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Migration and Narrative Ecologies

Public and Media Discourse in the EU

This survey article paves the way for a new exchange between migration studies in the social sciences and narrative research on migration in the humanities by introducing the concept of a narrative ecology of migration. Taking our cue from previous research on cultural, media, and narrative ecologies, we argue that narratives on migration travel through different cultural and discursive contexts where they encounter other stories which either sustain or challenge their significance. Our argument unfolds in two steps: After providing a survey of previous research on narrative ecologies, which we see as a subset of media ecologies, we describe the levels of the narrative ecology of migration by discussing the ways in which different narratives on migration, as well as stories of migration, interact with each other on local, national, and European scales.

1. Introduction

Narrative is a fundamental sense-making instrument, a "tool for thinking" – to lift David Herman's (2003) influential formulation – that enables the segmentation and evaluation of experience. As is widely recognized in the interdisciplinary field of narrative studies, telling a story is a means of identifying agents and events within the flux of experience (segmentation); it also enables the storyteller to assign significance to those agents and events (evaluation).[1] Writing from an evolutionary perspective, Michelle Scalise Sugiyama (2001) argues that stories play a key role in human subsistence through their ability to model intersubjective behavior and convey information about the physical environment – both a result of how narrative breaks down and evaluates experience. Scalise Sugiyama hypothesizes that narrative must be as old as language itself, which "most likely emerged by 100,000 years ago, when *Homo sapiens* began spreading out of Africa" (223). If that is correct, it follows that storytelling developed in parallel with the migratory movements that brought a rather unremarkable species of the *Homo* genus from East Africa to planetary domination. Narrative as a tool for making sense of the world and the migratory propensities of our species thus appear to be closely intertwined.

Even today, when the word *migration* tends to trigger profoundly different associations from the dispersal of *Homo sapiens*, stories are central to the way we understand mobility on a global scale. In *On the Move. Mobility in the Modern Western World* (2006), Tim Cresswell examines the "metanarratives of mobility" that structure the individual and social perception of movement, from holidaymakers to refugees fleeing war, poverty, or climate change (55). "Metanarratives" – a

term Cresswell borrows from Jean-François Lyotard (1984) – aren't individual stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end but rather cultural ideas (such as nomadism and sedentarism, in Cresswell's discussion) that have a certain narrative potential in that they inspire or shape particular stories about mobility.

These metanarratives wield considerable cultural and political power, as researchers in the field of migration studies have repeatedly acknowledged. For instance, writing in the journal *Comparative Migration Studies*, social scientist James Dennison quotes from the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR): "How we perceive and speak about migrants and migration – the narrative – plays a fundamental role in guaranteeing equality and the human rights of migrants" (qtd. in Dennison 2021, 1; see also OHCHR 2023). Dennison's interest in narrative is encouraging, and it is hard to disagree with his conclusion that narratives are an important part of the policymaking and communication efforts that surround migration. However, as Dennison points out, the use of the concept of narrative in these debates on migration is frequently loose and undertheorized (2). In fact, in the quotation above, the OHCHR website's equation of perception, speech, and "the narrative" is indicative of a widespread tendency to employ the word *narrative* interchangeably with attitudes or views.[2]

From a narratological perspective, narrative needs individuated protagonists and a clear-cut temporal progression (see, e.g., Herman 2009); the concept is not interchangeable with the cultural perception of a certain phenomenon, although it is certainly bound up with it. The field of interdisciplinary narrative research, and especially the study of "narrative dynamics" (Sommer 2023), can help migration studies explore the significance of narrative in discourses on migration and mobility. A narrative dynamics-focused approach is not interested in policing the use of the term *narrative* but introduces a number of distinctions and conceptual tools affording a more precise understanding of how narratives interact with one another, on multiple levels.

