

# **On the Narrativity of Rituals: Interfaces between Narratives and Rituals and Their Potential for Ritual Studies**

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VERA & ANSGAR NÜNNING

## **PROLOGUE: ARE NARRATIVE THEORY AND RITUAL STUDIES STRANGE BED FELLOWS? INTRODUCTION TO THE OBJECTIVES AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHAPTER**

Whoever attempts to address the question of how narrative theory and ritual studies are related must venture deep into new territory. That is to say, whoever wants to plunge into the research on what rituals have to do with narrative, what narration has to do with rituals, and how narrative theory and ritual studies are related, is likely to find themselves at a loss: when reviewing the vast multitude of publications on narrative theory, now burgeoning to the point that even the experts themselves can barely gain an overview of it, it is astounding to observe that while narrative studies has pursued interests in many subjects – one could almost say: in almost all subjects – it has, to date, hardly concerned itself at all with rituals or ritual-narration. When reading the latest handbooks, monographs and collections on the equally booming topic of ritual studies, however, one arrives at the sobering conclusion that narrativity and narration, though mentioned in passing, have themselves hardly ever been the object of systematic or theo-

retical reflections. Burckhard Dücker's excellent introductory monograph *Rituals: Forms – Functions – History*<sup>1</sup> or the wide-ranging two-volume anthology *Theorizing Rituals*, which of course provide an incomparably more comprehensive overview than we can offer here, can be taken as representative of many works in ritual studies in that they dedicate no separate chapter to either the narration or the narrativity of rituals. Attempts to find any such concepts from narrative theory in the index of this handbook or any other publication on ritual studies will, at present, be in vain. Until now, ritual studies and narrative theory have hardly even taken notice of one another.<sup>2</sup> Thus, one might – at first sight – arrive at the conclusion that narrative theory and ritual studies are strange bed fellows. Yet this first impression is deceptive. A closer look – this, at least, is our first thesis – reveals a close connection between narrative and rituals.<sup>3</sup> One can even go so far as to talk about the narrativity of rituals and the rituality of (at least certain) narratives.

Since making bold, sweeping statements is typical for programmatic contributions such as this, we would like to begin by introducing three deliberately exaggerated theses. The first thesis is that rituals and narratives are closely connected, as evidenced by a multitude of similarities, parallels and structural analogies. We will present these in an introductory overview of the interfaces of narratives and rituals, as well as of narrative theory and ritual theory, and, in doing so, identify and elaborate on the different levels and forms of these interfaces. Our second thesis is that the examination of both the narrative structure and the perspectivity of rituals and ritual narrations can be especially profitable from the point of view of narratology or literary narrative theory, as sections two and three will reveal. The third

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- 1 All translations from German-language scholarship are by Simon Cooke, who also provided a draft translation of an earlier version of the manuscript. Moreover, thanks are due to Jan Rupp for valuable suggestions and to Martin Zettersten, who provided a number of stylistic improvements.
  - 2 However, Dücker refers to the long-standing debate over the relationship between “myth and ritual, word and narrative on the one hand and action on the other” (76). For this debate over “myth and ritual theory” (76), see also Segal.
  - 3 This connection is suggested yet not fully developed by the following studies: Elsbree, *Rituals of Life and Ritual Passages*. For a more general study of the relationship between literature and ritual, see Braungart.

thesis proposes that, above all, rituals and narratives display a number of formal equivalences, which we will try to outline in the last section – “Cultures as Communities of Narratives and Values” – from the point of view of both cultural studies and functional-historical narrative research.

As the above theses already make clear, this chapter tries to provide some theoretical underpinnings that linking concepts and categories from narrative theory and ritual theory can be profitable for both fields. The chapter also endorses a premise that has become controversial in ritual studies in recent years: though we are highly aware of the substantial differences between types of rituals and narratives, and even more aware of the heterogeneity of particular rituals and stories which are subsumed under a heading like “marriage ritual” or “*bildungsroman*,” we still think it is profitable to try to abstract away from these divergences and construct a kind of “ideal type” of both ritual and narrative. It is quite obvious that almost every single instance does not entirely conform to these constructs – after all, there is no “narrative” as such, there are only particular narrations, marked by their genre-specific features, the particular cultural situation in which they are told, the particularities of their styles, character conception, perspectivization, embedded values and so on. Even a well-known and seemingly simple genre like the “*bildungsroman*,” for instance, covers a broad spectrum of different – and contradictory – sub-genres, which depend on the cultural preferences, the (rejection of) teleology, as well as the particularities of the “female” *bildungsroman* or those of different generations of authors with a migration background. But aware as we are of these differences, we still think that much would be lost if scholars refrained from exploring the general features of narratives and rituals. After all, the concentration on particular ritual performances or texts shifts the focus away from the features they have in common with others, and can thus hide from view the elements in which a given ritual or story significantly undercuts and changes genre conventions.

