

Sebastian M. Herrmann,  
Katja Kanzler,  
Stefan Schubert [eds.]

# BEYOND NARRATIVE

Exploring Narrative Liminality  
and Its Cultural Work

[transcript] Culture & Theory

Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, Stefan Schubert (eds.)  
Beyond Narrative

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## **Beyond Narrative**

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**[transcript]**

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## Acknowledgments

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This book has its origins in 2015, when the three of us and our colleague Frank Usbeck, having just finished a project on the poetics and politics of narrative, became increasingly interested in thinking and theorizing beyond this seemingly ubiquitous form. Having focused so much on the well-established category of narrative, we now wanted to divert our attention to artifacts and formations that reached beyond, challenged, or ‘hybridized’ narrativity. Eventually, these efforts resulted in an academic network on “Narrative Liminality and/in the Formation of American Modernities” ([www.narrative-liminality.de](http://www.narrative-liminality.de)), which ran from 2017 to 2021 and was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

During these years, the members of the network met in four different workshops, collaborated on an online platform, and engaged with other scholars in an international conference at Leipzig University, Germany, in October 2019. Shortly thereafter, the Corona pandemic precluded further in-person meetings, but the results of the discussions and collaborations among participants in the network are now collected in the present volume. All ten members have contributed articles to this book, along with a number of other scholars who interacted with the “Narrative Liminality” network as speakers in workshops or presenters during the 2019 conference. We want to thank all of them for the immense energy and enthusiasm they brought to the network, the insightful theoretical and conceptual discussions, and the productive spirit of collaboration that was with us during these years. Together, we pushed for new ways of conceptualizing what is beyond narrative and how one can study it. We also want to thank those colleagues who shared their expertise and insights with us along the way but who could not contribute to this book, among them Jeremy Douglass and Jared Gardner. While considerable work of employing and refining our concept of narrative liminality remains to be done, the network’s collective effort laid important groundwork for thinking about narrative and other symbolic forms without reifying the boundaries between these forms.

We are particularly happy that the results of these years of thinking about the borderlands of narrativity can be presented in open-access form, and we want to thank the DFG as well as Leipzig University’s Open Access Publication Fund for



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*Leipzig, August 2021*

*Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, and Stefan Schubert*

# Borderlands of Narrativity

## Towards a Study of Narrative Liminality and Its Cultural Work

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Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, Stefan Schubert (Leipzig University)

Already two decades ago, writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Peter Brooks forcefully declared the narrative turn to be over. “The notion,” he stated, “that narrative is part of a universal cognitive tool kit, which seemed in the mid-60’s a radical discovery, is now one of the banalities of postmodernism.” Brooks, of course, was in no way alone in his assessment. Beginning at around the end of the twentieth century, a steady stream of scholarship had begun to ritually diagnose the demise of narrative as a useful analytic category, to issue calls “[a]gainst [n]arrativity” (Strawson) or “[a]gainst [n]arrative” and against the “broad, overly eager uses” of the concept (Tammi 19), and to more generally lament the “*narrative fatigue* due to overkill” in previous decades (Freeman 22; emphasis in the original). Indeed, so multiple were these calls to be done with narrative, they themselves now constitute an entire subset in the ongoing scholarship on narrative. If all these assessments were right, if, by the end of the twentieth century, the concept of narrative was dead after all, the unending stream of obituaries certainly was evidence of a lively afterlife.

Far from simply joining this chorus, and far from simply insisting that these repeated proclamations of the death of narrative signal the continuing impact of the concept, this book calls for an investigation of what we call the ‘borderlands of narrativity’—the complex and culturally productive area where the symbolic form of narrative meets other symbolic logics. Often, we contend, it is not simply the narrative form that becomes culturally salient or politically meaningful, and often the most compelling insights of cultural and textual study are not to be found by simply identifying the presence of narrative logics in one artifact or another. Rather, it is the narrative form’s ability to interface with other symbolic logics, along with the complex formal negotiations that take place in these processes of interfacing, that determines much of narrative’s cultural and political salience—an aspect that has so far been largely overlooked. What is needed, then, is not simply more study of narrative, or less; or a more intensive study of other discursive logics in narrative’s

stead. What is needed is the investigation of the often fuzzy, complex borderlands the narrative form shares with other forms of discourse.

We begin this volume with Brooks's refutation of narrative not only because he illustrates the two major lines of attack that have been lobbed against narrative—that the concept was overexpanded and overused and that an interest in narrative had displaced the study of other formal logics—but because he also provides an opportunity to more tangibly show what we mean by a study of narrative liminality. Both complaints about narrative, demonstrated amply in Brooks's essay, are based in the sense of having to push back against previous decades' "narrative excess" (Freeman 23). As Brooks observes with a crucial choice of verb, narrative "appears to have *colonized* large realms of discourse, both popular and academic" (our emphasis), and in this sense the concept's success presents a problem onto itself. In academia, this ready "travelling" of the concept has led to a proliferation of "narrative turns" across a broad range of vastly different disciplines (Hyvärinen et al.; Hyvärinen), but the price for such wide, "promiscuous" (Brooks) appeal has been a bloating of the term: In many cases, and in many disciplines, an attention to narrative has come to mean little more than an awareness for the "narrative construction of reality," as Jerome Bruner's felicitous and widely resonant phrasing has it. 'Narrative,' in other words, has ended up meaning little more than 'social construction.' At its core, this is the once "radical discovery" of the 1960s that, in Brooks's eyes, has grown banal; and the term's success has been largely due to its ability to express social constructionism in particularly accessible ways.

