Storytelling in Social Advocacy: Building a Partnership Between Academia and NGOs

**RESEARCH AND TEACHING WORKSHOP**
ARQUS EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCE
WROCŁAW (POLAND)

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PROJECT PARTNERS

Uniwersytet Wrocławski

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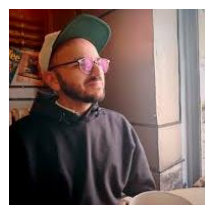
Mateusz Zieliński, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Political Science. He holds a degree in political science from the Université Libre de Bruxelles. His research primarily concentrates on political representation theory, with a particular emphasis on addressing the needs of those at risk of extreme socio-economic exclusion. He has served as the principal investigator for two OPUS grants from the National Science Centre and is currently involved in an international research project under the Horizon 2020 ENCODE grant, which focuses on the role of emotions in politics. In addition, he collaborates with the MiserArt Foundation, an organisation supporting individuals facing homelessness.

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Ana Maria Costa e Silva has a PhD in Educational Sciences and in School Psychology and Human Development. She is a professor and researcher at the University of Minho, Portugal and a Specialist in Curricular Studies and Conflict Mediation, coordinated and integrated/or several international projects. She is a founding member and director of several scientific associations, namely the European Social Mediation Association CreE-A and Estreiadiálogos, the International Collaborative Research-Action Network of Lusophone countries. She is coordinator of the Portuguese Mediation Commission. Her work includes almost two hundred publications.
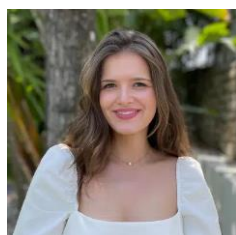
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Jurga Mataitytė-Diržienė, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at Vilnius University, teaching in the Social Work and Social Policy programs. She conducts research on disability, social integration, support services, and media representations of these topics. She has extensive practical experience working with persons with disabilities as well as in NGOs active in the fields of youth and migration. Her research interests include social change in the context of state transformations and interdisciplinary social work; the integration of persons with disabilities and migrants; transformations of social assistance, education, and healthcare systems; analysis of social and healthcare services for people with disabilities and their families; the development of competencies among social support specialists; and public attitudes and media representation of these groups.

MiserArt Foundation supports individuals experiencing homelessness by using art as a mechanism for social change. It provides space and platform for these communities, whose stories often go unheard, misrepresented, and marginalized.

The Ołbin Local Activity Centre is a community-created space dedicated to serving local residents. Its aim is to develop an engaging offer of leisure activities together with the Ołbin neighbourhood.. It hosts a Neighbourhood Library, a Cultural Information Point, and a variety of workshops and activities. It is also is home to the Senior Club and the Children and Youth Activity Centre

Praise of Friendship is a grassroots academic collective that brings together students engaged in various social projects. It is a non-hierarchical activist group that will help us understand the issues of representation, dignity, and agency from the young people's perspective.

SCHEDULE

December 4, 2025 (Thursday)

10:00 – 11:30 – Seminar*: Crisis of Narration and Emotional Responsibility in Social Communication: Ethics, Shock, Dignity*

11:30 – 12:00 – Coffee break

Place: – *Local Activity Center 'Żółty Parasol', Prusa Street 37–39*

12:00 – 13:00 – Ethnographic Walk*: Gentrification and Homelessness. A Case Study of Ołbin and Nadodrze Districts*

13:00 – 14:30 – Workshop*: Emotion-Driven Communication Strategies in Social Projects – Part 1*

14:30 – 15:00 – Lunch break

15.00 – 16:30 – Workshop*: Emotion-Driven Communication Strategies in Social Projects – Part 2*

Place: *– MiserArt Foundation, Cybulskiego Street 35A*

December 5, 2025 (Friday)

10:00 – 11:30 – Partner Dialogue*: Academia and NGOs as Co-Creators of Social Change: Local Engagement, International Networks, and Academic Solidarity*

Place: – *Institute of Political Science, Koszarowa Street 2/3*

PROGRAMME

December 4, 2025 (Thursday)

A short seminar-style discussion titled: "Crisis of Narration and Emotional Responsibility in Social Communication: Ethics, Shock, Dignity" – inspired by Byung-Chul Han's *The Crisis of Narration* and his reflections on the loss of narrative depth, the transition from storytelling to information and "storyselling," and linked to challenges in storytelling about homelessness, exclusion, and vulnerable subjects.
Topics:

• Emotional constellations, metaphorical redescription, emotional triggers in public storytelling.
• How current NGO narratives frame homelessness and inclusion, with particular attention to Ukrainian citizens — both in terms of how international assistance is communicated and how personal vulnerabilities connected to displacement and refugee trauma are represented. What emotions dominate?
• Empowerment vs. victimization. Risks of emotional manipulation, voyeurism, shock aesthetics, "pornography of suffering," "likes instead of healing." Examination of how to narrate without stripping dignity.

Discussion questions:

• Is contemporary storytelling about homelessness closer to "storyselling" than to healing narration?
• How can we avoid using trauma as spectacle while still mobilizing empathy?
• Can emotionally charged storytelling coexist with fully respectful representation?
• How can we cultivate "narrative communities" rather than one-directional emotional consumption, especially in times of growing social and political polarization and the need for communication through conflict?

A hands-on workshop: "Emotion-Driven Communication Strategies in Social Projects", which will explore how emotional dynamics influence communication strategies in design-based social projects. Drawing on the insights from the ENCODE project, the workshop will focus on:
• Metaphorical redescription – techniques for reshaping public understanding through alternative frames.
• Value–emotion constellations – which emotionally charged storytelling patterns are proven to be especially engaging in digital communication environments.
Using real-world examples from MiserArt – a partner institution focused on inclusive and socially engaged artistic work – participants will collaboratively experiment with storytelling strategies that use emotional framing to shape public perception and engagement. Students will be

encouraged to construct persuasive positive and negative messages referencing two distinct types of emotions identified in the research.

The workshop flow:

Step	What happens?
Introduction	Overview of the ENCODE project and key concepts: emotional narratives, metaphorical redescription, value–emotion constellations. *Method:* short lecture with multimedia examples.
Case Exploration	Identifying emotional triggers and frames in existing NGO campaigns (including MiserArt). *Method:* guided dialogue.
	Mapping the two selected emotion types (e.g., fear vs. hope / anger vs. compassion) and linking them to value-based storytelling. *Method:* collaborative mapping.
Story Construction	Students work in groups to design contrasting messages (negative vs. positive) based on the same issue or scenario from MiserArt's practices. *Method:* hands-on design session.
Sharing& Feedback	Groups present their message sets and reflect on their effectiveness and potential impact. *Method:* peer review and instructor feedback.
Reflection& Wrap-up	Praxeological and ethical reflection on the workshop findings. *Method:* open discussion.

December 5, 2025 (Friday)

A partner dialogue: "Academia and NGOs as Co-Creators of Social Change: Local Engagement, International Networks, and Academic Solidarity" - an informal, experience-based conversation structured around interlinked thematic movements.

Topics and opening questions:

1. What Works? – Sharing Good Practices of University–NGO Cooperation
Topics:
 - Examples of effective collaborations (co-designed community projects, research through practice, service learning, participatory research).
 - The role of students as mediators and "translators" between academia and practice.
- How trust, continuity, and mutual respect are built over time.
   Opening question: "Can you recall a collaboration where academia was an active co-creator of social change rather than just an observer?"

2. Between Theory and the Street – Social Responsibility and Sensitivity of Academia
Topics:
 - How universities can act as socially engaged institutions rather than isolated knowledge producers.
- Bridging the gap between slow academic research and urgent social needs.
- How to communicate complex issues (e.g., homelessness, inclusion) without generalizing or objectifying.
- Avoiding extractive research: moving from "studying communities" to "researching with communities."
   Opening question: "Do academics truly listen to communities with the same depth with which they expect communities to listen to their theories?"

3. Expectations and Ethical Dialogue – Practitioners and Academics in Conversation
 Topics:
 - What NGOs need from academia: analytical support, evaluation tools, narrative strategies, advocacy backing, reflective spaces.
- What academics need from NGOs: access to lived realities, participatory feedback, co-authorship in knowledge production.
 - Ensuring that knowledge generated in research returns to the community in a useful form.
 - Avoiding emotional exploitation and "poverty storytelling."
   Opening question: "What is the ONE thing that needs improvement in how universities and NGOs collaborate?"