This survey article paves the way for a new conversation on the relationship between migration discourses, media environments, and narrative dynamics.[3] Our aim is to bring together work on media as an infrastructure for communication (including narrative communication) and insights into how stories circulate and interact within the cultural system. Hence, we start by introducing the notion of a media ecology, a "travelling concept" (Bal 2002) which has facilitated cross-disciplinary debates on how media shape public perceptions as well as individual attitudes and worldviews since the 1970s (section 2). The second part of our article focuses more narrowly on the concept of narrative ecology, a subset of media ecologies with a specific focus on narrative. After tracing the origins of the concept in narrative studies (section 3), we will go on to identify the different levels of a narrative ecology of migration (section 4) to illustrate the way in which narrative across a range of verbal, visual, and auditory media plays a key role in coming to terms with transnational mobility. We will then conclude our article with a brief overview of the articles collected in this special issue, all of which explore the public discourse on migration in four EU countries (Aus-

tria, Germany, Hungary, and Italy) around the so-called European migrant crisis of 2015 (section 5).

2. Media Ecologies: A New Paradigm

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) popularized the phrase "ecology of mind" in an influential essay collection, and since then the idea of ecology has been frequently applied to information or knowledge systems. The concept of ecology suggests an evolving system, with multiple objects interacting in an open-ended and typically complex manner. Their interaction is shaped – but not completely determined – by their environment or context. In an ecosystem, these objects are life forms, and the environment is a material setting, with its unique features and properties (climate, physical configuration, etc.). Their interaction creates a certain dynamic, which can either preserve the ecosystem's balance or lead to dramatic transformations over time. In a *cultural* ecology, these interactions are much more abstract, and the environment in which they take place is primarily social rather than physical.[4]

One of the earliest uses of the term *ecology* in the cultural domain was Neil Postman's 1968 discussion of *media ecology* in a conference paper later published under the title "The Reformed English Curriculum" (Postman 1970). Postman's proposal was to reconsider the goals of English as a school subject, moving beyond the study of literary genres: "I call the alternative 'media ecology'. Its intention is to study the interaction between people and their communications technology. More particularly, media ecology looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value" (161). Historical context is clearly visible in Postman's description of his new concept, as the study of media ecology serves to show "how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival" in the "nuclear space age" (161). Developed further in the decades that followed, his core definition of media ecology, i.e., the study of "the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character" (qtd. in Granata 2021, 12), has proven to be highly productive and influential. The ecological metaphor of a media ecology emphasizes a systemic approach to communication across a variety of practices and technologies, from oral language to writing, the radio, television, and the internet. The concept refers to the media environments which shape our experience of the world and organize our interactions with and within it. According to Paolo Granata (2021, 8), "the media are our habits and habitat, the infrastructure of that invisible and complex network that is the human ecosystem." Exploring the interdependencies of technology, communication, and culture, research on contemporary media ecologies emphasizes, and focuses on, characteristic features of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has called "liquid modernity" – that is, connections and networks, processes of transformation, and procedural dynamics.

The ecological approach to mass media communication takes its inspiration from a wide variety of sources, from environmental studies and biology, systems theory and cybernetics, as well as neuroscience and complexity theory. Granata's 2021 survey of the emergence and development of media ecology research begins by pointing out some deficiencies of two earlier paradigms, i.e., functionalist-quantitative approaches to mass media on the one hand, and politically or ideologically motivated schools of thought, particularly those influenced by European Marxist perspectives, on the other (16). This allows us to fully appreciate the novelty and relevance of ecological approaches, which is often taken for granted in today's theoretical frameworks:

> It is only at an ecological and environmental level – or starting from the systematic relations between human culture and its expressive forms – that the deep transformations that shape social change in any phase of human history emerge, and therefore can be observed, studied and understood. From this perspective, the new paradigm of media ecology represents a seminal turning point in epistemological terms. (16)

Historically, the study of media environments has focused on three closely related aspects: technologies and institutions, contents and forms, as well as audiences and effects. These perspectives are also at the core of systematic analyses of media as communication channels which may be employed for strategic storytelling. This is where narrative comes in: as a discourse mode with which audiences are intuitively familiar, it lends itself to framing political messages. Narrative as a purposeful and goal-oriented form of communication raises a plethora of questions, however, both in theory (rhetorical narratology; see, e.g., Phelan 2017) and in practice (international relations). Working within the latter field, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle (2013) offer an impressive list of the challenges involved in successful narrative communication:

