



Article scientifique

Article

2024

Published version

Open Access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

---

## On the Concept of Narrative

---

Giannuzzo, Anaïs

### How to cite

GIANNUZZO, Anaïs. On the Concept of Narrative. In: *Studia philosophica*, 2024, vol. 83, p. 39–54. doi: 10.24894/StPh-en.2024.83004

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:181445>

Publication DOI: [10.24894/StPh-en.2024.83004](https://doi.org/10.24894/StPh-en.2024.83004)

# On the Concept of Narrative

Anais Giannuzzo

Until recently, the term “narrative” has mostly been applied to novels and movies, but we can observe it being used more and more extensively in everyday communication, notably in newspaper articles and podcasts. It seems that the use of the term has evolved in response to new parameters in our world: the proliferation of new media, such as podcasts, video games, and virtual reality may have contributed to a broader and more flexible application. In this paper, I will argue that we can account for both uses of the term with one theory of the concept of narrative. I will further argue that the expanded use of the term illuminates aspects of the concept that are not as prominent when the focus of its application is primarily on novels and movies. Specifically, I posit that the newly emerging properties are interactivity, immersion, and appropriation.<sup>1</sup>

Philosophers and literary scholars alike have been interested in defining the concept of narrative. Literary scholars Maria Mäkelä and Samuli Björninen (2022), for example, point to a contrast between two distinct uses of the term “narrative”. Narratives are in some contexts representations of “temporal succession, causality and change”; in other contexts, narratives portray “how the world is both seen and represented”.<sup>2</sup> Philosophers (e.g., Noël Carroll<sup>3</sup>) have traditionally been interested in the first use of “narrative”, while the second is the culturally-tainted use that journalists, politicians, and podcasters employ.<sup>4</sup>

The second use of “narrative” refers to what is in people’s minds: it is broad and perhaps also obscure; it even sometimes seems to pick out completely different objects.<sup>5</sup> Journalist Mary Kay Linge (2021) speaks of narrative as “a truth-

---

1 I would like to thank both reviewers, as well as Julia Langkau, for their precious comments and critiques, which significantly contributed to enhancing the quality of this paper.

2 Maria Mäkelä and Samuli Björninen: *My Story, Your Narrative: Scholarly Terms and Popular Usage*, in: *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by Paul Dawson; Maria Mäkelä (New York: Routledge, 2022) 14.

3 Noël Carroll: *On the Narrative Connection*, in: *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 122.

4 The same distinction is made by Molly Patterson and Kristen Monroe (Molly Patterson; Kristen Renwick Monroe: *Narrative in Political Science*, in: *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998)). Somers and Gibson distinguish between four narratives: “Ontological narratives”, “public narratives”, “conceptual narrativity” and “metanarrativity” (Margaret R. Somers; Gloria D. Gibson: *Reclaiming the Epistemological Other: Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity* (working paper, 1993) 31–32).

5 Mari Hatavara; Lars-Christer Hydén; Matti Hyvärinen: *Introduction, or Another Story of Narrative*, in: *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative*, ed. by Mari Hatavara; Lars-Christer Hydén; Matti Hyvärinen (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2013) 4. They warn us: “The very concept of narrative has for decades been at risk of losing all meaning as a result of being understood too broadly”.

producing machine’ constructed to twist facts into a pattern”.<sup>6</sup> In political theory, Shaul R. Shenhav (2006) tells us that the term is used to speak about “political identity, perspective and ideology”;<sup>7</sup> Molly Patterson and Kristen Monroe (2003) refer to a psychological phenomenon: “[n]arrative plays a central role in cognition, in organizing our perceptions of reality into a coherent and meaningful pattern”.<sup>8</sup> Besides its assimilation into various fields, it is perhaps the rise of new media – mainly video games and virtual reality – that may have encouraged a wider and looser use of the term “narrative”, since these media add an interesting component: in video games and in virtual reality, narratives are interactive.

It may seem that the use of “narrative” has changed: the assimilation of the term into political theory and the social sciences points to a psychologization of “narrative”. The theoretical question thus is whether this expanded use of the term reflects two different concepts of “narrative” or whether it rather illuminates properties of a single concept of narrative that were not salient when the focus was exclusively on novels and movies. I argue for the latter. My aim is to show that both uses mentioned by Mäkelä and Björninen refer to the same concept, and that the properties of narratives that were previously not apparent are interactivity, immersion, and appropriation.

I will do so by first introducing a case and then discussing standard philosophical theories of narrative, the *literary account*, and the *coherence account*. I will demonstrate how the literary account fails to explain our case. I will then show that, while the coherence account succeeds in explaining the broader way in which “narrative” is currently used, it is also missing some elements. The remainder of the paper is devoted to offering an improved account of narrative: one that can account both for the narrow use of the term preferred by philosophers as well as for wider uses.