3. Academic Solidarity and Support Networks for Socially Engaged Scholars
 Topics:
 - Challenges scholars face when doing community-driven or activist research (lack of institutional recognition, burnout, isolation).
 - The need for cross-institutional networks to exchange methodologies, ethical guidelines, and reflections on power dynamics.
 - Creating international "communities of practice" for responsible storytelling, social design, and critical emotional communication.

- The potential of European/global networks of socially responsible academic practitioners (e.g., connected through ENCODE, Horizon, Erasmus+, Social Design Labs).

Opening question: "How can we create academic spaces that reward care-based collaboration over competitive output metrics?"

5. From Local Experience to International Cooperation and Knowledge Exchange
Topics:
- Possibilities of forming transnational research–practice hubs (university + NGO + community + students).
- Co-designed international workshops, staff/student exchanges, shared storytelling labs.
- Preparing the ground for future collaborative project proposals (Erasmus+, Creative Europe, Horizon Europe).

Opening question: "If we were to co-create an international project one year from today — which social issue should unite us?"

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

HE CRISIS OF NARRATION

Byung-Chul Han

THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD

The children's author Paul Maar tells the story of a boy who cannot tell stories.[1] When his little sister, Susanne, is struggling to fall asleep, tossing and turning in her bed, she asks Konrad to tell her a story. He declines in a huff. Konrad's parents, by contrast, love telling stories. They are almost addicted to it, and they argue over who will go first. They therefore decide to keep a list, so that everyone gets a go. When Roland, the father, has told a story, the mother puts an 'R' on the list. When Olivia, the mother, tells a story, the father enters a large 'O'. Every now and again, a small 'S' finds its way on to the list in between all the 'Rs' and 'Os' – Susanne, too, is beginning to enjoy telling stories. The family forms a small storytelling community. Konrad is the exception.

The family is particularly in the mood for stories during breakfast at the weekend. Narrating requires leisure. Under conditions of accelerated communication, we do not have the time, or even the patience, to tell stories. We merely exchange information. Under more leisurely conditions, anything can trigger a narrative. The father, for instance, asks the mother: 'Olivia, could you pass the jam please?' As soon as he grasps the jam jar, he gazes dreamily, and *narrates*:

This reminds me of my grandfather. One day, I might have been eight or nine, grandpa asked for strawberry jam over lunch. Lunch, mind you! At first we thought we had misunderstood him, because we were having a roast with baked potatoes, as we always did on 2 September …

'This reminds me of …' and 'one day' are the ways in which the father introduces his narrations. Narration and remembrance cause each other. Someone who lives completely in the moment cannot narrate anything.

The mismatch between the roast and strawberry jam creates the narrative tension. It invokes the whole story of someone's life, the drama or tragedy of a person's biography. The profound

inwardness betrayed by the father's dreamlike gaze nourishes the remembrance as narration. Post-narrative time is a time without inwardness. Information turns everything towards the outside. Instead of the *inwardness of a narrator*, we have the *alertness of an information hunter*.

The memory prompted by the strawberry jam is reminiscent of Proust's *mémoire involontaire*. In a hotel room in the seaside town of Balbec, Proust bends down to untie his shoelaces, and is suddenly confronted with an image of his late grandmother. The painful memory of his beloved grandmother brings tears to his eyes, but it also gives him a moment of happiness. In a *mémoire involontaire*, two separate moments in time combine into one *fragrant crystal of time*. The torturous contingency of time is thereby overcome, and this produces happiness. By establishing strong connections between events, a narrative overcomes the emptiness and fleetingness of time. *Narrative time does not pass*. This is why the loss of our narrative capacities intensifies the experience of contingency. This loss means we are subject to transience and contingency. The memory of the grandmother's face is also experienced as her *true* image. We recognize the *truth* only in hindsight. Truth has its place in *remembrance as narration*.

Time is becoming increasingly atomized. Narrating a story, by contrast, consists in establishing connections. Whoever narrates in the Proustian sense delves into life and inwardly weaves new threads between events. In this way, a narrator forms a dense network of relations in which nothing remains isolated. Everything appears to be meaningful. It is through narrative that we escape the contingency of life.

Konrad cannot narrate because his world consists exclusively of facts. Instead of telling stories, he enumerates these facts. When his mother asks him about yesterday, he replies: 'Yesterday, I was in school. First, we had maths, then German, then biology, and then two hours of sports. Then I went home and did my homework. Then, I spent some time at the computer, and later I went to bed.' His life is determined by external events. He lacks the inwardness that would allow him to internalize events and to weave and condense them into a story.

His little sister wants to help him. She suggests: 'I always begin by saying: there once was a mouse.' Konrad immediately interrupts her: 'Shrew, house mouse, or vole?' Then he continues: 'Mice belong to the genus rodents. There are two groups. Genuine mice and voles.' Konrad's world is fully disenchanted. It disintegrates into facts and loses narrative tension. The world that can be explained cannot be narrated.

Eventually, Konrad's mother and father realize that he cannot narrate. They decide to send him to Ms Leishure, who taught them how to tell stories. One rainy day, Konrad goes to see Ms Leishure. At her door, he is welcomed by a friendly old lady with white hair and thick, still dark eyebrows: 'I understand that your parents have sent you to me so that you can learn how to tell stories.' From the outside, the house appears to be very small, but inside there is a seemingly endless corridor. Ms Leishure puts a parcel in Konrad's hands and, pointing to a small staircase, asks him to take it upstairs to her sister. Konrad ascends the stairs, which seem to go on forever.

Astonished, he asks: 'How is this possible? I saw the house from the outside, and it had only one floor. We must be on the seventh by now.' Konrad notices that he is all alone. Suddenly, in the wall next to him a low door opens. A hoarse voice calls out: 'Ah, there you arse at last. Now home on and come bin!' Everything seems enchanted. Language itself is a strange riddle; it has something magical about it, as if it is under a spell. Konrad pokes his head through the door. In the darkness, he is able to make out an owlish figure. Frightened, he asks: 'Who … who are you?' 'Don't be so purrious. Do you want to let me wait foreven?' the owlish creature retorts. Konrad stoops to go through the door. 'Soon you'll blow downhill! Have a lice trip!' the voice chuckles. At that very moment, Konrad notices that the dark room has no floor. He falls downwards through a tube at breakneck pace. He tries in vain to find something to hold on to, all the time feeling as though he has been swallowed by some enormous animal. The tube eventually spits him out at Ms Leishure's feet. 'What did you do with the parcel?' she asks angrily. 'I must have lost it along the way', Konrad answers. Ms Leishure puts her hand in a pocket of her dark dress and pulls out another parcel. Konrad could have sworn that it was the very same one she gave him earlier. 'Here', Ms Leishure says brusquely. 'Please deliver this to my brother downstairs.' 'In the basement?' Konrad asks. 'Nonsense', says Ms Leishure. 'You'll find him on the ground floor. We are up on the seventh floor, as you know! Now go!' Konrad cautiously descends the small staircase, which again seems to go on forever. After a hundred steps, Konrad reaches a dark corridor. 'Hello', he hesitantly calls out. No one answers. Konrad tries 'Hello, Mr Leishure! Can you hear me?' A door next to Konrad opens, and a coarse voice says: 'Of course, I swear you. I'm not deaf! Quick, come wine!' In the dark room there is a seated figure who looks like a beaver and smokes a cigar. The beaver creature asks: 'What are you baiting for? Come on nine!' Konrad slowly enters the room. Again he falls into the dark bowels of the house, and again they spit him out at Ms Leishure's feet. She draws on a thin cigar and says: 'Let me guess? You failed to deliver the parcel again.' Konrad musters his courage to say: 'No. But anyway, I am not here to deliver parcels but to learn how to tell stories.' 'How can I teach a boy who cannot even carry a parcel upstairs how to tell a story! You'd better go home – you are a hopeless case', Ms Leishure says confidently. She opens a door in the wall next to him: 'Have a safe journey dome and all the west', she says, pushing him out. Again Konrad slides down through the endless twists and turns of the house. This time, however, he ends up not at Ms Leishure's feet but directly in front of his house. His parents and sister are still having breakfast when Konrad comes rushing into the house, announcing excitedly: 'I have to tell you something. You will never believe what happened to me …'. For Konrad, the world is now no longer intelligible. It consists not of objective facts but of events that resist explanation, and for that very reason require narration. His narrative turn makes Konrad a member of the small narrative community. His mother and father smile at each other. 'There you go!' his mother says. She puts a big 'K' on the list.