In the following, we would like to focus on the question of the possible benefits that new concepts and developments in narrative research might have when applied in ritual studies. Therefore, we will start with a short review of the interfaces of narratives and rituals – the aforementioned narrativity of rituals and rituality of narratives.

## **1. NARRATIVITY OF RITUALS AND RITUALITY OF NARRATIVES: AN INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW OF THE INTERFACES OF NARRATIVES AND RITUALS, AND NARRATIVE THEORY AND RITUAL THEORY**

Rituals and narratives are so closely linked that it is actually quite astonishing that narrative theory and ritual theory have both largely ignored each other. On the one hand, since rituals themselves often possess a narrative structure, it is possible to talk about a narrativity of rituals. On the other hand, the second part of the chiasm – namely, the rituality of narratives – is meant to point out that many narratives and cultural plots contain features of rituals.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the narrative structure of rituals, the perspectivity of rituals and ritual narrations is another aspect that connects rituals and narrations. Finally, one needs to mention functional equivalences between narratives and rituals which are based on the respective performative qualities we will analyse in the final part of this chapter.

Since these parallels, structural similarities and functional equivalences will be presented in the following section in more detail, a short overview of the most important overlaps between narratives and rituals will suffice at this point. Without attempting or being able to claim completeness, one can distinguish at least twelve different forms or levels of these interfaces. The first three emanate from the definitions of narrativity currently used in narrative theory and are – though from a different perspective – briefly outlined in the introduction to this volume:

1. The situatedness of narratives and rituals: Both narratives and rituals are embedded in a particular cultural moment, and in a particular situation which is, among other aspects, influenced by the emotions, knowledge and intentions of the participants as well as by their social and personal relations to each other. This “situatedness” influences the form and design of the particular narrative as well as ritual performance.

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4 Cf. Braungart 27, who points out that literary texts often feature ritual-like elements and follow a certain aesthetic of repetition, as a matter of generic conventions, for example.

2. The creation of a world which changes: Both narratives and rituals create a world of their own, a world apart from the ordinary context in which readers, viewers or participants find themselves. This world is peopled by agents who are human (or resemble human beings in significant ways, be they gods or talking animals) and is characterized by the fact that certain (although sometimes slight, psychological rather than physical) transformations occur within this world.
3. The narrative structure of narrations and rituals: Both narrations and rituals usually feature a certain sequencing. In addition to the beginning and the ending, one can distinguish a number of mandatory and optional sequences respectively.<sup>5</sup> While the sequencing of elements is, in some ritual types, relatively rigid, most narrative genres make it possible to loosely join a variety of scenes; even the chronological order of the depicted events is rarely adhered to. However, some genres feature a rather rigid structure; fairy tales or early forms of detective fiction are cases in point, as well as eye-witness accounts of traffic accidents or short narrative CVs handed in for job applications.
4. The perspectivity of narratives, rituals and ritual stories: A second interface is based on the fact that the narrative-theoretical category of perspective plays a role in both the investigation of rituals and in the analysis of narratives. In both fields, different levels of perspectivity have to be considered: in rituals, there are the perspectives of participants – with all the differences between them – to be distinguished from those of observers, who may be in a position to overlook the whole field and get a more or less holistic impression of the event, but also lose a certain understanding of the event or have a restricted viewpoint. Ritual stories are usually written from the perspective of one of the observers or participants; in order to get a more balanced account of the ritual in question, one has to take into account the different perspectives of several witnesses. But even though it is possible to take into account categories like the spatio-temporal position of the witness as well as aspects such as his or her beliefs, emotions, norms and values, it seems impossible to arrive at “the objective” story of the ritual. The perspectives of characters and narrators in stories resemble those in rituals, as they are

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5 On this aspect of the sequencing or (narrative) structure of rituals, see Gladigow; Oppitz.

subject to the same restraints. In contrast to rituals (though not to stories about rituals), there probably are more levels of the embeddedness of perspectives to be considered with regard to narratives: the level of characters (who themselves may tell “embedded” stories), the level of narrators talking about those characters and positioning them in a meaningful structure, and the abstract level of the perspective that the story as a whole provides (which may include an ironic distance to the narrator). This abstract level of perspectivity, which results from the way the events are mediated by language and/or images and sounds, is thus lacking in rituals.