## The Villain, The Victim, and The Saviour

In an episode of the podcast *You’re Wrong About* that addresses the Jonestown Massacre, Sarah Marshall speaks of narratives to explain what, in 1978, may have motivated around six hundred people to commit suicide by drinking cyanide after having killed around three hundred children by making them drink the poison first:

---

6 Mary Kay Linge: How the New York Times Publishes Lies to Serve a Biased Narrative, in: New York Post (8 May 2021), URL=<https://nypost.com/2021/05/08/how-the-new-york-times-publishes-lies-to-serve-a-biased-narrative/>.

7 Shaul R. Shenhav: Political Narratives and Political Reality, in: International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique 27/3 (2006) 245.

8 M. Patterson; K. Monroe: Narrative in Political Science, op. cit., 319.

The classic triangle in interpersonal drama is victim, villain, savior and if you can create a narrative on these people that you've already, you know, have such psychological power over that [A.G.: Marshall is speaking of Jim Jones], you know, "You were the victim. I am your savior. Someone else is the villain. I am saving you from this other force".<sup>9</sup>

Using the notion of narrative, Marshall explains how Jim Jones's followers, the so-called *People's Temple*, adopted a narrative in which they are the victims, Jim Jones is their savior, and some others, such as people who thought differently, governments and capitalism, are the villain. This third party, the "others", is a danger from which Jim Jones would save them, or so the narrative goes. The *Jonestown Massacre* case offers an example of how a "narrative" can be connected to our life by guiding our thoughts and behaviors.

Marshall probably uses the term "narrative" because, first, what she identifies is too complex to be called a belief. It may rather be described as (say) a complex discourse or a shared, elaborate point of view – or even better: a shared *imaginative representation*. The content of the narrative involves self-representations, emotions (e.g. fear), feelings (e.g. uncertainty), imagistic representations, beliefs, and so forth. Second, this imaginative representation takes people to have certain archetypal features of characters (the villain, the victim, the savior).

Implicit in Marshall's observation is the idea that the narrative also offers a sense of perceiving and understanding the world, and that it gives meaning to the actions of its characters. In this sense, the narrative is 'ongoing' in people's minds: it is used to understand what is happening around them and suggesting how they should act, and it will likely be altered in light of new events and actions. Ultimately, it offers a sense of purpose to members of the *People's Temple*.

## Definitions of Narrative

In this section, I look at two philosophical accounts of narrative. The aim is to test whether these accounts can elucidate both the traditional and the broader uses of "narrative".<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Marshall; Michael Hobbes: *The Jonestown Massacre*, in: *You're Wrong About* (2018), URL=<https://www.buzzsprout.com/1112270/3884087-the-jonestown-massacre>, accessed 7 December 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Some argue that the term "narrative" refers to various uses of language rather than one clear-cut phenomenon. According to David Rudrum (David Rudrum: *From Narrative Representation to Narrative Use: Towards the Limits of Definition*, in: *Narrative* 13/2 (2005) 195–204), e.g., one may treat a typical narrative (book, movie) as a non-narrative (as an instruction for example) and *vice versa*. I will leave these kinds of accounts aside here.

### i. The Literary Account

Every variety of what I call the “literary account” of narrative has its particularities. Gregory Currie (2010), for example, considers a narrative to be “the means by which someone communicates a story to someone else”, thus offering a concept of narrative as a communicative act.<sup>11</sup> Peter Lamarque (2014) offers a structural account in which narratives organize and structure events with one another from a certain point of view.<sup>12</sup> Carroll (2001) regards the narrative connection of events and states of affairs as essential.<sup>13</sup> Still, I subsume various accounts of narratives under the term “literary account”, because all of them focus on literary narratives.<sup>14</sup>

The literary account generally conceives of narratives as *representations*: examples include movies, novels, and daily conversations about things that have happened. Narratives represent at least more than one *event* and/or *state of affairs*. More specifically, narratives *recount* past events and/or states of affairs.<sup>15</sup> These recounting representations are artifacts whose function is to communicate a story to an audience – whether the story is written down, spoken out loud to a person or a group of people, or communicated through pointing at objects: a narrative is always a “story told”.<sup>16</sup> In Peter Lamarque’s words, “[t]here can be no narrative without narration”.<sup>17</sup>

What is peculiar to narratives – and distinguishes them from annals and chronicles – is that the events or states of affairs built into them are not merely retold as a list, but linked together by certain *relations*. Defenders of the literary account disagree on the nature of these relationships. One interesting candidate is the causal relation, which most of the authors who have offered a literary ac-

11 Gregory Currie: *Narratives and Narrators* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 1.

12 Peter Lamarque: *The Opacity of Narrative* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014).

13 N. Carroll: *On the Narrative Connection*, op. cit. refers to J. L. Mackie’ “INUS conditions” (John L. Mackie: *Causes and Conditions*, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2/4 (1965) 245–64). “INUS conditions” are “*insufficient* but *necessary* part[s] of a condition which is itself *unnecessary* but *sufficient* for the result”. To Currie requiring that narratives entail INUS conditions is too demanding, because it “require[s] the assumption of determinacy” (G. Currie: *Narratives and Narrators*, op. cit., 40). That is, INUS conditions require the events following the causes to be determined by their causes.

