

Narratives of the Infinite: Legitimate or not?

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Narratology and narrative theory come from different heuristic backgrounds, even if they are influencing each other. Narratology is rather interested in modes of describing narrative phenomena in fictional literature; narrative theory tends to be more of a theoretical enquiry in what makes something a narrative, what it means to tell a story, and how narrative practices organize our world. The old judgment that 'poets are lying' concerns the narrative theorist more than the narratologist, who tends to rather ask how a poet is lying. This difference, in my opinion, gave rise to the current "rampant use of the term 'narrative'" (CFP).

Building on narrative theory, and in particular on Albrecht Koschorke's 2012 "general narrative theory" (subtitle) which conceptualizes narrative in Cultural Studies as a meaning-making mechanism, I produced a monograph (Mühr 2024) that investigates the epistemological problem of the infinite from such a narrative theory perspective: The infinite overburdens our imagination; we can think of its existence, but we are unable to determine its dimensions. How has European thinking dealt with this incommensurability of the infinite throughout its history? In this book, I argue that the respective semanticizations of its incommensurability are "narratives", because they paradoxically transform the "ontological indifference" (Koschorke 2012, 16-19) of the infinite into concrete representations. By case studies from Parmenides to Popper, I demonstrate how something that cannot be determined is narrated.

In my contribution to the conference, I would like to discuss to what extent the term "narrative" is justified for the phenomena I analysed in my work. In particular, I want to discuss the following narratives of incommensurability, taken from the history of mathematics, but confronted with "everyday life experience" (CFP):

- The (his) story of the tangent, only be defined by a tautology
- The story of the lying Cretan
- The paradox of Xeno about Achilles not being able to overtake a turtle
- The story of the Hilbert Hotel and its counterpart: the platonic concept of emanatio What is at issue, is the assumption of the homo narrans asserted in Koschorke's work, or in other words, the question of whether, if confronted with incommensurability, we aren't compelled to create meaning and "reality" by lying, or by telling stories.

References:

Koschorke, Albrecht (2012): Wahrheit und Erfindung. Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie, Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer

ENN8 Conference: "Cross-Genre and Cross-Media Transferability of Narrative Categories: Possibilities and Limits" (Wuppertal, 2025)

Mühr, Stephan (2024): Narrative des Unendlichen. Erzählungen über das Unbestimmte von Parmenides bis Popper, Bielefeld: transcript