

Civic Storytelling

*The Rise of Short Forms
and the Agency of Literature*

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Civic Storytelling and the Postliterary Image Life

Since the late twentieth century, the appeal of civic storytelling has extended beyond literary texts, assimilating the spread of the visual means of photography, video, film, animation, video games, virtual reality, and augmented reality. In addition, lived and personal storytelling has returned in such projects as *The Moth* and NPR's *Radio Diaries*. It seems fair to say that storytelling has left the realm of literature and has become omnipresent. The formerly specific term "storytelling" now covers a spectrum from the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion in the 1970s, to the documentary films of Alexander Kluge and Werner Herzog, to business practices involving viral public-relations campaigns and product-marketing strategies. Yet only very few of these inflationary uses of the term "storytelling" warrant what we have called "civic storytelling," the recasting and reimagining of civic life through a certain kind of brief narrative that can radically modulate the ontology of human encounters. While expanded storytelling such as the New Journalism or public relations perhaps appear to draw on the novella's original proximity to the newspaper, in the sense of a story accentuating a novelty, this so-called storytelling glosses over its problems to make them disappear, resulting in the opposite of the narrativized accentuation of civic storytelling. Fact is approximated to fiction not to catalyze the understanding of specific problems, but to redirect the reader's or

viewer's attention away from the problems at hand. This results in a breakdown of the separation of form and content, the differentiation for which a novella or a report must introduce arguments and to which it must guide attention.

Despite the exaggerated currency of storytelling, there is a strand of nonliterary and nontextual storytelling in the decades after Joyce and Arendt that truly acts with civic interest and brings the short narrative form into the postliterary realm. These narratives mix documentary and factual accounts of general knowledge with personal, subjective perspectives, reports, and experiences that turn an event or a problem into an experience, updating the novella, fairy tale, and epiphany forms. There may be no climate change, to give one example, unless a narrator tells the story of seeing it with their own eyes, narrating by social media post, smartphone-filmed video, or in conversations with relatives or friends the failure from one winter to the next of crops reliably grown for a century. Because they are personal, some of these exploratory stories have been called "essays," yet these are not the same things as the essays of Montaigne or Virginia Woolf, not true soliloquies of thought. Postliterary civic storytelling is essayistic in its experimental mixing of media genres, crossing the textual essay's conjectural initiation of thought with an exploration of various media genres. The term "essay" is also inaccurate because it omits the narrative core of these accounts. Instead, such storytelling "essays" stand in the tradition of short narrative forms and update genres such as the fable, the novella, because they perform a topical form of speech addressing the here and now. They present an event or a phenomenon, and not a mere idea, which is why postliterary short narrative forms that narrate civic stories can be videos, photo stories, or graphic novellas, but also mixed-media installations in art spaces or virtual-reality experiences. Before facts or information can be drawn from such short-form narratives, their form guides our attention to extraordinary occurrences within the everyday, bringing them and the underlying problems and questions into the world for the first time.

Stranger Than Fiction

The media artist Steyerl has pointedly caught the problem of storytelling today by arguing that the trend of mixing personal and documentary media in journalism or art is not just typical of the digital realm, but it is also symptomatic of a general cultural discontent with fiction. She detects this problem in the fact that “the mix of fact and fiction is one of the main tools of contemporary political manipulation.” While the simultaneous increase of personal essayistic storytelling thus merely seems to remedy the larger trend in manipulation with its individualized version, in which one might see the effects of neoliberalism on the person, Steyerl is also witnessing an active “response” to this development: “There is a new lease on realism, to safeguard veracity, facts, reality, etc.,” resulting in a complementary increase in the documentary, almost as a remedy to the omnipresent essayification and essayistic storytelling.¹

The problematic consequence of the deepening opposition between essayism and realism, she continues, is that the middle ground between the two is no longer desired by narrators of either side. Fictional storytelling finds itself caught in a third space between speculative essay and realist documentation and is declared dangerous if it does not position itself clearly as an unhinged essayistic story or as quasi-documentary autofiction. Current novellas, epiphanies, and fables are required to justify the validity of their genuine mode—how and why their own values are different from the manipulative political fictions such as sensationalism, fake news, or conspiracies, on the one hand, and from the warranted, fact-based, personal, and witnessing narratives on the other. The ability of storytelling to introduce new problems into society, as Arendt had demanded, is thus already ontologically prohibited when fiction is exempt from civic discourse. The public is increasingly trained to pay more attention to how a narrative is framed, whether as proven fact or as unsubstantiated commentary, than to allow the story its own unpredictable and selective adaptation of reality and fiction.

With respect to her own work as a media artist, Steyerl formulates an emphatic advocacy of fictional storytelling: "It seems that one not only has to defend facts, but maybe fiction has to be defended equally rigorously. It is a fact that telling fictional stories does not necessarily equal lying. So, while the assault on facticity erodes civic life, trying to mitigate the situation by minimizing fiction erodes art."² Her defense of fiction does not obey the rules of the lie-or-fact polarization but seeks to reground art and fiction in the pre-essayistic mode where fact and fiction cohabit in narratives that seek to emphasize greater societal problems, as we saw, for example, in how Storm's story of Hauke Haien turned a dike into a body politic physically negotiating between nature and culture.