14 Besides already mentioned authors, see also Martin Wallace: *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Ruth Ronen: *Description, Narrative and Representation*, in: *Narrative* 5/3 (1997) 274–286; Noël Carroll: *Narrative Closure*, in: *Philosophical Studies* 135/1 (2 August 2007) 1–15; Susan L. Feagin: *On Noël Carroll on Narrative Closure*, in: *Philosophical Studies* 135/1 (2 August 2007) 17–25; Brian Richardson: *Recent Concepts of Narrative and the Narratives of Narrative Theory*, in: *Style* 34/2 (2000) 168–175.

15 See G. Currie: *Narratives and Narrators*, op. cit.; P. Lamarque: *The Opacity of Narrative*, op. cit.; Gerald Prince: *Narratology* (De Gruyter Mouton, 2012).

16 P. Lamarque: *The Opacity of Narrative*, op. cit.; G. Currie: *Narratives and Narrators*, op. cit.

17 P. Lamarque: *The Opacity of Narrative*, op. cit., 9.

count of narrative consider to be at least typical for narratives. Currie (2010) argues that the causal relation is oftentimes loose. His argument follows David Velleman (2003), who suggested that causal relations are not necessary in a narrative, illustrating his point with Aristotle's example of the *Murder of Mityts*: "Mityts was murdered, and the murderer of Mityts went on to be killed by a falling statue of Mityts himself".<sup>18</sup> This story has narrative features; yet since it does not recount a causal sequence of events, causal relations are not necessary for narrative. Currie as well as Peter Goldie (2014) suggest that the causal relation between different events or states of affairs in narratives may be what they call "salient" causes.<sup>19</sup> An event in a narrative can have several causes, depending on the perspective of the narrator. David Lewis makes this point clear:

If someone says that the bald tire was the cause of the crash, another says that the driver's drunkenness was the cause, and still another says that the cause was the bad upbringing which made him so reckless, I do not think any of them disagree with me when I say that the causal history includes all three. *They disagree only about which part of the causal history is most salient for the purposes of some particular inquiry.* They may be looking for the most remarkable part, the most remediable or blameworthy part, the least obvious of the discoverable parts, [...]. Some parts will be salient in some contexts, others in others.<sup>20</sup>

Lamarque considers a further relation to be necessary for the narrative, the *temporal* relation. Ruth Ronnen (1997) and Eva von Contzen (2016) argue against the necessity of temporal relations in narratives, because they find descriptions and lists to be textual structures that do not necessitate any temporal dimension, while being typically (part of) narratives.<sup>21</sup> Scholars have also contended that non-narrative kinds of texts such as manuals may as well rely on temporal and causal relations.<sup>22</sup> It follows from this that causal and temporal relations are neither necessary nor sufficient for determining whether a text, a movie, or a daily conversation is a narrative; many seem to agree, however, that these relations are typical features of narratives.

A further attempt at capturing what unifies narratives consists in identifying another feature of narratives: the degree of *narrativity*.<sup>23</sup> Examples of what narrativity consists in include a "focus on the particular, the contingent, the con-

<sup>18</sup> J. David Velleman: Narrative Explanation, in: *Philosophical Review* 112/1 (2003) 1–25; G. Currie: *Narratives and Narrators*, op. cit., 29.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Goldie: *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> David Lewis: *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 215, my emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> R. Ronen: Description, Narrative and Representation, op. cit., 248; Eva von Contzen: The Limits of Narration: Lists and Literary History, in: *Style* 50/3 (2016) 243.

<sup>22</sup> See D. Rudrum: From Narrative Representation to Narrative Use, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

crete”; a “unified subject” or “thematic unity”; and a certain perspective or point of view.<sup>24</sup> Not every narrative displays all of these features, but typical narratives will likely possess one or more of these features.

The literary account has the advantage of being simple: a narrative involves at least two events or states of affairs that are related to each other and display certain formal and aesthetic features. The account defines the narrative as connecting disparate past events with one another, structuring and linking them together, and retelling them from a certain perspective.

However, the literary account of narrative cannot explain cases such as the *Jonestown Massacre*. The main issue is that it considers literary narratives to be either the only narratives or at least the prototypical and more interesting ones.<sup>25</sup> Daily talk and related phenomena are narratives depending on their resemblance to literary narratives. What is more, non-literary narratives are generally viewed as uninteresting, and only literary ones are really worthy of our theoretical attention.<sup>26</sup> The reason is that the “minimal conditions for narrative are easily met [and] most narratives are ephemeral, insignificant and, in the long term, without interest or value”.<sup>27</sup>

One might want to argue that the literary account offers the features that are central to non-literary narratives such as the *Jonestown Massacre* case. This is not the case, however, because the criteria it offers are simultaneously too difficult to meet and not explanatory enough. The criteria are too difficult to meet because the literary account conceives of narratives as artifacts that have to be communicated to an audience (since narratives are always told stories).<sup>28</sup> However, it seems clear from our case that narratives can remain untold and simply exist in the form of imaginative representations.