5. The experientiality of narratives, rituals and ritual stories: This aspect, which is sometimes held to be the defining characteristic of narrativity,<sup>6</sup> presents a parallel between narrations and rituals or ritual stories, too, for the latter also feature characters and participants who experience the ritual from a subjective point of view. While the experientiality of people engaged in performing or observing rituals is marked by fleeting perceptions and feelings as well as more lasting impressions, which are often made up of very heterogeneous, if not contradictory elements, the experiences of characters or narrators in stories are formed – and thus ascribed meaning – by the use of language and narrative. The experientiality made accessible by narratives is structured, ordered and interpreted.
6. Narrative as a part of rituals: Furthermore, rituals often involve narrations as one of their elements. This becomes especially apparent in marriage rituals, for example, in which short versions of the bride’s and bridegroom’s life-stories are told (often much to their chagrin). An example from the realm of politics is the use of certain cultural plots made in the nomination of a candidate for the American presidential elections – such as narrations of the *American Dream*.
7. The performative power of narrations and rituals: In terms of their potential functions and effects, another similarity between narratives and rituals consists in the fact that both possess a high degree of performativity. In ritual studies, the focus on individual performances has been strong from the beginning, whereas narratological studies have on-

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6 Experientiality is a feature of most narratological definitions of narrative. See Fludemik; Herman.

ly recently concentrated on the "mimesis of narrating," exploring the ways in which the event of narrating is represented in tales which serve to highlight the performance of the narrator.

8. Closely connected to this performativity is the power of both narratives and rituals to create and change worlds. Both are privileged "ways of worldmaking" in Nelson Goodman's sense. While the functions of narratives and media as means of creating new worlds have been the focus of recent scholarship,<sup>7</sup> the changes that can be brought about via narratives within and about rituals have not received much attention – even though changes in ritual performances are often justified by means of narratives.<sup>8</sup>
9. Ritual narrations, narratives and narrative genres are some of the most important media for the transmission of rituals. For ritual studies, not only documentary text types like statements gathered via interviews or documentary videos, but also literary genres and travelogues prove to be important sources for collecting data.
10. The combination of rituals and narratives in ritual stories: Most rituals and ritual sites themselves have a story – the story of ritual performances (Dücker 213) – which features a narrative structure. What Aleida Assmann has written of memorial sites holds true for ritual sites as well: they also retain "material traces, which become narratives and with that points of reference for a new cultural memory" (309). Furthermore, rituals and their respective ritual histories should be of equal importance for the histories of institutions, enterprises and nations.
11. The self-referentiality of rituals and narratives: Just as the self-referential dimension of ritual actions is based on every new ritual performance being related to the history of the respective ritual (cf. Dücker 53), the self-referentiality of cultural narratives is based on their being highly conventionalized and related to respective pretexts.<sup>9</sup> One can generally assume that, in being a part of them, narratives raise the self-

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7 See A. Nünning, V. Nünning and Neumann, *Cultural Ways and Aesthetics and Politics*.

8 We owe this insight to Axel Michaels, who suggested this after a lecture we gave at the Collaborative Research Centre "Ritual Dynamics," University of Heidelberg.

9 On the aspect of intertextuality and "interrituality," see Gladigow; Michaels.

referential dimension of rituals in so far as they are often ritualized themselves and explicitly express a given ritual occasion.<sup>10</sup>

12. Both rituals and narratives are characterized by a structure of agency. In both cases agency can be distributed widely rather than lying with ritual experts or narrators alone. Thus, questions such as who acts or is given the possibility to act, and who has their story told or their perception represented are central to the study of rituals as well as narratives. Categories which indicate narrative agency, such as narrative transmission and perspective structure, might be productively applied to the analysis of rituals, just as, vice versa, concepts of ritual agency to the analysis of narratives.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the first preliminary conclusion is that there are several overlaps between narratives and rituals on various levels. Furthermore, it is obvious that one of the primary assumptions of the collaborative research centre on "ritual dynamics" – namely that rituals constitute a special mode of human behaviour (cf. Michaels 3) and that "the activities we think of as 'ritual' can be found in many periods and places" (Bell ix)<sup>12</sup> – also holds true for narrations and narrative actions respectively: narrating is, likewise, an anthropologically basic human need, a special type of activity found universally, whereas the respective characteristics are, like rituals, dependent on culture and history.<sup>13</sup>

While it is inherent to our theme to emphasize the similarities and parallels between narratives and rituals, the differences between them should not be forgotten. Rituals are symbolic actions with a high degree of physical performativity, which, as a result of their performative and scene-like dimensions, can, as a rule, activate all channels of the human senses. Narratives, by contrast, are predominantly constituted of cognitive and emotional components – at least if one restricts the meaning of the term to writ-

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10 On the aspect of ritual "self-referentiality," see Stausberg, "Reflexive Ritualisation" and "Reflexivity."

11 We owe this insight to Jan Rupp. Further on the aspect of ritual agency, see Sax.

12 For this "hypothesis that ritual activities are special types of activity which are found universally," see also Dücker 2.