This is true in narrative's transdisciplinary appeals, but it is even more acutely the case in the more "popular" "realms of discourse" Brooks addresses: The majority of his essay is devoted to showcasing how US society—and US politics in particular—has become estranged from reality thanks to the power of narrative. Ronald Reagan, he thus elaborates, was "the first U.S. president to govern largely by anecdote"; Bill Clinton was impeached by the Starr Report, the main chapter of which was labeled not an investigation but a "Narrative"; and George W. Bush brandished "stories" whenever he tried to sell the American people on either his cabinet picks or his tax cut policies. In a society and in a cultural moment—postmodernity—that is so fully and so self-reflexively aware of the power of narrative, there is no need to keep rediscovering the importance of narrative, Brooks asserts. The freshness of this discovery has worn off in the same way that postmodernism has exhausted itself, and in this sense, Brooks's, like other calls for an end of the study of narrative, speaks of a need for conceptual innovation at least as much as it speaks of a broader cultural desire, poignantly palpable at the end of twentieth century, to usher in a new period and to finally be done with (late) postmodernity (cf. also Herrmann et al.).

The second line of attack, similarly present in Brooks's essay, is more narrowly formal. As he points out, the 'colonization' of public discourse by narrative has

decimated and displaced a more 'indigenous' discursive presence both in contemporary culture and in academia, and it has thus come at the cost of "other forms of discourse" that are organized by other formal principles. In the public realm, he explains, narrative has come "to trump statistics" and "compilations of fact," and it has similarly pushed aside a "more traditional rhetoric of American politics, concocted of moral and sentimental abstractions." This is problematic because these other discursive strategies, he claims, would point to "a different truth" than the one pushed by these narratively invested politicians, Bush and Reagan. Similarly, he asserts, the Starr Report on Clinton's sexual behavior relied on narrative to advance its own agenda. Had it been less invested in doing so, had it been more interested in truth than in politics, it would have presented its findings "as a collage of witnesses' reports and legal argumentation" and thus in "a more cubist approach," which would have allowed readers to interact with the information more freely and more critically. And even academic discourse, he points out, once "governed by logic, syllogism, or mathematical formula" has become all the poorer for dismissing these earlier, endemic discursive logics in favor of narrative.

Notably, Brooks's call to reclaim—and (re)focus academic attention on—formal discursive logics other than narrative resonates with other debates lively at the time: The formation of the field of game studies, for example, was accompanied by animated debates over how the symbolic logics of play were fundamentally different from those of narrative, debates that explicitly pushed back against the perceived "colonisations" of the emerging field by narratologists, calling this a kind of "theoretical imperialism" (Eskelinen, "Towards"; Aarseth, *Cybertext* 16; cf. also Eskelinen, "Gaming Situation"; Aarseth, "Genre Trouble"; Pearce). Just as these debates binarily pitted so-called ludologists against narratologists (cf. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan), they also set up narrative and play as irreconcilably different categories, with some positions alleging that trying, for instance, to frame video games as (partly) narrative makes it epistemologically impossible to properly understand how the medium operates. Similarly, discussions of spectacle and its place especially in contemporary cinema, building on work by scholars like Laura Mulvey and Tom Gunning, turned on and drove home the observation that spectacle is best understood as disrupting, suspending, or even displacing narrative from a cinematic 'text.' Redeeming spectacle, in these debates, typically means asserting—against a perceived general trend—that even the nonnarrative can have its value (Bukatman; Jenkins; King). While much of the scholarship thus proceeds from the assumption that spectacle and narrative are two symbolic logics that are fundamentally at odds with one another, some more recent work is beginning to question precisely that, hypothesizing that there might be "no *necessary* opposition between narrative and spectacle" (Lavik 173; emphasis in the original) or asking how exactly the two are intertwined in cultural materials (cf. Lewis). A similar debate underwrote an influential discussion of "database as symbolic form" triggered by Lev Manovich around

the turn of the millennium. Building on work by Erwin Panofsky (and, ultimately, Ernst Cassirer), Manovich casts narrative and data as two fundamentally different, oppositional “symbolic forms,” two “natural enemies” competing over the “exclusive right to make meaning out of the world” (85). Despite N. Katherine Hayles’s intervention—in a special issue of *PMLA*, she insisted on imagining the relationship between data and narrative not as antagonistic but as symbiotic—Manovich’s vision of Manichean oppositionality was the more mainstream and more resonant model. It captured the general sense, informing many, and many later, debates of the relationship of narrative and data: a sense that these two forms were categorically distinct, that the constellation was, as Jesse Rosenthal put it, one of “Narrative against Data” (1), and that narrative was the form that had to be pushed back against.

