

# The (Pictorial) Construction of Collective Identities in the Third Reich<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Collective identities of the Self vs. the Other are not only conveyed in and between cultures through verbal discourse, but also through pictures. Cultural encounters are often comprehended by storytelling, the verbal expression of which has been abundantly studied. Pictorial manifestations of narration, however, have received comparatively less attention. Mostly, narration has been associated with verbal discourses, where, briefly put, events or situations are temporally ordered. Even though the narrative capacity of pictures has been taken for granted by e.g. art historians, attempts to elucidate the semiotic and cognitive basis of visual narrativity, esp. in static pictures, have been relatively rare (cf. Ranta, 2013).

Within cognitive science, narratives are regarded as crucial and fundamental cognitive instruments or tools (e. g. Bruner, 1990; Schank, 1995). As Roger Schank suggests, the identity of (sub-) cultures is to a considerable extent based upon the sharing of narrative structures. According to Schank, culturally shared stories—or stories in general—occur frequently in highly abbreviated form, as “skeleton stories” or “gists”, not least in pictorial form. Moreover, in ways that correspond to Schank’s account of storytelling and cognition, these may also have implications for conceptions of one’s home-culture in relation to an alien-culture. Many pictures and visual artworks have indeed been produced in order to consolidate, modify, and demarcate certain cultural stances.

In this paper, I shall focus upon one (and even today highly relevant) example of creating cultural identity, namely the racist confrontation of the “Aryans” vs. the Other (esp. Jews, but also Slavs and Romani) as promoted by National Socialist thinking and politics during the Third Reich in German history. Some concrete pictorial examples indicating these attempts will be discussed and analysed from a narratological and cognitive semiotic perspective.

*Keywords: art, pictures, National Socialism, narrativity, cultural encounters, cognitive semiotics, cognitive psychology*

## 1. What Is (Pictorial) Narrativity?

Unquestionably, narrative is a cross-cultural phenomenon as well as one occurring across all individuals within cultures. Despite any cultural variations as to subject matters, the capacity and practice of storytelling seems to be prevalent even among the most isolated societies. But also as to the subject matters, many successful stories seem indeed to be concerned with more or less universal human preoccupations, such as sex, danger, life and death, deception, violence, power, wealth, and so on (cf. Schank, 1979). Many stories, in various kinds of semiotic modalities (whether oral, written, or pictorial), appear to touch upon our existential interests, fears, and hopes, and thereby contribute to giving structure to the instability and vulnerability of human existence. They tell us something about the world (or some of its aspects) and about possible or recommended ways of interaction or manipulation. Thus storytelling is certainly an important means of creating ontological, existential, or social orders as well as reminding us of existent ones (of which we are perhaps not always aware), thereby playing a part in their reproduction (cf. Ranta, 2013).

But what exactly is a narrative? A minimal condition for something being a narrative has, for example, been claimed to be “the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other” (Prince, 1982, p. 4). Although most accounts have focused upon verbal narratives, this condition as such has no particular requirements concerning the expression side, thus opening up for the possibility of narrative being manifested in media other than language, and even in such media which do not permit any (clear) temporal division, such as static pictorial representations (cf. Sonesson, 1997). Quite frequently, narratives have been delineated from non-narrative texts (e.g. arguments, explanations, or chronicles) by a set of defining criteria, such as temporal sequentiality, emplotment, eventfulness, causality or causal agency, and particularity (rather than generality). Since all of these features are not necessarily found together, narrativity may perhaps reasonably be regarded as a prototype-based category, i.e. centring around clear-cut “stories” experienced as reference points, though as a whole constituting a category with fuzzy boundaries. Narratives, one could argue, may be intertwined with or at least include non-narrative texts; narratives may be manifested in various genres or media; and meaning bearers of various kinds may be more or less narrative.

As a point of departure, let us thus propose that a narrative usually is a “text” (in a wide semiotic sense, i.e. understood as every meaning-bearing artefact produced within a particular culture) that is constructed to represent a temporal sequence of events or actions that usually are experienced as being causally intertwined in some way. These texts may be purely fact-based, fictional, or both; further, they can be verbal, nonverbal, or a combination of both.

We may subsequently ask what kinds of functions or needs narratives might fulfil. As various scholars have suggested, narratives may function as:

- Fundamental means for organizing human experience and for constructing models of reality;
- Means for creating, consolidating, and transmitting cultural traditions, and building the values and beliefs that define cultural identities;
- Vehicles of dominant ideologies and instruments of power, designed to influence recipients' attitudes and behaviour;
- Instruments of individual or collective self-creation;
- Moulds for shaping, modifying, and preserving individual and collective memories;
- Sources of education and entertainment;
- Scenarios for thought experiments;
- Means for fostering empathy and antipathy (see e.g. Ryan, 2005, p. 345; Korthals Altes, 2005).