Paul Maar's story reads like a subtle social critique. It seems to lament the fact that we have unlearned how to tell stories. And this loss of our narrative capacity is attributed to the disenchantment of the world. This disenchantment can be reduced to the formula: things *are*, but they are *mute*. The magic evaporates from them. The pure facticity of existence makes narrative impossible. Facticity and narration are mutually exclusive.

The disenchantment of the world means first and foremost that our relationship to the world is reduced to causality. But causality is only *one* kind of relationship. The hegemony of causality leads to a poverty in world and experience. A magical world is one in which things enter into relations with each other that are not ruled by causal connections – relations in which things exchange intimacies. Causality is a mechanical and external relation. Magical and poetic relationships to the world rest on a deep *sympathy* that connects humans and things. In *The Disciples at Saïs*, Novalis says:

Does not the rock become an individual 'thou' when I address it? And what else am I than the river when I gaze with melancholy in its waves, and my thoughts are lost in its course? … Whether any one has yet understood the stones or the stars I know not, but such a one must certainly have been a gifted being.[2]

For Walter Benjamin, children are the last inhabitants of a magical world. For them, nothing merely *exists*. Everything is *eloquent* and *meaningful*. A *magical intimacy*connects them with the world. In play, they transform themselves into things and in this way come into close contact with them:

Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child himself becomes something floating and white, a ghost. The dining table under which he is crouching turns him into the wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved legs. And behind a door, he himself *is* the door – wears it as his heavy mask, and like a shaman will bewitch all those who unsuspectingly enter…. the apartment is the arsenal of his masks. Yet once each year – in mysterious places, in their empty eye sockets, in their fixed mouths – presents lie. Magical experience becomes science. As its engineer, the child disenchants the gloomy parental apartment and looks for Easter eggs.[3]

Today, children have become profane, digital beings. The magical experience of the world has withered. Children hunt for information, their *digital Easter eggs*.

The disenchantment of the world is expressed in de-auratization. The aura is the radiance that raises the world above its mere facticity, the mysterious veil around things. The aura has a narrative core. Benjamin points out that the narrative memory images of *mémoire involontaire* possess an aura, whereas photographic images do not: 'If the distinctive feature of the images arising from *mémoire involontaire* is seen in their aura, then photography is decisively implicated in the phenomenon of a "decline of the aura".[4]

Photographs are distinguished from memory images by their lack of narrative inwardness. Photographs represent what is there without internalizing it. They do not mean anything. Memory as narration, by contrast, does not represent a spatiotemporal continuum. Rather, it is based on a *narrative selection*. Unlike photography, memory is decidedly arbitrary and incomplete. It expands or contracts temporal distances. It leaves out years or decades.[5] Narrativity is opposed to logical facticity.

Following a suggestion in Proust, Benjamin believes that things retain within themselves the gaze that looked on them.[6] They themselves thus become gaze-like. The gaze helps to weave the auratic veil that surrounds things. Aura is the 'distance of the gaze that is awakened in what is looked at'.[7] When looked at intently, things return our gaze:

The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. This ability corresponds to the data of *mémoire involontaire*.[8]

When things lose their aura, they lose their magic – they neither look at us nor speak to us. They are no longer a 'thou' but a mute 'it'. We no longer *exchange gazes* with the world.

When they are submerged in the fluid medium of *mémoire involontaire*, things become fragrant vessels in which what was seen and felt is condensed in narrative fashion. Names, too, take on an aura and *narrate*: 'A name read long ago in a book contains within its syllables the strong wind and brilliant sunshine that prevailed while we were reading it.[9] Words, too, can radiate an aura. Benjamin quotes Karl Kraus: 'The closer one looks at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back'.[10]

Today, we primarily perceive the world with a view to getting information. Information has neither distance nor expanse. It cannot hold rough winds or dazzling sunshine. It lacks auratic space. Information therefore de-auratizes and disenchants the world. When language decays into information, it loses its aura. Information is the endpoint of atrophied language.

Memory is a narrative practice that connects events in novel combinations and creates a network of relations. The tsunami of information destroys narrative inwardness. De-narrativized memories resemble 'junk-shops – great dumps of images of all kinds and origins, used and shop-soiled symbols, piled up any old how'.[11] The things in a junk shop are a chaotic, disorderly heap. *The heap is the counter-figure of narrative*. Events coalesce into a *story* only when they are *stratified* in a particular way. Heaps of data or information are storyless. They are not narrative but cumulative.

The story is the counter-figure of information insofar as it has a beginning and an end. It is characterized by closure. It is a *concluding form*:

There is an essential – as I see it – distinction between stories, on the one hand, which have as their goal, an end, completeness, closure, and, on the other hand, information, which is always, by definition, partial, incomplete, fragmentary.[12]

A completely unbounded world lacks enchantment and magic. Enchantment depends on boundaries, transitions and thresholds. Susan Sontag writes:

For there to be completeness, unity, coherence, there must be borders. Everything is relevant in the journey we take within those borders. One could describe the story's end as a point of magical convergence for the shifting preparatory views: a fixed position from which the reader sees how initially disparate things finally belong together.[13]

Narrative is a play of light and shadow, of the visible and invisible, of nearness and distance. *Transparency* destroys this dialectical tension, which forms the basis of every narrative. The digital disenchantment of the world goes far beyond the disenchantment that Max Weber attributed to scientific rationalization. *Today's disenchantment is the result of the informatization of the world. Transparency is the new formula of disenchantment*. Transparency disenchants the world by dissolving it into data and information.

In an interview, Paul Virilio mentions a science-fiction short story about the invention of a tiny camera. It is so small and light that it can be transported by a snowflake. Extraordinary numbers of these cameras are mixed into artificial snow and then dropped from aeroplanes. People think it is snowing, but in fact the world is being contaminated with cameras. The world becomes fully transparent. Nothing remains hidden. There are no more blind spots. Asked what we will dream of when everything becomes visible, Virilio answers: 'We'll dream of being blind.'[14] There is no such thing as a *transparent narrative*. Every narrative needs secrets and enchantment. Only our dreams of blindness would save us from the hell of transparency, would return to us the capacity to narrate.

Gershom Scholem concludes one of his books on Jewish mysticism with a Hasidic tale:

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer – and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the 'Maggid' of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers – and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs – and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the story-teller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.[15]

Theodor W. Adorno quotes this Hasidic tale in full in his 'Gruß an Gershom Scholem: Zum 70. Geburtstag' [Greetings to Gershom Scholem on his seventieth birthday].[16] He interprets the story as a metaphor for the advance of secularization in modernity. The world becomes increasingly disenchanted. The mythical fire has long since burnt itself out. We no longer know how to say prayers. We are not able to engage in secret meditation. The mythical place in the woods has also

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been forgotten. Today, we must add to this list: we are losing the *capacity to tell the story* through which we can invoke this mythical past.

Notes

1.   Paul Maar, 'Die Geschichte vom Jungen, der keine Geschichten erzählen konnte', in *Die Zeit*, 28 October 2004.

2.   Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), 'The Disciples at Saïs', in *The Disciples at Saïs and Other Fragments*, London: Methuen, 1903, pp. 91–143; here p. 129 (transl. modified).

3.   Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913–1926*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 444–88; here: pp. 465f.

4.   Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 313–55; here: p. 338.

5.   See Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 50f.

6.   See Proust, *Time Regained*, p. 241: 'Certain people, whose minds are prone to mystery, like to believe that objects retain something of the eyes which have looked at them, that old buildings and pictures appear to us not as they originally were but beneath a perceptible veil woven for them over the centuries by the love and contemplation of millions of admirers.'

7.   Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 314 (transl. amended).

8.   Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 338.

9.   Proust, *Time Regained*, p. 241.

10.   Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 354 (note 77).

11.   Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 38.

12.   Susan Sontag, 'At the Same Time: The Novelist and Moral Reasoning', in *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, pp. 210–31; here: p. 224.

13.   Ibid.

14.   Paul Virilio, 'Cyberwar, God and Television: An Interview with Paul Virilio', in Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (eds), *Digital Delirium*, Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1997, pp. 41–8; here: p. 47.

15.   Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken, 1995 [1946], pp. 349f.