Ultimately, these three debates, along with other, similar interventions, did indeed constitute a valuable counterweight against the dominance of narrative in literary and cultural studies. They are exemplary in how they attempt to limit the reach of narrative by pointing to other formal patternings of discourse, other symbolic forms, that they imagine as categorically different or incompatible with what narrative is. Such stark oppositionality, however, comes at a price. In how these interventions operate on the basis of binary either-or oppositions, they do little to illuminate the ways in which cultural artifacts often become meaningful by tapping into multiple symbolic forms at once, by traveling among, or translating between, such forms or by forcing them to overlap.

This brings us back, for one more time, to Peter Brooks’s essay in the *Chronicle*. Writing in 2001, Brooks obviously could not imagine a presidency by then-reality TV star Donald Trump. Briefly after discussing Reagan, Clinton, and Bush, however, he turns in an abrupt and almost prescient way to a discussion of reality TV, a then-new formal strategy in television that was widely perceived as being non-narrative and that was increasing its cultural presence at the time: “Meanwhile,” he writes, “we have reality TV (*Survivor*, *Temptation Island*), which producers contrast to story-form TV (*The West Wing*), sometimes with predications that the former will make the latter obsolete. But reality TV is as narrative as can be: It invites the viewer to construct it as a continuing story, a grittier, or more titillating, sitcom.” Eager to show that narrative indeed does reign supreme in turn-of-the-century US culture, Brooks here commits a telling sleight of hand: He dismisses the nonnarrative, discontinuous, spectacular, ludic, collage-like qualities of reality TV, its being different from “story-form TV,” by claiming that viewers will turn this nonnarrative material into “a continuing story.” Put in the terms of narrative liminality, he casts what we would call a moment of potential or latent narrativity, i.e., an arguably nonnarrative artifact’s ability to be turned into a story, as being an instance of narrative itself.

Indeed, on closer inspection, most of Brooks's examples of narrative's presumed dominance in the contemporary moment are somewhat dubious along the same lines, suggesting that he, too, falls prey to the very overexpansion of the concept of narrative he laments: The Starr Report, despite its main chapter indeed conspicuously being labeled "Narrative," is peppered with footnotes and references, constituting a veritable database of factual information that is merely woven together by the narrative thread of the main text and that invites readings other than the one presented—a textual quality Brooks acknowledges but fails to discuss any further. Similarly, many of the 'narratives' presented by George W. Bush, while referred to as a "story" by the president, are, as Brooks portrays them, not full-fledged narratives but merely archetypal characters, "an elderly citizen from Florida forced to sell her home to pay for prescription drugs" or "a crime victim mugged by liberal courts." They "*represent* exemplary narratives" (our emphasis), they evoke stories, but they are not, strictly speaking, stories themselves. Casting them, as Brooks does, as narratives overlooks those formal qualities that makes them politically salient—qualities such as their "spreadability" (Jenkins et al.), which stem precisely from their atrophied narrativity. Finally, as Brooks also acknowledges, the power of Reagan's storytelling resided not in the narrative but in the anecdotal quality of the former actor's tellings. As mere anecdotes, these short, fragmented, barely narrative pieces form the direct opposite of the *grands récits* typically credited with narrative power. In short, the examples Brooks offers of an alleged dominance of the symbolic form of narrative turn out to be examples of much more complex symbolic constellations: In each instance, the social meaning and political power of these 'texts' does not rest on them being narrative. It also does not rest on them simply corresponding to some other symbolic form. It rests instead on the translations between different symbolic forms that these texts invite and partake in.

What is needed, then—twenty years into the ongoing declarations of the demise of narrative and into the declaration that other forms of discourse required serious study—are investigations not into either this one form, narrative, or its presumed 'enemies' or 'others,' but into how different symbolic forms overlap and interact in cultural artifacts or practices: into how their respective formal territories, mechanisms, and affordances—to pick up Caroline Levine's immensely stimulating development of the term for formal(ist) analysis—mix and blur, and into how these gray zones of mixing of different symbolic forms more often than not constitute the rich soil from which social and cultural salience (and political power) springs. It is the study of these multiple liminalities between symbolic forms that we call for when we call for an investigation of narrative liminality. There is as of yet no set methodology for the study of narrative liminality, and so, in lieu of such a set methodology, we suggest the following ten theses:

## Ten Theses on Narrative Liminality

1. The study of narratives has greatly enriched scholarship across the humanities, not least by drawing attention to the ways in which the epistemological, societal, and political effects of texts or practices are tied to their formal qualities. Yet narrative, as a conceptual category, risks obfuscating rather than illuminating cultural dynamics when it is operated as an unbounded category. Not everything is narrative, and narrative is not everything.
2. In this spirit, narrative can be conceptualized as a symbolic form that circulates in culture alongside other symbolic forms such as data(base), play, spectacle, ritual, etc. Each of these symbolic forms comes with its own, discrete principles of patterning experience and knowledge. Each carries its own aesthetic, epistemological, affective, and political implications. Each comes with its own set of affordances.
3. Like most borders, the boundaries between symbolic forms are porous and permeable. They allow for, even invite, crossings and transgressions, traffic and exchange, policing and challenge. Symbolic forms are thus bounded by borderlands, liminal zones that host mixings, overlaps, and encounters of various kinds.
4. Cultural artifacts and practices regularly traverse the boundaries between different symbolic forms. The resulting encounters can develop different dynamics, which always need to be examined in detail—dynamics, for instance, of conflict, symbiosis, intersection, disruption, dialectics, etc.
5. Narrative holds a privileged position among symbolic forms. In part, this may owe to the central role it plays in Western imaginaries and epistemologies, in part to the canonization of narrative as a concept in the humanities that has rendered it more visible than other symbolic forms. The borderlands around narrative thus enjoy a particular prominence and—potentially—cultural salience. While inquiry into forms and instances of narrative liminality may thus be particularly urgent, it should serve as an invitation to direct more sustained attention to the borderlands and the traffic between other symbolic forms, for instance between data and play.
6. Cultural artifacts and practices at the borderlands of symbolic forms combine and hybridize the principles and affordances of these forms. For example, a narratively liminal artifact like a video game may combine the interactivity of play with the world-making and causation afforded by narrative. For such lim-