The privileged medium for transmitting narratives appears to be linguistic structures, which until recently most narratologists have focused upon. At first glance, narratives would indeed seem to be best supported by “genuine” temporal arts, such as poetry, drama, literature in general, motion pictures, or the like, which have an inherently sequential structure. Static pictures, by contrast, are only capable of representing timeless situations or single, momentary instants within a wider, implied story-arc. Thoughts along these lines have been put forward by 18th-century scholars, most notably perhaps by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (Lessing, 1766/1957). However, it seems unquestionable that numerous (more or less clear-cut) examples of pictorial storytelling can be found at least as early as ancient Greece and Rome, not to mention the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (and numerous examples from the Middle East and Asia could also be cited, including pictorial narratives from ancient Egypt, India, and China). Thus we might distinguish between at least three types of pictorial storytelling (cf. also Ranta, 2011, 2013):

1. *Serial pictures* where multiple static, distinct pictures, each of them conveying a single scene, are linked in narrative series that has a fixed reading order, frequently horizontal or vertical.
2. Single pictures showing different events and persons in the same pictorial space, sometimes called “continuous narratives”, cases of “simultaneous succession”, or “*polyphase pictures*” (cf. Andrews, 1995; Ryan, 2012 [2014], section 3.4.1; Steiner, 2004; Wolf, 2005).
3. Single pictures in which an entire story is compressed into or implied by a single scene, sometimes called “*monophase pictures*”.

The last case, of course, constitutes a challenge: to what extent does pictorial narrating in especially single pictures presuppose the beholder's previous acquaintance with verbally communicated stories or further media-external contexts? In media involving static images, many works seem indeed to be parasitic on language-based stories, where only a beholder acquainted with the relevant contextual background might see this pictorial representation as a significant or crucial moment within a narrative sequence, implicitly

stretching backwards in time as well as forward into the future. Monophase pictures may have a more or less illustrative function, being sometimes complemented by external or internal textual descriptions, comments, and other paratextual elements; in other cases a verbal title prompts viewers to situate the static images in a narrative context (see also Ryan, 2012 [2014], section 3.4). Yet pictorial stimuli are frequently also narratively quite indeterminate or polysemic, permitting multiple interpretative paths. For example, different temporal orders or causal relations among the rendered agents may be imposed upon and compatible with the content of pictures, though the pictures in question strictly speaking do not exclusively express any of those orders or relations, neither formally nor semantically.

After this introductory overview of some debated aspects of narrativity, let us address the second subject of this paper, namely how racial identities and conceptions of otherness were established and consolidated during the Third Reich, not least by pictorial means.

## 2. Constructing Otherness in the Third Reich

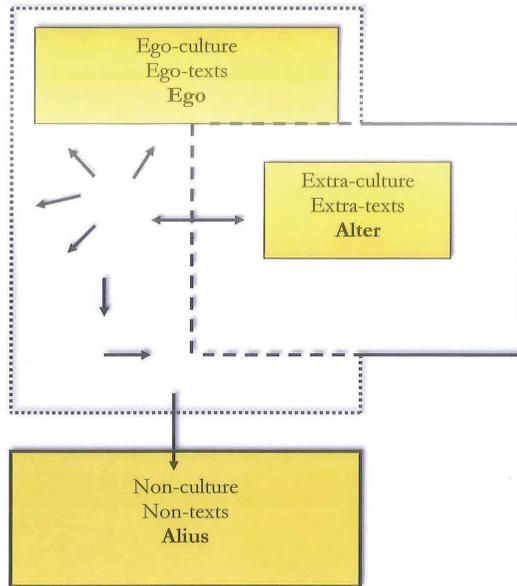
In his philosophical analysis of experience and consciousness, the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl introduced and elucidated the concept of Lifeworld—the (dynamic) horizon of all our experiences and the world taken for granted, i.e. the background on which all things appear as themselves and as meaningful. Consciousness is claimed to be rooted in and functioning in a world of meanings and pre-judgements that are socially, culturally, and historically constituted. Within the Lifeworld, in addition to any individual stance, intersubjective higher order groupings, such as families or nations, are established, joined by common purposes, practices, and “communal memories” (cf. Lewis & Staehler, 2010, p. 57). As Husserl’s thoughts on intersubjectivity and historicity became further elaborated, the concepts of *homeworld* and *alienworld* were employed to designate historically dynamic and co-constitutive worlds (as experienced). The homeworld might be described as a single community of subjects, their common lifeworld—a general framework which can be looked upon as a system of senses, values, or meanings, fixed by (implicit) intersubjective standards that determine what should count as “normal”. An alienworld, on the other hand, is something considered abnormal to this standard normality, conceived as alien, which can only be appropriated or assimilated into the lifeworld, and only understood against its background.