Elsewhere, Steyerl explains that the apparent lack of similar civic problems being identified in the postliterary era since the 1980s resulted from an increased tendency of real life to separate from its own fantasies. This led to the paradox that the imaginary threads always running through real life can no longer be fully imagined, since their transfer into actively fantasized or fictional modes is suppressed by the need to focus on facts. To approach this paradox as an aesthetic problem solved by fictional storytelling, Steyerl reoccupies the term "documentary," albeit only in quotation marks. What she desires to be "documentary" is thus the form of a genre, rather than a mode of representation: "My conviction is that, now more than ever, real life is much stranger than any fiction one could imagine. So somehow the forms of reporting have to become crazier and stranger, too. Otherwise they are not going to be 'documentary' enough, they are not going to live up to what's happening."³

Steyerl's undertaking is to work against the fact-or-fiction dichotomy by documenting the paradoxical and hence fictional ingredients of all that is falsely deemed purely factual. For postliterary storytelling, the underlying question we can extract from Steyerl's theory is hence primarily a formal one: How can reality or real life today be evoked, rendered, and addressed in its postliterary version? Steyerl implies the detachment of reality from textuality when she points

out how much a representation of “real life” would have to take into account what she terms “image life,” a concept signifying the mode of everyday life in current post-textual societies. We live with images, in images, and as images, that is, as both conscious and unconscious consumers, objects, and agents of images. “The thing formerly called real life,” Steyerl summarizes, “has already become deeply imaged,” and hence can no longer be grasped by “what we used to call representation.”²⁴ Neither theories of representation nor representational artistic practices have been able to capture how our image life can be narrated.

In a world that is no longer a textual reality but increasingly an “imaged” reality, civic storytelling and short narrative forms must consist of an “imaged storytelling” that works beyond the mere and often disciplinary, institutional, and medium-specific distinctions that still determine that a certain problem be narrated only in a certain way. Such conventional pairing suggests that simple normative differentiations are still unquestionably applied when a story is told: Must it be a text, image, or film? Art, literature, or essay? Online, in the university, or the museum? Such categories restrict storytelling modes to certain media, genres, and institutions and over time have even helped cause increasingly polarized modes of thinking and framing content in either-or dichotomies. These increasingly irreconcilable categories fundamentally illustrate Steyerl’s point about the decreasing ability of listeners, readers, and the public to engage with not easily categorizable narratives. An experimental and avant-gardist attitude such as that radiating from Joyce’s epiphanies or Flaubert’s *idées reçues* no longer creates interest in today’s postliterary “real life,” but does not receive the attention it demands and deserves simply because it falls into categories such as “text” and “literature” that no longer apply to early twenty-first-century real life in its fullest sense.

The modern and modernist rules of formatting narratives and stories have ceased to function today, and Steyerl’s diagnosis that the divergence of fact and fiction has left open a large, uncovered area of fiction suggests that the problem must hence be solved by letting

genres, institutions, and media fully overlap in the same way that our “real life” always overlaps with our “image life.” Instead, however, even mixed-media formats often keep separate speculative and factual passages and do not allow the crossing of modes and their mutual intensification. Speculative novellas such as the magical novellas of César Aira, for example his 2002 *Varamo*, or speculative film legends such as the 2015 film *Il Solengo*, directed by Alessio Rigo de Righi and Matteo Zoppis, have tried to answer this misleading policing of modalities by consciously yet defensively suppressing clear genre definitions.

A more aggressive and effective approach is offered by Steyerl herself. In another 2016 interview, she is asked about her mixing of scientific articles and artistic videos and answers with an imperative to conflate media, genre, and institution to aim for new epistemologies of today’s hybrid forms of life:

There are certain rules of science that, on the one hand, are very helpful but, on the other, also constitute mental barriers. Pure speculation, however, or fabulation — means I am unscrupulously drawing on — are sometimes cutting open unforeseen breaches between one area and another — between different disciplines or traditions but also quite often between completely separate geographic regions. I believe that we have to think together what does not belong together because that’s reality today. And that’s where extended procedures [*erweiterte Verfahren*] are needed.⁵

One can sense here that Steyerl’s theoretical analyses about the emboldened distinctions between fact and fiction are only preparing conclusions she draws for her own storytelling work in her films and also, to some extent, in her presentations. “Documenting” reality, in other words, is increasingly an act of creating active narrative forms by emphatically mixing genres so that they spill into each other without providing the reader or viewer with markers or warranties about the level of fictionality or facticity — all while capturing as closely as possible the lived realities of humans, which would be unnarratable by the means of nineteenth-century realism.



Figures 3–6.

Stills from Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013, signed certificate sent via Fedex—10/11/2016, HD video, single screen in architectural environment, 15 minutes, 52 seconds. Image CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl. Images courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin.



