

Hans J. Wulff

# “Life is made up of stories”

## Perspectives on storytelling

**The author highlights the importance of stories in children’s everyday life, and shows which “models of reality” they contain. Insights from narratology and scriptwriting help further our understanding of how good stories come into being.**

The human species is the storytelling animal. Telling stories is a genuinely human activity and distinguishes us from all other animals. But not everyone can tell stories equally well; not everyone is skilled. This skill requires a practice of everyday storytelling – in the family, down at the pub, in the supermarket. Life is made up of stories, because we can only retrieve stories.

### *Life is made up of stories*

Things that merely happen to us are forgotten or repressed into bad dreams; they can only become an object of memory once they are a narrative. We have a sensorium for stories. Biographical memory is stored in the form of stories. Something that has happened only becomes really good and worth remembering when it becomes a story. Something that has happened is told and retold, modulated and changed, until it becomes a good story. Only then can it remain. Some people can tell better stories than others. And some are better at telling stories. Storytelling requires a culture in which narration is cul-

tivated. Stories are the cement that holds families, neighbourhoods and friends together.

### *Stories create community*

This is why storytellers assume community-building roles – in the media too. They fulfil key interpretative functions in every collective in the world. This is why storytelling is becoming professionalized everywhere. The distance between Scheherazade, the teller of fairy tales, the village gossip and the journalist is not so great. They entertain because they offer horizons of meaning, because they capture the imagination of their audience, because they enable them to feel excited, moved or indignant. And because they offer solutions for conflicts and dilemmas, mark out criteria for right and wrong, show the consequences of actions and perhaps also just confirm judgements and attitudes which the recipient already had. And since the audience’s emotions are at stake, since they are perhaps at the centre of the communicative bond between storyteller and listener/reader/viewer, telling stories can also incite hatred, exclude and defame. Storytellers do propaganda work; they influence attitudes and people’s willingness to carry out acts. Film and television and large parts of audio-visual and print journalism are story machines. Stories around the clock, about everything and everyone. “What’s the ‘story’?”, asks the

tabloid editor or the producer of the TV magazine. If a subject matter does not yield a story, it is uninteresting. Even reality television only works if the events turn into a story. Journalists and media-makers are thus professional storytellers. They get money for shaping narratives out of existing material or for making them up. But are they also storytellers in real life? Do they tell stories for the pleasure of creating connections, for the pleasure of being with others?

### *Stories provide horizons of meaning*

Stories provide the material and examples for conversation and discussion. In a television programme, the characters have been scheming against each other: one of the girls tries to eliminate a rival by spreading lies about another girl, who is going out with the boy she likes. The reception shows that viewers take a close interest in the matter at hand. Is it permissible to behave like this? Is it acceptable? Or must we use fair means to fight for the partner we want? Some conversations in the schoolyard are not actually about trivial forms of television, but about social virtues – you just have to listen carefully. All this points to a deep moral and normative substructure which is always part of narrative. I want to talk about violence. If I create my narrative as an everyday narrative, I the-

matize the conventional ways violence is regulated in the world we live in by showing the transgression of boundaries and rules (in schoolyards, in the pub, in the family, it does not matter where at this point). 2 things occur in the process: on the one hand, these boundaries and rules are validated (the story is about the restoration of everyday peace, which ends the incursion of violence, at least as a utopian hope), on the other hand I will thematize exceptional situations and give them

a structural-exemplary outline – only they can explain why the conventional structure of everyday life can be torn down.

It is always about a “something”: whether it is 2 school children fighting over a “something”, 2 men who get into an argument over “something” in a pub, or a father who brutally punishes his son because of “something”: it is the often apparently trivial reason which marks the violent reaction as excessive and objectionable; but the “something” also contains an indication of the values of the characters, which are intelligible for the audience, also as indications of dependencies and power relations in which the characters are involved. The narrative shifts attention from the purely physical action to the deeper system of (moral, ethical, religious, ideological etc.) convictions of the characters and also to the social conditions which they cannot escape. Both – the extreme nature of the action and the implicit hint of the reasons for escaping the control of everyday behaviour – are strategies to illustrate rule systems and everyday norms which are actually hidden. The breaking of a rule primarily achieves one thing: it highlights the rule, it proves that the rule exists.