inal artifacts, allegiances to different symbolic forms like play and narrative are a matter of scale rather than of either-or.

7. Focusing on narrative liminality, and thus focusing on the scalar, gradable nature of a symbolic form's properties, works against strong disciplinary desires to clearly and unambiguously define symbolic forms. In particular, focusing on narrative liminality works against disciplinary efforts to define what narrative 'is' or 'is not,' embracing a gradable quality instead, best captured by the concept of 'narrativity.' Similar gradable terms exist or need to be employed for other symbolic forms.
8. In liminal artifacts and practices, the principles and affordances of different symbolic forms intersect and organize each other in always specific, situated ways. These intersections are best described in terms of relationships between the manifest and the latent, the explicit and the implicit, the present and the tacit, or similar concepts that highlight the gradable and interdependent relationships at stake.
9. Different symbolic forms serve distinct cultural functions, inhabit distinct cultural locations, and are differently accessible to different social actors. They are thus socially embedded and implicated in structures of power; they and their uses are both subject to historical change and can become instruments of historical change, each of them in specific ways. Processes of historical change—challenges to, conflicts over, or transformations of the social, political, and cultural structures in which symbolic forms circulate—often animate the borderlands between symbolic forms and are, in turn, often energized by cultural artifacts and practices that emanate from there. Liminal artifacts seem to possess unique potentials in situations where the multiple boundaries that organize the social and cultural world are set, or are to be set, in motion.
10. When artifacts and practices invest in solidifying and absolutizing the boundaries between symbolic forms, in advancing notions of symbolic form-purity and of binarisms between them, this also does cultural work. One field where this kind of boundary work can be prominently observed is academia. There, it is often bound up with institutional politics of self-legitimization and disciplinary territoriality. Engaging the borderlands between symbolic forms and narrative liminality thus also demands academic self-reflection.



## Articles in This Collection

The sixteen articles collected in this book examine the borderlands of narrativity. Discussing literature, popular culture, digital technology, historical artifacts, and other kinds of texts from a time span of close to two hundred years, they function as case studies exemplifying the productivity of the conceptual framework sketched above, with some articles highlighting formalistic, conceptual, or theoretical questions and others centering on cultural and historical contextualizations. In curating these contributions, we have decided against clustering them into subsets or chapters so as not to imply that their inquiries could be reduced to just one central idea. Instead, we understand all of the sixteen articles' case studies as entering into a dialog with each other. Together, they speak to the rich, multifaceted scholarly promise of probing the borderlands of narrativity.

Maurice S. Lee opens our collection with an article on "Numbers, Literature, Aesthetics," exploring the role that numbers, quantification, and data play in literature. His article is positioned against a widespread skepticism around considering the role of numbers and other data in aesthetic terms, and he instead argues that numbers can possess affective and narrative power as well. The hesitation of studying numbers in literature can also be seen as a by-product of the overreach of narrative, which, as Lee points out, adds to a perceived binary between the literary and the informational. While data and literature today are most visibly being discussed in the digital humanities, Lee's article traces the history of quantification in literature by pointing to significant 'numerical' moments in nineteenth-century texts. He turns to a genre that is particularly invested in exploring the liminal spaces between numbers and narrative, the British and American adventure novels of the long nineteenth century, most prominently Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. His rereading of the adventure novel as a numbers-oriented genre focuses on how such liminal moments are characterized not only by antagonism but also by negotiation and collaboration. Lee's article thus works both as a specific intervention into our thinking about the literature and culture of the nineteenth century and as a historical contextualization of the borderlands of data and narrative.

James Dorson adds to this investigation of the nexus of data, narrative, and literature, yet he moves historically toward the end of the nineteenth century in his contribution "The Data of Life and the Life of Data: Epistemological and Aesthetic Liminality at the Fin de Siècle." Looking at both scientific writings (e.g., by Charles Darwin and Claude Bernard) and literary works (including by H. G. Wells and Frank Norris), he scrutinizes moments and instances in these texts in which data takes on 'a life of its own,' becoming vital. Dorson places this inquiry against the backdrop of contemporary humanities scholarship, which is still wary of the place of data within literary studies, and he argues against an opposition that sees data as 'dis-

enchanting' and narrative (or art more generally) as 'unsettling.' Instead, he moves to instances of liminality between these forms, for example in moments that produce a 'data sublime' through the spectacular complexity and immensity of evoking data configurations. The article's close analyses, in conjunction with its conceptual contextualization, rethink the relationship of data and narrative in terms of a dialectical interdependence rather than a strict opposition, facilitating an exploration of the liminal areas between the two forms that emerge in texts of the fin de siècle.