Steyerl's 2013 work *How Not to Be Seen*, for example, an almost sixteen-minute video that has also been shown as installation, could be categorized as a short narrative fiction, perhaps as a novella or a fairy tale or even as a story bearing "the air of a fable," as a recent catalogue suggests.⁶ Ascribing such genres to Steyerl's video work is not beside the point; it offers an exercise that is highly suited to gauge the systemic impact of short narrative forms in the postliterary realm. In fact, Steyerl provides her works, both videos and video installations, with a thoroughly narratological groundwork that understands the limits of the author in the postliterary. The works use the collective visibility of our "image lives" to tell us stories that are by definition collective, made up of analyses, examples, and fictional applications. Seen as a small narrative form, Steyerl's works are fairy tales according to Benjamin's theory. Both formally analyze malignant actors and structures in the world while at the same time narrating plots that encapsulate the overcoming of this evil, often in concluding utopian parables. The viewer is instructed how such an analysis of evil can be used to turn its mode of controlling the world on its head. In *How Not to Be Seen*, for example, a fundamental dialectic between visibility and controllability is narrated through historical dispositives of optical sovereignty, from camera technology to gated communities, but is then turned topsy-turvy by a fantastical revenge fairy tale. The very people who were treated only as pixels by digital-observation machines hijack the same camera technology that subjected them to the digital realm and thus, by controlling their own visibility dispositive, decide finally to live on as "happy pixels" in "low-resolution gif loops."⁷

With regard to her own theoretical takes on the possibility of "documentarism" today, Steyerl's work can be best summed up as escalations of the documentary in which realism becomes an agency against itself. Steyerl's narratives begin very much in the way novels, proverbs, and Joycean epiphanies begin, that is, as close to reality as possible. They then so overstretch their realist diegesis and its surfaces of the "image life" that they create glitches in what now

no longer can be considered a reliable representation. Steyerl has described her extended procedures of storytelling as “ripping reality,”⁸ an undertaking similar to Eyal Weizman’s project of a “forensic architecture.”⁹ This points to a two-step process of narration to tear through reality’s surface and then to “rip off,” to appropriate reality by modeling it differently, a process that accurately explains the poetological structure of Steyerl’s video works. In contrast to other critical media artists of the postliterary era such as Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen, the critical theory produced by tearing through reality in Steyerl’s works is only the debris of the videos. Their primary effect is to narrate an unrealistic short story with its “ripped” realistic means so that it can interfere with our everyday lives. In their fabulatory tales, they accentuate the shortcomings and blind spots of reality and offer them to political discourse.

As a consequence, Steyerl’s diegeses underline that our twenty-first-century forms of image life are not (or not yet) comprehensible by rendering and synthesizing factual information but only by undoing its existing explanations by concentrating and intensifying them until they tip over into fairy tales and fables. For that reason, Steyerl has described her working method not as “creating evidence or doing any form of consciousness-raising” but instead as working toward “finding ways to improve situations.”¹⁰ Her verb “to improve” points to operations of semantic formatting such as emphasizing, intensifying, and accentuating, which by going back to her diagnosis about today’s lives as being lived through paradoxically unavailable images underlines that real situations of the image life can be narrated only by “extended procedures.” The diegesis of such storytelling procedures must disregard the mental barriers between heuristic fantasy, personal fiction, investigative reporting, and scientific theory and their respective media or institutions. Unsurprisingly, the phenomenon of “improving situations” through fabulistic stories echoes Blumenberg’s interest in “inducing” “pensiveness” by the same type of stories, the unexpected opening of breaches and glitches in the lifeworld by interruption and disturbance. “We think about where

we stand,” writes Blumenberg in a definition applicable to Steyerl’s videos, “because we were disturbed in not thinking about it. Pensiveness means: everything is not as obvious as it was.”¹¹

No Climate Change without Storytelling

When Steyerl opts to reintroduce fiction into the documentation of reality, she is in fact choosing to return to an earlier stage of short-form narration, that is, the eighteenth-century stage of protonovellas found in the *lettre de cachet* system and in similar case history collections. As discussed earlier, case studies and case histories have generally been read to contain a specific scientific knowledge relevant for fact-based epistemologies such as scientific observation, medicine, and law. Yet they reveal facts in such casuistic systems only because readers in such a system know what range of information they are looking for and already understand such stories as representations of a specific type of case. A doctor interested in studying epilepsy might collect a set of case histories of what are believed to be epilepsy patients but will overlook the linguistic, geographic, or even narratological knowledge also contained in them. The epistemic system in place prescribes what can possibly be found in such case stories, namely, by definition, nothing outside of the system that organizes them. What gets overlooked in such a system is the agency of the form of the story.

A case history narrates an event so that it appears to offer knowledge. The casuistic framing, however, makes the reader forget the short form’s crucial part in the production of this knowledge. This means, in turn, that whenever short forms are considered to contain knowledge, an aspect of narratological form is at play in fictionally simulating such knowledge, in particular when short forms render scenes, events, or situations that are not yet easily sortable into casuistic systems. As seen particularly with the novella, short narrative forms narrate realities that involve unheard-of events or occurrences, which indicate that these events are unheard of because no collective or systematic effort exists to make them heard and to understand the causes and reasons for their happening.

