narratives, journalistic portrayals of terrorist acts and works by Lord Byron, Joseph Conrad and Günter Grass. Her guiding framework is the Kantian conception of sublimity.

The final essay by war photographer and documentary filmmaker Louie Palu offers a provoking insight into the ethical issues photographs are involved in not only during their creation but also with regard to the censorship of photographs and their use and "message shaping" in the media. Drawing on a selection of his recent photographs, he argues that photojournalism is "an exercise in controlling what we do see and what we don't see" (p. 270). His all-encompassing question is "who is creating images related to storytelling and history and what – if any – ethical codes are they following" (p. 268).

What is especially noteworthy about this volume is its attempt to provide some "concluding reflections" which is still something of a rarity in volumes of collected essays. The demanding task is performed by Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, Professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, editor of the journal *Storyworlds* and a scientist well versed in areas of twentieth century philosophy and the entanglement of arts and society. Following Hannah Arendt's favorite phrase "Men in Dark times" (2000), she titles her reflective chapter "Narrative in Dark Times" – a decision she ascribes to her overall insight into "how challenging our times are for story telling as a cultural and literary practice" as we have lost our trust in masterplots just as we might have lost our willingness to emplot events that are too traumatic or escape our understanding. Ritivoi formulates four key questions that arise from and connect the essays in the volume. First, she interrogates the premise that storytelling has ethical value, then she deals with the ethics of storytelling in terms of intelligibility and temporality, and finally she engages with the different modalities of narrative.

Concluding Remarks

It is prudent that the editors make it very clear from the beginning that literary and artistic narratives do not automatically make us better people. All in all, the collection successfully re-orientates the debate around the ethics of storytelling towards a complex non-moralistic understanding of the inherently ambiguous role of narrative in the configuration of experience. Most contributors carefully prevent the idealization of storytelling and stress the aloofness of ethics and especially ethical action. At a time when literature, and especially literature that is

classified to have ethical potential, is instrumentalized and passed off as a means to make better people, it is of great value to be reminded of the fact that (literary) art can never be ethical as such; the ethical dimension takes shape in dialogue with the reader, the viewer or the listener and is therefore always beyond the critic's genuine object of analysis.

Thinking of the empathetic listener as secondary witness (Assmann), the assemblage of restitution (Reading), the heterogeneous temporalities of the present (Kaakinen) and subsumptive vs. non-subsumptive storytelling (Meretoja) as well as many other tools for thought and analysis introduced and developed in this volume, it becomes clear that *Storytelling and Ethics* has indeed brought together new vocabularies for articulating how literary and other artistic narratives open new possibilities of thought and experiences.

The individual chapters repeatedly highlight the ethical potential of especially those stories that are demanding to read because they defy simplification, identification and rely on fractured, multiperspectival and dialogical forms of narrative mediation. These narratives challenge our frames of understanding because they defy appropriation and surprise us by their difference. If that is true, and I think it is, then we are not only challenged as readers but also as teachers of literature and the arts. We need to develop but also train complex and comprehensive narrative literacies that enable readers, listeners and viewers to appreciate and work with stories that go beyond our scope of knowledge and understanding. Reading these narratives requires curiosity, exercise, motivation and high frustration tolerance.

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Dr. Anne Rügge-meier
Department of English Studies
Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg
E-mail: anne.rueggemeier@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de

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