13 On story-telling as a basic human need, see Sugiyama, "Origins of Narrative" and "Narrative Theory."

ten narratives. With regard to a wider definition of the term narrative, which includes stories told in drama, ballet, or pantomime (see Ryan, *Narrative*; Barthes 79), different aspects have to be considered: paintings, sculptures or friezes, for instance, also appeal to the eye, while films usually integrate sounds as well. Touch and olfactory signals, however, are – at the moment – largely confined to rituals, and the stories told in rituals. One important difference seems to remain, however, for while rituals are usually characterized by the tendency to be repetitive, affirmative and constructive (cf. Dücker 31), narrations in general and literary genres in particular can, to a greater degree, be innovative and function as a revisionist counter-discourse or a culture-critical meta-discourse (cf. Zapf). Thus, while the generally dominant features of rituals are the self-presentation of the prevailing order and the establishment, visualization and preservation of community- and consensus-creating value-orientations, this only holds true for certain, culturally dominant or collective narratives. But this difference, which was long held to be a given, fades if one takes into account the broad variety of individualized rituals. And even with regard to the contrast between eventfulness and repetition, the case is far more complex, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out in her brilliant contribution to this volume.

Despite these differences however, the multitude of overlaps between narratives and rituals, which can be found on various levels, indicates that a cooperation between narrative theory and ritual theory could be fruitful for both sides. The most obvious field of interdisciplinary cooperation would be the application of the narratological toolkit for the interpretation of narratives to the stories told in and about rituals. After all, most of the accounts of rituals are narratives – so why not take advantage of the highly differentiated tools for the analysis of stories developed in the field of narratology? At the same time, the question arises as to which aspects of rituals appear especially interesting from a narratological point of view. We would like to take a closer look at two of the overlaps mentioned above, namely the narrative structure of rituals and the perspectivity of rituals.

## 2. THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF RITUALS AND RITUAL NARRATIONS: RITUALS AND RITUAL THEORIES FROM A NARRATOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

The most obvious parallel between narratives and rituals is surely that rituals themselves often have a narrative structure. "Because ritual acts follow a course from their beginnings to set destinations, they have a sense-making narrative structure" (Dücker 11; cf. 127).<sup>14</sup> According to most typologies that have been developed by ritual studies for the description of the forms of ritual actions, sequencing – which is a characteristic of narrativity – is a constitutive characteristic of rituals. Both formulaic narrative genres like folk tales and the ritual process are divided into certain sections or sequences which proceed according to a set order.

Initiation and transition rituals which facilitate transitions in life serve to exemplify the narrative structure of rituals. One example is Arnold van Gennep's three-phase model, which he developed in order to analyse the spatial, temporal and social transition processes. This model – which takes as its starting point the phase of the initial condition, followed by the liminal, intermediate phase during which the change takes place, which leads to the connection-phase – features distinctive temporal and narrative structures. Paraphrasing van Gennep's model, "[t]he three phases – separation, liminality, and incorporation – enact a powerful homology of our personal sense of beginnings, transitions, and endings in life and literature" (Elsbree, *Ritual Passages* 16). However, other cultural events such as the empowerment or disempowerment of rulers are not only strongly ritualized by strictly set procedure structures, but also possess a narrative structure as well.

As mentioned above, many rituals not only feature a narrative structure, they also often integrate narratives as elements of their ritual forms of action. When narratives become a part of rituals, they usually further emphasize their narrative structure by summarizing the life or development of the

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14 Cf. also Elsbree, who describes "ritual and narrative structures as coexisting, ordering activities of the brain" (*Ritual Passages* 13). Similar to narrative, "ritual [is] a coherent set of symbolic actions that has a real, transformative effect on individuals and social groups" (Lincoln 6).

ritual's protagonist up until the present point in time in a narrative, and often highly conventionalized and ritualized, way. This is not only evident in the private domain in marriage rituals, but also in the field of academic honours and ceremonies at which the laudation, which usually has a narrative structure, is the central element. Just like any other narrative genre, the stories told – or read aloud – in rituals are subject to both cultural norms and historical change. As Stefanie Hammer's contribution to this volume shows, even within a relatively brief period of time, and in a very specific ritual like the burial ceremony of German soldiers, such embedded narratives do change within the space of only a few decades, thus expressing a new evaluation of both the role of the state and the status of soldiers.