The definition that unheard-of events must be told, however, is exactly what Steyerl demands today from the “documentation” of our “image life”; there must not be any compliance with the preexisting epistemic systems such as “reality” or “fabrication,” and the “documentation” of unheard-of events must exhibit how our lived lives are indeed stranger than fabrication or reality. What is unheard of — a story depicting an “improbable veracity” (*unwahrscheinliche Wahrhaftigkeit*) — suffices to be told. Steyerl thus reactivates this Kleistian formulation, which as Rüdiger Campe has developed,¹² marks the narratological border case of creating reality through fictional prose, that is, narrating what is virtually real (true) but factually unrealistic or improbable. For Steyerl, however, such improbable veracities must be extended to improbably veracious formats and media, thereby making the story worth telling by extending its means. Scientific arguments, Steyerl argues, should occur side by side with highly speculative fabulations, purely fabricated characters, and realistic everyday settings, whether as narration or image. With her program, Steyerl lays out what short-form civic storytelling in our day must do to narrate occurrences of life again in such a way that they indeed continue the effectiveness of topical speech. They give form to everyday occurrences and hence change how realistically these occurrences are perceived so that they can be introduced into society as issues demanding attention, response, and reaction.

One such current area that has attracted much attention from storytellers in the recent two decades is the environment, in particular under the conditions of climate change. While the plots of stories about the environment and the climate all follow one and the same basic interest — to capture specific sensations and situations — there are primarily local and personal occasions and reasons to tell climate stories, particularly because the narrator can be the witness only of the environment and the climate they live in and have experienced.¹³ While originally, climate change was conveyed and documented through secondary statistical data such as carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, by the early 2000s, geographers had

begun to provide first-person accounts of climate change. One such study published in 2008 documents the stories told about a changing climate by the First People Iñupiat members of the small community of Point Hope, Alaska, the northwesternmost settlement in the Western Hemisphere. The cultural geographer Chie Sakakibara, who studied their narrative culture from 2005 to 2007, concluded that “contemporary storytelling among the Iñupiat of Point Hope seeks to cope with an unpredictable future”:

Arctic climate change impacts human lifeways on a cultural level by threatening their homeland, their sense of place, and their kinship with the environment. . . . Such change is culturally processed through the tradition of storytelling, and storytelling serves as a way of maintaining connectivity to a disappearing place. The types of stories and modes of telling them reveal people’s uncertainty about the future based on knowledge of the immediate past. . . . The Iñupiat memory stays alive with their home, and the drowning home is to be remembered as the storytelling practice keeps the human kinship with the land visible and tangible as a cultural form of communication.¹⁴

Sakakibara presents climate storytelling among the Iñupiat as the continuation of a folk practice already in place. It follows no pre-framed epistemological system, like Western empiricist casuistry, but arises from within a community dealing primarily with the practical challenges of a rising sea level and melting tundra. Academic and journalistic categorizations of fact, fiction, and fabrication, of science, story, and subjectivity, cannot be applied to the storytelling she describes among the Iñupiat. Their practices are not caused by climate change, but rather assimilate the occurrences, uncertainties, and preparations resulting from a warming Arctic Circle into their existing storytelling routines and frameworks.

In light of this and other examples of how indigenous people adapt life practices to the Anthropocene, the global efforts to explore, track, and exhibit climate change through storytelling can be understood as a relearning of older techniques of the *Homo narrans*.¹⁵ As seen in the calls for a recognition of such practices by Benjamin,

Propp, and Bloch, Western modernity has systematically concealed the communicative and political potential of collective storytelling, especially as fairy tales or folk tales. Understanding the regional and larger environment via sense experience and direct communication has been devalued, as well, since the arrival of science-based disciplines of environment monitoring. That short-form storytelling, however, always has been the most capable way of processing environmental and climatic situations for the individual was foreshadowed by Locke's seventeenth-century example of how a personal commonplace anecdote about the weather creates a better situational understanding than syllogistic or systematic knowledge could. John Durham Peters has recently pointed to the deeply modern yet phenomenologically impoverished predisposition at stake here when he argues that the twenty-first century must "open again the relationship of media to nature" on a fundamental level, which, according to him, should lead to a new "a philosophy of elemental media."¹⁶ Short-form storytelling is perhaps one of the few human practices that has such openness to the media-nature relationship deeply inscribed in it. The Iñupiat of Point Hope, in other words, model for Western civilization the epistemological practices and qualities of storytelling that were lost since Locke's hopeless attempt to defend a country gentlewoman's anecdotal reasoning against modern science. In a reversal of the catastrophic Western dismissal of Indigenous practices in the last centuries, the temporalities of who needs to catch up to whom have now been flipped. While the Iñupiat and others will likely retain their storytelling practice during the ongoing climate catastrophe and following the resulting changes, the question is rather whether the West and the Westernized can roll back to a pre-Lockian state of the *Homo narrans* in time to adapt their lives to their storytelling.