16.   Theodor W. Adorno, 'Gruß an G. Scholem. Zum 70. Geburtstag', in *Gesammelte Schriften Vol. 20.2*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, pp. 478–86.

FROM SHOCKS TO LIKES

In his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Walter Benjamin quotes from a short prose piece by Baudelaire, 'Perte d'auréole' [Loss of a Halo]. It tells the story of a poet who loses his halo while crossing a boulevard:

A short while ago I was hurrying across the boulevard, and amid that churning chaos in which death comes galloping at you from all sides at once I must have made an awkward movement, for the halo slipped off my head and fell into the mire of the macadam.[1]

Benjamin interprets the story as an allegory of the disintegration of the aura in modernity. Baudelaire 'named the price for which the sensation of modernity could be had: the disintegration of the aura in immediate shock experience [*Chockerlebnis*]'.[2] Reality impacts on the observer via the shock. Its representation moves from the canvas to the projection screen. A painting invites the observer to linger in front of it in contemplation and to enter into free association. *The observers rest in themselves*. The spectator at the movies, by contrast, resembles the pedestrian in the middle of chaotic traffic where death approaches on all sides: 'Film is the art form corresponding to the increased threat to life that faces people today.'[3]

According to Freud, the main function of consciousness is to protect us against stimuli. Consciousness tries to assign the received stimulus a place within itself, at the expense of the integrity of the conscious material. Benjamin quotes Freud:

For a living organism, protection against stimuli is almost more important than the reception of stimuli. The protective shield is equipped with its own store of energy and must above all strive to preserve the special forms of conversion of energy operating in it against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world-effects that tend toward an equalization of potential and hence toward destruction.

'The threat posed by these energies', Benjamin says, 'is the threat of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect.'[4] Consciousness prevents stimuli from reaching the deeper layers of the psyche. When consciousness's protection against stimuli fails, we suffer a traumatic shock. Dreaming and remembering are delayed ways of coming to terms with such shocks. They take the time that was originally lacking and deal with the stimuli in hindsight. If consciousness succeeds in parrying the shock, the impact of the occurrence is weakened, and it becomes an event. In the modern age, the shock aspect of individual impressions has become so intensified that our consciousness is forced to be permanently active as a shield against stimuli. The more it succeeds in this endeavour, the less the stimuli become part of our *experience*. Experiences [*Erfahrungen*] are replaced with events [*Erlebnisse*], that is, with attenuated shocks. The eye of the modern city

dweller is overburdened with protective tasks. It unlearns contemplative lingering: 'In the protective eye, there is no daydreaming surrender to distance and to faraway things.'[5]

Benjamin turns the experience of shocks into Baudelaire's poetic principle. Baudelaire speaks of a duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright. This duel is the creative process itself. Thus, Baudelaire placed shock experience [*Chockerfahrung*] at the very center of his art… . Since Baudelaire was himself vulnerable to being frightened, it was not unusual for him to evoke fright. Valles tells us about his eccentric grimaces … Gautier speaks of the italicizing Baudelaire indulged in when reciting poetry; Nadar describes his jerky gait.

According to Benjamin, Baudelaire was one of those 'traumatophile types'. He 'made it his business to parry the shocks … with his spiritual and physical self'.[6] He '*stabs away*' with his pencil.

More than 100 years have passed since Benjamin published his essay on Baudelaire. The screens on which movies played have been replaced by digital screens that we look at almost constantly. Etymologically, a screen [*Schirm*] is a protective barrier. A screen *bans* reality, which becomes an image, thus screening us off from it. We perceive reality almost exclusively via digital screens. Reality has become merely a section of the screen. On a smartphone screen, reality is so attenuated that it can no longer create any shock experiences. *Shocks give way to likes*.

Because it removes reality's *gaze*, the smartphone is a most efficient tool for screening us off from reality. Reality's gaze is the gaze through which the *other* addresses us. Reality as *something facing us* disappears entirely behind the touchscreen. Deprived of its otherness, the other becomes consumable. According to Lacan, a picture still possesses a gaze that looks at me, captures me, enchants and fascinates me, that puts me under its spell and takes hold of my eyes: 'certainly, in the picture, something of the gaze is always manifested'.[7] Lacan distinguishes between the gaze and the eyes. The eyes construct an imaginary mirror image that *the gaze crosses out*.
A countenance demands distance. It is a *thou* and not an available *it*. It is possible to put one's finger on the picture of a person, or even erase it, only because it has already lost its gaze – the countenance. Lacan would say that the picture on the touchscreen is *without gaze*, that it serves only to please my eyes and satisfy my needs. In this, the touchscreen differs from the picture as a *screen* (*écran*) behind which the gaze still *remains visible*. Because the digital screen completely seals us off from reality, nothing *remains visible* behind it. The digital screen is *flat*.

Every theory of the picture reflects the society to which it belongs. During Lacan's time, the world was still experienced as having a gaze. In Heidegger, we also find formulations that sound odd today. In 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935–6), he writes about 'equipment' [*Zeug*], such as an axe, jug or shoes: 'Serviceability is the basic trait from out of which these kinds of beings look at us – that is, flash at us and thereby presence and so be the beings they are.'[8] In fact, it is serviceability that makes the being-present of beings disappear, because we perceive equipment

only with regard to its purpose. Heidegger's 'equipment' still retains the dimension of a gaze. It is *something facing us*, looking at us.

The disappearance of the gaze accompanies the narcissization of perception. Narcissism removes the gaze, that is, the other, and puts an imaginary mirror image in its place. Smartphones accelerate the expulsion of the other. They are digital mirrors that bring about a post-infantile return of the mirror stage. The use of smartphones means that we remain in a mirror stage that upholds an imaginary ego. The digital subjects Lacan's triad of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic to a radical reconstruction. It dismantles the real and replaces the symbolic, which embodies shared values and norms, with the imaginary. Ultimately, the digital leads to the erosion of community.

In the age of Netflix, no one speaks of having shock experiences in connection with films. A Netflix series is nothing like a piece of art that corresponds to a pronounced danger to life and limb. Rather, it typically leads to *binge watching*. Viewers are fattened like consumer cattle. *Binge watching* is a paradigm for the general mode of perception in digital late modernity.

The *transformation from shocks to likes* can also be derived from a change in our psychic apparatus. It may be true that the increasing sensory overload in modernity is experienced as a shock. But over time, the psychic apparatus gets used to the increased stimuli, and perception becomes accordingly dulled. The cortex of the brain where our defences against stimuli are located becomes calloused, so to speak. The outermost layer of consciousness hardens and becomes 'to some degree inorganic'.[9]

The type of artist represented by Baudelaire, someone who inadvertently causes fright, would today seem not only antiquated but almost grotesque. The artist who typifies our age is Jeff Koons. He appears *smart*. His works reflect the smooth consumer world that is the opposite of the world of shocks. All Koons wants from his audience is a simple 'Wow!' His art is intentionally relaxed and disarming. What he wants above all is *to be liked*. His motto is: 'embrace the viewer'. There is nothing in his art that is intended to frighten or rattle the viewer. His art is located beyond the world of shocks. Its aim, Koons says, is 'communication'. He could also have said: *the watchword of my art is the like*.

Notes

1. Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 342.
2. Ibid., p. 343.
3. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', p. 281 (note 42).
4. Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 317.
5. Ibid., p. 341.
6. Ibid., p. 319.

7.   Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1998 [1973], p. 101.

8.   Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 1–56; here: p. 10.

9.   Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1961, p. 21.

THEORY AS NARRATIVE

In his essay 'The End of Theory', Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of *Wired*, claims that incredibly large amounts of data make theories superfluous: 'Today companies like Google, which have grown up in an era of massively abundant data, don't have to settle for wrong models. Indeed, they don't have to settle for models at all.'[1] Human behaviour, he writes, can be precisely predicted and controlled with the help of data-driven psychology or sociology. The place of theory is taken by direct correlations between data:

Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves.

But big data does not explain anything. Big data merely discloses *correlations* between things. Correlations are the most primitive form of knowledge. They do not allow us to understand anything. Big data cannot explain *why* things are correlated in the way they are. It does not establish causal or conceptual connections. The question '*why?*' is replaced with a *non-conceptual 'this-is-how-it-is'*.