*Two and a Half Heroes*: Umut and Luka react against a gang and get beaten up. They fight oppression and tighten their friendship (see also experts' opinions in this issue)

Two and a Half Heroes © Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg, Germany

### *Stories negotiate rules*

“Everyday life” is understood here in the most abstract sense imaginable, as (formal) background knowledge which the audience brings to every viewing, even if the story is set in a distant, past, or completely imaginary world. It is not so much about what the viewers do and think every day, but about a different process: all narrative texts have the basic quality of constructing models of reality, even those which seem to be set in the schoolyard next door. They do not depict reality, but construct realities. Some of these “model worlds” have certain similarities with a viewer’s everyday reality, others, on the other hand, create a completely “unreal reality” – in space, in ancient Bologna, in a present-day remote culture or in the Stone Age. The only thing that matters is that the viewers can also understand these texts, although – superficially – they have little to do with their everyday realities. This is possible because texts can construct blueprints for entire realities. In doing so they make reference to the knowledge of the recipients and build on more abstract layers of knowledge than mere familiarity with “normal” everyday life: they make use of the

viewer’s ability to imagine a “possible” everyday life with all its normative depths.

### *Stories create possible worlds*

This was precisely Bruno Bettelheim’s concern in his book *The uses of enchantment* (see also vom Orde in this issue). Here he argues that narratives not only present “stories”, strange and wonderful, terrible and beautiful stories, but that they also have a different, educational and social horizon of function. Because stories are always partly about values and virtues, because they are based on conflicts of values and virtues and, furthermore, offer these in a form which conveys their essence, children in particular can develop more abstract ideas of morality which ultimately become part of their everyday skills and enable them to behave responsibly as moral beings.

### *Stories enable children to behave responsibly and to develop trust*

Bettelheim, however, also ascribes his life-long recall of the fairy tales his mother had told him to the fact

that it was his mother who had told them. The storyteller – particularly in the intimate situation of face-to-face narration – always enters a relationship with the listener characterized by trust that the story being told will end well. Narration is a social scenario which, for a short time, shelters the 2 people involved against the world, and can thus reinforce a fundamental “trust in the world”. Bettelheim was later a cinema-goer, immersing himself in fantasy worlds which were no longer narrated by his mother: “We experienced exciting fantasies which made our monotonous (if not joyless) existence so much more bearable”, he wrote (1985, p. 54): even media narrative involves entering into a communicative relationship of trust, and thus also has a disburdening and consoling power which should be valued.

### *Stories are (not) unchangeable*

There is a whole academic discipline concerned with the forms of narration: narratology is the study of narrative. Yet storytelling is far too intimate a part of everyday and professional practice to be exhausted by the arid categories of story grammars or taxonomies of perspective. For some branches of scholarship, the text is something sacrosanct, an authentic cell of meaning. Anyone who interferes with it destroys a concept of meaning. This points back to the book of books in the Judeo-Christian tradition and to a faith in the written word, a belief in the uniqueness of that word. And yet the bible is an omnibus story, a confused book full of books, a record of a chain of narrative stretching over centuries. Texts change as they are told, and nor could it be otherwise. A story is not a given and unchangeable thing, but an invention. It makes a difference whether male heroes are turned into female heroines. If the end is put at the beginning and the plot is developed from there, the audience is given a different



Open Story © YLE, Finland

**Stories are not an unchangeable thing.** *Open Story* asks children to write a story and invites other children to write in the ending (here: the destiny of the neglected boy Jimi) (see also experts' opinions in this issue)

route into the world they will be entering while they read or watch. Trivial matters can be turned into weighty ones, the same story can be tried out from the point of view of the servant or the son. Thus Robinson's story becomes Friday's, Caesar's story becomes that of the cook. What is the “story”? Some things have to be taken to extremes: the hurt knee becomes a broken leg, the skinny sister becomes a man-eating vamp, the stuffy policeman with his parking ticket becomes a malevolent sheriff with a pistol.