A range of projects already exists that aim to reawaken such storytelling about the climate for nonindigenous and nonfolkloristic people and communities. Storytelling, however, is primarily considered a journalistic and documentary work that communicates

facts about climate change in multiple modes and media. A recently funded UK-based initiative of documentary filmmakers called the Climate Story Lab, for example, promotes existing films about the climate and provides a “tool box” for “both storytellers and cultural organizers — from museum curators to college professors to festival programmers — to facilitate necessary climate narrative conversations.”¹⁷ The global political conversation about climate change is accurately framed as a “narrative” because it includes a large non-factual, fictional, but nonetheless effective component. Their goal is not to extend science, but to aim to initiate the telling of stories about the minute effects of climate change around the world, ideally reaching “a biodiversity of stories as diverse as the ecosystem we seek to save.” Similar to the casuistic case history projects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the multitude of stories that such large-scale storytelling projects aim to promote serve primarily a particular predefined cause. In each story, climate change is supposed to be identified. In contrast to the criminalistic *lettres de cachet*, or the psychological *Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, there isn’t a single ideal addressee, such as a king, a judge, or a doctor, who needs to be persuaded according to preexisting norms and rules. Climate-change storytelling addresses a multitude of audiences across the world — the *Homo narrans* as its desired universal audience — and each will read such stories about climate change with different preconceptions, expectations, or even biases. The openness of such projects makes them less scientific and more discursively aimed at an open public. Hence, they compare to oral histories, which have been perhaps the most politically effective form of collective storytelling projects in the twentieth century. Revealingly, both collective oral history and collective climate change storytelling have a common goal beyond merely spreading experiences. They capture and record lived realities that are in danger of being overlooked, forgotten, and mistreated exactly because they are not necessarily available as empirical data, but as anecdotes, situations, and unheard-of events.

The Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich has compiled

numerous such storytelling projects, most famously those of survivors of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, in her 1997 book *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*.¹⁸ In her epilogue, Alexievich confronts the opposition between factual reporting and fictional storytelling that is at stake in the ongoing renewal of this form of civic interaction. While she set out to write an “oral history,” as the subtitle of the book acknowledges, Alexievich is convinced that “the simple fact . . . is no closer to the truth than a vague feeling.” It was thus not overlooked scientific data, but a relentless “spilling of these feelings past the facts” on the side of the Chernobyl survivors that caused her to collect these stories. Her anthology sets out to reach beyond factual history to a deeper history made of emotions exclusively transferable through the plots of stories. Comparing her own interest in storytelling to Russian literature, Alexievich argues that oral histories must go beyond the facts in a way that only literary narration can. “Why repeat the facts — they cover up our feelings,” she writes, summarizing the threat and thereby justifying, at least implicitly, how she has freely montaged and adapted the interviews she conducted over several years in Belarus for her book. Plot formations and their dramaturgy also lead Alexievich to focus on the everywoman and everyman who experienced Chernobyl because it was they who “were . . . answering the most important questions,” not academics or politicians.¹⁹

Alexievich’s self-assessment underlines that the literary techniques of editing, narrativizing, and montaging are essential to produce collective storytelling whose formal structure attracts the attention needed to compete with purely factual, nonliterary discourses such as science and journalism. As seen in the context of the *lettres de cachet*, the most irrelevant person in society can make their story heard at the top or the center of society only by short-form storytelling resembling the novella, the epiphany, or the fairy tale to create genuine attention from the bottom up. For this reason, Foucault had likened these *lettres* to the novella, and this bottom-up urge of storytelling continues in Alexievich’s single-handed montage of individuals.

The 2010s were a time when purely bottom-up storytelling could be seen to return in the context of climate change in nonindigenous, largely science-driven mass-information societies. A 2017–18 project by the American journalist Meera Subramanian reported a reemergence of storytelling in a series of nine articles titled “Finding Middle Ground: Conversations across America” that she wrote for *InsideClimateNews.com*. Moving from shellfish harvesters on the Texas coast to Georgia peach farmers and dogsledders in Wisconsin, Subramanian traces how the facts of a changing environment — warmer winters, more rain, flooding, heavier storms, rising sea levels, and overfishing, to name just a few — look from the bottom to those relying economically on its day-to-day stability. Finding such signs and instantiations of climate change on an immediate, direct level of economic dependance ensures the genuine emergence of a story from an individual’s lifeworld. But Subramanian is not just looking for working-class authenticity. Without bias, she depicts the opposing stories constructed by those working on the ground to make sense of the change they are witnessing around them. Her work is thus journalistic only on the surface, resembling instead the work of the cultural geographer Sakakibara, who depicted the Iñupiat in Alaska, the difference being that through Subramanian, we see that climate storytelling has now suddenly reemerged among nonindigenous cultures suddenly faced with unexpected changes. “Human beings are natural storytellers,” Subramanian recounts, describing what she found in her series, “and there are two narratives being told in America today about how to make sense of extreme weather events.” She offers the following explanation for these fundamentally different narratives:

One narrative comes from scientists and large international organizations with unwieldy names like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), who offer a lot of numbers and complicated science about a warming planet. . . . The other narrative turns to a single book filled with parables of good versus evil and drama far more compelling than what the IPCC reports

offer. The Bible explains tragedy and human suffering and redemption as being part of God's plan, giving meaning to natural disasters.²⁰

As applicable as Subramanian's opposition between science and religion might be, especially where she encounters climate change skepticism from Evangelical Christians, it seems clear that the difference between science and the Bible stems from their opposing implications for narratology and storytelling. While there are not always specifically and literally biblical oppositions to the top-down narrative of science, the centuries-long success of the Bible lies in its narrative composition. Hundreds of parables and episodes are offered for interpretation, and the Bible's resistance to science and, for that matter, the resistance of other religious books to science, is more reflective of the human condition as storytellers than of the internal failures of science. In fact, the Bible's descent from a vast tradition of apocryphal storytelling was disguised only after its canonization from a growing story anthology to a single completed book in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Almost all scriptural religions are results of prior mythological, parabolic, fantastical, legendary, and other short-form storytelling collections, pointing to the anthropological consistency of making sense of changing worlds by adapting existing plots and narratological devices to new events and environments.²¹ Subramanian even discloses that she did not mention climate change when collecting the stories of her interlocutors, but instead let them tell their own version of what we have generally come to call "climate change." For any antclimate-change project that relies on individuals acting out of their own conviction, this means that such apocryphal storytelling is necessary to make sense collectively before collective action can begin.

A Georgia peach grower's family, for example, whose farm dates back to 1897, tells Subramanian how their well-established peach varieties no longer receive the required amounts of "cold hours" below forty-five degrees Fahrenheit each winter. This prevents the peach buds in their orchards from fully developing and results in a

devastating crop loss that occurred in two-thirds of the most recent years prior to 2017. In the way that the peach farmer Robert Dickey tells the story about this development to Subramanian, we can hear a novella emerging about the worrisome days early in the year, when cold was expected but did not arrive.

But warm winters are especially vexing. When crops are lost to freezes and hail storms, the damage is immediate and obvious. The effects of a low-chill year vary wildly among varieties of peaches, between micro-climates within a single orchard, even from the base of the branch to its tip. “It was very unusual,” says Robert, recalling how baffled he was by his orchards this spring. “We did not know what some of the peaches on the tree would do.”

While the Dickeyes emphatically avoid the term “climate change,” these vexing events and the tense weeks in early spring still lead them to adapt their own bottom-up story, all the way to imagining how the next fateful winter could once again lead to a positive yield.

“I was very skeptical two years ago,” Mr. Bob’s son Robert says. “But with two warm winters I’m beginning to pay a lot more notice to it.” I ask how many consecutive winters he’d have to experience before he started planting varieties that could handle warmer weather. He laughs, then says, “Maybe one more.” . . . But the past, they insist, does not predict the future. The Dickeyes use the word “optimistic.” They use the word “hope.” Quietly, they are adapting, innovating, recovering and hedging their bets. They are planting test plots of low-chill peaches and watching them closely.

All of Subramanian’s nine articles tell about turning points in individuals’ lives that are merely a casuistic experience of climate change but that occur regardless of these individuals’ abiding by the scientific, top-down climate-change narrative. A devastating flood in West Virginia leads some members of a small, heavily Republican community to rebuild their houses on higher ground while praying in the hope that what they call “the weather” will improve. Conservative farmers in North Dakota decide to reduce their cattle herds in response to unforeseeable hardships brought by flash droughts,

arguing that they “love Mother Earth.” Young Christian students introduce the collective human effect into the usual Evangelical climate-change narrative of an almighty God by labeling climate change a “structural sin.”

What Subramanian reports from her travels across the United States is narratologically interesting because it exhibits that competing apocryphal climate change narratives are increasingly coalescing and merging, especially where they are generated and told close to turbulent environmental conditions. This status quo of climate storytelling in the United States manifests the opposite of the top-down-induced landscape of scientific truths that are mapped onto single incidents according to scientific accounts of these changes, leaving aside as irrelevant the locals’ views and cognitions. Subramanian presents a form of storytelling that is a “citizen storytelling,” the sister of “citizen science,” where everyone must speak up about how they observe the weather extremes in comparison with their own historical weather memory and related experiences. Again, Locke’s 1690s observation that looking at the weather, “a country gentlewoman will . . . clearly see the probable connexion of all these [factors] . . . without tying them together in those artificial and cumbersome fetters of several syllogisms” reminds us of the long-overlooked epistemic quality of topical short-form narratives for the environment and shows that communal action demanded by twenty-first-century climate change must begin with civic storytelling.