> We must account for the way in which a narrative is adapted, challenged, repackaged, twisted, and recontextualized as it travels through media ecologies. If policymakers want to know how to win the battle of the narratives, then mapping the circuits of communication, interpretation, and meaning making in media ecologies is a first step. As if that is not hard enough, we must explain how actors in international relations try to manage and shape those media ecologies to ensure that their narrative gets heard and supported to the maximum degree while others get sidelined. They must exploit the media ecologies of the day, distributing their narrative within the national and transnational public spheres, winning the arguments and the framing battles. But they must also compete to shape the infrastructure of these ecologies itself, since that infrastructure privileges certain voices and certain ways of communicating over others. (148)

Narratives, Miskimmon et al. argue, are not only indispensable tools for communication, but also deeply embedded in media ecologies: if this holds true, we need to understand what they are and how they work. There is a substantial body of theoretical knowledge developed by narrative scholars since the 1950s, largely unnoticed outside of the humanities, which may provide useful heuristic categories and conceptual frameworks. One way of unlocking this potential is to extend the discussion of media ecologies to focus more specifically on narrative ecologies.

3. Tracing the Origins of Narrative Ecologies

As suggested in the introduction, stories shape our understanding of the world on an individual and societal level. But stories come in many guises: from fleeting narratives arising in oral interaction – "small stories," as researchers in qualitative psychology call them –[5] to the intricate plots of TV series or novels. Some of these stories are fictional, others are grounded in personal experience and presented as factual accounts. Moreover, some stories are widely known within a certain culture (e.g., William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* in the Western world), whereas others are obscure or vanish after the telling. Most important perhaps is that stories *travel*: they move around, bumping into other stories and sometimes clashing with them (as in conflicting accounts of a historical event). They are also cognitive and communicative tools, vital for narrative world-making (see Herman 2002; Nünning et al. 2010) and for the sharing of experiences and worldviews. All these interactions between stories, and between stories and minds, form the subset of a media ecology which we call narrative ecology.

Over the last two decades, the term *narrative ecology* has been widely used in the fields of educational research, narrative psychology, and the social sciences. Keith Turvey (2012; 2013) has introduced the concept in educational research as a method to explore the ways in which student teachers story their professional and personal relationship with new technologies and media that are implemented in pedagogical methods. More specifically, he conceptualizes narrative ecology as a "teacher-centred model that seeks to give expression, through narrative, to the nuanced and complex factors observed to be at play as student teachers appropriate technologies in their professional practice" (2013, 65). To our knowledge, Turvey's work constitutes the only approach which has adapted the notion of narrative ecology as a methodology rather than a purely theoretical concept. In the other fields mentioned above, the metaphor has been understood in a sense compatible with the notion of ecology as an information or knowledge system.

In narrative psychology, the term *narrative ecology* has been deployed primarily in connection with family stories. The majority of studies on this subject draw on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development, which posits that, in order to understand the development of individuals, one has to consider the entire social and cultural ecological system in which such growth occurs.[6] Combining Bronfenbrenner's model with Dan P. McAdams's work on the concept of life story,[7] research on family stories construe families as a narrative space or environment in which family members tell, share, retell, and shape stories which enable not only children and adolescents but also adults to form their identity. Kate C. McLean, in her monograph *The Co-Authored Self. Family Stories and the Construction of Personal Identity* (2016), argues that "[i]t is with and through stories that we develop an understanding of our selves through time" (2). Seen in this light, family stories can function as a source of knowledge

which generates "family paradigms, myths, stories, and rituals" (Pratt and Fiese 2004a, 4) and produces collective memories (Fivush and Merrill 2016). Although the stories which different families tell each other within a given society or culture may resemble each other, "[e]ach family's narrative ecology […] may affirm its own literary tradition, be it one filled with happy stories or one tending toward the tragic or ironic" (McAdams 2004, 246).

Based on these insights, studies in narrative psychology have introduced the concept of the "narrative ecology of the self" (McLean and Breen 2015) to describe the multilayered ecosystem of narratives that shape our identity. According to McLean (2016, 5), the narrative ecology of the self "features not only the stories of one's own personal experiences, but also includes the stories of one's friends, romantic partners, and teachers; [as well as] stories that persist in the culture at large." One's narrative identity, as well as one's autobiographical memory, is consequently made up of different types of stories, each of which belongs to a different level of the narrative ecology of the self.