As a narrative, theory designs an order of things, setting them in relation to each other. Theory thereby explains *why* they behave the way they do. It develops *conceptual contexts* that make things intelligible. Unlike big data, theory offers us the highest form of knowledge: *comprehension*. Theory is a *form of closure* that *takes hold of things* and thereby makes them graspable. Big data, by contrast, is completely *open*. Theory, as a form of closure, *comprises* things *within* a conceptual framework and thus makes them *graspable*. The end of theory ultimately means the end of *concept as spirit* [*Begriff als Geist*]. Artificial intelligence can do without the conceptual. *Intelligence is not spirit*. Only spirit is capable of a reordering of things, of creating a new narrative. Intelligence computes and counts. *Spirit, however, recounts*. Data-driven human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] are not sciences of *spirit* but data science. *Data drive out spirit*. Data-knowledge marks the *degree zero of spirit*. In a world saturated with data and information, our narrative capacity withers. Fewer theories are therefore formulated – no one wants to take the *risk* of putting forward a theory.

That a theory is actually a narrative is clear from the work of Sigmund Freud. His psychoanalysis is a narrative that offers a model for explaining the workings of our psychic apparatus. He subjects his patients' stories to his psychoanalytic narrative, which allows us to understand a particular kind of behaviour or a particular symptom. The cure is said to be successful when the patient accepts the narrative that he offers them. The case histories, as told by his patients, and his psychoanalytic narrative interact with each other. The psychoanalytic narrative is continually retold in light of the material Freud is trying to interpret. The stories told by the patients are meant to be fully absorbed by Freud's narrative. In this process, Freud becomes the hero of his own narrative:

As a re-teller of that which has been told to him in a distorted way, he proves to be more than simply the person who brings all inconsistent information into focus, weighing and ordering it. He is never in danger of being impacted by the story, as he never loses his interpretive distance from any potential repercussions. We might even claim that the more the material to be interpreted threatens to escape his grasp, the more stubbornly he insists on his explanatory psychoanalytic formulas. And in doing so, he reveals himself as the hidden hero of his own analytic narratives.[2]

Plato's dialogues are an early illustration of the fact that philosophy is also a narrative. Plato may often, in the name of truth, be critical of myth as narrative, but paradoxically he frequently makes use of mythical stories himself. In some of his dialogues they play a central role. In *Phaedo*, for instance, Plato tells the story of the soul's fate after death, just as Dante does in his *Divine Comedy*.

Sinners are condemned to eternal torture and 'hurled into Tartarus'.[3] Only the virtuous go to heaven after their death. Plato concludes his elaborations on the fate of the soul after death by saying:

No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief – for the risk is a noble one – that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation, which is why I have been prolonging my tale [*mythos*].[4]

Philosophy, in the form of 'poetry' (*mythos*), takes a *risk*, a *noble risk*. It narrates – even *risks to suggest – a new form of life and being*. Descartes's *ego cogito, ergo sum* introduces a new order of things that represents the beginning of modern times. By leaving the Christian narrative of the Middle Ages behind, the radical orientation towards certainty *risks something new*. Enlightenment is also a narrative. Kant's moral theory, likewise, is a very risky narrative in which a moral God ensures that happiness is 'distributed in exact proportion to morality'.[5] God compensates us for our renunciation of earthly pleasures and pursuit of virtue. Kant's postulate of the soul's immortality is also a risky narrative. The 'production of the highest good', Kant

argues, is 'possible only on the presupposition of the existence and personality of the same rational being continuing endlessly', because 'the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law' is 'a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence'. That is, Kant postulates an 'endless progress' in which the human being, even beyond death, seeks to achieve the 'highest good'.[6] As far as the immortality of the soul is concerned, Kant's moral theory, *as a tale*, does not fundamentally differ from Plato's *myth*. But unlike Kant, Plato explicitly emphasizes that it is a narrative (*mythos*).

New narratives allow for new forms of perception. Nietzsche's revaluation of all values opens up a new perspective on the world. The world is, so to speak, *re-narrated*, and as a result we see it with fresh eyes. Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* is anything but a science in the narrow sense. It is conceived as a *narrative about the future* that is based on a 'hope', on a 'faith in a tomorrow and a day after tomorrow'. Nietzsche's revaluation of all values is a *narrative as risk and festival*, even as *adventure*. In the preface to *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes:

'Gay Science': this signifies the saturnalia of a mind that has patiently resisted a terrible, long pressure – patiently, severely, coldly, without yielding, but also without hope – and is now all of a sudden attacked by hope, by hope for health, by the *intoxication* of recovery. Is it any wonder that in the process much that is unreasonable and foolish comes to light, much wanton tenderness, lavished even on problems that have a prickly hide, not made to be fondled and lured? This entire book is really nothing but an amusement after long privation and powerlessness, the jubilation of returning strength, of a reawakened faith in a tomorrow and a day after tomorrow, of a sudden sense and anticipation of a future, of impending adventures, of reopened seas, of goals that are permitted and believed in again.[7]

Nietzsche, the narrator, specifically emphasizes his *authorship*: 'I have it in my hands, I have a hand for *switching perspectives*: which is why, for me alone, the *revaluation of values* was possible at all.'[8] Only to the extent that a theory is also a narrative can it be a *passion*. It is precisely because artificial intelligence is incapable of *passion*, of *passionate narration*, that it cannot think.

Once philosophy claims to be a science, an exact science even, decay sets in. Conceived as a science, philosophy denies its original narrative character and it loses its *language*. Philosophy *falls silent*. An academic philosophy that limits itself to the administration of its own history is unable to *narrate*. It does not run any *risks*; it runs a *bureaucracy*. The current crisis of narration thus also takes hold of philosophy and puts an end to it. We *lack* the courage for philosophy, the courage for theory, that
is, *the courage to create a narrative*. We must always bear in mind that, in the final analysis, thinking is also a narrating that progresses in narrative steps.

Notes

1.	Chris Anderson, 'The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete', *Wired*, 23 July 2008, at https://www.wired.com/2008/06/pb-theory

2.	Elisabeth Bronfen: 'Theory as Narrative: Sigmund Freud', in Dieter Mersch, Silvia Sasse and Sandro Zanetti (eds), *Aesthetic Theory*, Zurich: Diaphanes, 2019, pp. 53–68; here: p. 55.

3.	Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Complete Works*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997, pp. 49–100; here: p. 96 (113e).

4.	Ibid., p. 97 (114d).

5.	Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 90.

6.	Ibid., pp. 98f.

7.	Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 3.

8.	Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1887–1889*, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Vol. 13, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988, p. 630. Transl. note: See the almost, but not quite, identical wording in *Ecce Homo* (*The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 76): 'I have a hand for switching perspectives: the first reason why a "revaluation of values" is even possible, perhaps for me alone.' The English translation of *Ecce Homo* leaves out 'Ich habe es jetzt in der Hand' [I now have it in my hands, …]. Note the addition of 'now' (*jetzt*) and the change from past to present tense ('was' to 'is' possible).

NARRATION AS HEALING

In one of his 'thought figures', Walter Benjamin invokes the primordial scene of healing: 'The child is sick. His mother puts him to bed and sits down beside him. And then she begins to tell him stories.' Telling stories is healing because it creates deep relaxation and primordial trust. The loving voice of the mother soothes the child, strokes the child's soul, strengthens their bond, supports the child. Children's stories, moreover, tell of an ideal world; they turn the world into a familiar home. A standard children's story plot line relates the happy overcoming of a crisis. This helps the child to get over the crisis that the illness represents.

The hand that *narrates* is also healing. Benjamin speaks of the 'strange healing powers' that emanate from the woman's hands, which move as if telling of something: 'Their movements are highly expressive. But it is not possible to describe their expression … It is as if they were telling a story.' Every illness is the sign of an inner blockage that can be released through the *rhythm of narration*. The *hand that tells a story* releases tension, blockages and hardenings. It puts things back into balance, even lets them *flow* again. Benjamin wonders 'whether every illness might be cured if it could only float along the river of narrative – until it reached the mouth'. Pain is a dam that offers an initial resistance to the narrative flow. But the narrative flow swells and eventually becomes strong enough to break the dam. Then, the flow takes with it everything along the way

to the 'ocean of blissful oblivion'. The stroking hand 'marks out a bed for this torrent'. Benjamin points out 'that the story a sick man tells the doctor at the start of his treatment can become the first stage in the healing process'.[1]

Freud, too, understands pain as a symptom of a blockage in a person's history. The person is unable to continue their story. Psychological disorders are symptoms of a blocked story. The healing consists in the liberation of the patient from this narrative block, in bringing what cannot be narrated to linguistic expression. The patient is cured the moment she *narrates herself free*. Narratives develop healing powers. Benjamin mentions the Merseburg charms, the second of which was intended as a magical healing procedure. It is not, however, an abstract formula. Rather, it tells the story of a wounded horse and Wotan's use of a magic spell. Benjamin notes: 'It is not simply that they repeat Wotan's formula; in addition, they *narrate* the situation which led him to use it in the first place.'[2]

A traumatic experience can be overcome by integrating it into a religious narrative that provides consolation or hope and thus carries us through the crisis. *Crisis narratives* help us to come to terms with catastrophic events by embedding them in meaningful contexts. Conspiracy theories also have a therapeutic function. They offer simple explanations for the complex situations that are responsible for crises. Conspiracy theories are therefore stories mostly told in times of crisis. When crisis threatens, *narration per se* has a therapeutic effect, because it *places the situation in the past*. As part of the past, it no longer affects the present. The situation is *put to bed*, so to speak.

