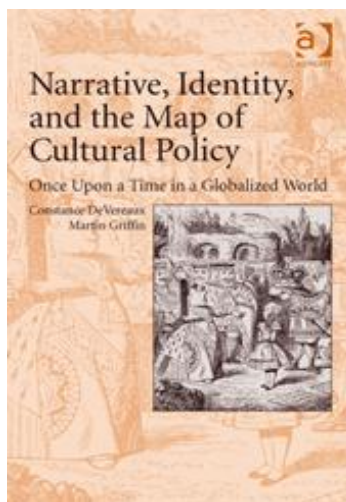


Using Narrative Analysis in Understanding Cultural Policy

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Constance DeVereaux and Martin Griffin. *Narrative, Identity, and the Map of Cultural Policy: Once Upon a Time in a Globalized World*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 184

That narrative analysis became an important part of the humanities in the second half of the 20th century is a relatively well-known fact. Studying how the acquisition and comprehension of narrative model our thoughts and actions with regard to key aspects of our life has definitely proven to be useful in a wide array of disciplines. What has been less under scrutiny is the role narrative plays when faced with macro-structural clashes of identities, so many of which occurred and still occur in a “transnational” or globalized world. DeVereaux and Griffin’s book comes to fill this gap, plunging right to the heart of the problem and showing that debates on cultural clashes due to a “pluralistic” global society are far from settled.

The authors’ underlying idea differs little from the existent understanding of narrative: besides the childhood-specific role that the latter was previously believed to play, narrative seems to occupy a central role in adult life, as well. The specific field in which the authors set out to test this working hypothesis (the field of cultural policy making) brings, nonetheless, new food for thought to the table. Narrative, both in its understanding as “story,” as well as in its understanding as that which enables a story to convey a particular effect, rests in strong connection to the issue of identity, the authors hold. They believe that we, the “creatures of the word,” express our

thoughts and mediate all our interaction by means of narrative's pervasiveness. Globally, the authors identify two underlying types of narrative that influence cultural policy making with regard to identity: globalization and transnationalism, one erasing borders between nations, while the other attempting to maintain them. The question asked is whether the two types of narrative are truly reflected within the construction of identity on a practical level. To formulate an answer to their inquiry, the authors turn to particular cultural policies pertaining to different governmental and nongovernmental organizations (especially emphasized in chapter 6).

What the book proposes from the outset is reading cultural policy through the lens of narrative structures, i.e., "plot, character, setting, point of view/voice, scene, and description" (chapter 1). A first important outcome of analyzing cultural policy as narrative is that its "aesthetic and emotional domains" are brought forth, besides its logical aspects, as chapter 2 explains extensively. Chapter 3 and the four case studies it presents show that different narratives can and often do come into conflict with one another. Here and in the last two chapters, the authors also show that narrative models the way we think about and apply commonly shared ethical and political values, such that cultural policy becomes a matter of translating into language the identity of a group. Chapter 4 revolves around a somewhat reconciling point of view with regard to the dual nature of narrative. The authors argue that narrative is "aesthetic" and "emotional," but it also has logical and causal implications that rest in tight connection to the former. This point is made by considering narrative in everyday life and by analyzing how childhood-specific storytelling influences daily decision-making in adult life.

The first instantiation of narrative tackled is the one of "cultural assimilation" associated to the melting-pot theory. In chapter 1 the authors argue that the melting-pot narrative persisted in the United States even though strong observation-based theories such as that of transnationalism, belonging to Randolph Bourne, proved otherwise. The shift from the melting-pot narrative came about with Americans' attention being repeatedly drawn on the different types of communities they had to cope with, communities such as new types of immigrants, American Muslim communities, and so forth. Even though it is claimed that narratives such as globalization and transnationalism actually repeat themselves throughout history (p. 26), it is also argued that such narratives may contribute to political growth, following the

example of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which gradually expanded its account of new social and psychological experiences. But complexity isn't all it takes for a narrative to function properly, we are told (p. 29). Slogans, for example, are short and catchy even though they do not bear explicit narrative frames. So the authors believe a good narrative is one that tends to achieve the perfect balance between complexity and control over complexity.

The most valuable contribution brought to the subject matter by the book is a framework against which both narrators and narrative analysts may test the strength of a narrative. The framework is made up of the following three points:

1. The aesthetic construction of narrative, viz., using “language, cadence, image, and plot” (p. 30) to convey the narrative as a story.
2. The ideological element of narrative, viz., the context embedded in the narrative, which fuels the latter with meaning.
3. The rhetoric or expression of narrative, viz., *how* the teller decides to communicate narratives.

In the authors' opinion, the link between (aesthetic and ideological) content and expression weighs more than meets the eye in judging the impact and relevance of narratives. An example in which aesthetic and ideological elements recommend a narrative that is undermined by its rhetoric is Philipp Jenninger's speech in the German *Bundestag* on November 10th, 1980, thoroughly analyzed in the first chapter (pp. 32-36).