From a cultural semiotic viewpoint, as first delineated by the Tartu school of semiotics, it might be argued that all societies make models of their own culture, conceived of as in opposition to other cultures (Lotman et al., 1975). In these models, the own culture is basically opposed to nature or non-culture, as order to disorder, civilisation to Barbarism, and so on. This conception might be regarded as a *canonical* model, defined from the point of view of the own culture itself, implicitly placing the Ego inside it looking out over non-culture (as suggested by Sonesson, 2000, 2004, 2012). There are at least two kinds of criteria for making such a division between culture and non-culture:

something could be part of non-culture because it is less valued (a normative stance), or because it is too difficult or even impossible to understand (a cognitive stance). But these criteria do not have to coincide. It might be easier understanding one's own culture, but it is possible to have at the same time a more positive view of another culture (as, for example, Peter the Great, who wanted to westernize Russia). In such cases, the subject has no longer a normative preference for his/her native culture, but rather for the other. Moreover, we may make a distinction between those we treat as different but equal, with whom we are on speaking terms, i.e. as *Alter*, and those we treat as things, as the third person of grammar, i.e. as *Alius*. Columbus et al. might be regarded as a good example of conceiving the American continent and its inhabitants as *Alius*, concerning the relation as to how they acknowledged the language and ways of life of whom they met; the natives are e.g. included in the same lists of merchandise offered to the emperor, such as gold, spices, and so forth. Cortez, on the other hand, took the attitude one might have to an *Alter*, a possible dialogue partner, when hiring translators and giving the Spaniards some paraphernalia of Mesoamerican culture (cf. Sonesson, 2000).

I will in the following use the terms *Ego-culture*, *Alter-culture*, and *Alius-culture* and apply the “dialogical” model proposed by Anna Cabak Rédei (Cabak Rédei, 2007, pp. 262-265). According to this model (see *figure 1*), an *Alius-culture* is characterized by the absence of dialogue and basically—from the Ego-perspective—an unwillingness to understand and to be understood. While Extra-texts belonging to the *Alter-culture*, seen from the perspective of the Ego, have common normative and cognitive denominators and in principle can be made intelligible, Non-texts belonging to the *Alius-culture* are non-informative and lack any value; they are not regarded as having the potential of participating in a dialogical communicative act. The *Ego-culture*, as the broken lines indicate, is open to expansion towards the *Alter*; it models and expands its self-understanding in relation to the *Alter-culture*, while the solid framing lines of the *Alius* box indicate the lack of any such dialogical potential. In both cases, however, the relationships between *Ego-culture* and *Alter* and *Alius* respectively are asymmetrical, dominated by the Ego, which decides which position to take versus the counterparts. Furthermore, the arrows in this schematization are intended to suggest processes of inclusion and exclusion of texts from the *Ego-culture* perspective according to its needs, and where the *Alter-culture* to some extent can be integrated, being partly open to expansion towards or assimilation within the former. However, Non-texts from the *Alius-culture* may be observed, but are not allowed to enter the *Ego-culture* sphere, being unwanted and/or unintelligible.

Figure 1. The dialogical model (modified reproduction from Cabak Rédei, 2007, p. 263)



This model, so I claim, might fruitfully be employed to analyse some of the mechanisms characterizing the formation and consolidation of collective identities in Nationalist Socialist Germany. The Third Reich may be seen as the culmination of the development of nationalism in Europe resulting in a radicalized segregation of Ego-culture from its Alter or Alius counterparts. Within this context, considerable efforts were made to produce “texts” (in a wide sense), not least including pictorial material, in order to demarcate the (Aryan) Ego from the Other.

As to pictorial representations, these attempts were certainly not restricted to the fine arts, but occurred also frequently through media such as newspapers or journals (e.g. *Der Stürmer*, *Neues Volk*, *Das Schwarze Korps*, or *Kladderadatsch*), school and children’s books, flyers, and not least posters, which all were extensively used for propagandistic purposes.

Let us first have a look at which basic ideas seem to have been prevalent within National Socialist or, if we may generalize, fascist world views. First of all, we may note that it has sometimes been claimed that the term “fascism”, stemming from the Italian term “Fascismo”, should be restricted to the specific national form of “authoritarian” or “totalitarian” regime or political movement which ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943 under Mussolini’s leadership. Some scholars have argued that there are substantial differences between Italian fascism, German National Socialism, and other varieties of “fascist” movements, and the National Socialist movement seems to have put much stronger emphasis on racial issues than its Italian counterpart.