Hannah Arendt prefaces the chapter on action in *The Human Condition* with an unusual line from Isak Dinesen: 'All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.'[3] *Narrative phantasy* is healing. By placing our sorrows under the narrative light, it takes away their oppressive facticity. They are absorbed by narrative rhythms and melodies. A story raises them above mere facticity. Instead of solidifying into a mental block, they liquefy in the narrative flow.

Today's storytelling cannot prevent the disappearance of the *narrative atmosphere*. At doctors' surgeries, scarcely a story is told. Doctors have neither the time nor the patience to listen. The *spirit of narration* does not fit with the logic of efficiency. Only in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis are there still moments reminiscent of the healing powers of storytelling. Michael Ende's character Momo is able to heal people simply by listening to them. She has plenty of time: 'Time was Momo's only form of wealth.'[4] She gives her time to the other. The *time of the other* is a *good time*. Momo is the ideal listener:

No, what Momo was better at than anyone else was *listening*. Anyone can listen, you may say – what's so special about that? – but you'd be wrong. Very few people know how to listen properly, and Momo's way of listening was quite unique.[5]

Momo's friendly, attentive silence invokes in others ideas that would otherwise never have occurred to them:

It wasn't that she actually said anything or asked questions that put such ideas into their heads. She simply sat there and listened with utmost attention and sympathy, fixing them with her big, dark eyes, and they suddenly became aware of ideas they had never suspected.[6]

Momo allows others to *narrate themselves free*. She heals by removing narrative blockages:

Another time, a little boy brought her his canary because it wouldn't sing. Momo found that a far harder proposition. She had to sit and listen to the bird for a whole week before it started to trill and warble again.[7]

Listening is in the first instance directed at the other *person*, the *who of the other*, not at the content that is communicated. Momo's deep and friendly gaze *addresses* the others explicitly in their *otherness*. Listening is not a passive state; it is an active doing. *It inspires the other to narrate* and opens up a *resonating space* in which the narrator feels *addressed*, *heard*, even *loved*.

Touch also has healing powers. Like storytelling, touching creates closeness and primordial trust. As a *tactile narrative*, a touch releases tensions and blockages that lead to pain and illness. The physician Viktor von Weizsäcker invokes a primordial scene of healing:

When a sister, still very young herself, sees her little brother in pain, she senses what to do before knowing anything: her hand finds its way; she wants to caress him where it hurts – *thus, the little Samaritan becomes the first doctor*. A pre-knowledge about a primal effect is unconsciously at work in her. That knowledge guides her urge towards her hand and leads the hand to perform the soothing caress. For that is what the brother will experience; the hand will soothe him. Between himself and the pain slips the sensation of being touched by the sisterly hand, and the pain retreats before this new sensation.[8]

The hand that touches has the same healing powers as the voice that narrates. It creates closeness and trust. It releases tension and removes fear.

We currently live in a society in which there is no touching. Touching someone presupposes the *otherness of the other*, which places them beyond simple availability. We cannot touch a consumable object – we take hold of it or take it into our possession. In particular, the smartphone, the embodiment of the digital dispositif, creates the illusion of universal availability. Its consumerist habitus takes hold in every sphere of life. It robs others of their otherness and reduces them to consumable objects.

The retreat of touch is making us ill. Lacking touch, we remain hopelessly entrapped in our ego. Touch in the proper sense pulls us out of our ego. Poverty in touch ultimately means poverty in

world. It makes us depressive, lonely and fearful. Digitalization intensifies this poverty in touch and world. Paradoxically, the rise of connectivity separates us. That is the hopeless dialectic of connection. Being connected is not the same thing as being united.

'Stories' on social media, which are in fact mere self-promotion, separate people from each other. Unlike narratives, they produce neither closeness nor empathy. In the end, they are information adorned with images – information that is briefly registered and then disappears. The stories do not narrate; they *advertise*. Vying for attention does not create community. In the age of storytelling as storyselling, narration and advertisement become indistinguishable. That is the current crisis of narration.

Notes

1.   All quotations from Walter Benjamin, 'Storytelling and Healing', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2*, pp. 724f.

2.   Ibid. (transl. amended; emphasis B.-C. Han).

3.   Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998 [1958], p. 175. Transl. note: The quotation is from an interview with Karen Blixen conducted by Bent Mohn ('Talk with Isak Dinesen', *The New York Times Book Review*, 3 November 1957): 'I am not a novelist, really not even a writer; I am a storyteller. One of my friends said about me that I think all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them, and perhaps this is not entirely untrue. To me, the explanation of life seems to be its melody, its pattern. And I feel in life such an infinite, truly inconceivable fantasy.' Karen Blixen and Isak Dinesen are two pen names of Karen Christenze von Blixen-Finecke.

4.   Michael Ende, *Momo*, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1985, p. 12.

5.   Ibid., p. 11.

6.   Ibid.

7.   Ibid., pp. 15f.

8.   Viktor von Weizsäcker, 'Die Schmerzen', in *Der Arzt und der Kranke: Stücke einer medizinischen Anthropologie*, Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987, pp. 27–47; here p. 27.

NARRATIVE COMMUNITY

In his essay *Behutsame Ortsbestimmung* [A careful definition of a place], Péter Nádas describes a village with an ancient wild pear tree at its centre. On warm summer nights, the villagers meet under the tree and tell each other stories. The village is a narrative community. The stories, with the values and norms they carry, unite the people. The narrative community is a community *without communication*: 'You get the feeling that life here does not consist of personal

experiences … but of a deep keeping of silence.'[1] Under the pear tree, the villagers indulge in 'ritual contemplation', a ritual silence, and give their blessings to the 'content of collective consciousness': 'They do not have opinions on this or that, but incessantly tell just one great story.'[2] At the end of his essay, Nádas, not without some regret, writes: 'On warm summer nights, quiet singing could be heard from under the wild pear tree. The villagers sang quietly…. Today, there are no chosen trees, and the song of the village has faded.'[3]

In Nádas's narrative community, a community without communication, there is a silence, a silent unity. It is the exact opposite of today's information society. We no longer tell each other stories. Instead, we *communicate* incessantly. We *post*, *share* and *like*. The 'ritual contemplation' that blesses the content of collective consciousness gives way to the intoxication of communication and information. The noise of communication silences the song in which all villagers join, the *one great story* that unites them. *Community without communication gives way to communication without community.*

Stories create social cohesion. They offer meaning and bear values that create community. They must be distinguished from those narratives that found *a regime*. The narratives on which the neoliberal regime is based prevent the formation of community. The neoliberal narrative of performance turns every individual into an *entrepreneur of his own self.* Everyone competes with everyone else. The performance narrative does not produce social cohesion – it does not produce a *we*. On the contrary, it destroys solidarity and empathy. By separating individuals from one another, the neoliberal narratives of self-optimization, self-realization and authenticity destabilize society. When everyone worships the self, is a priest of themselves, when *everyone plays to the gallery*, *gives a performance of themselves*, no stable community can form.

Myths are *ritually staged shared narratives*.

