

Introduction

“Narrating the Future”

Examining current notions about the future of humanity, it seems certain that this future will be shaped by either of two possible but antithetical developments: vast opportunities or catastrophic threats. Both scenarios, however, envision our future by narrative means, be it in fictional narration, in historiographic depiction, scientific predictions or along the lines of prophetic speculation.

We negotiate our projections of future worlds in classical forms of science fiction (in literature, film or television, or in audio dramas, video games or graphic novels) as well as in nearly every other channel of social communication. Popular-scientific bestsellers (such as Yuval Noah Harari’s *Homo Deus*) anticipate the deification of humanity as a result of biological modification and the fusion of man and machine. Futurologists working in think-tanks trace the outlines of technological developments and their influence on our lifestyle habits. Sociological blueprints, ecological models, and statistical projections influence political agendas, democratic decision-making processes, and the social climate. Tangible technologies such as robotics and artificial intelligence, or transhumanistic ideas inform public debates in the feature sections of newspapers, in scientific publications, and in programmatic speeches.

Fictional narratives have a strong impact on these conversations. A case in point is Andrew Niccol’s feature film *Gattaca* (1997), which led to the integration of the so-called *Gattaca*-argument into reflections upon transhumanistic ideas (cf. Beuthan 2015; with regard to other examples in literature, film and computer games, cf. also Orth 2019). Narratives also consider technologies that are already in existence but hold a promise of further development. Fictions often project possible technological advancements into the future and paint a picture of the potential and the dangers stemming from such ‘achievements.’ With regard to issues such as Artificial Intelligence, these may still seem remote (cf. Irsigler / Orth 2019); yet novels like Dave Eggers’s *The Circle* (2013) situate the imagined in a very proximate future, depicting its reality of social media and their implicit surveillance technologies in order to reveal how closely our present might resemble the dystopian potential of a possible future negotiated in fiction.

Although technological concerns that form a central aspect of science fiction can often be found in narratives of the future (cf. e.g. Dinello 2005 or the contributions in Fuhse 2008) or related genres such as dystopian fiction (cf. the

contributions in Chilese / Preußner 2013), not every science fiction narrative, which, by definition, takes place in the future, can be reduced to this facet. Rather, connections to a wide range of issues which preoccupy our present reality are being displaced into the nearer or remoter future, as evidenced in climate-change fiction such as Thomas von Steinaecker's *Die Verteidigung des Paradieses* (2016). Social structures are similarly transferred into the future in order to be criticized, as is the case in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895); the novel stages class struggles which literally lead to cannibalism. A more positive mode of social coexistence is envisaged by the *Star Trek* universe, in which humans no longer work for money, but for the continuous improvement of humanity. All these narratives contain an implicit warning, one that is stronger the more immediate the potential realization of the narrated events (cf. Orth 2008): The more imaginable and thus 'achievable' the fictional future appears, the more urgently the respective fictions seem to reflect on the present in which they were produced and to narratively construct possible consequences of the phenomena they thematize (e.g. the use of technology, climate change, or social structures). Against this background, narrating the future – i.e. above all the unknown – serves the purpose not only of mere entertainment or speculation, but also of what it is that fundamentally characterizes cultural artefacts: comprehending humanity, our (technological) creations and the consequences of our behavior, and thereby not least pondering the human condition.

The collected contributions to this issue of *DIEGESIS* explore the ways in which different kinds of narratives of the future reflect upon humanity and society. The focus lies on narrative fiction since the eighteenth century, as well as on various medial formats of the present. Two contributions investigate the obvious references of narratives set in the future to the present day. Carolin Gebauer draws on instances of so-called speculative fiction, that genre of narrative which can preferably be read as a fictional commentary on the problems and challenges our world faces today. By analyzing the interplay between form and content in these texts, she demonstrates how narrative strategies may influence the ethical implications of dystopian blueprints for the future. Felicitas Meifert-Menhard attends to narratives which explicitly deal with climate change. Her contribution mainly concentrates on examining those narrative strategies which do justice to the complexity of climate change as they match content-related aspects on a formal level.

Two further articles are concerned with the different paradoxes brought about by a narratological perspective: Hania Siebenpfeiffer investigates novels of the future with regard to their implied temporal relations. In the respective narratives, a linear logic of time seems to dissolve, which, in turn, highlights the representability of time by means of a clearly identified sequence of past, present, and future. Sebastian Domsch grasps a narratological paradox relating to the narrative thematization of sustainability: While narrativity necessitates eventfulness and, as a consequence, change, sustainability actually requires the absence of any kind of alteration.

Thomas Klein takes a look at the current social reality beyond literary fiction and the attempt to actively bring about an alternative reality of life with the help of ‘realistic’ utopias. His contribution reflects how climate change and a concomitant pressing demand for action may enable the development of narrative approaches that overcome the alleged ‘elusiveness’ of classical utopian thought experiments by contriving scenarios of the future that are not only conceivable, but – despite their utopian character – also realizable.

A featured article by Roy Sommer engages with a further facet of the nexus between narrating and the future – the resonance of texts we read in our long-term memory. His essay “Libraries of the Mind. What Happens after Reading” explores various aspects of forgetting and remembering literature, fathoms the limits of a neuroscientific measuring of our *Kopfbibliotheken* (‘libraries of the mind’), and describes how the narrativity of a novel dissolves after the act of reading. What remains is an “architexture” that contributes to the preservation of our world pictures. The issue “Narrating the Future” is completed by a review of the handbook *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft. Erzählen*, edited by Martin Huber and Wolf Schmid (Berlin / Boston, MA 2017) as well as a conversation with Françoise Lavocat about the past, present, and future of narratology.

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