However, since the 1990’s an increasing consensus concerning the use of “fascism” seems to have emerged among some political scientists and historians, according to whom this concept may very well be stipulated as a generic one with certain core tenets,

at least for pragmatic and comparative reasons. Roger Griffin's work on fascism as a generic concept has by numerous scholars been described as one of the conceptually and methodologically most sophisticated approaches in fascist studies (e.g. Griffin, 1993, 2004). According to Griffin, we might very well describe a "fascist minimum" as "palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism". The term "palingenesis" stems, etymologically seen, from the Greek terms "palin" (again, anew) and "genesis" (creation, birth) and is used by Griffin as referring to a core myth within fascist thinking. The idea of renewal, rebirth or regeneration is of course by no means peculiar to fascism, but also essential within Christianity, most notably with the resurrection of Jesus Christ himself, the Renaissance view on the West's cultural history, Marxist thinking, just to mention a few examples. And as an archetype myth it is not even restricted to the Western world. Certainly, as Griffin claims, the idea of and striving for a new birth occurring after a period of perceived decadence lies at the heart of fascism. The term "populist ultra-nationalism" is referred to as a very specific sub-category of "nationalism". First, fascist movements depend, even if they are led by small elites, in practice or in principle on the support of the public or larger groups of people. Second, they reject anything compatible with liberal institutions or pluralist representative governments, they favour prevalently charismatic forms of politics, and they endorse a concept of the nation as a "higher" racial, historical, spiritual or organic reality which includes all the members of an assumed ethnical community. Fascism's mobilizing vision is that of the national community rising phoenix-like after a period of intruding decadence which all but destroyed it. Some of these mobilizing passions—which function in fascist movements to recruit followers and "weld" its followers to its leader—can, as suggested by Robert Paxton, perhaps be outlined as follows:

1. The primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether universal or individual.
2. The belief that one's group is a victim, a sentiment which justifies any action against the group's enemies, internal as well as external.  
[...]
5. An enhanced sense of identity and belonging, in which the grandeur of the group reinforces individual self-esteem.  
[...]
7. The beauty of violence and of will, when they are devoted to the group's success in a Darwinian struggle. (Paxton, 1998, pp. 6-7).

At the heart of fascism, defined as a palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism of which National Socialism might be seen as a subcategory, lies thus the idea of striving for a new birth occurring after a period of perceived decadence (e.g. Griffin, 1993; Paxton, 1998; see also Ranta, 2010). This general narrative of crisis would, for example, include the belief that one's group is a victim, a sentiment which justifies any action against the

group's enemies, internal as well as external (Paxton, 1998).

### 3. Ego vs. Alius in Third Reich Iconography

In National Socialist art, the Aryan past is rendered as an idyllic world, frequently as a pre-industrial way of life, functioning as a (timeless) source of inspiration for the future; racially perfect men and women are depicted, partially alluding to an ideal Classical past. Imperfect aspects of this idealized world, such as “inferior races”, are largely omitted. Modernist (esp. abstract and expressionist) art is, however, clearly regarded as an opposite pole, indicative of ethnic, political, or mental Otherness. In other media, such as journals, posters and school books, however, Bolshevik or Jewish stereotypes of the Others are explicitly shown in propagandistic images in order to reinforce anxieties about contemporary developments in political and economic life. The “typical” outward features of those reveal, for example, their allegedly Middle Eastern and Asiatic as well as derogatory characteristics. While “racial inferior” elements of the German race (e.g. persons with mental or physical disabilities) or “inferior races” (e.g. Slavs) sometimes were conceived of as Alter-cultural elements, Gypsies and especially Jews had a special status as anti-types, as belonging to an Alius-culture, deprived of any option of assimilation, with which no dialogue whatsoever could be possible. An example illustrating—and participating in the overall Nazi narrative, as outlined in the previous section—this antithetic distinction between the Ego and the Alius can be found in the picture book for children “Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud bei seinem Eid” (Don’t Trust a Fox in a Green Meadow or the Oath of a Jew) from 1936 (by Elvira Bauer, 1936, *figure 2*).