Adapting Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems model, prior research has designated these different levels as the micro-system, the exo-system, and the macro-system (Fivush and Merrill 2016, 308; see also McLean 2016, 6). The micro-system relates to the sphere of family, which plays a special role in the narrative ecology of the self, for it is within this narrative space that we first learn to construct our identity through means of narration (McLean 2016, 7). The exo-system refers to personal stories told by others who are not part of the family, yet are relatively close to one or several family members (e.g., friends, teachers, and colleagues). Finally, the macro-system includes society and culture at large, thus representing the narrative space where cultural master-narratives and myths are produced by the media and public discourse.[8] Since these three levels of the narrative ecology serve as a heuristic for the description and analysis of the various scales of narrative that influence one's identity, they should be considered as permeable spaces (McLean 2016, 7) or rather "nested narrative structures" (McLean and Breen 2015, 386) that interpenetrate and interact with each other. By applying the model to the context of leadership identity constructions, Maria Lundberg (2019, ch. 5) has furthermore shown that the model of the narrative ecology of the self is not restricted to family stories, but can instead be applied to any other type of identity discourse.

In the social sciences, the notion of narrative ecology has been adopted in order to foreground the relation between master- and counter-narratives. The distinction of master- and counter-narratives was first introduced in a 2002 double special issue of the journal *Narrative Inquiry* (Andrews 2002; Bamberg and McCabe 2002). Since the debate on counter-narratives had a strong resonance with scholars working in the field of narrative studies, two of the editors – Molly Andrews and Michael Bamberg – soon decided to expand both these special issues into a collective volume (see Bamberg and Andrews 2004a) published in 2004 (Bamberg and Andrews 2004b, ix). In her opening contribution to this volume, Andrews (2004, 1) defines counter-narratives as stories which are both told and experienced by people as offering "resistance, either explicitly or im-

plicitly, to dominant cultural narratives." These dominant narratives, in turn, qualify as master-narratives, i.e., narratives that, according to Bamberg (2004a, 360), function as "culturally accepted frames" which tend to "'normalize' and 'naturalize'" actions and events by setting them up as routines. On the one hand, master-narratives serve to "constrain and delineate the agency of subjects, seemingly reducing their actions," which is probably the main reason why they are often challenged by counter-narratives highlighting marginalized perspectives (Lueg et al. 2021, 4). On the other hand, master-narratives provide guidance and a sense of orientation which structure and order the actions of subjects (Bamberg 2004a, 360), because they generate scripts and frames we resort to when modeling "culturally expected events" (Hyvärinen 2021, 20).

Since these initial debates in the early 2000s, research on counter-master-narrative dynamics has flourished and expanded into various branches of the social sciences (Frandsen et al. 2017; Lueg and Lundholt 2021).[9] The field of organization studies in particular has shown increasing interest in counter-narratives, and it is within this strand of master-counter-narrative research that the concept of a narrative ecology has been applied to analyze the relation between the various narratives that shape social life. In his contribution to the 2017 volume *Counter-Narratives and Organization*, edited by Sanne Frandsen, Timothy Kuhn, and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, Yiannis Gabriel stresses the mutual dependence between master- and counter-narratives: "Master narratives," he maintains, "need counter-narratives in order to recognize themselves as narratives, and counter-narratives need master narratives in order to be recognized as counter-narratives" (208). More specifically, he argues that "counter-narratives emerge out of various counter-claims, claims, in other words, that invoke a master narrative, drawing it, so to speak, into consciousness in order to rebut it or challenge it" (209). Counter-narratives accordingly uncover flaws, contradictions, and false premises of master-narratives, as they offer alternative and superior explanations and interpretations of events. In this respect, they can be seen as political interventions that undermine and subvert mainstream or canonical political interests and positions (210). Once counter-claims have been established as counter-narratives, they can yield counter-claims and narratives of their own, thus attaining to master-narratives themselves (211).