It is only in chapter 2 that the framework is prepared for being tested out in the field of cultural policy. Here (pp. 48-52), modern and contemporary examples of narrative are used to explain the framework and to make some necessary additions to it. Such additions include analyzing formal composition, taking into account the difference between story (= narrative content) and discourse (= expectations and assumptions within which the story becomes meaningful), and the difference between the emotions instilled and the ethical implications of narratives. Chapter 3 is where the authors dive into the conflict between narratives and take four cases from recent history to exemplify how the ideological and rhetorical elements within a narrative influence policy making and how opposing narratives enter into conflict with each other with the possibility of a permanent failure of reconciliation (as in the case of the Taliban – non-Taliban debate over the Buddhas of Bamiyan). The point made throughout is that

presenting a narrative is in no way limited to presenting a means to analyze the world we live in, but, quite differently, it is rather a means to produce “real-world effects” by actually influencing people’s behaviors.

To this effect, one of the most interesting parts of the book is when philosophy is brought into discussion for elucidating the notion of narrative. Kant is referenced to explain that epistemological frames have a tendency to lock their agents within their logic. When confronted with different narratives than the ones we act in accordance with, we must, therefore, continuously “negotiate (...) new environment[s]” (pp. 99 et seq.). Wittgenstein, Suzanne Langer, and Cassirer are brought into discussion when tackling the fundamental question of where does understanding stand in terms of measuring the properness of a narrative (p. 102). An appeal to ancient Greek philosophers is made when arguing that elements such as causality and unity lend plausibility to narratives. All in all, the authors successfully manage to convince readers that different narrative frames (e.g., the media, novels, epic poetry, and whatnot) manage to shape different understandings of the same event. Examples ranging from Plato’s version of Socrates defense to nowadays’ dissensions concerning Julian Assange are used to this end.

Another interesting part of the book is the authors’ attempt to explain our reactions to policy changes, particularly our reaction of repulsion, as in when feeling violated by a certain new policy taken up (pp. 116 et seq.). One common cause for this is that we perceive a certain lack of narrative causality within the narrative of that change. For example, “the government consulted its citizens extensively before enforcing a law” is generally acceptable, while “the government enforced a law and then consulted its citizens extensively with respect to that law” is generally unacceptable. When inquiring about the relation we have to the truth value of a narrative, DeVereaux and Griffin assert, therefore, that the question is not whether a narrative has truth value by itself, but rather how what believe is true is shaped by the narratives we explicitly or implicitly adhere to. One cannot help notice that the authors presuppose a strong connection between what one thinks is true in a narrative and one’s identity, equivalence debatable on several levels. However, I believe the reader will have no problem accepting this equivalence as a working hypothesis.

The main study case treated for linking narrative to identity is that of Indians living within the US. The authors focus on how stories help

shape and maintain a group's identity, no matter if those narratives come into conflict with the *status quo* established by the dominant group. In fact, the fifth chapter manages to highlight cases in which a dominant narrative is altered substantially by minority narratives, as was the case when the Washington Redskins football team was asked to change their name due to the negative connotations that the word "redskin" might have within the native-American community (p. 130). The notion of "transculturation" is introduced when describing how a group defines its identity through a struggle of acceptance or rejection of cultural elements. In DeVereaux and Griffin's view, the process leads to a rejection of both dominant narratives *and* the group's very own traditional narratives, thus resulting in a new narrative from which a group's identity stems. One example offered is the case of the narratives surrounding the Latino theatre in Los Angeles, which emerged as a new cultural arts hub, well separated from mainstream US theatre, as well as from the Hispanic traditional narratives surrounding theatre. Therefore, the examination of "transnationalism" as a "blurred line between homeland and adopted land" (p. 138) seems to be somewhat challenged by the notion of transculturation, the latter of which referring to narratives that conform neither to homeland nor to adopted land main stories.

What binds the tens of narrative examples provided throughout the book together is the authors' attempt to convey that, if the narrative framework is properly controlled, one can successfully instill or alter identities into or of groups of people. The final chapter takes citizenship as an example of narrative and its framework control throughout global history. By far the case study treated most extensively (pp. 143 et seq.) is that of Romania, where native Romanians live alongside Hungarians and other minorities such as Germans, Serbians, or Turks. Here, the authors argue, we can find one of the most obvious cases in which national history came to be subordinated to politics: archaeologists and historians gradually took up contradictory historical premises (i.e., that Romanians are descendants of the Romans *vs.* that Romanians are descendants of the Dacians) to satisfy national interest. All in all, that is one further example of how control over the framework provided in the book yields results in cultural policy.

DeVereaux and Griffin successfully manage to show how the framework they provide for reading narratives helps us gain a better insight into how and why certain cultural policies are supported or

rejected, both by authorities as well as by the common folk. Although dense in exemplifying what sometimes seem to be unrelated narrative cases, the book's application potential is well worth considering, making this piece a welcome addition to the bibliography of all scholars interested in resorting to narrative analysis in applied aesthetics and applied cultural studies.