Since 2010, several online aggregator platforms have formed that invite often subjective accounts, stories, and observations from interested citizens across the world. Such “citizen storytelling” projects function within a more organized framework than common social media posts using hashtags, whose effect on Twitter or Instagram is visible only during truly catastrophic climate events such as a tsunami or extensive wildfires. A relatively early, but constantly growing platform is *ISeeChange.com*, a website that invites individual “sightings” such as the date of first snow, the sighting of blossoms, and the flooding of streets. *ISeeChange*, which was founded 2012, also

publishes coordinated “stories” from individual “sightings,” curating the collections of incidents and inviting individuals to participate. This includes a call to “volunteer to map urban heat in New Orleans” and an edited correlation of separate “sightings” into larger contexts that associate them with more in-depth scientific and journalistic reports, including, among others, a “story” about the increasing numbers of people displaced by natural disasters.

The need for such technological implementation of collective storytelling is summarized by the environmental humanist Rob Nixon, who argues that such low-threshold and media storytelling, whether done by a journalist such as Subramanian or on a platform such as *ISeeChange*, has finally superseded the activism of the specialist author. “‘Writer’ has become a more demotic designation,” writes Nixon, “less grand, less glamorous, less distinctively vocational, and more likely to involve mongrel blends of word, image, and video. *Écriture engagée* will never again be a specialist calling à la Sartre — or even à la [the Nigerian environmental activist] Ken Saro-Wiwa — now that we have entered what one might call the age of the writer-hacktivist.”²²

It is no longer the very strong unity of theory and fiction, as combined in the figure of the singular author, that can problematize the environment or climate through a plot. The story has now become a device of collective intelligence, told from within coalitions and communal experiences so that their telling as short forms can again incite new experiences. Such coordinated efforts actualize the power of the short form as an independent agency in the world that can — and in the case of climate change, *must* — act on its own behalf.

Known Practices of Storytelling and Unknown Forms of Life

As different as amateur online climate storytelling projects such as *ISeeChange* might seem from Steyerl’s elaborate videos and installations, they are two examples of a shift from the textual form of the short narrative to forms with heightened social impact in the

postliterary. Since the last decades of the twentieth century, short forms have been entering our “image life” by hijacking it, mixing text, voice, photographs, films, TV excerpts, video games, and virtual reality into stories that continue the topical function of narratives in everyday life. Besides Steyerl’s artworks and the crowd-based climate stories, there are numerous fictional stories that have extended their narrative diegesis beyond textuality and into images.

The reach of the postliterary short form results in two new functions. On the one hand, there is, as in Steyerl’s case, the short form’s function to “document” as yet unknown ways of life deemed too strange even for established fictional genres. On the other hand, there is the short narrative form’s translation of life forms such as the current “image life” or life in the climate crisis into phenomena, providing them with the agency to take place and realize themselves in reality and society. These two aspects — to “document” by fiction and to become a phenomenon’s agency — compose the short form’s anthropological practice within political society. They interfere into known factuallities and systematized lives with unheard-of events and life forms that recall the *Homo narrans* in us and leave us with the only possible practice: to follow the story and adapt our world to it.

The experimental extent of the current adaptations of the short narrative form for the postliterary imaginations of the present can be best illustrated with a brief list of further examples, which at the same time gives an outlook on how seemingly stable human realities in the image life have been, and will be, interrupted by such postliterary storytelling.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s contribution to the 1977 anthology film *Germany in Autumn* (*Deutschland im Herbst*) is an autofictional story about a distressed director and his boyfriend during the proceedings against the members of the Red Army Faction. The real-time realism of this thirty-minute episode is intensified by Fassbinder’s playing himself, caught between consuming alcohol and drugs and the newspaper’s, telephone’s, radio’s, and television’s reporting of distressing news. It presents to us, in a few minutes, how a familiar

lifeworld is suddenly transformed by the mediascape of a looming state of emergency and amplifies all emotional, psychological, addictive, and other previously existing tensions. No viewer of the episode can return to their prior reality without tension after watching Fassbinder succumbing to this experiment, whatever the viewer's current mediascape and political situation may be.

In 1980, the French author and photographer Hervé Guibert published a story called “Suzanne et Louise” consisting of single-paragraph vignettes and photographs that show and describe his two aunts, Suzanne and Louise, exhibiting them in their private rooms and during encounters — real, dreamed, and fictional — that Guibert has had with them. This story culminates in a final photograph in which Guibert places himself in his own story, sitting between his aunts, to signal, finally, that its author can no longer be indifferent to the story, or rather, that the agency of the short form finally had entered his own life during its conception.

In 1988, the Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski released ten one-hour films, each telling a separate, self-contained story about an ethical dilemma involving citizens living in a housing project in 1980s Poland. Resembling a novella cycle such as the *Decameron*, these films, called *Dekalog*, are based on the biblical Ten Commandments and take place in the same neighborhood. They are double-sided narrative investigations that test, via fictional narrative, how these kinds of archaic rules can possibly be followed in late twentieth-century societies while at the same time experimenting, via the form of the film novella, with how following a rule can be told from within the postliterary image life.