Regina Schober's article "The Potentialities of Data: Self-Tracking as Liminal Narrative" moves such inquiries into the contemporary moment, arguing to understand practices of self-tracking (for instance by measuring biometric data in apps) as forms of life writing that rely on both data and narrative to constitute a meaningful practice. While previous scholarship has already considered processes of quantifying the self as part of the logics of data capitalism and self-optimization, Schober highlights that the datafication of the self is intricately connected to narrative. Throughout her contribution, her focus lies on tracing the relationship between these two symbolic forms, which she considers one of both conflict and complementary harmony. In understanding self-tracking as a mediated externalization of the self, she highlights how the practice relies on the visualization of data, creating data maps that, in turn, brim with narrative potentiality. On top of these theoretical and conceptual concerns, Schober's article contextualizes the intersections of data and narrative in self-tracking as a cultural question, interrogating what kind of knowledge self-tracking produces and how these twenty-first-century constructions of identity are interwoven with issues of agency and privilege.

Such cultural concerns are also at the center of Sebastian M. Herrmann's article "Unnecessary Complications? The Interplay of Symbolic Forms in John Carroll Power's 'Diagram and Statistical Record of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence.'" Herrmann looks at one particular artifact, a broadsheet from 1858 that uses a line-graph visualization to display biographical data about the signers of the Declaration of Independence, in order to probe into the cultural work that this particular way of curating information does. By closely analyzing the mechanics of the diagram, he points out how it has only limited value as a reference work or as a didactic text, combining seemingly arbitrary pieces of information with each other and making it more difficult to actually access that information. These 'unnecessary complications,' as Herrmann calls them, can be made sense of historically, however, when framed within the middle of the nineteenth century's intense interest in notions of 'fact' and 'data.' In Herrmann's reading, the diagram can best be understood as merging three distinct symbolic forms—data, narrative, and play. It thus has to be read via its affordances, which go beyond merely displaying information and instead also invite playful tracing and interactive exploring, among others. Studying how this artifact works within the borderlands of narrative, play,

and data thus evidences nineteenth-century American culture's fascination with the mingling of symbolic forms and with experimenting with more 'democratic' forms of representation.

The affordances of the same three symbolic forms can overlap in very different textual and medial artifacts, as becomes evident in Sören Schoppmeier's contribution "Narrative Liminality, Ambient Operations, and the Database Western in Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* Videogames." Schoppmeier also understands his primary text as an interaction between database, narrative, and play, yet on the surface, the contemporary video games that he examines look very different, of course, from nineteenth-century texts. Schoppmeier argues to consider the *Red Dead Redemption* games as constituting a new kind of genre, the 'database Western,' which he specifically investigates by looking at what he calls its 'ambient operations,' events that happen around the player in the game world without constituting the center of attention. The video games in this franchise are full of such events, and for Schoppmeier, they work according to a database logic: They are selected to happen seemingly at random, which then affords interaction by the player and can potentially entail narrative significance. Yet while the different forms intersect in these 'ambient' events, in Schoppmeier's analysis, the database dominates the other forms. Overall, his article contextualizes these design choices within the Western genre that *Red Dead Redemption* narratively evokes, reading the interaction between these different symbolic forms for its politics, which Schoppmeier argues sever the games' genre from history.

The way in which different symbolic forms can both invigorate and impede each other is also a central concern in Sarah J. Link's contribution "Detecting Liminality: The List and Symbolic Form," in which she positions the list as a form potentially characterized equally by narrative, database, and play. She traces the different ways in which we encounter lists in fiction in the genre of the detective novel, where they can appear diegetically (e.g., as an element in the story), textually (in terms of how the narrative discourse presents the story to readers), and paratextually (in the table of contents or in a score sheet). By reading Agatha Christie's fiction for its use of lists, the article establishes how they function as representations of consciousness and processes of rationalization without the mediation that is typical of narrativity, instead aligning them more closely between the symbolic forms of narrative and database. She adds to this an investigation of Dennis Wheatley's *Murder Dossier* novels, which further increase the potential for interactivity inherent in detective fiction by inviting their readers to play with the works' own database structure. Taken together, Link's article points out how lists' adaptive potential lies in the contact zones of different symbolic forms, which the texts she examines make use of both for reasons of narrative innovation and experimentation and as a specific way of meaning-making that goes beyond what a 'purely' narrative form can express.