If narratives are stories told, then they also are fixed representations, that is, they are determined and unchangeable. But this seems not to apply to our case. It is plausible that, depending on what Jim Jones preaches, the members of the *People’s Temple* will change their narrative to include new items around victimhood and saviourhood.

The literary account of narrative is also too restrictive to explain the *Jonestown Massacre* case. A first issue is that it views narratives to be retellings of past events. This neither accounts for counterfactual narratives – for example, an answer to the question: “Had I been ill yesterday, what would I have told

24 G. Currie: *Narratives and Narrators*, op. cit., 9, 28; N. Carroll: *On the Narrative Connection*, op. cit., 119.

25 E.g., P. Lamarque: *The Opacity of Narrative*, op. cit.; G. Currie: *Narratives and Narrators*, op. cit.; M. Wallace: *Recent Theories of Narrative*, op. cit.; R. Ronen: *Description, Narrative and Representation*, op. cit.; N. Carroll: *Narrative Closure*, op. cit.; S. L. Feagin: *On Noël Carroll on Narrative Closure*, op. cit.

26 P. Lamarque: *The Opacity of Narrative*, op. cit., 62.

27 *Ibid.*, 65.

28 P. Lamarque: *The Opacity of Narrative*, op. cit.; G. Currie: *Narratives and Narrators*, op. cit.

her?"; nor for narratives about the future – such as the narrative resulting from thinking about wishes or plans like “When I grow up, I want to be an astronaut”. It is clear that the narrative of the *Jonestown Massacre* is not a retelling of a past (fictional) event; rather, it is a representation that guides (in the present) the perception and understanding of the world, as well as the actions, of the people who foster the representation.

The literary account of narrative is insufficient for two further reasons. The first reason is that the account focuses on events and states of affairs. Likely, this is a minimal condition, and proponents of the literary account would not deny that narratives can also include other material. But still, this does not account for the richness of narratives. The *Jonestown Massacre* narrative refers to people, character types, emotions, feelings, beliefs, self-representations, etc. While one could argue that events and states of affairs encompass people, character types, emotions, and so on – a good definition of the concept of narrative should aim at making the richness of its content explicit.

Lastly, the account fails to explain how narratives can offer guidance and orientation to one’s understanding and actions in real life. Interestingly, Currie mentions that narratives have this potential: “Narratives [...] may, in some circumstances and for some people, guide our actions and contribute to the worth of what we are and what we do”.<sup>29</sup> However, none of the defenders of the literary account explains how this may happen.

## ii. The Coherence Account

The second account I will consider is represented by Peter Goldie’s theory of narrative, which views narratives as coherent structures. This kind of account can also be found in other fields such as sociology.<sup>30</sup>

According to the coherence account, narratives can take a variety of forms: they can be “spoken, written down, drawn, acted, sung, mimed, danced, filmed, or communicated through some combination of these”.<sup>31</sup> But they can also remain untold: “Narrative thinking is narratable, communicable, but need not be publicly narrated or communicated to another person”.<sup>32</sup> There are different ways in which one can engage in narrative thinking –

remembering, perhaps episodically or experientially, some events that happened to me or that I observed; hypothesizing what might happen in the future; thinking through a narrative propositionally; mentally rehearsing it, as one might mentally

---

<sup>29</sup> Gregory Currie: Narrative Representation of Causes, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64/3 (2006) 25.

<sup>30</sup> In sociology, see M. Somers and G. D. Gibson: *Reclaiming the Epistemological Other*, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> P. Goldie: *The Mess Inside*, op. cit., 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

rehearse a speech; using perceptual imagination to, for example, visualize what might happen; thinking through an episode of events coolly with little or no emotional engagement; thinking through the episode vividly and highly emotionally; thinking of “that terrible quarter of an hour when I thought that all was lost”; thinking through how things might have turned out differently if I hadn’t made that terrible mistake [...]”.<sup>33</sup>

For Goldie, and in contrast to the literary account, narratives can be about future events, they can include counterfactual thinking, and they can be mentally rehearsed and analyzed. This suggests that narrative thinking can be used as a tool for thought, in the sense that it allows one, for instance, to practice what one will tell one’s friend, to vividly review a childhood memory, or to mentally represent what one’s future will look like.

According to the coherence account, narratives do not necessarily result from the intention to create or communicate a narrative. As a consequence, they are not under the total control of the narrator. Narratives can thus express more than “just the narrator’s thoughts, feelings and intentions that were his specific reasons for producing that narrative in that way at that time”.<sup>34</sup> This entails that the meaning of a narrative can go beyond what its narrator intended. As we have just seen, in narrative thinking, the narrative can simply remain in the head of the narrator. Consequently, we cannot reduce narratives to the sharable product that results from a human intention to tell a story, as the literary account has it. Rather, for Goldie, what determines whether something is a narrative is its *structure*.