Figure 2. (German) Ego vs. (Jewish) Alius (from Bauer, 1936, p. 4)



The German is here depicted as a tall, blond, slender and sturdy Aryan archetype with regular features and a high forehead. His shovel indicates that he is engaged in physical (i.e. “genuine”) work. In contrast to the Aryan ideal, the Jew is shown as short, dark-haired, misshapen, bulky, with a sloping forehead and a crooked nose, embodying the Jewish racial characteristics set forth by the Nazis. At the same time, this image conveys the stereotype of the money-hungry Jew, well-dressed and carrying an attaché case in his hand and a financial newspaper in his pocket. The proud posture of the Aryan, contrasting with the somewhat crooked one of the Jew, looks fiercely down upon the latter, who seems to give him a sneaky glance. These illustrations are then accompanied by short texts in verse form, intended to enhance this dichotomization of these figures. As to the right one, the accompanying text reads as follows:

*This is the Jew, as all can see,  
The biggest villain in the whole Reich!  
He thinks himself the greatest Beau  
Yet is the ugliest around!*  
(Bauer, 1936, p. 5; my translation)

Frequently, in art as in other pictorial media, Aryans are depicted with blond hair, blue eyes, long head, a smooth straight nose, and presumably tall stature—the stereotyped physical appearance of the Nordic race. Especially within the fine arts, the everyday life of the Ego-world is rendered in a non-problematic and idyllic way, where humans often seem to live in a rural society, a cultural environment consisting of craftsmen and peasants with close contact to nature and within an implied “unspoiled” social order, not least within the family. In summing up, main groups of artworks produced and officially sanctioned between 1933 and 1945 had the following topics:

1. Landscapes, showing the beauty and “eternal” essence of the German homeland (*figure 3*; Davidson, 1991).
2. The simple, idyllic life of peasants and craftsmen (*figure 4*; Davidson, 1991).
3. The security and comfort provided by the family.
4. Workers in a pre-industrial society.
5. Women as mothers or sexually reproductive, preservers of the race.
6. Racially worthy (Nordic, Aryan) humans, sometimes from a (mythologized) ancient/antique past.
7. Construction sites (e.g. of high ways, bridges, [administrative] buildings).
8. Party officials (not least messiahlike renderings of Hitler himself)
9. War scenes, often idealizing the comradeship and (heroic) death of soldiers.

Figure 3. Autumn Countryside in the Eifel (Werner Peiner, date unknown)

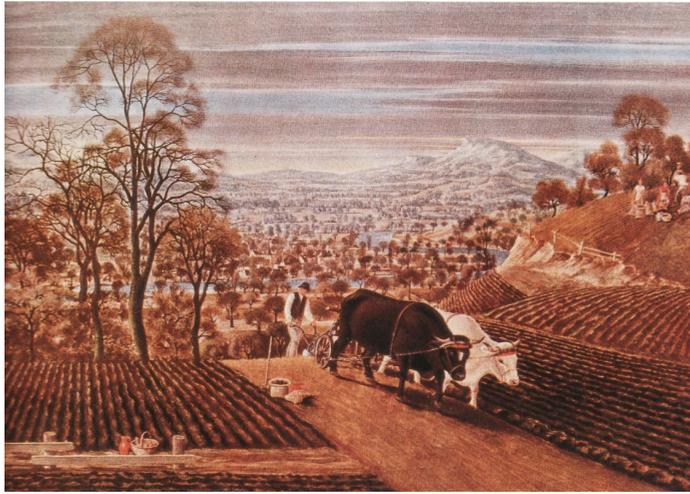
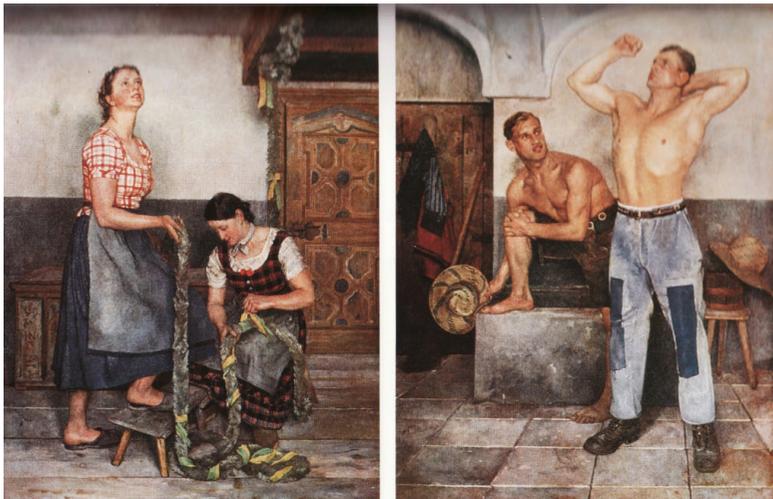


Figure 4. Peasant Trilogy: The Servant Girls/The Servants (Sepp Hiltz, 1941)



The fine arts as, for example, Hitler stated in his inauguration speech of the exhibition building “Haus der deutschen Kunst” (House of German Art) in Munich (1937), should be uplifting, represent the good, beautiful, and healthy, and omit critical or problematic social issues. In other media, the rendering of anti-types received a far more prominent role. Jews, not least, are frequently rendered as short, fat, kinky-haired, hook-nosed, thick-lipped, stingy, dark-coloured, beady eyes, and short arms, just to mention some characteristics (*figures 5 a/b, 6*).