Stefan Schubert's contribution "'To Live Your Life Again, Turn to Page 1': Affordances of Narrative and Play in Neil Patrick Harris's *Choose Your Own Autobiography*" is interested in another phenomenon of narrative innovation, discussing a form of life writing that engages with both narrative and play. He frames the autobiography by actor and comedian Neil Patrick Harris as part of a larger pop-cultural trend towards fusing narrative with play, which he dubs 'ludic textuality.' Harris's text experiments with established ways of how we tell life stories by presenting his autobiography similarly to a choose-your-own-adventure story. Affordances take center stage in Schubert's argument, which focuses on how the text's ludonarrative mechanics afford not just playful nonlinearity and interactivity but also narrative closure, finality, and linearity—at times symbiotically, at times by impeding each other. These poetics also come with their own particular politics, enabling Harris to textually render identity as fragmented and multiple while also complicating the book's viability as an autobiography. Ultimately, Schubert's contribution highlights how the mingling of different symbolic forms allows the book to metatextually explore its own mechanics, a dynamic that might hold true for other borderlands of narrativity as well.

Sascha Pöhlmann investigates the limits of narrative in the works of an author known for experimenting with the very mediality of the novel in his contribution "Multimodality as a Limit of Narrative in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*." On a theoretical level, Pöhlmann argues against the widespread notion that multimodality, understood as the use of more than one semiotic mode to convey meaning, is to be considered a narrative strategy, instead making a case for contextualizing it as an instance of narrative liminality. While his arguments apply to all of Danielewski's works to some extent, he pursues his analysis through a close reading of the pentalogy *The Familiar*, investigating the books' manifold visual elements, material aspects, and the multitude of styles used, including software code and free indirect discourse. This consideration of the books' visual aesthetics and their use of unconventional narrative perspectives allows him to argue how the series' textual, visual, and material elements trouble and transgress the boundary between narrative and nonnarrative elements without either reinforcing or disintegrating that border. In a larger sense, Pöhlmann's article demonstrates how such a reframing of multimodality as a formation of narrative liminality opens up new perspectives on the work of a writer like Danielewski and on its position within literary traditions.

Gesine Wegner's contribution "The Poetics and Politics of Staring: Spectacle and Disability in Chris Ware's *Building Stories*" considers the multimodal medium of comics, and her analysis of *Building Stories* explores the role that spectacle plays in Ware's work. Her framing intervenes in existing scholarship of Ware's oeuvre, which has highlighted the importance that (narrative) closure and ludic elements in his comics play, by instead analyzing how spectacle disrupts the narrative process of *Building Stories* but also provides orientation for readers in navigating the

multimodal text. Wegner traces this reciprocal relationship between narrative and spectacle in the overall format of *Building Stories*, which expands on the medium's common affordances, and in the individual pieces, or perhaps stories, that the novel builds on. She complements this consideration of *Building Stories'* poetics with an investigation of the politics that spectacle enables in the text: The book invites its readers to stare, a practice primarily targeted at disabled bodies. Overall, the article points out how the interplay of spectacle and narrative activates particular modes of meaning-making, thus extending concepts such as the idea of visual pleasure from the medium of film to comics and demonstrating how this type of meaning-making is more dependent on symbolic form than it is on medium.

Katja Kanzler also examines the symbolic form of spectacle, shifting attention, however, to the medium of television in her article "No Show Dissed Quite Like This One': Invective at the Borderlands of Narrative and Spectacle in *Veep*." Building on scholarship of spectacle and spectacularity, especially from film studies, she extends the concept's usual understanding of visual spectacle to also include verbal ones. This allows her to demonstrate that the ubiquitous and incessant use of all manner of insults and degradation in the political satire/comedy *Veep* can best be conceptualized as spectacular, not as narrative, especially due to its excessiveness and its focus on affective stimulation. In a second step, however, the article argues that the proliferation of invectives in the show often operates in the borderlands of narrative and spectacle, for instance when these insults contribute to the protagonists' characterization and when they tap into latent metanarratives that become reinvigorated through the spectacularity of verbal abuse. In turn, this dynamic complicates how the show's audience is interpellated and affectively positioned towards the frequency and intensity of *Veep's* invectives. Next to carefully tracing elements of the two symbolic forms in the show and contextualizing them within a politicized invective culture, Kanzler's contribution thus also introduces a theorization of the relationship between narrative and spectacle that transcends previous binaristic paradigms.

In her article "Repetition, Rhythm, and Recital: Lyrical Strategies and the Ritualistic in Twenty-First-Century US 'We' Narratives," Michaela Beck examines a trend in contemporary literature by detecting a proliferation of 'we' narratives in a number of recent novels and short stories. In Beck's understanding, fictional works such as *Then We Came to the End* and *Our Hearts Will Burn Us Down*, which are narrated by a collective referred to as 'we,' feature elements that traditionally have not been assumed under the logic of narrative. In particular, she focuses on repetition and rhythm as two such characteristics that become prominent in 'we' narratives. To understand the function of repetitive and rhythmic elements, she turns to the exchanges and interdependencies between narrative, lyric, and ritual. By analyzing rhythmic and repetitive elements in TaraShea Nesbit's novel *The Wives of Los Alamos*, she highlights how these three symbolic forms are combined in moments of both

cooperation and conflict. In a final step, the article connects these formal concerns to the cultural work that this interweaving of different symbolic forms does, which Beck pinpoints to concerns about the stability of collective identity and belonging in twenty-first-century America.