Narrative structure is determined by three features: *coherence*, *meaningfulness*, and *emotional and evaluative import*.<sup>35</sup> The *coherence* of the narrative is not solely dependent upon causal and temporal structure, because, according to Goldie, we also need room for “coincidence” in narratives.<sup>36</sup> Causal relations must be understood loosely: Goldie appeals to the notion of *salient* causes.<sup>37</sup> *Meaningfulness* refers to the “thoughts, feelings and actions” of characters internal to the narrative or the narrator: they must make sense given their personal perspective in the given context.<sup>38</sup> There are different ways in which thoughts, feelings, and actions can make sense – by explaining what characters were anticipating, by appealing to dispositions that the characters have, or by referring to

---

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 33.

35 Ibid., 2.

36 Ibid., 17.

37 As in the literary account, see above.

38 Ibid., 17.

contextual factors.<sup>39</sup> *Emotional and evaluative import* refers to the evaluations and emotions of the characters in, and the narrator of, the narrative.<sup>40</sup>

Goldie distinguishes between two senses of the term “narrative”: (a) the process of narrating – “the activity [...] of producing a particular narrative, whether for the first time or not” – and (b) the narrative as a product, “the story that is told”. In reference to Paul Ricœur<sup>41</sup>, Goldie calls the process of forming a narrative the *process of emplotment*: “emplotment brings together the raw material, organizing [it] into a coherent whole”.<sup>42</sup> Not only events and states of affairs can serve as the raw material of a narrative: actions, individuals, objects, thoughts, feelings, moods, and emotions can do so as well. The process of emplotment “involves agency”: the narrator decides what raw material to include, in which order, and in what form.<sup>43</sup> This is what Goldie names the *shaping* of the raw material, the selection of the raw material in a certain “degree of richness”.<sup>44</sup> The narrator *organizes* the raw material, offering a structure with a beginning, middle, and end. Lastly, they *color* the raw material through the inclusion of emotions and evaluations. Emplotment may involve several attempts: one may want to “go back” and change the narrative (in the sense of product).<sup>45</sup>

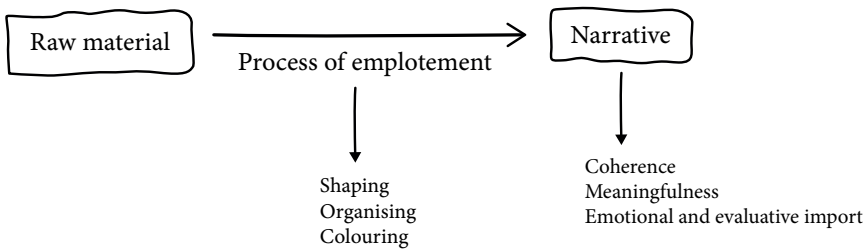


Figure 1: An illustration of Peter Goldie’s account of narrative.

Every narrator has a personal “way of telling” or “style”: whether they compose a complex literary narrative, write a movie scenario, or tell a story about their last

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 20–21. It can happen that narratives do not provide explicit meaningfulness. The audience (if there is one) might fill explanatory gaps, thus contributing to the meaningfulness of the narrative.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 24. A narrative can depict both the narrator’s perspective, but also the perspective of various characters on the events of the narrative.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Ricœur: *Temps et récit* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984).

<sup>42</sup> P. Goldie: *The Mess Inside*, op. cit., 10.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

mishap, they will tell it in a particular way.<sup>46</sup> The personal point of view of the narrator results from the fact that they not only import their own evaluations and emotions but also create the narrative's coherence and meaningfulness.

The coherence account is more comprehensive than the literary account. First, the form a narrative takes is not relevant in the coherence account: a narrative can be a novel, a movie, a dance recital, a discourse, or a thought. The *Jonestown Massacre* case can be accounted for in this way insofar as the members of the *People's Temple* engage in *narrative thinking*. Narrative thinking may be more malleable to change than 'fixed' narratives such as novels: members of the *People's Temple* may more easily switch back to the process of emplotment, which accounts for the fact that they will adjust their narrative in light of new information. Second, the coherence account of narrative does justice to the richness of the content of narratives. Instead of offering a set of two minimal subject matters that all narratives must include, Goldie lists a wide array of raw material that narratives generally include. This is essential to explaining why one speaks of narratives when referring to discourse and points of view.<sup>47</sup> Political narratives, for example, may consist in worldviews – evaluations about the state of the world and ideas about how it should be – and they take emotions, actions, and persons into account. When building a narrative around my friend George, who aggressively told me to chew less loudly this morning, I may include his personal history (when stressed he has a tendency to misophonia) and his moods (he is under a lot of pressure at work). We will see in section 4 that these features are essential to the *Jonestown Massacre* case.

## Interactivity, Immersion, and Appropriation

Does the *People's Temple* narrative fulfill the criteria of coherence, meaningfulness, and emotional and evaluative import? I think it does. To show how the coherence account can account for cases like the *Jonestown Massacre* narrative, I suggest a distinction between two forms the narrative takes: the *narrative representation* and the *narrative applied*.