In 2016, the book *Franckushima* was published, a 256-page “graphic essay” retelling the 2011 Fukushima nuclear catastrophe like a disaster novella, only spilled over into a graphic novel about the failed evacuation of the area and the aftereffects of radioactivity and then into a scientific essay on the prevailing nuclear risks in France and elsewhere. The book was cocreated by a Japanese-French team of artists, scientists, and lawyers under the coordination of the illustrator

Géraud Bournet. It applies graphic storytelling to a varying set of genres that shift between documentary illustration, visual literature, and possibilitarian heuristics to induce political, legal, and activist actions to prevent further disasters of the same kind.

In 2020, the architect Samaneh Moafi and her team of collaborators at the collective Forensic Architecture published an eleven-minute video titled *The Beirut Port Explosion*, renarrating the devastating fires and explosions in a warehouse at the Beirut harbor in August 2020. Using governmental documents and publicly available video and photo footage and its metadata, the video reconstructs a 3-D model of the fires, smoke-plume shapes, and their location in the warehouse during the minutes before the enormous detonation that would devastate a large part of the city of Beirut and throw the Lebanese government into turmoil. What is at first purely speculative storytelling is applied here to condense possibilities and a plurality of media into realistic likelihoods. This transforms the heretofore unexplored disaster from an unheard-of phenomenon in the media into a realistic scenario of malfeasance that must provoke future investigations into the parties and actors responsible for the negligence. Upon release, this multimedia narrative was marked as “ongoing,” and all relevant 3-D models and files were made openly available via GitHub.

Such short narrative forms continue the tradition of topical storytelling for a postliterary and less textual public sphere. While today’s academic disciplines seem to have clearly defined what history is, what literature is, what journalism is, what an investigation is, and what art is, these stories disregard such definitions and such separations. Steyerl’s works, climate-change storytelling projects, and the examples above all demonstrate that the theoretical and practical transgressions of genre, media, and epistemological borders are symptomatic of a larger shift in the tradition of topical speech away from textuality and its seemingly stable formats. Instead, the Aristotelian and Arendtian rule of topical speech as the medium of appearance in the political space has begun to undergo subtle, but far-reaching transformations in the twenty-first century. The

loss of literature's monopoly on short narrative forms that we are experiencing since the rise of visual mass media in the twentieth century is thus no crisis of storytelling. It should rather be understood as just another stage in the morphology of how storytelling implements and modulates human encounters in society. In fact, the situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century should perhaps be compared to the situation in the mid-eighteenth century, when between Baumgarten's last poetical *ars topica* and Schlegel's first pragmatic novella theory, new modes of storytelling were rising to the surface while the existing determinators of the early modern lifeworld — statehood, personhood, citizenship, politics, religion, to name just a few — were undergoing radical transformations.

The deepest interest of this study is therefore to invite readers to think through the problem of topical storytelling in our time and to identify undiscovered strands of short narrative forms of fiction that apply topical speech to everyday problems in order to introduce them, as originally and necessarily fictional problems, into discourses of events. Given the agency of the short narrative form, Arendt's argument that enacted storytelling is required to open the space of politics now can be linked back to the short form in new ways; wherever short narrative forms insert unheard of events and perceptions into the public sphere, these events and perceptions necessarily have become a matter of the political. As evident in the context of the *lettres de cachet*, the fairy tale, and climate-change storytelling, such new storytelling modes and genres arise mostly between people and in situations that are not on the radar of academic discourses and other allegedly close observers of culture. The invitation to seek out topical storytelling in interdisciplinary and nonacademic fields is hence also an invitation to extend the academic concepts and ideas of what literary, essayistic, or multimodal storytelling might be into the necessarily nonacademic, not yet analyzed and theorized realm. We can keep all historical layers of short narrative forms relevant for both humanistic study and society only by knowing what storytelling and topical speech is today. Interacting with short narrative

forms as readers, viewers, and participants changes not just *what* we know about the world and society, but also *how* we know what world and society are. To discover what civic storytelling is at any given time — as heuristic practice, as media format, as epistemological interference — varies the very makeup of the human world.

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C O D A

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2. Ibid.
3. Laura Poitras, “Interview with Hito Steyerl,” *Artforum* 53.9 (May 2015), p. 313.
4. Ibid., pp. 313–14.
5. Katja Kwastek, “Interview with Hito Steyerl,” *Kunstforum International* 242 (September–October 2016), p. 128. “Es gibt bestimmte Regeln der Wissenschaft, die auf der einen Seite sehr hilfreich sind, aber auf der anderen Seite auch Denkbarrieren darstellen. Und die pure Spekulation oder das Fabulieren — Mittel, deren ich mich hemmungslos bediene — schlagen manchmal ungeahnte Schneisen von einem Bereich zum nächsten — zwischen verschiedenen Disziplinen oder Traditionen, aber auch sehr oft zwischen völlig voneinander getrennten geographischen Regionen. Ich glaube dass man das zusammendenken muss, was nicht zusammengehört, weil das heute die Realität ist. Und da braucht es erweiterte Verfahren.”
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