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

The human species is the storytelling animal. Telling stories is a genuinely human activity and distinguishes us from all other animals. But not everyone can tell stories equally well; not everyone is skilled. This skill requires a practice of everyday storytelling – in the family, down at the pub, in the supermarket. Life is made up of stories, because we can only retrieve stories. Things that merely happen to us are forgotten or repressed into bad dreams; they can only become an object of memory once they are a narrative. We have a sensorium for stories. Biographical memory is stored in the form of stories. Something that has happened only becomes really good and worth remembering when it becomes a story. Something that has happened is told and retold, modulated and changed, until it becomes a good story. Only then can it remain. Some people can tell better stories than others. And some are better at telling stories. Storytelling requires a culture in which narration is cultivated. Stories are the cement that holds families, neighbourhoods and friends together.

**Stories create community**

This is why storytellers assume community-building roles – in the media too. They fulfil key interpretative functions in every collective in the world. This is why storytelling is becoming professionalized everywhere. The distance between Scheherazade, the teller of fairy tales, the village gossip and the journalist is not so great. They entertain because they offer horizons of meaning, because they capture the imagination of their audience, because they enable them to feel excited, moved or indignant. And because they offer solutions for conflicts and dilemmas, mark out criteria for right and wrong, show the consequences of actions and perhaps also just confirm judgements and attitudes which the recipient already had. And since the audience’s emotions are at stake, since they are perhaps at the centre of the communicative bond between storyteller and listener/reader/viewer, telling stories can also incite hatred, exclude and defame. Storytellers do propaganda work; they influence attitudes and people’s willingness to carry out acts. Film and television and large parts of audio-visual and print journalism are story machines. Stories around the clock, about everything and everyone. “What’s the ‘story’?”, asks the tabloid editor or the producer of the TV magazine. If a subject matter does not yield a story, it is uninteresting. Even reality television only works if the events turn into a story. Journalists and media-makers are thus professional storytellers. They get money for shaping narratives out of existing material or for making them up. But are they also storytellers in real life? Do they tell stories for the pleasure of creating connections, for the pleasure of being with others?

**Stories provide horizons of meaning**

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

All this points to a deep moral and normative substructure which is always part of narrative. I want to talk about violence. If I create my narrative as an everyday narrative, I the-
matize the conventional ways violence is regulat-
ed in the world we live in by showing the transgres-
sion of boundaries and rules (in schoolyards, in
the pub, in the family, it does not matter where at
this point). 2 things occur in the process: on the one
hand, these boundaries and rules are validated
(the story is about the restoration of everyday
peace, which ends the incursion of violence, at
least as a utopian hope), on the other hand I will
thematize exceptional situations and give them
a structural-exemplary outline – only
they can explain why the convention-
al structure of everyday life can be
tear down.

It is always about a “something”:
whether it is 2 school children fighting
over a “something”, 2 men who get
into an argument over “something” in
a pub, or a father who brutally pun-
ishes his son because of “something”:
it is the often apparently trivial reason
which marks the violent reaction as
eccessive and objectionable; but the
“something” also contains an indica-
tion of the values of the characters,
which are intelligible for the audi-
ence, also as indications of depend-
cencies and power relations in which
the characters are involved. The nar-
rative shifts attention from the purely
physical action to the deeper system
of (moral, ethical, religious, ideologi-
cal etc.) convictions of the charac-
ters and also to the social conditions
which they cannot escape. Both –
the extreme nature of the action and the
implicit hint of the reasons for escap-
ing the control of everyday behav-
ior – are strategies to illustrate rule
systems and everyday norms which
are actually hidden. The breaking of
a rule primarily achieves one thing:
it highlights the rule, it proves that
the rule exists.

Stories negotiate rules

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

Stories create possible worlds

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

Stories enable children
to behave responsibly and
to develop trust

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

Stories are (not) unchangeable

There is a whole academic discipline concerned with the forms of narration: narratology is the study of narrative. Yet storytelling is far too intimate a part of everyday and professional practice to be exhausted by the arid categories of story grammars or taxonomies of perspective. For some branches of scholarship, the text is something sacrosanct, an authentic cell of meaning. Anyone who interferes with it destroys a concept of meaning. This points back to the book of books in the Judeo-Christian tradition and to a faith in the written word, a belief in the uniqueness of that word. And yet the bible is an omnibus story, a confused book full of books, a record of a chain of narrative stretching over centuries. Texts change as they are told, and nor could it be otherwise. A story is not a given and unchangeable thing, but an invention. It makes a difference whether male heroes are turned into female heroines. If the end is put at the beginning and the plot is developed from there, the audience is given a different route into the world they will be entering while they read or watch. Trivial matters can be turned into weighty ones, the same story can be tried out from the point of view of the servant or the son. Thus Robinson’s story becomes Friday’s, Caesar’s story becomes that of the cook. What is the “story”? Some things have to be taken to extremes: the hurt knee becomes a broken leg, the skinny sister becomes a man-eating vamp, the stuffy policeman with his parking ticket becomes a malevolent sheriff with a pistol.

Stories have to be involving

The aim is always to capture the listeners, to fascinate them, to bring them closer to the characters. Nothing is as appealing as experiencing an event with the characters, as they act or are acted on. It is only then that the tale being told gains that emotional intensity which makes me follow the story, immerse myself in it. And which makes the narrative at least partly my own. I can be part of the story because I can put myself in the characters’ place.
This may also be a reason why stories are so memorable. The same applies if I want to remember things I have experienced myself: if I have developed it into a narrative, I can tell it again. And when others tell me what has happened to them, I can retell it to others (even if I may leave out or change this or that). A story goes through many tellings before it becomes good and narratable.

Stories gain their own life

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

Professional storytelling is teamwork

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

Telling stories should be part of education

Narration itself is an empirical fact, not intuitive and blind, but analytical – and it has to be so because it is based on work which can be professionalized. Professionalism could not be based solely on intuition. This is already shown by the vast amount of knowledge to be found in manuals of scriptwriting, knowledge about the subject, processes and aesthetic qualities, which scholars have only recently begun to take seriously. Script development is extremely practical in orientation, and dependent on the examples and models of the addressees, but at the same time it is/can be linked with scholarly reflection. The work with the material makes constant use of categories in narratology: ideally, storytelling should be a reflective practice for the professional.

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

Storytellers need to reflect on their work

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

REFERENCES


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