Figure 5. a) Front page of the journal “Der Stürmer” (October 1936, issue 41); caption: “Insatiable—Far be it from the Jews to enslave a single people. Their goal is to devour the entire world”; b) Caption: “Baptism has not made a non-Jew out of him” (from Hiemer, 1938, p. 19)

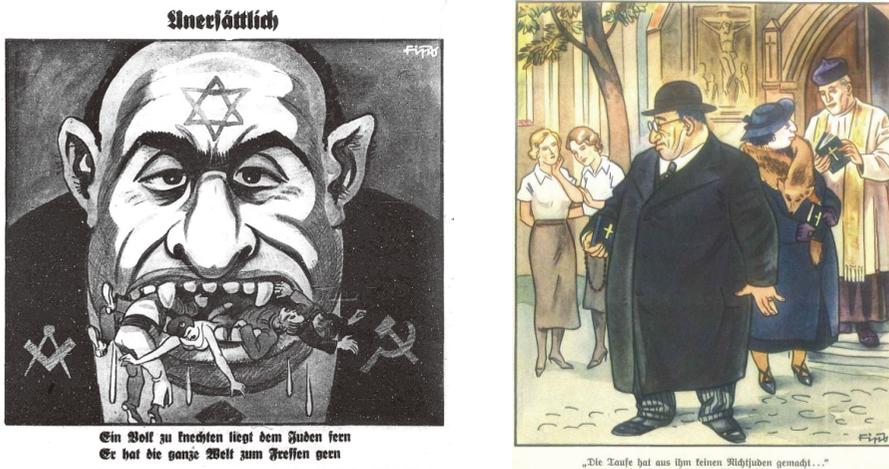
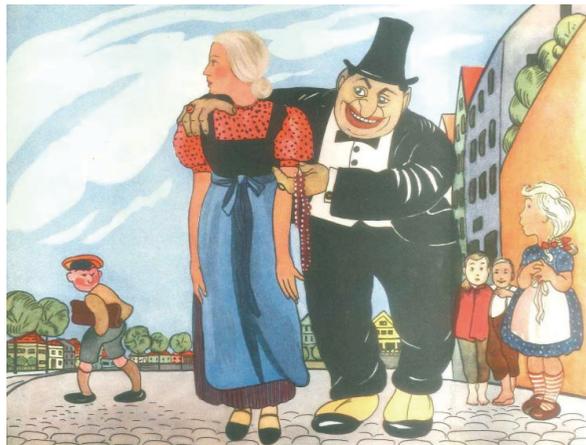


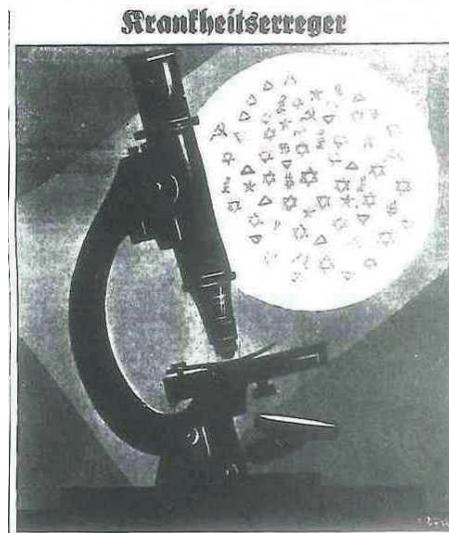
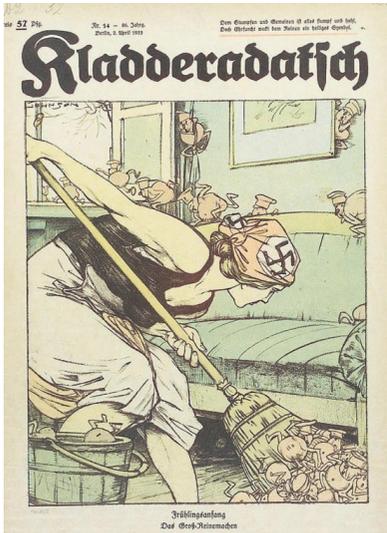
Figure 6. (from Bauer, 1936, p. 24)



The Alius-type is basically conveyed as an infiltrator, talented in mimicry, who, upon gaining entry into German society, has usurped the political and economic power of Germany and focused his attention upon the destruction and infiltration of the German people (figure 6). From the visual differences, other differences are inferred; Jews are considered to be unable to create innovative culture and art, just being imitators at best. In general, their thoughts, feelings, and actions are presented as a contradiction and threat to German morality. In contrast to the honest, productive German farmer or worker, the Jew is depicted as parasitic and quasi-human, engaged in deceitful activities as a lawyer, a merchant, or a banker, sometimes in cooperation with other enemies, such as the USA or the Soviet Union. Apart from being depicted as greedy and unpleasant, they were also portrayed as degenerate, appalling masses associated with vermin or the like, thus being wholly dehumanized (figures 7 a/b).