Katharina Gerund's article "Home Front Autobiographies of the 'War on Terror': Narrative Liminality, Tacit Knowledge, and Affective Labor" continues this interest in contemporary literature, investigating the autobiographical works written by (predominantly female) military spouses. In Gerund's reading, texts such as Jenn Carpenter's *One Army Wife's Tale*, Lily Burana's *I Love a Man in Uniform: A Memoir of Love, War, and Other Battles*, and Taya Kyle's *American Wife: Love, War, Faith, and Renewal* grapple with the unrepresentability of the experience of war by building on and activating readers' emotional knowledge about family and love. It is especially in how these autobiographies rely on different forms of tacit knowledge (such as 'emotional understanding' or 'bodily knowing') that Gerund reads them as expanding on the narrative form, finding ways to activate this extra-narrative knowledge in order to fuel the texts' own cultural work—which then, again, is rendered narratively as well. The article locates this contradictory and ambiguous cultural work in how the books promote US warfare, display its adverse effects on the home front, and empower military spouses in finding ways to make their stories work and resonate both narratively and affectively.

Moving away slightly from this attention to novels, Christina Meyer explores iconic characters of consumer culture in her contribution "Form and/in Modernity: The Brownies, a Case Study." Her focus is on a set of fictional characters called the Brownies, first featured in serialized illustrated stories found in the children's magazine *St. Nicholas* in 1883. From there, the figures soon proliferated in a variety of other media forms and consumer items. Meyer argues that this portability of the Brownies can be explained through an analysis of their form, with 'form' understood as referring to both the Brownies' physical appearance and the material forms that they circulated in. Crucially, in her reading, it is narrative depletion that mobilizes these characters, enabling them to be adapted and to reemerge in different media and contexts. The lack of certain narrative features usually associated with characters in a story accentuates their iconic properties and the nonnarrative ways in which they can be interacted with. Taking a step back, Meyer contextualizes the need for and cultural work of this mobility within the burgeoning consumer culture of the time and the capitalist mechanics within which it operated.

A related interest in narrative depletion and iconicity also animates Sebastian Domsch's argument in his contribution "Embodying Narrative, Staging Icons: The Liminal Space of Embodied Performance." He examines two historically and culturally very different practices, mystery plays and cosplay. In his reading, both show a comparable affinity for depleting the narrativity that governs them to a considerable extent and embracing other symbolic forms for meaning-making, most

prominently play, spectacle, performance, and ritual. Mystery plays are biblical dramas that were prominent in Europe between the thirteenth and sixteenth century and constituted that period's only form of dramatic entertainment. Cosplay, on the other hand, is a contemporary fan practice of dressing up and performing in a visually recognizable way like characters from popular entertainment franchises. Domsch scrutinizes the similarities between these performative practices for their narrative and nonnarrative dynamics. By considering storyworlds, iconicity, performance, and embodiment, his article not only examines the poetics and politics of these practices but also provides a theoretical and conceptual framework for studying such diminished narrativity. The article thus demonstrates how these performance practices build on narrative material but operate by reducing the narrativity of their source material in order to foreground the iconic, the spectacular, and the ritualistic.

Leon Gurevitch's article "Liminal Labor: Narrating Authorship, the VFX Career, and Protest Through 'Social-Actor-Networks'" considers the role of narrativity and visuality in the labor market of the visual effects industry. It focuses in particular on so-called green screen protests from 2013, during which people working in the VFX industry used green tiles for their social media profiles, drawing attention to how many contemporary Hollywood films would look like without visual effects and without the labor from the industry they depend on. Gurevitch considers how these images and other social media strategies, such as tagged credits lists posted on Facebook, use the visual form to evoke narrative associations and to thus forge connections through their shared seriality to other stories of networked and decentralized labor. As the article outlines, the green screen protests can serve as a case study in how protest, and with it a sense of belonging, community, and authorship, can be mobilized beyond more traditional narrative means by forming identities around visuality rather than narrativity. Gurevitch considers these tendencies against their explicitly political background and takes a step back to connect this particular example of digital protest to more recent forms of a growing culture of networked activism.

We conclude this collection with an article by Caroline Levine, who, fittingly, discusses "Endings and Sustainability." Her contribution proceeds from the common assumption that endings provide narrative closure, because of which many scholars consider (especially happy) endings to serve politically conservative functions. However, Levine's line of argument reconsiders the ending as a form that affords transition rather than closure, as a shift into predicable stability, a reconsideration that she traces in the endings of fictional works such as *Barchester Towers*, *Esther Waters*, and *Oliver Twist*. Her article connects this interest in the affordances of endings with the contemporary political moment, in which she detects a need for stability, security, and predictability provided by (happy) endings in the context of the climate crisis, understanding such endings as thresholds to sustainability.

To illustrate this point, Levine reads Matthew Desmond's nonfiction book *Evicted* as interweaving data on the history of housing policy with individualized narratives about a number of precarious characters, a liminality that also characterizes the book's ending and that it uses to imagine policy solutions—rather than narratively individualized ones—for large-scale structural change. The way in which these 'collective happy endings' tap into the gray area between narratability and the nonnarrative beyond turns them into exactly the kind of form, Levine argues, that is politically needed in the current moment.