To better conceptualize the dynamic interplay between master- and counter-narratives, Gabriel draws on the metaphor of ecology. Defining the discursive spaces in which different narratives emerge and aggregate into clusters which support or contest one another, he identifies seven different ecosystems which can be described as follows (221–222):

(1) narrative temperate regions, where different narratives coexist by "displaying considerable diversity, versatility and tolerance for each other" (221);
(2) narrative deserts, in which only few narratives emerge; possible reasons for this could be cultural or social "taboos against narrativization" (221) or the fact that potential storytellers are traumatized;

(3) narrative monocultures which are "dominated by a few hegemonic narratives which are only challenged occasionally and tentatively by oppositional voices" (221) which, however, fail to become proper counter-narratives;
(4) narrative mountains, which only allow for weak narratives to unfold without causing any long-lasting effects;
(5) narrative marshlands "where heavy and wet narratives prosper, tending to sink deep into the morass" (221); this is, for example, the case if narratives address urgent social and political issues;
(6) narrative jungles, where many different narratives emerge, competing for discursive hegemony; and
(7) narrative allotments and gardens in which only private narratives are told, while being shielded from "weedlike counterclaims and counter-narratives" (222).

While Gabriel's differentiation of different types of narrative ecologies provides appealing food for thought – for example, the idea of distinguishing different patterns of how master- and counter-narratives interact seems very promising – his typology fails to distinguish clearly between the seven ecosystems outlined above. For instance, it is difficult to understand the differences between narrative deserts, narrative monocultures, and narrative mountains, given that all three ecosystems are said to bring forth only very few, and in some cases even weak, (diverging) narratives. Moreover, Gabriel claims that, even though he develops his ideas about narrative ecologies with reference to stories that are shared within organizations, his considerations can also be applied to different societal and cultural contexts: "[N]arratives," he argues, "are not constrained by formal organizational boundaries. Instead, they can and often do cross such boundaries, moving from one organization to another, from one discourse to another, and from one narrative space to another" (209). We certainly agree with Gabriel that the idea of a narrative ecology should not be restricted to the realm of organizations and that organizations – just like the families that are foregrounded in psychological approaches to a narrative ecology of the self – should rather be construed as making up only one layer of a complex narrative ecosystem. Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether narrative ecosystems like a narrative monoculture or a narrative 'mountain' actually exist, for even in authoritarian regimes there usually exist counter-narratives that challenge the master-narrative. Therefore, in lieu of conceptualizing the discursive spaces in which the narrative dynamics of migration unfold as *different* types of narrative ecologies, we would rather follow the suggestion of the work on family stories discussed above and think of the narrative ecology of migration as *one* complex ecosystem consisting of different levels. We will outline these levels in the following section.

4. Levels of the Narrative Ecology of Migration

Stories circulate and interact within the narrative ecosystem, and they do so on multiple levels depending on the overall spatial, temporal, and social reach of a story – how widespread it is, how long it manages to persist, whether it circulates privately or publicly (and in what groups or social circles), and so on. This is where narrative and media ecologies converge: a story's ability to circulate is influenced by the physical and social infrastructure of the media ecology, including what media technologies are available and how their accessibility is shaped by political and socio-cultural factors.

The narrative ecology, as we conceptualize it here, consists of three overlapping levels which together cover all possible forms of narrative, ranging from cultural myths and master-narratives through various forms of storytelling in news media, public discourses, and the arts to life stories of individuals. On the most abstract level of the narrative ecology, we find the *grands récits* and metanarratives discussed by Lyotard and Cresswell: cultural myths that function as attractors or catalysts for storytelling. Examples include the notion of mobility as an essential resource for economic development, a metanarrative that can underpin stories of successful migration; story templates such as the quest for "greener pastures" or economic narratives like the global village; and multicultural narrative metaphors like the salad bowl or melting pot. All these narratives can, of course, be challenged by counter-narratives which question such views (Lueg and Lundholt 2021; see also the previous section).

The most concrete level of the narrative ecology, on the other hand, is constituted by stories told by individuals in different communicative situations such as everyday conversations (see Norrick 2000) or in interviews during asylum procedures. These "small stories" (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; see also note 5) not only reflect personal experience, but may also resonate with other experiential narratives, thereby establishing narrative communities. A case in point are stories of transit, detention, and waiting in limbo which give rise to the figure of the "slow refugee" (Sommer 2023).

In-between the levels of metanarratives or cultural myths and individual stories resides the intermediate level of narrative representations. These are mediated through verbal or visual media and can thus be studied using some form of textual or media analysis like narratological close readings or discourse analysis. A closer examination of these mediated narratives reveals that they come in various forms, ranging from fictional to factual accounts, as well as from literary to non-literary practices of storytelling. They can, moreover, be found in different public contexts such as politics, law, science and academia, as well as literature and the arts.