The *narrative representation* is what Marshall talks about when she says "You were the victim. I am your savior. Someone else is the villain. I am saving you from this other force".<sup>48</sup> It is a narrative representation because it 'lives' in the imagination. The narrative representation is, in this case, very basic, but it does exemplify the three features necessary for something to count as a narrative according to the coherence account. It combines raw material (people, characters, actions) in a coherent and salient way: the three roles are part of the same

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>47</sup> See *ibid.*, Introduction.

<sup>48</sup> S. Marshall and M. Hobbes: *The Jonestown Massacre*, *op. cit.*

category of character types in a narrative.<sup>49</sup> The role distribution is meaningful in that it relates otherwise disparate things by explaining intentions, context, and so on. The narrative imports emotions and evaluations through the evaluatively-laden terms of “victim”, “villain” and “savior”. It also divulges a certain perspective on the situation: seeing oneself as a victim and Jim Jones as a savior is clearly one-sided. Although this particular narrative representation is not very elaborate, narrative representations may be extremely complex, combining many different mental states and further raw material.

In our case, the narrative becomes more interesting when it is used to understand and act on the world, that is, when it is *applied*. The applied narrative uses the narrative representation as a guide or template for understanding and acting in the world: the applied narrative is expressed in (say) behavior, understandings, and creative processes.

Using the narrative representation as a guide can also mean that one perceives the narrative structure in the world.<sup>50</sup> In the *Jonestown Massacre* case, people perceive themselves and others as victims; they are afraid of who they view as the villain; and they admire and follow Jim Jones, whom they see as their savior. By applying the framework of the narrative representation to the outside world, one provides the world with meaning and coherence, and offers it emotional and evaluative content. In this sense, the narrative representation becomes a tool for thought. When behaviors, character traits, and events are perceived through the lens of a narrative representation, they are seen as having a narrative structure.<sup>51</sup> That is to say that the behaviors, character traits, and events are provided with coherence, meaning, and emotional and evaluative coloring. In the case of the *Jonestown Massacre* narrative, a narrative representation was, it seems, formed collectively to guide actions, find meaning in one’s life, or cope with the situation one is in (I address collective narratives below).

The application of the narrative is not being accounted for in the coherence account: Goldie focuses on agency within the process of developing a narrative. The applied *Jonestown Massacre* narrative reveals agency in relation to the nar-

---

<sup>49</sup> See Eileen John: *The Experience of Fiction*, in: *The Philosophy of Fiction*, ed. by Julia Langkau; Patrik Engisch (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>50</sup> The adverse is also possible: one can modify one’s narrative representation according to information in the world. For example, members of the *People’s Temple* will adjust their narrative representation according to what Jim Jones preaches.

<sup>51</sup> There is debate around whether these events, behaviours and selves are themselves narrative in structure, or whether they are simply described as such. I will not enter this debate here, but simply side with the defenders of the second idea (see Jukka Mikkonen: *The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Jukka Mikkonen: *Philosophy, Literature and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Marya Schechtman: *The Narrative Self*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, ed. by Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 394–417; Marya Schechtman: *Self-Narrative, Literary Narrative, and Self-Understanding*, in: *Philosophia* (2023) 11–20; P. Lamarque: *The Opacity of Narrative*, op. cit.; P. Goldie: *The Mess Inside*, op. cit., and more).

rative as a product. To explain the ‘inner workings’ of the narrative applied, I will refer to the notion of *interactivity*. Interactivity has mainly been discussed in the context of the philosophy of video games: it means that the player can participate and contribute to the fiction.<sup>52</sup> Interactivity is what distinguishes video games from other kinds of fiction.<sup>53</sup> In novels and movies, readers and viewers interact minimally by forming hypotheses and imaginative representations. In video games, which are rather “strongly interactive”, players are expected to be active.<sup>54</sup> However, neither video games nor novels and movies give completely free reign to the audience.<sup>55</sup> Video games offer a set of puzzles the player has to solve, labyrinthic environments that they have to escape from, and powers they must acquire to advance in the game. In this way, the game sets boundaries, offering direction and meaning to the decisions of the player. Analogously, the narrative *guides* the understanding and actions of members of the *People’s Temple*: the narrative offers a structure, and highlights certain elements as belonging to it. This structure interacts with our perceptions: either the perceptions will change the content of the narrative (for instance according to Jim Jones’s latest preaching), or the content of the narrative will impact the content of the perception (as when one perceives oneself as a victim).

According to Grant Tavinor (2009), the interactivity of video games causes the player to have an *experience of immersion*. By this, he means (among other things) that one is absorbed in the “*flow*” of the fictional world.<sup>56</sup> Psychologists Bob Witmer and Michael Singer (1998) also describe immersion in this sense as “a psychological state characterized by perceiving oneself to be enveloped by, included in, and interacting with an environment that provides a continuous stream of stimuli and experiences”.<sup>57</sup> Entertaining, or being entangled into, narrative thinking can offer such an immersive experience of being ‘absorbed in the

---

52 See also Berys Gaut: *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Grant Tavinor: *The Art of Video games* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); David J. Chalmers: *The Virtual and the Real*, in: *Disputatio* 9/46 (27 November 2017) 309–352.