Figure 7. a) Front page of the journal “Kladderadatsch” (April 1933); caption: “Beginning of Spring—Great Cleansing”;

b) Front page of the journal “Der Stürmer” (April 1943, issue 16); caption: “Disease Germs”



The demarcation of Jews as the ultimate *Alius* had a considerable significance for consolidating and enhancing the Aryan Ego-culture, as an efficient cognitive tool for the promotion of the National Socialist utopia. Indeed, it might even be claimed that a group of scapegoats were essential in order to increase the mobilizing passions mentioned earlier. Hitler himself described his view on the role of Jews, during an alleged conversation with Hermann Rauschning, a German politician and former member of the Nazi party (which he renounced already in 1934). When asked whether he was striving for the total annihilation of the Jews, Hitler responded as follows:

‘No,’ he replied. ‘We should have then to invent him. It is essential to have a tangible enemy, not merely an abstract one. [...] The Jew,’ he said, ‘is always with us. But it is easier to combat him in the flesh than an invisible daemon. The Jew was the enemy of the Roman Empire, even of Egypt and Babylon; but I have been the first to go all out against him. Jews have been ready to help me in my political struggle.’ (Rauschning, 1940, p. 237)

Although the accuracy and numerous details of Rauschning’s report have been questioned by some historians (cf. esp. Hänel, 1984), his account is certainly compatible with Hitler’s and other Nazi politicians’ writings and speeches. And undoubtedly, National Socialist iconography, as here exemplified, and its implications can quite clearly be regarded as having given expression to, and being intended to promote and enhance the Nazi version of paligenetic ultra-nationalism. And as such, this iconography was a strongly contributing ingredient of a meta-narrative describing the Aryan homeworld as threatened by Alien intruders, which have to be combated (for an interesting overview of pictorial

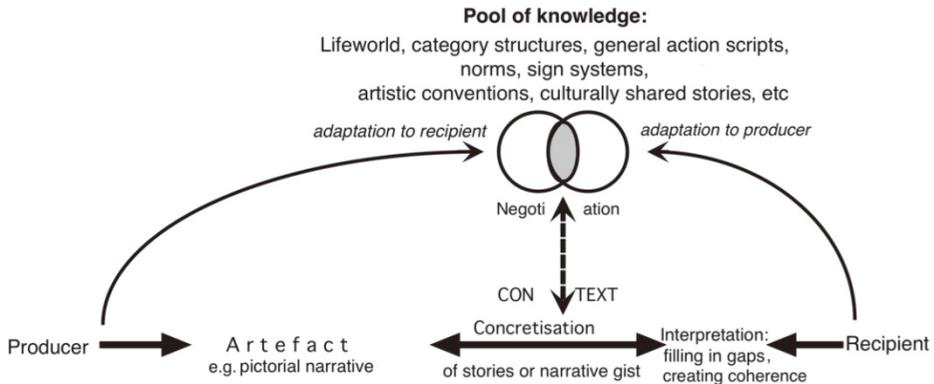
Nazi propaganda, see Narayanaswami, 2011).

#### **4. (Pictorial) Narratives as Cognitive Tools**

Let us now, in the last section of this paper, return to narrativity, in particular pictorial storytelling. Generally speaking, as cognitive psychologists such as Jerome Bruner and Roger Schank have argued, narratives are crucial and fundamental *cognitive* instruments or tools (Bruner, 1990; Schank, 1995). For these theorists, stories support or enhance intelligence itself. According to Schank, in his later work which extended his previous research on action schemas, intelligence largely involves the storage and retrieval of scripts, that is, generalized sets of expectations about what will happen in well-understood situations. On various levels of abstraction, story-based memories arise as the result of our attempts to preserve “the connectivity of events that would otherwise be disassociated over time” (Schank, 1995, p. 124). Furthermore, as Schank suggests, cultural identities are largely based upon shared low- and high-level narrative structures. Such culturally shared stories—or stories in general—occur frequently in a highly abbreviated form, as “skeleton stories”, proverbs, or as “gists.” People often do not remember specific narrations of stories, but rather gists. Thus condensed linguistic utterances can remind us of possible gists, which are then sometimes extended into full-fledged narratives.