The narrative ecology is consequently influenced by a number of agents, which include people but also political, legal, or cultural institutions. These superindividual entities also take on considerable agency – following Bruno Latour's (2005) Actor-Network Theory – in reinforcing and spreading certain

narratives at the expense of others.[10] As Carolin Gebauer and Roy Sommer (2023) have shown, vicarious storytelling – i.e., the act of telling a story on behalf of someone else – plays a key role in this process. Both classical news media and social media with their algorithmic logic are further important factors in the narrative ecology, distributing stories that reach millions of readers or viewers. Cultural practices that trade in fictional stories, such as literature and cinema, are also implicated in the narrative ecosystem. Literary scholar Hubert Zapf (2001), for example, has written about literature's "cultural ecology," capturing the way in which literature builds on and responds to stories circulating in other areas of society. For Zapf, literary works can perform various cultural functions including offering explicit reflection on culturally entrenched stories, questioning them, or creating unexpected linkage between disparate ideas or discussions.[11] This model can be extended to other representational or artistic practices within the narrative ecology, including film, television, theater, dance performances, art, etc.

Figure 1 below visualizes the narrative ecology of migration; the diagram is based on the model of the narrative ecology of the self provided by McLean (2016, 6; see fig. 1.1 on the following page). Our model, which focuses on migration, distinguishes value-based metanarratives like empathy for others or universal human rights, scholarly notions of a post-migrant society (see the contributions in Gaonkar et al. 2021), economic views of transnational mobility as a resource, and cultural myths of migration, all of which form the most abstract level ("metanarratives & migration myths"), from strategic policy narratives (Miskimmon et al. 2013; 2017), including right-wing narratives of national sovereignty and racist narratives of cultural purity, news stories, or representtations of migration in literature, cinema, or television, which make up the intermediate level ("(media & artistic) narratives on migration"). While such "narratives on migration" present migration from an etic or outside perspective, individual "stories of migration," which reflect the experience of migrants in transit or in countries of destination, depict the phenomenon from an emic or inside perspective (Gebauer and Sommer 2023); these constitute the most concrete level of the model of the narrative ecology of migration ("(individual) stories of migration").

As the bidirectional arrows in the model indicate, interactions are possible both within each level and across levels, for instance when a literary narrative embraces the logic of a larger cultural narrative – as is the case in novels like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999), and Xiaolu Guo's *A Lover's Discourse* (2020) which adopt and propagate a metanarrative of the mobile, international lifestyle of modern global nomads. Yet, such mediated representations can also engage with cultural myths in order to criticize their underlying ideology – cases in point are the Netflix series *Stateless* (2020) or Alejandro González Iñárritu's virtual reality project *Carne y arena* (2017), both of which question Western border regimes. Examples of this kind serve to illustrate the effect of a culturally widespread narrative influencing a more local instance of storytelling. In other cases, the influence goes in the opposite direction, with individual stories having an impact, albeit temporarily, on

the cultural level. A tragic example of this reversed effect is a photograph of the dead body of three-year old Alan Kurdi on the Turkish Mediterranean coast (see Smith 2015, n. pag.): circulating in the media during the peak of the European migration "crisis," the image became an important symbol of the suffering of refugees, shocking the European public. Taken together, then, all these instances of mediated narratives on migration demonstrate that the narrative ecology is constantly evolving in response to both external events and interactions within the system.