53 Dominic Lopes (2001) offers a distinction between works that are “weakly interactive”, such as literary fictions and movies, and works that are “strongly interactive”, such as video games (Dominic M. McIver Lopes: *The Ontology of Interactive Art*, in: *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35/4 (2001) 65).

54 See Noël Carroll: *The Creative Audience: Some Ways in Which Readers, Viewers, and/or Listeners Use Their Imaginations to Engage Fictional Artworks*, in: *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, ed. by Elliot Samuel Paul; Scott Barry Kaufman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 62–81; D. Lopes: *The Ontology of Interactive Art*, op. cit.

55 This restriction is specific to certain types of video games. There are video games in which the player has more agency regarding the way in which the narrative unfolds, such as *World of Warcraft* or *The Sims*.

56 G. Tavinor: *The Art of Video games*, op. cit., 51–52, his emphasis. Tavinor distinguishes three meanings of “immersion”.

57 Bob G. Witmer; Michael J. Singer: *Measuring Presence in Virtual Environments: A Presence Questionnaire*, in: *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 7/3 (June 1998) 227.

flow'. One's attention is guided by the structure of the narrative. Being immersed in a narrative may shape one's current perception of the world, and thus guide one's actions and understanding. It offers a similar experience to, say, putting on colored lens glasses: one perceives the world as if it were pink or green. In the case of the *Jonestown Massacre* narrative, being immersed in narrative thinking will lead the members to perceive objects, people, and events as threatening, reassuring, and so on. The members of the *People's Temple* see themselves as victims; they perceive their opponents such as the defenders of capitalism as villains. Having perceived, or rather, understood, the world in such a way, they will in turn act on the world in a particular manner. Hence, one could explain the murder-suicide as the consequence of their being immersed in a certain narrative, thus of their not being able to take potentially conflicting information into account.

Another feature may explain why narratives can serve as an incentive to act and understand the world in a certain way. The raw material of narratives also often consists of beliefs and desires, which Goldie does not mention. Desires have a mind-to-world direction of fit. If narratives include desires in their raw material, they can motivate us to act in the world accordingly.<sup>58</sup> The narrative of the members of the *People's Temple* may include the desire to make the world a better place. They will thus act in a conducive way to bring about this desire. Beliefs have a world-to-mind direction of fit. They can enable one to get a better understanding of the situation. The beliefs one may form about the world may be added to the content of the narrative, which may lead to a deeper understanding.<sup>59</sup> In this way, narratives can also be misleading. If Jim Jones preaches that the members of the *People's Temple* need to set an example and move to Guyana to create a perfect new system, the members will do it. Because the members of the *People's Temple* desire to make the world a better place, and believe it is by starting from scratch and setting an example, they will act accordingly.<sup>60</sup>

Collective narratives may motivate collective action.<sup>61</sup> Members of the *People's Temple* seem to share the same narrative representation. This shared narra-

---

58 Shenhav speaks about the issues that arise when one wants to change the world in order to make the world match one's narrative representation (S. Shenhav: *Political Narratives and Political Reality*, op. cit., 254).

59 Understanding has a relational structure as well, see Catherine Z. Elgin: *True Enough* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017); Stephen R. Grimm (ed.): *Varieties of Understanding: New Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).

60 Donald Davidson: *Actions, Reasons, and Causes*, in: *Journal of Philosophy* 60/23 (1963) 685; John R. Searle: *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Jerry A. Fodor: *Psychosemantics: The Problem of Meaning in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987); Rosalind Hursthouse: *Arational Actions*, in: *The Journal of Philosophy* 88/2 (1991) 57–68.

61 See M. Patterson and K. Monroe (*Narrative in Political Science*, op. cit., 315–316): "Insofar as narratives affect our perceptions of political reality, which in turn affect our actions in response to or

tive representation has to be distinguished from the personal narrative representation. The shared narrative representation is often basic (as we saw at the beginning of this section). The personal narrative representation may, on the other hand, be complex and nuanced because it will be enriched by the narrative thinker's personal points of view. This is due to the fact that narrators import their own evaluations and emotions, and they create the coherence and meaningfulness of the narrative. Hence, when adopting new narratives or new raw material, narrative thinkers appropriate it: they add their own personal point of view to the new narrative or the new raw material. *Appropriating a narrative* means that the narrative representation one adopts will also include personal impressions (own's own emotions when listening to Jim Jones preaching, for example) and other related personal life experiences, if there were any (one's ongoing search for meaning in life). *Appropriating raw material into an existing narrative* means integrating it into an already existing structure. In the *Jonestown Massacre* narrative, every single person entertaining it also appropriated it – that is, they adapted it to their own personal interests, evaluations, and emotional dispositions. It is also possible that one appropriates an already existing narrative into one's own narrative representation.<sup>62</sup> Cultural artifacts such as movies or books do not unfrequently have such an impact on one's conceptions.<sup>63</sup>

Hence, while narrative representations can be collectively shared, they primarily prevail in the minds of single persons. Interactivity, immersion, and appropriation thus appear as typical features that all narratives can have; appropriate use of the narrative representation and the applied narrative will, perhaps not necessarily, but ordinarily involve these three features.