Now, I would like to claim that pictorial material often functions in a similar way. As mentioned earlier, pictures may have a quite explicit or full-fledged narrative appearance, but sometimes even highly condensed or indeterminate pictures may trigger the emergence of narrative interpretations. These may be idiosyncratic, but frequently they may also be intersubjectively shared or created. Indeed, the production of visual works of art or pictures in general is influenced by the requirements and needs of a certain public. The producer replies to these requests and offers opportunities for the beholder to bring his or her background experience (including familiarity with artistic conventions) to bear on the work. Both storyteller and recipient share numerous unstated assumptions concerning causal relationships between events, concepts of class, gender, age, social roles, etc., general cultural knowledge, acquaintance with various action scripts, and so on. Moreover, narratives also contain numerous normative assumptions or claims (e.g. ethical, political, or epistemic ones). The beholder interprets a work of art (within a given context, e.g. historical, social, institutional, and/or liturgical ones) in accordance with this background knowledge which the work has been adapted to, and narrative gaps in the pictorial material are “filled in” with the necessary connecting details by the beholders. The generation of pictorial narrativity as such an interactive relationship could perhaps be schematized as follows (*figure 8*).

Figure 8. Pictorial narrativity as the interaction between producer and recipient (modified adaptation of a communication model in Sonesson, 1999, p. 96)



Apart from many other functions, narratives or narrative gists may often be created as well as appreciated as fundamental means for organizing human experience and for constructing models of reality, as means for creating, consolidating, and transmitting cultural traditions, belief systems, and identities, and as scenarios for thought experiments. It seems hardly controversial to claim that narratives frequently, or even basically, function as significant cognitive instruments for organizing and stabilizing our various experiences, creating coherence and intelligibility within the vicissitudes and complexities of our existence. Moreover, in ways that correspond with Schank’s account of storytelling and cognitive processing, the implied world views of pictures may also impact the world views that they evoke (cf., for example, Kearney, 1984, Vidal, 2008 on the concept of world view; for a general discussion on pictorial representations, see Ranta, 2007, 2013).

Further, to borrow a term introduced by the psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald, narratives may be manifested as exograms, that is, “external memory record[s] of ideas” or external symbolic devices linked to the present context of remembering that allow us to extend and enhance our bio-memory systems and significantly augment the working memory capacity (cf. Donald, 2010). Such exograms are, for example, quasi-permanent, exceeding one’s life span; they have a virtually unlimited storage capacity; they are crafted; they are easily retrievable and, not least, they may be manifested in various media. Storytelling certainly did not suddenly “pop up” when written languages were developed; also orally told stories can qualify as exograms, if they are relatively widespread, well-known, and have a historical continuity or stability. Storytelling is basically a social action (or has emerged from social interaction), which involves a storyteller and a recipient. And surely narrative may also function as a means of manipulating and deceiving others, in order for the teller(s) to serve his (their) own end(s). As Donald claims, in “conquering a rival society, the first act of the conquerors is to impose the myth on the conquered. And the strongest instinct of the conquered is to resist this pressure; the loss of one’s myth involves a profoundly disorientating loss of identity” (Donald, 1991, p. 258; see also Scalise Sugiyama, 1996). Narratives

may be selections and (re-) constructions of a past and appear also to play a crucial role as cognitive tools or “exograms” for understanding and manipulating the varying environmental conditions which we as humans encounter. As representational units within a wider network of “distributed cognition”, narratives help to structure and coordinate social interaction.

To return to the main topic of this paper, National Socialist iconography as here outlined was—among others things—intended to render and reveal an eternal conflict between an Aryan homeworld against a (Jewish) alienworld. Some of the pictures produced had undoubtedly a quite explicit narrative appearance, and were rather straightforwardly experienced as such, for example illustrations used in children’s books or journal articles, where textual complements steered more fixed readings. But also still pictures in propagandistic posters, rendering Ego and Alius personifications with their alleged physical as well as implied racial, political, and moral characteristics, were certainly understood as narrative abbreviations of a larger narrative structure. This *master story*, which permeated the Third Reich in most media and institutions, in speeches, public spectacles, and exhibitions, basically consisted of the historical struggle between the Aryan protagonists and heroes and the Jewish antagonists and villains, between good and evil, and a promise of a utopian future. And within this overarching story, National Socialist images functioned as narrative gists and cognitive tools, used as instruments for generating and enhancing collective identities as envisaged by National Socialism.

### Note

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