### *Stories have to be involving*

The aim is always to capture the listeners, to fascinate them, to bring them closer to the characters. Nothing is as appealing as experiencing an event with the characters, as they act or are acted on. It is only then that the tale being told gains that emotional intensity which makes me follow the story, immerse myself in it. And which makes the narrative at least partly my own. I can be part of the story because I can put myself in the characters' place.

This may also be a reason why stories are so memorable. The same applies

if I want to remember things I have experienced myself: if I have developed it into a narrative, I can tell it again. And when others tell me what has happened to them, I can retell it to others (even if I may leave out or change this or that). A story goes through many tellings before it becomes good and narratable.

### *Stories gain their own life*

A story reflects what the storytellers bring to it. In the end the story is no longer merely subjective, it breaks away from the storyteller and from the event experienced or the work of invention which once preceded it. Professional scriptwriting is not an individual task. A story develops through collective encouragement, through consultation, variation and modulation, or even distortion. A story is not an individual product, but the result of a joint effort. When narration is regarded as a trade, the writers are not narcissistically bound; they do not expose or endanger themselves. Script development is the result of teamwork, and requires several people who commit to and concentrate on the product. Even if I am working on the conception of a story alone, others



are present – as those who provide the models, who stand for the rules I am following, and who, above all, form my first, still imaginary audience, simulated by me.

### *Professional storytelling is teamwork*

Such a latent or real community in narration is foreign to most educational institutions – here the focus is on individual achievement, and collective modes of production are exotic working methods.

Storytelling and story development as a method of structuring meaning, and as a didactic technique with a firm focus on the audience, occurs with concrete material. The concrete and the abstract – the aim is to bring these together and blend them. In academic discourse there is talk of the “perspectivity of the representation”, and not of whose story is actually being told, about the “lack of motivation”, and not about the development of consistent characters who act plausibly. Whole genres and styles of representation, such as those of soap-operas, are criticized, without any realization that the “story” may be about failing to communicate and growing apart in everyday life (and what genre is better suited to presenting this than the soap-opera?). The concrete cannot be dissolved into aesthetic or ideological criticism – and this is why it is not just appealing, but also necessary for educational theory, to take the concrete as a starting point. So: telling stories, varying and improving them is part of pedagogical work. In places which do not really seem to have anything to do with educational settings.

### *Telling stories should be part of education*

Narration itself is an empirical fact, not intuitive and blind, but analytical – and it has to be so because it is based on work which can be professionalized. Professionalism could not



In the programme *Once Upon A Time – The Chalk Boy* from the Philippines a little boy discovers the drawing of a boy that comes alive. The German Children's Jury at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2012 awarded this story about a friendship a prize and connected to it despite its setting in a Southeast Asian culture

be based solely on intuition. This is already shown by the vast amount of knowledge to be found in manuals of scriptwriting, knowledge about the subject, processes and aesthetic qualities, which scholars have only recently begun to take seriously. Script development is extremely practical in orientation, and dependent on the examples and models of the addressees, but at the same time it is/can be linked with scholarly reflection. The work with the material makes constant use of categories in narratology: ideally, storytelling should be a reflective practice for the professional.

“Be honest and sincere, research well, stick to the facts”, says the journalistic doctrine of virtue. “Keep your audience, tell the story, be interesting and trust in the moral of your story”, says the storytellers' experience. Both these things need to be conveyed, both aspired to, even if they are not quite reconcilable.

### *Storytellers need to reflect on their work*

Ideally, narration should be based on respect for the audience. Just as viewers assume that the storyteller is

aware of why he is telling this story, and invest an “advance payment” of trust in the stories in which they immerse themselves at the cinema or when watching television, so too does the storyteller have to be aware of his or her audience, and its need for entertainment and meaning. The storyteller has to face up to the inescapable responsibility that comes with storytelling. ■

## REFERENCES

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