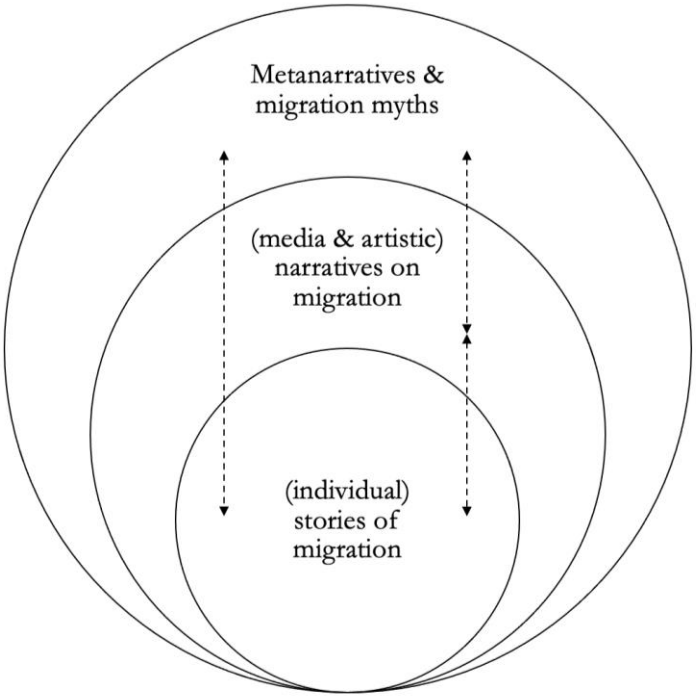

Figure 1: The narrative ecology of migration

Since models serve to reduce (rather than increase) complexity, it is clear that the narrative ecology is much more complex than the distinction of three levels shown in Figure 1 suggests. Besides, the arrows depicted in the diagram do not fully capture the nonlinear, often cyclical, nature of the narrative dynamics that play out within the narrative ecology of migration. Roy Sommer (2023) has introduced a more dynamic conception of interactions between narratives to account for the ways in which (social) media narratives operate in the public sphere, with a number of examples taken from recent debates on migration. Some stories are deployed as "chaff" (501–502), particularly on social media: analogous to the military tactic of releasing a cloud of aluminum confetti to prevent an aircraft's detection, these stories are shared on the internet so as to confuse and distract from the real issues. In other instances, narratives can be brought into ideological alignment through processes of "aggregation" (502–503); they may thus add up to an ideologically coherent worldview, so that their relationship becomes – using another, biological, metaphor – "symbiotic" (503).

5. Media Narratives on Migration

Our discussion of narrative ecology provides a jumping-off point for understanding the role that narrative plays in the European discourse of migration, as well as the significance of the articles included in this special issue. Many stories address or "negotiate" – to adopt Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's (2017) terminology – the topic of migration, and they exist on virtually all of the levels of the narrative ecology discussed above. First, we have the metanarratives of migration as a threat to a country's security or culture, as a source of cheap labor, as an opportunity for self-determination, and so on. These are, as mentioned previously, views onto which individual narratives can latch, but they do not display the particularity that narrative theorists generally associate with stories. We also have a number of narrative templates or prototypes that tend to come up in the discourse surrounding migration. For instance, the "good immigrant" is one such template, imagining an exemplary migrant who assimilates quietly, lives lawfully, and makes a positive economic contribution. This is a prototype that can be invoked by particular narratives circulating on a cultural level, including the narratives told by policymakers when discussing the advantages of a particular approach to migration. Media and artistic representations can reinforce, question, or complicate these prototypes (which are in many instances also *stereo*- or *arche*types).[12]

The current political and cultural discourse on migration in a European context tends to be split between anti-migration sentiment on the one hand, and humanitarian positions on the other (see De Haas 2023). This polarization can be seen at work in EU-level debates around and after 2015, which saw a significant increase in migration to the continent (mainly as a result of the civil war in Syria). In terms of narrative ecology, the polarization depends on the oversimplification practiced by larger (meta-)narratives on a European level. These stories tend to understand migration narrowly, as a phenomenon endangering European security and prosperity or as a problem or crisis to be addressed, instead of painting a more nuanced picture of migration as an opportunity for the member states to grow culturally and economically. Largely, this depends on how media narratives replicate culturally dominant views and stereotypes and fail to come to terms with the complexity of migration. Moreover, individual stories of migration (i.e., experiential narratives told by migrants themselves) rarely enter mainstream discourse, which results in a partial and skewed understanding of migrants' experiences and reasons for leaving their home country.

The *DIEGESIS* special issue "European Narratives on Migration. Concepts and Case Studies" uses media representations of, as well as public debates on, migration as a route into the broader narrative ecology. This focus is based on the assumption that public discourse and the news media play a central role in bridging the gap between larger political and cultural narratives and the personal stories told by individual migrants. In fields such as linguistics and communication studies, media coverage of migration in particular has been studied widely,

including from a European perspective (see, e.g., Eberl et al. 2018; Fábián 2023). However, none of this scholarship engages with narrative theory.