Especially in the case of rituals which mark central transitions in life, the narrative structure of the ritual also shapes the respective life-story of the person participating in the ritual. Of course, the significance of the rituals for the biographies of those participating in them either as protagonists or as spectators is well known (cf. Großklaus). However, the formative power which narrative patterns of sense-making exert on the level of the ritual itself and on the level of retrospective sense-making deserves greater attention. Dücker rightly observes that rituals are, "in sum, action-sequences which one remembers because they are meaningful for one's own life-history and which have become a symbolic point of reference for a narrative context which generates meaning" (8). Thus, the close connection between rituals and stories or narrations is based on the fact that transition rituals such as school enrolment, graduation from school or university, and weddings mark especially important stages which play a central and structuring role for both the individual life-story and the family memory. It is also grounded in the importance of stories within one's own life, as a central element of constructing identity, especially in times of crises.<sup>15</sup>

From the point of view of narrative theory, this firstly raises the question of to what extent culture-specific patterns of narration or narrative genres have emerged for the telling of such ritually emphasized situations. This is especially pertinent since many narrative genres are themselves ritualized so strongly that one can speak of their "rituality." During the past couple of years the genres of biography and autobiography in particular have displayed a strong tendency towards self-reflexivity which has led to the de-

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15 See, for instance, Eakin; Echterhoff and Straub.

velopment of innovative forms of fictional meta-(auto)biographies. In the same way as the practice of rituals usually includes criticism of rituals (cf. Dücker 13), self-reflexive meta-biographies, which continue the practice of the genre, often function as a medium of genre memory and genre criticism (cf. Nadj).

Secondly, the narrative structure of rituals raises a further question: to what extent do certain rituals correlate with certain narratives or culturally available plots? With the aid of categories developed in narrative theory for the analysis of event sequences and plots, ritual studies could describe more exactly the respective narrative structure of certain types of rituals.

Since narrations are often important parts of rituals, the third question to arise is of what functions narratives fulfil as elements of rituals. In the case of funerary and burial rituals, narrations can help to commemorate the deceased in an idealized or wished-for form, just as pictures turn absence into presence. Barack Obama's speeches, which frequently include biographical narrations, illustrate four further functions which narratives can serve in political rituals: they introduce the candidate as a representative and protagonist of the cultural plot of the *American Dream*; they integrate the event into the tradition and, in so doing, suggest continuity; they propagate the values and norms he represents by appealing to the emotions; and, thus, are meant to promote the reintegration of the nation.

The thesis of a structural and functional analogy between narratives and rituals is further supported by the extensive overlaps between the so-called "building blocks of narrative" and the useful matrix of characteristics developed by Burckhard Dücker and Dietrich Harth for "Ritual" as a frame- and framing-concept.<sup>16</sup> The categories of analysis from narrative theory can be useful for ritual studies as a means of examining the following dimensions of the narrative structure of rituals more closely:

- the time structure of rituals or the "ritual time-structure" (Dücker 39ff.),
- the structure and semantization of ritual sites (cf. 44ff.),
- the action-structure of rituals, ritual scripts and ritual narrations, and the sequence of obligatory and optional sequences,
- the event-relation (cf. 100),

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16 Cf. Dücker 100-102. The concept of framing is, however, more difficult to apply to any given ritual than it appears at first sight; cf. Jungaberle and Weinhold.

- the ritual's participants, and the various roles played respectively by the protagonists, specialists, participants and onlookers, as well as their interrelations (cf. 48ff.).

Thus, the conclusion so far is that rituals and ritual narrations not only feature a narrative structure but often constitute important elements of rituals as well. Furthermore, aside from those embedded narrations, rituals feature other typical elements of narratives. Beyond that, individual life stories, family histories and the histories of institutions, enterprises and nations are strongly shaped by ritualized narratives.

### **3. THE MULTIPERSPECTIVITY OF RITUALS AND RITUAL NARRATIONS: RITUALS AND RITUAL NARRATIONS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF LITERARY STUDIES AND NARRATIVE THEORY**

While the narrative structure of rituals is already widely known – even if, to the best of our knowledge, it has hardly ever been the subject of systematic or comparative cultural research – there is another narratologically interesting aspect of rituals that has as yet attracted relatively little interest: that is, the perspective from which ritual action-processes are observed and represented (cf. Dücker 63). Instead of just focusing on the level of the ritual action-sequences, it is important to systematically consider the perspectivity or multiperspectivity of rituals and ritual narrations as well.

Ritual studies has so far made a distinction between the interior or life-world perspective of the people participating in the ritual, i.e. the emic perspective, and the exterior or system-perspective of onlookers, the etic perspective. Even though this theoretical and methodological distinction between the interior perspective of the participants and the exterior perspective of the onlookers is without doubt fundamental and important, it only begins to reflect the perspectival complexity and multiperspectivity of many rituals and ritual narrations. Specialists and persons in charge of a ritual performance surely have a different perspective than other participants and onlookers, who are involved nonetheless. Moreover, the distinction according to the criterion of belonging vs. non-belonging (i.e. us vs. them; cf. Dücker 124) appears to be too crude to grasp the multitude of perspectives

that must be taken into account if we are to analyse rituals and ritual narrations in a sophisticated way.