However, not all narrative communities are mythbased communities that involve a shared collective consciousness. On the basis of narratives about the future, modern societies can create *dynamic narrative communities* that allow for change. Conservative and nationalist narratives that are directed against liberal permissiveness are exclusionary and discriminatory. But not all community-founding narratives are based on the *exclusion of the other*. There are also *inclusive narratives* that do not cling to a particular identity. For example, the radical universalism of Kant's philosophical sketch *Perpetual Peace* amounts to a master narrative in which all human beings and nations are included and united in a world community. Kant bases perpetual peace on the ideas of 'cosmopolitan right' and 'universal hospitality'.[4] According to these ideas, all men are entitled to present themselves in the society of others by virtue of their right to communal possession of the earth's surface. Since the earth is a globe, they cannot disperse over an infinite area, but must necessarily tolerate one another's company. And no-one originally has any greater right than anyone else to occupy any particular portion of the earth.[5]

In this universalist narrative, there can be no refugees. Every human being enjoys unlimited hospitality. Everyone is a cosmopolitan. Novalis is another thinker who argues for a radical universalism. He imagines a 'world family' beyond nation or identity. He takes poetry to be the medium of reconciliation and love. Poetry unites people and things in the most intimate community:

Poetry elevates each single thing through a particular combination with the rest of the whole … poetry shapes the beautiful society – the world family – the beautiful household of the universe…. The individual lives in the whole and the whole in the individual. Through poetry there arises the highest sympathy and common activity, the most intimate communion of the finite and the infinite.[6]

This most intimate community is a *narrative community*, but it rejects exclusionary narratives of identity.

Because we lack sufficiently strong communal narratives, our late modern societies are unstable. Without a shared narrative, the *political*, which makes *shared action* possible, cannot properly form. In the neoliberal regime, the shared narrative gradually disintegrates into *private narratives*, *models of self-realization*. The neoliberal regime prevents the formation of community-founding narratives. In the name of performance and productivity, it separates human beings from one another. As a result, we have few narratives that could serve to found community and meaning. The proliferation of private narratives erodes community. Stories on social media, which make the private public, undermine the *political public sphere* and make the formation of shared narratives even more difficult.

Political action in the genuine sense presupposes a narrative. The action must be *narratable*. Without a narrative, action deteriorates into contingent acts or reactions. Political action presupposes *narrative coherence*. Hannah Arendt explicitly links action to narration:
For action and speech, which, as we saw before, belonged close together in the Greek understanding of politics, are indeed the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear to be.[7]

Today, narratives are becoming more and more depoliticized. They mainly serve to create a society based on singularities – cultural singularities such as singular objects, styles, places, collectives or products.[8] As a consequence, they are no longer a force that forms community. Shared action, the *we*, is based on narrative. Narratives now mainly serve commercial interests. Storytelling as storyselling creates not a narrative community but a consumer society. Narratives are produced and consumed like commodities. Consumers do not form a community, a *we*. The commercialization of narratives robs them of their political force. When certain goods are embellished with moral narratives such as 'fair trade', even morality becomes consumable. The moral narrative becomes information, and is sold and consumed as a product's distinguishing

feature. Moral consumption, mediated by narratives, increases only our own sense of self-worth. Through these narratives, we refer not to a community that is to be improved, but only to our own egos.

Notes

1.	Péter Nádas, *Behutsame Ortsbestimmung: Zwei Berichte*, Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2006, p. 11. Transl. note: The German book contains two texts, 'Genaue Ortsbestimmung' and 'Der eigene Tod', originally published separately in Hungarian: 'A helyzsin óvatos megházozása' (A careful definition of a place), in *Hátországi napló: Újabb usszék* (Diary from the hinterland: recent essays), Pécs: Jelenkor, 2006, and *Saját halál* (One's own death), Pécs: Jelenkor, 2004.

1.	Nádas, *Behutsame Ortsbestimmung*, p. 25 and p. 17.
2.	Ibid., p. 33.
3.	Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 93–130; here: p. 105.
4.	Ibid., p. 106.
5.	Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Philosophical Writings*, New York: State University of New York, 1997, p. 54.
6.	Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 97.
7.	See Andreas Reckwitz, *The Society of Singularities*, Cambridge: Polity, 2020

ENCODE RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY FOR COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

Unveiling Emotional Dimensions of Politics to Foster European Democracy[1]

ENCODE – a story about searching for the meaning of emotions

From the very beginning, ENCODE set out **to deepen our understanding of the emotional and narrative dimensions that shape public discourse**. The project emerged from the observation that the growing fragmentation of communication processes fuels negative emotions and erodes public trust in democratic institutions, ultimately undermining effective policymaking. In response, ENCODE seeks to decode how emotions structure meaning within citizens' narratives and to translate these insights into strategies that encourage a positive emotional turn in democratic politics—one that strengthens collective resilience rather than deepens division.

Here, *narratives* **are understood not merely as stories, but as fundamental meaning-making structures** that guide how individuals interpret facts, form beliefs, and engage with society. Their power lies in the way they connect to core emotions: they evoke fear, hope, anger, or belonging, shaping both perception and action. In the digital age, such emotional narratives are continuously amplified—and contested—online, where algorithms reward content that sparks intense affect. This interplay among emotion, narrative, and technology has profound implications for democratic integrity.
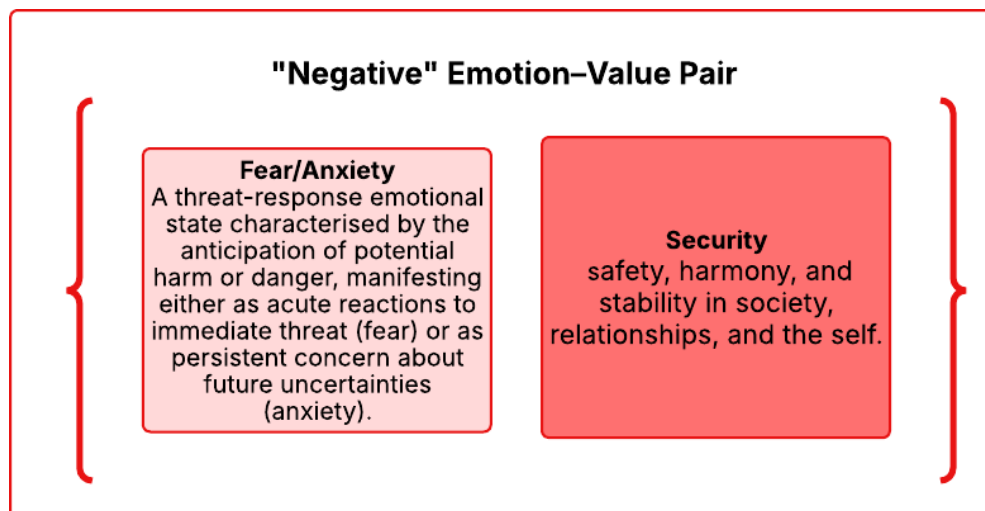
In ENCODE, we argue that emotions act not only as filters but also as catalysts within the digital information ecosystem. They operate at cognitive and social levels alike, creating patterns of attachment and belonging. To show this, we conducted a broad set of studies, including an extensive social media analysis. Within this work, we systematically identified and examined the key patterns, mechanisms, and components that trigger emotional responses in political communication.
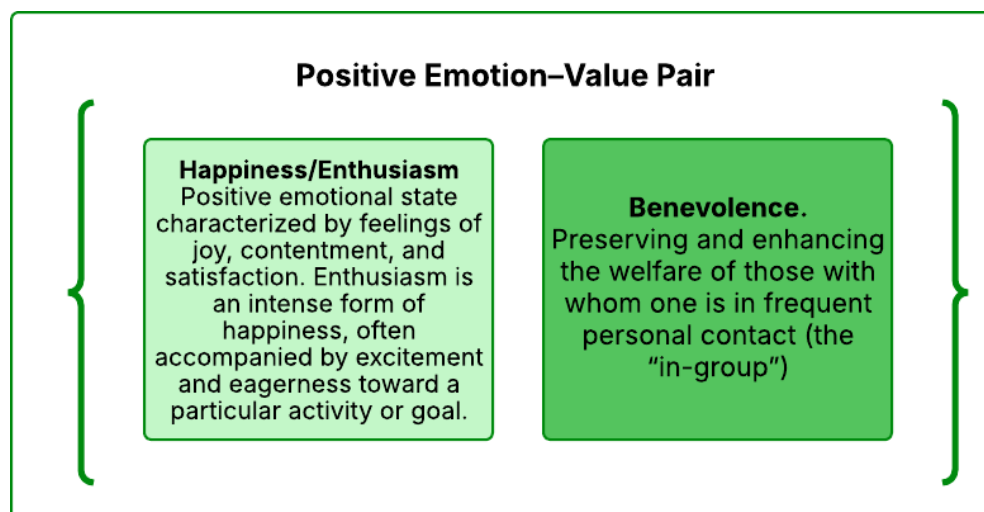
The qualitative component—using manual coding and discourse analysis to assess the context and impact of emotional posts—was combined with quantitative methods. Based on a manually annotated **sample of 14,000 posts on X (formerly Twitter), a large language model (LLM) .was trained to classify the full corpus of 2.1 million entries using statistical techniques**. Integrating these approaches allowed us to conduct a robust cross-platform comparison that accounts for the distinct affordances and user behaviours of each digital environment.