Addressing this lacuna, the contributions assembled in this special issue approach migration discourses from a narratological perspective that seeks to uncover the dynamics of migration within the European public sphere. In doing so, they focus on different news media and genres: The contributions by Simona Adinolfi and Marco Caracciolo as well as by Birgit Bahtić-Kunrath and Carolin Gebauer draw on both progressive and conservative newspapers, revealing discontinuities – but also surprising continuities – in their coverage of migration,[13] whereas the contributions by Carolin Gebauer, by Roy Sommer and Ida Fábián, as well as by Moustapha Diallo and Mariam Muwanga take a meta-perspective on migration discourses. All these discussions are inspired by migration research in the social sciences while retaining humanities methods of formal analysis and close reading, as well as critical discourse analysis. The analyses not only focus on the interaction between narrative techniques and rhetorical tools such as framing (see Bahtić-Kunrath and Gebauer 2023) and metaphor (see Adinolfi and Caracciolo 2023) in concrete textual examples, but they also investigate the broader dynamics of master- and counter-narratives in migration discourses (see Diallo and Muwanga 2023; Gebauer 2023; Sommer and Fábián 2023).

In order to offer a diverse sampling of Europe's narrative ecology of migration, the articles engage with four different national contexts: Austria (see Bahtić-Kunrath and Gebauer 2023), Germany (see Gebauer 2023), including the African diaspora in Germany (see Diallo and Muwanga 2023), Hungary (see Sommer and Fábián 2023), and Italy (see Adinolfi and Caracciolo 2023). These countries were chosen in that they represent a broad spectrum of European migration policies: Germany, as the destination country for many migrants, Italy as an important point of entry into the European Union, Austria as a transit country, Hungary as a well-known hotspot of anti-immigration sentiment. Despite the focus on different national discourses, a number of shared themes run through the essays, particularly the importance of offering a multiperspectival view of migration that does justice to the phenomenon's inherent complexity as well as the complexity of its embedding within the narrative ecology. We hope that the work presented here will become a starting point for fruitful interactions between narrative theory and the social sciences going forward.

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[1] Here and throughout this introduction, we use the terms *narrative* and *story* interchangeably.
[2] See Dawson 2023 on this extended use of the term *narrative*.
[3] In narratological terms, our work can be situated within the field of contextualist narratology (Sommer 2007; Nünning 2009), which understands narratives as structurally in dialogue with the cultural views and assumptions that they help shape.
[4] We use the term *cultural ecology* in the sense of Hubert Zapf (2001; see also section 4). For a literature survey on how the term is deployed in research on cultural and creative sectors and industries, see De Bernard et al. 2021.
[5] See, e.g., Bamberg 2004b; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2006.
[6] See, e.g., McLean and Breen 2015; Fivush and Merrill 2016; McLean 2016; as well as the contributions in Pratt and Fiese 2004b.
[7] See McAdams 1988; 1993; 2001.
[8] As qualitative studies by Breen et al. (2017) have shown, media stories (including fiction, movies, and television programs) in particular can have a strong bearing on the formation of both individual and collective identities.
[9] For a more detailed account of more recent approaches to counter-master-narrative dynamics and especially a critique of construing both types of narrative as binary categories, see also Gebauer's (2023) contribution to this special issue.
[10] A comprehensive discussion of narrative as a tool of agency, or rather "an instrument of persuasion" as well as "behavioural […] and constitutive power" (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 141) has been provided by recent research on strategic narratives in the field of politics and international relations (see, e.g., Barthwal-Datta et al. 2023; Miskimmon et al. 2013; as well as the contributions to Miskimmon et al. 2017). Such work is complementary to recent sociological approaches to narrative which conceptualize narrative as forms of "social action" (Björninen et al. 2020).
[11] Zapf (2001, 93) calls these functions, respectively, "metadiscourse," "counterdiscourse," and "interdiscourse." There is a clear overlap between "counterdiscourse" and the social science concept of counter-narrative (Bamberg and Andrews 2004), but Zapf's triad has the advantage of being more precise and fine-grained than the binary oppositive between narrative and counter-narrative.
[12] See, e.g., Szczepanik 2016 for a discussion of the "refugee archetype."
[13] We chose to focus on "legacy" media (i.e., newspapers) so as to ensure the coherence of the analyses across the special issue, but we are aware of the need to extend the discussion to audiovisual or social media. We hope follow-up work can address that limitation of our approach.