

ROBERT VELLUSIG

Time and Gestalt. On Experience, Memory, and Narration

It is a credo of literary scholarship that narration is a matter of transforming a series of events into stories in which the events not only follow one another but also follow from one another. The logical chronological organisation of events and the cognitive processing of spatiotemporal data are seen as the most basic functions of narration. This article formulates objections to such axioms and endeavours to develop categories which are capable of expressing the peculiarities of poetic narration (whether in literary or non-literary texts) more precisely. It reconstructs the logic of stories from the logic of their genesis and places the logic of their genesis on the firm foundation of the logic of consciousness and its communicative coordination.

The article proposes that formulating a theory of narration as a genuinely aesthetic, though not primarily written practice requires making the following distinctions: (1) the cognitive-theoretical distinction between two different forms of ›having a world‹: the first-person perspective of experience and the third-person perspective of knowledge; (2) the semiotic distinction between two different communicative practices: information about facts and the imaginative visualisation of an experiential reality; (3) the distinction between two different mnemonic systems: the episodic and the semantic memory; (4) the distinction between two different ways of representing the passage of time: the chronology from earlier to later and the succession of past, present, and future events.

(1) Human beings are not organic computers designed to process data, but rather entities who are aware of how their cognitive apparatus processes experience. Our sensory perceptions and physical sensations, our feelings and emotions, our needs, motivations, and aspirations are bound essentially to a subjective experiential perspective. We experience the world from a first-person perspective; we gain knowledge of the world by transcending this perspective of experience through media. Knowledge can be collected, handed down, corrected, and expanded collectively, but in our experience no one can stand in as a substitute for us.

(2) Since experience is not composed of language or organized in a structural process, it cannot be conveyed immediately. It cannot be articulated in the medium of discursive symbolism, but only in the medium of presentational symbolism. One cannot say it, but only visualise it, i. e. repeat it in memory and condition it for use by the imagination. The visualisation of the world from the perspective of the first person is something categorically different from information about facts. Information is bound to a specific point in time. It is used up when one has it. The sense of verbally instructed sequences in the imagination lies in their experiential qualities and is conserved even when one knows the story.

(3) Like phenomenal consciousness itself, memory is personal, sensually concrete, scenically immediate, and procedural. One can know all kinds of things about one's life (e. g. when one was born) without being able to actually remember them, and one can know all kinds of things about past events without having actually experienced them. Contrary to context-free world knowledge and knowledge about past events, memory (the ›episodic memory‹) is a form in which events are re-experienced each time anew.

(4) The act of differentiating between that which happened earlier and that which happened later is a category of knowledge; it is unchangeable and marks a chronology. The act of differentiating between past, present, and future events is bound to a ›wandering focal point‹ with changeable time horizons: present changes to past, future to present. This differentiation is a category of experience in time; it marks a process of consciousness.

On the basis of these three distinctions I attempt to demonstrate that narration finds its mimetic point of reference in experience and that experience gains a complex temporal form in the mode of recollective visualisation. Experiencing and remembering are the tools of consciousness we use to construct stories when we narrate. Stories are that which is left over when the act of narration is complete and can be narrated again and continued. They emerge when we remember a sequence of events we experienced at a given point and visualise this procedural experiential reality for an attentive consciousness. Their beginning is the beginning of an end; their end is the end of a beginning; their middle a middle which follows this beginning and leads to that end. Narration is the verbal (or in a broader sense media based) cultural technique which gives a gestalt to individual human life and experience in all of its variations and facets. Poetic stories open the doors to our personal world.

Next, I endeavour to concretize these assumptions – the personal and temporal quality of stories – using the example of two texts: one on the intelligent behaviour of the sphecoid wasp and one including a recipe for turkey with whisky. The story of the wasp, which is equipped with genetically programmed behavioural patterns but which cannot comport itself according to these patterns because it lives purely in the present, shows that narration is not possible without a certain degree of ›personalness‹. (I use this example to discuss the idea of innate plots formulated by Karl Eibl.) The story of the chef who gets drunk on whisky while preparing ›turkey with whisky‹ shows how knowledge about the logical coherence of an event becomes the experience of a temporal process. The text demonstrates what it means to enter into an imagination process structured as form. The reader of the text involuntarily becomes the medium of personified performance.

Käte Hamburger defined the mimetic and imaginative quality of literary fiction as the visualisation of personal action and interaction. At the end of my article I take up this notion and attempt to illustrate that poetic visualisation and the psychological objectification of sequences of events – narration and explanation – are two

complementary phenomena with their own specific terms of validity. This may be explained through concepts from the psychology of perception: the consequent differentiation between what one can know about the world with reason and how one experiences the world – notwithstanding this knowledge – is the result of a process of cultural differentiation. This story is a media story. Thus, while it is true that a theory of narration needs to begin with the elementary forms of oral narration, it should end up as a theory of narrative writing.

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