While the analysis employed natural language processing and machine learning to detect emotions and sentiment across large datasets, the manually coded training sample was filtered to include only political posts. These were pre-selected through a keyword-based approach, and all material was treated equally as potential annotation content. Each post, transcribed segment, or comment was considered a distinct unit of analysis.

One of the most striking results was the strong association between specific emotions and values present in the posts. The clearest patterns emerged between fear/anxiety and security (co-occurring in approximately 22% of cases beyond what would be expected by chance), and between happiness/enthusiasm and benevolence (co-occurring in roughly 14% of cases beyond chance levels). Among other findings, we thus identified two emotion–value pairs that may shape how users consume social media

"Negative" Emotion–Value Pair

Fear/Anxiety
A threat-response emotional state characterised by the anticipation of potential harm or danger, manifesting either as acute reactions to immediate threat (fear) or as persistent concern about future uncertainties (anxiety).

Security
safety, harmony, and stability in society, relationships, and the self.

Positive Emotion–Value Pair

Happiness/Enthusiasm
Positive emotional state characterized by feelings of joy, contentment, and satisfaction. Enthusiasm is an intense form of happiness, often accompanied by excitement and eagerness toward a particular activity or goal.

Benevolence.
Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (the "in-group")

Our analysis of media outlets' content showed that engagement per post was 127% higher for emotional material, prompting more likes, replies, retweets, and quotes. The initial question that guided our work was how to activate "positive" sets of emotional–value associations rather than negative ones. Over time, however, we began to realise that our aim might need to be slightly different

Searching for a solution – when the path matters more than the destination

In public debate, it is widely assumed that contemporary democracies are defined by growing **affective polarization—understood as an affective distance between political opponents**, in which opposing groups of citizens harbour deep distrust and antipathy toward one another. Relations between groups competing for political power are thus dominated by fear and uncertainty, while security often becomes the overriding public value.

At this stage, ENCODE turns to the insights of Chantal Mouffe, the Belgian philosopher who, in writing about hostility in democracy, points to *metaphorical redescription* as the first step toward breaking political deadlocks. Mouffe argues that we must begin by acknowledging the difficult and unsettling emotions that accompany democratic life. Competition between groups is an inherent feature of democracy; yet **while conflict cannot—and should not—be erased, it can be redefined.** What we *can* change is the way we think about it: instead of antagonism, where political struggle is framed as a battle between enemies, she urges us to think and speak in terms of *agonism*, where political adversaries remain opponents at the centre of public contestation. This shift transforms the prevailing interpretive frame: in an agonistic democratic order, political rivals are recognized as "somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 102).

Following her steps, we came to believe that democratic societies must first acknowledge that we no longer inhabit pluralistic societies, but rather a condition we refer to as *polarism:* **a system in which affective polarization is accepted as something natural, though unwanted**. Only sustained public debate and a genuine attempt to understand why we feel what we feel—an effort to comprehend emotions rather than to prescribe new ones—can eventually guide us back toward pluralism: the coexistence of different values and visions of the good life that is widely recognized as democracy's preferred condition. We believe that the key shift in interpretive frameworks—the very redescription Mouffe calls for—requires understanding that **transforming polarization demands transforming our natural habitat**: the communicative and emotional ecosystem in which we live.

Here we drew inspiration from Jordi Quoidbach, who, together with his team, proposed in 2014 a new approach to examining the impact of emotions on human psycho-physical well-being. Instead of asking how frequently individuals experience positive emotions, or whether positive emotions outweigh negative ones, the researchers introduced the metric of *emodiversity*. It is defined as "the variety and relative abundance of the emotions that humans experience" (Quoidbach et al., 2014, p. 2057) and consists of two components:

• **Richness** – the number of different emotions experienced by an individual or group (e.g., whether someone feels only a few basic emotions or a broad spectrum of them).
• **Evenness** – the relative balance among those emotions (e.g., whether one emotion dominates, or whether emotional states appear in more equal proportion).

The concept originates in the natural sciences, where the abundance and diversity of biological forms within an ecosystem are seen as positive and desirable states. By analogy, the most beneficial emotional life is one characterized by high emodiversity—by both richness and balance. In other words, **the goal cannot be to replace negative emotions with positive ones, but rather to cultivate an emotional ecosystem** in which richness necessarily includes states that feel distant, uncomfortable, or unsettling.

Only through such a long-term process of rebuilding the democratic emotional ecosystem can a new vision of a pluralistic society emerge—what we call *affective pluralism*, **in which diversity of ideas and values is accompanied by a diversity of emotional experiences**. Yet we should not fixate on the final destination and lose sight of the fact that, as always, the path itself matters more. At both the individual and societal levels, the task is not to simply replace the constellation of *fear/anxiety and security* with that of

happiness/enthusiasm and benevolence. It requires acknowledging both, and creating interpretive frameworks that allow us to rewrite the story of how these emotions are lived—drawing a path that leads from our fears and uncertainties toward a perhaps never fully attainable vision of better times and a renewed, diverse emotional environment.

Theory of Affective Pluralization
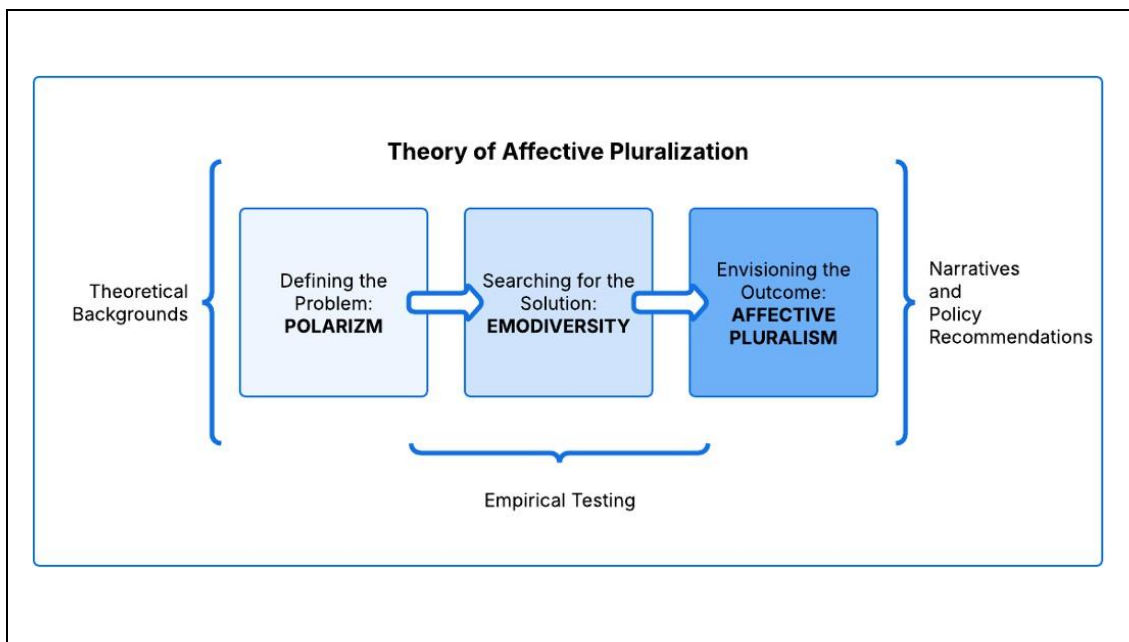
Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox.* Verso.

Quoidbach, J., Taquet, M., Desseilles, M., de Montjoye, Y.-A., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Emodiversity and the emotional ecosystem. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 143*(6), 2057–2066. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038025

This text is written in a popular-science style; the full list of references and research results can be found in the project's individual deliverables, available here:

https://encodemotions.eu/category/public-deliverables/