As is generally known, literary narrative theory has developed a broad spectrum of competing models for the description of the possible ways in which an event or an action sequence can be narratively and perspectively mediated. Though constraints of space do not allow for a separate, detailed presentation of these models,<sup>17</sup> we would at least like to point out that these models can also be profitable for the analysis of the perspectivity or multiperspectivity of rituals and ritual narrations.

On the one hand, the models from literary narrative theory offer analytical categories for defining the respective forms of perspectivization and changes of perspective in narrative sources on which ritual studies rely for the collection of data. In doing so, it becomes clear which perspective is privileged in a certain culture or epoch. This is closely related to questions of authority: which perspectives (in particular with regard to social/religious status or role as well as moral and religious values) are given a voice or privileged against other, "peripheral" subjects? It is also linked to formal and structural issues, such as the choice of genre or the creation of the "persona" of a narrator within a text.

On the other hand, the analytical categories which we have developed for forms and functions of multi-perspective narrations in literary narrative texts (cf. Nünning and Nünning, *Multiperspektivisches Erzählen*) can profitably be adapted for the study of multi-perspectivity in rituals and ritual narrations. Furthermore, literary narrative theory has developed differentiated categories for resolving the question of the credibility, or the degree of (un-)reliability – especially relevant for travelogues – which might prove beneficial for the analysis of ritual narrations.

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17. See, for instance, the discussion about the concept of "point of view," "perspective" and "focalization," which are conceptualized in different ways by any number of theorists, among them Gerard Genette, Seymour Chapman, Dorrit Cohn, James Phelan and a host of others. For a brief introduction to categories for the analysis of narratives see Neumann and Nünning; a good overview of the main concepts and areas of research is provided by Herman, Jahn and Ryan.

#### 4. CULTURES AS COMMUNITIES OF NARRATIVES AND VALUES, OR: THE NARRATIVE-PERFORMATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL MEMORY, SOCIAL NORMS AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: RITUAL AND RITUAL-NARRATION FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF CULTURAL-HISTORICAL AND FUNCTIONAL-HISTORICAL NARRATIVE RESEARCH

In this penultimate section we aim to shed some light on the question of the functions which narrations and ritual performances can fulfil for their respective cultural formations. Both have a broad spectrum of different functions which, at the same time, they are never fully absorbed into (cf. Wulf 190). Moreover, it is always controversial which functions can be held to be most important and even differentiated from other ones. Particularly with regard to functions, any kind of typology is bound to be as arbitrary as it is – hopefully – useful for an understanding of the features narratives and rituals have in common.

From the point of view of cultural-historical and functional-historical narrative research, the most important parallels between narratives and rituals consist in some extensive functional equivalences which both of them feature. Even if it is obvious that different kinds of narrations or rituals also fulfil a host of different functions respectively, it seems fruitful to theoretically distinguish a number of functions which can emerge together in narrative or ritual practice with respective variations, of course, in their dominant relations:

1. Narrations and rituals have an ordering and structuring function which shapes chaotic events into certain action sequences and, in doing so, arranges and structures both individual and social life (cf. Michaels 5-6; Herman, "Stories").<sup>18</sup> This function of ordering and structuring relates to the overarching time-structure of a culture. Through narratives and

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18 Cf. also Elsbree, *Ritual Passages* 1: "As two ongoing, homologically related activities, ritual and narrative are among the primary means we employ to structure ourselves and our societies and to generate the semantic systems which go beyond both self and society."

rituals, the endless flow of experiences which marks our waking moments becomes meaningful; they make it possible to construct units like episodes and turning points such as the decision to marry or the marriage ritual.

2. By establishing order and structure, narratives and rituals secondly contribute to the reduction of complexity. In doing so, they open up possibilities for coping with contingencies and crises for both the individual and the collective (cf. Wulf 193f.; Herman, "Stories" 179). Both rituals and cultural narratives provide reliable patterns of action which offer relief by telling us what is expected in given situations, or what to do when there is a "breach of the canonical" (cf. Bruner, "Narrative Construction" and *Making Stories* 28).
3. Thirdly, both narrations and rituals fulfil an important community-building and consensus-making function: narratives and rituals support the coherence and the continuity of cultural formations and can therefore function as media of internal integration.<sup>19</sup> However, this community-building function is dependent on the position of the individual within the community; it only works as far as those belonging to that particular community are concerned. Rituals as well as narratives work "integratively towards the inside, exclusively and hierarchically towards the outside" (Böhme 61).
4. This, fourthly, is linked to a differentiating function which narratives and rituals fulfil as media which mark the borders with other cultural formations. What Dücker remarks concerning rituals in this respect is equally true for many cultural narratives: "In this way integration and differentiation are among the central functions of ritual and ritualized action forms." (31) Differentiation also includes highlighting borders and excluding those who do not belong.