In a similar way to Levine's cautioning about how to understand endings, neither this introduction nor this overall collection can or should provide narrative closure. It rather wants to function as a point of transition and of departure: This book aims to open up a conversation about the 'beyond' of narrative, about the myriad constellations in which narrativity interlaces with, rubs against, or morphs into the principles of other symbolic forms—data, play, spectacle, ritual, and others. With the notion of narrative liminality, which this book's contributions operationalize in such inspiringly diverse ways, we hope to offer a conceptual platform that brings into focus the borderlands of narrative and that provides a language to discuss the representational and epistemological dynamics that can be observed there, as well as the cultural work they enable.

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# Numbers, Literature, Aesthetics

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## **Abstract:**

*I presented this talk as a keynote address at the “Beyond Narrative: Literature, Culture, and the Borderlands of Narrativity” conference held in Leipzig in October of 2019. One thrust of the paper was that quantitative and aesthetic discourses are not as opposed as we tend to think—that numbers can possess the kind of dramatic, affective, narrative power often taken to be uniquely literary. My paper built toward a reading of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, focusing on the enchanting, wonderful merging of quantitative and aesthetic domains. Five months later, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself obsessively processing data with very different emotions: fear, anger, regret, and the anguish of uncertainty. These, too, may seem the stuff of literature, but just as we impose narratives on numbers, numbers impose meanings on us.*

No one knows for sure why Roberto Bolaño titled his posthumously published 2004 novel 2666. Bolaño’s earlier novel, *Amulet* (1999), refers to the year 2666, and by some accounts, the biblical story of Exodus takes place 2666 years after God created the world (Echevarría 897; Hitchings). But it may be that the exact figure of Bolaño’s title is less important than his gesture of using a number—a gesture that, like much of the first section of the book, feels vaguely ironic and threatening. 2666 begins with “The Part About the Critics,” which features four literary scholars obsessed with a reclusive German author who provides tenuous order to their otherwise purposeless lives. In one scene that promises to be particularly revealing, Manuel Espinoza and Jean-Claude Pelletier talk on the phone about the failed marriage of Liz Norton, their fellow scholar and mutual lover:

The first twenty minutes were tragic in tone, with the word *fate* used ten times and the word *friendship* twenty-four times. Liz Norton’s name was spoken fifty times, nine of them in vain. The word *Paris* was said seven times, *Madrid*, eight. The word *love* was spoken twice, once by each man. The word *horror* was spoken six times and the word *happiness* once (by Espinoza). The word *solution* was said twelve times. The word *solipsism* seven times. The word *euphemism* ten times. The word *category*, in the singular and the plural, nine times. (40-41; emphasis in the original)

And so on for other words: “*structuralism*” (1 time); “*American literature*” (3 times); “*dinner*,” “*eating*,” “*breakfast*,” and “*sandwich*” (19 times total); “*eyes*,” “*hands*,” and “*hair*” (14 times). The joke is that numbers cannot represent the kind of complex unfoldings of interiority that one might expect from a novel. The threat, heightened by the impotence of the literature professors, is that the passage qua statistical report actually charts the characters’ thoughts and feelings well enough to convey meaning and invite interpretation. In a novel that contains numerous catalogues and lists—including the chilling, numbing details of over one hundred police reports on murdered women—Bolaño’s data feels both foreign and appropriate to his larger aesthetic designs, both a replacement for and a mode of what we might call the literary (Jaussen). From cosmopolitan academics to armies moving across national boundaries to life on the borderlands between Mexico and the United States, *2666* explores the liminal spaces between numbers and narrative.

Perhaps David Foster Wallace had *2666* in mind in his posthumously assembled novel, *The Pale King* (2011). One of the book’s narrators, David Wallace, discovers his calling when he wanders into an accounting seminar taught by a Jesuit priest. Wallace (the character) recalls how, as a child,

[...] instead of reading something, I’d count the words in it, as though reading was the same as just counting the words. For example, ‘Here came Old Yeller, to save me from the hogs’ would equate to ten words which I would count off from one to ten instead of its being a sentence that made you love Old Yeller in the book even more. (160)

Wallace (both as author and character) punctuates *The Pale King* with meta-literary enumerations. For example: “I’ve said 2,752 words right now since I started. Meaning 2,752 words as of just before I said, ‘I’ve said,’ versus 2,754 if you count ‘I’ve said’—which I do, still” (160). Wallace later reports how the Jesuit, after “8,206 words,” ends his class with a stirring speech that Wallace reproduces verbatim but does not quantify, as if inspired, quasi-religious eloquence lies beyond the reach of numbers (225). The joke here is that the priest’s apparently transcendent speech is an encomium to accounting as numbers and narrative become, not so much incommensurate, but entangled and even congruent. Indeed, the most dramatic arc of *The Pale King* is not a love plot or some heroic journey—it is the character Wallace making his way from the airport to the Examination Center of the US Internal Revenue Service. As in *2666*, there is irony here but also a threat to aesthetic conventions. What, *The Pale King* seems to ask, is the difference between data and narrative, between information and literature?

This may seem a question for the twenty-first century and postmodernists navigating our digital revolution. With the dominance of Big Data, Big Tech, and the STEM fields, and with the rise of statistical analysis in the digital humanities and data-driven accountability in the corporate university, literary critics today might