---

in anticipation of political events, narrative plays a critical role in the construction of political behavior. In this sense, we create and use narratives to interpret and understand the political realities around us. We do this as individuals and we do it as collective units, as nations or groups”.

62 One might wonder whether fictional narratives really motivate any action whatsoever. Following Stacie Friend's solution to the Paradox of Fiction (Stacie Friend: *Emotion in Fiction: State of the Art*, in: *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 62/2 (4 June 2022) 257–271), some fictions may in fact motivate action. If one is moved by the movie *Free Willy* (1993), one may be motivated to donate to charities for the preservation of marine wildlife, for example. However, as fictional narratives depict a lot of non-actual events, characters, and facts, it is common not to act 'in the real world' on their content.

63 See, for example, how Christopher Neff and Francis Beryl draw back the decrease in the shark population to a generalised fear of sharks caused by representation of sharks in Spielberg's movie *Jaws* (1975) (Christopher Neff: *The Jaws Effect: How Movie Narratives Are Used to Influence Policy Responses to Shark Bites in Western Australia*, in: *Australian Journal of Political Science* 50/1 (2 January 2015) 114–127; Francis Beryl: *Before and After “Jaws”: Changing Representations of Shark Attacks*, in: *Australian Association for Maritime History* 34/2 (2012) 44–64).

## The Danger of the Fictionalising Tendencies

To conclude, in this paper, I have argued that current definitions of the concept of narrative have failed to account for a central aspect of narratives – namely how they can mediate one’s access to the world. I have argued so by distinguishing between narrative representation and narrative applied. The example of interaction in video games offers a promising illustration of how the narrative applied can affect one’s perception of the world, by guiding one’s understanding and actions. Two further aspects were shown to be missing from the concept of narrative offered by the coherence account: *immersion* and *appropriation*. That one may be immersed in one’s narrative representations accounts for the force of the influence they may have on one; it is like putting on colored shades: one perceives the world through the structure offered by the narrative. I also mentioned that one does not simply adopt a narrative or new raw material as it is, but rather ‘makes it one’s own’ or appropriates it. While none of these features are essential to narratives, they appear to be prevalent.

I can now answer the question posed at the beginning of the paper: does the broader use of “narrative” mean that two concepts are being employed or does it rather illuminate properties of narratives that were not salient when the focus was primarily on novels and movies? Extending the coherence account enabled me to show that the answer is the latter. The concept of narrative designates a structure that sets of events, and states of affairs, but also ideas, perceptions, beliefs, desires, actions, and understandings display. The concept of narrative as I defined it here applies to novels and movies, and it is also this complex structure that journalists and podcasters refer to when they designate worldviews or actions as expressing “narratives”.

Much more can and should be said about interaction, immersion, and appropriation, as well as about the link between representations and action.<sup>64</sup> Yet I want to end the paper with a brief note on the negative effects that narratives can have on our daily lives. Both Lamarque and Goldie speak about the dangers of our *fictionalizing tendencies*. According to Lamarque, our fictionalizing tendencies might lead us to “self-deception”, “self-aggrandisement”, and identification with “literary archetypes” (because we would perceive ourselves as characters with a certain role in the world); they might “encourage the thought that situations have ‘meaning’” and prompt us to “aestheticise our lives”.<sup>65</sup> Goldie argues that our fictionalizing tendencies lead us to “find agency in the world where

---

<sup>64</sup> Two interesting further aspects of narrative were not talked about here: (1) what M. Patterson and K. Monroe (1998) designate as “narrative labels”, such as skin-colour terms, in which a simple word may invoke a narrative; (2) the aspects that narratives reveal about their narrators (Patterson and Monroe: Narrative in Political Science, op. cit., 316, 320, 322; P. Goldie: The Mess Inside, op. cit., 160).

<sup>65</sup> P. Lamarque: The Opacity of Narrative, op. cit., 30–31.

it is not”, to “seek narrative closure where it cannot be found”, and to “transport notions of genre and character from fiction into real life”.<sup>66</sup> And this is exactly what happened in the case of the *Jonestown Massacre*: if Marshall is right, members of the *People’s Temple* indulged in fictionalizing tendencies by identifying themselves and others as fictional archetypes (the villain, the savior, and the victim) – they even created narrative closure through mass suicide.

The suggested concept of narrative may serve as a gateway to further reflection. One of its advantages is that it enables one to connect the research in philosophy to the research in other fields such as political theory, psychology, and sociology, by taking into account the complexity of narratives and the impact they may have on human thought and behavior.

Anaïs Giannuzzo, Université de Genève, Département de philosophie, 2 Rue De-Candolle, 1211 Genève; anais.giannuzzo@unige.ch, ORCID 0000-0002-3375-3872

---

<sup>66</sup> P. Goldie: *The Mess Inside*, op. cit., 171–72. See also Mark Freeman, ‘A Return to Origins: Why Narrative Is Here to Stay’, in: *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative*, op. cit., 53, 56.