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19 See Bruner, *Making Stories* 25: "[T]he sharing of common stories creates an interpretive community, a matter of great moment ... for promoting cultural cohesion." For the community-building function of ritual, see Durkheim 43: "The really religious beliefs are always common to a determined group, which makes profession of adhering to them and of practicing the rites connected with them. They are not merely received individually by all members of this group; they are something belonging to the group, and they make its unity."

5. Fifthly, narrations and rituals fulfil normative functions: both narratives and rituals serve as a means of constituting and passing on norms and values. Whereas rituals make a spectacle of those value-orientations in a performative way through symbolic actions, narrations usually vividly exemplify values and norms through the description of individual fates. In doing so, narratives make an equally important contribution as rituals to both the stabilization of social orders and to the preservation or change of social values and norms. Just as rituals do, narratives mediate between what is expected and what can be tolerated: they "define the range of canonical characters, the settings in which they operate, the actions that are permissible and comprehensible" (Bruner, "Transactional Self" 93). However, the "tellability" of stories depends on the "breach of the canonical." Expectations are not only raised but disappointed, otherwise there would be no point in telling the story at all.<sup>20</sup> The performance of routine actions is uninteresting from the narrative point of view, they only are mentioned if they are new, somehow broken, or related to another issue within the story.
6. Sixthly, narrations, just like rituals, are "central sites of social knowledge-transfer" (Dücker 3) that stage "collectively shared knowledge and collectively shared action-practices" (Wulf 189). By mediating cultural orientational knowledge, they serve as a means of providing and justifying culturally accepted patterns of actions at the same time.
7. The seventh function, which we have termed the "cultural-memory function," relates to narratives and rituals as important media of cultural remembrance as well as of the construction and modification of existing cultural memory. This includes the creation of "counter-narratives," which aim at criticizing, delegitimizing or even superseding existing memories. Rituals belong to the "privileged objects of memory politics" (Dücker 12) in just about every culture. This can be seen in the way they are preferably remembered – or thematized and staged – in their respective culture-specific narratives (cf. Birk).

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20 Among the scholars favouring an emphatic definition of event and tellability are Tzvetan Todorov, Jerome Bruner and David Herman. See the very good summary of the state of the discussion, which mentions a host of other scholars as well in Herman, *Basic Elements* 132-135.

8. Whereas the cultural-memory function is related to the past and to ritual narration, the future-shaping function of narratives and rituals consists in the fact that they contribute to both the mediation of schemata and scripts and to the dispositions for sequential actions (cf. Dücker 34). Thus, the history-forming function (9) of narratives and rituals is based on the fact that both narratives and rituals "legitimize future everyday actions beyond the ritual performance" or that they "create institutionally ensured behavioural dispositions" (9). Hence, if Christoph Wulf is right to speak of "ritual as memory and projection" (192), his formulation characterizes equally well an important function of narratives: because of their role as a medium of memory both rituals and narrative participate in what Daniel Schacter et al. think of as the most important function of memory: to imagine and plan future actions (cf. Schacter, Addis and Buckner).
9. Ninthly, the identity-generating (or identity-changing as well as identity-destroying) function, which narratives and rituals fulfil as media for the construction of collective identity, is based on the interaction of the functions which have previously been separated for analytical purposes. It has to be remembered, of course, that such memories of events which serve to construct collective identities are always sites of contest – contests which can even lead to the persecution and destruction of those who happen to belong to the group losing the fight (cf. V. Nünning).
10. Finally, the performative or worldmaking function might best be considered as the result of the interaction between the other functions mentioned above, rather than as another, further function: Both narratives and rituals function as important "ways of worldmaking" in Nelson Goodman's terms (cf. Nünning and Nünning, "Ways of Worldmaking"), or as "cultural constructions of world or reality" (Dücker 37).<sup>21</sup>

All in all it can be observed that narratives and rituals feature extensive functional equivalences. From the point of view of cultural-historical and functional-historical narrative research, the fact that both narratives and rit-

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21 As Goodman stresses, the making of new worlds always depends on the existence of old ones – and on their destruction. The most important principles of worldmaking are therefore composition and decomposition, deletion and supplementation, deformation, weighting, and ordering (7-12).

uals present historically variable symbolic forms, which are responsible for constituting cultures as "narrative- and memory-communities" (cf. Müller-Funk) and belief- and "value-communities" (Dücker 31) is probably the most important parallel. From the perspective of a functional approach to history, narrations and rituals prove to be social constructions or media of social self-monitoring and self-understanding, which, for their part, actually create the constitutive characteristics of the respective cultures.<sup>22</sup>

Conversely, one can also put forward the argument that a culture's narratives (cf. Müller-Funk) as well as its rituals "illustrate in miniature the reaches of the entire culture" (Dücker 3). In this lies the "metonymic function of rituals" (*ibid.*, cf. 209) and narratives, which makes both such an interesting research area from the perspective of cultural studies. Just as "theory-based ritual analysis opens a way into an understanding of different cultures" (3), theory-based analyses of narrations, cultural plots and narration patterns provide insights into the attitudes, values and norms of respective cultures.

Rituals as well as narratives can be understood as "indicators of and factors in cultural contexts and systems, their functional-capability, order, and continuity" (Dücker 193). They are both "products of a culture as well as forms and factors of presentation and mediation of their structure" (*ibid.*). Just as rituals mark the interface between the individual and the collective or the individual history and the collective history (cf. 30, 74) and, in doing so "take on a bridging function between the individual, the collective, and the cultural" (185), the narration patterns and plots common in a respective culture mediate between the individual, society and the overall culture which generates these narratives (cf. Bruner, "Transactional Self" 93f.). Just as rituals are created by a culture, a culture is created by its rituals. This chiasm is also pertinent to the relation between culture and narrative: Every culture creates its own culture-specific narrations and plots, while narratives, for their part, both constitute and modify the respective culture at the same time (cf. Müller-Funk).

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22 For the notion of literature/narrative and, by extension rituals as media of cultural self-reflection, see Voßkamp.

## **EPILOGUE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN POSTCLASSICAL NARRATOLOGIES AND THEIR POTENTIAL USEFULNESS FOR RITUAL STUDIES**

Looking back at the question asked at the beginning, the following conclusion can be made for the time being: "rearrangements in theory-design," Luhmann has observed, "must be judged above all by the consequences they bring about and by whether certain aspects can be presented in a better or worse way than before by means of the new arrangement" (57). Thus, the following question arises: what are the benefits of abandoning the peaceful coexistence and the reciprocal obliviousness which has hitherto been practised in narrative theory and ritual studies and to instead make use of approaches, insights and categories from narrative theory in ritual studies and conversely, to make use of the insights of ritual studies in narrative research? There are a number of good reasons in favour of taking a closer look at the interfaces between narratives and rituals merely outlined here and of continuing the suggested cooperation between ritual sciences and narrative theory.

For the time being one could refer to Gregory Bateson and soberly observe that two descriptions are usually better than one. Just as binocular vision does not just imply a mere quantitative enhancement but an improvement of quality, namely a perception of depth and three-dimensional vision, so the examination of the "rituals"-phenomenon from the point of view of both ritual studies and narrative theory leads to a "thicker" description, in Clifford Geertz's sense.

In the same way as ritual studies are able to sharpen our awareness of those aspects of narratives which have thus far been neglected in narrative theory, new developments and approaches from postclassical narrative theory can also be of use in ritual studies. On the one hand, this heuristic benefit is based on the fact that narrative theory directs focus to those dimensions of rituals and ritual narrations which have received relatively little attention so far – namely the narrative structures of rituals, the function of narrations as elements of rituals, and the perspectivity or multi-perspectivity of rituals.

On the other hand, the interfaces discussed above between narratives and rituals serve as a kind of features-matrix or a pattern of analytical categories which can be beneficial for the comparative analyses of rituals, ritual

narrations, and the histories of their performances in different cultures (cf. Dücker 46). In the context of culturally-comparative ritual examinations, the following questions arise from the point of view of narrative theory:

- To what extent do the narrative structures of certain rituals vary in different cultures?
- What differences are there with regard to narrative structures of different rituals or types of rituals?
- What are the typical characteristics of the respective culture with regard to the relationship between rituals and narratives?
- What functions do narratives as elements of rituals fulfil in varying cultural contexts?
- What is the relationship between narrations which are integrated into rituals and the norms and values which are made visible and explicit in ritual?
- How can narratological models be used in order to sufficiently describe the different forms of perspectivity and multi-perspectivity, which are characteristic of particular rituals and ritual narrations in different cultures?
- When analysing rituals as media events, what narrations are propagated through the media by means of ritual in different cultures and what culture-specific functions do these narratives fulfil? (cf. Dücker 59; Grimes).

In light of the multitude of interfaces that can be found between narratives and rituals on various levels, there is much to be said in favour of the hypothesis that ritual studies and narrative research are able to complement each another in a useful way. In the same way that the descriptive concepts and analytical methods developed by ritual studies might prove useful to narrative research, so too might the analytical categories and models of narrative theory be able to provide ritual studies with fresh impulses. In any case, the phenomena which both disciplines deal with are connected in so many ways that it is high time narrations were analysed from the point of view of ritual studies, and rituals from the perspective of narrative theory.

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