



THEME 02

# How do we distil a good narrative from 2020?

LANGUAGE

FUTURE  
THINKING

NARRATIVE

2020 was the year of the coronavirus crisis and in 2021, we'll hopefully be able to leave this crisis behind. How we do that depends on the story we create about it, and the language, metaphors, narratives we want to use. From the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, we can consider the structure of this story, and how we can actively build a post-corona future.

## Our observations

- In his book [Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present](#) (2020), historian Frank Snowden writes that epidemics have led to large public investments. The plague, for instance, led to the beginnings of public healthcare, as the temporary agencies and emergency ordinances gradually changed into permanent institutions. In his book [Epidemics and the Modern World](#) (2020), Mitchell Hammond writes that such initiatives and the first iterations of public administration were therefore of great importance to the modern state.
- According to French philosopher Michel Foucault, the Enlightenment and modernity were both a curse and a blessing. On the one hand, modernity has brought us much prosperity, in the form of disposable income, better healthcare, better social and physical infrastructure, and new innovations that make our daily lives better and more enjoyable. At the same time, Foucault contends modernity and the Enlightenment have also brought us a new form of power and discipline, "[biopower](#)", and he viewed the new forms and institutions of public [healthcare](#) as laboratories for experimenting with new forms of social control.
- In their book [Metaphors We Live By](#) (2003), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson pose that the metaphors we use in our language also influence our direct physical and social experiences. According to them, the conceptual framework from which we interpret and approach reality is metaphorical by nature, and thus subconsciously influences our thinking and actions. Metaphors aren't fully rational but integrate feelings, thought structures and our imagination into a figurative "image of thought".
- Many contemporary thinkers emphasize that humans are a "story-telling being", and that narratives are a fundamental determinant of how we relate to reality and are able to shape the future. Think of Yuval Harari in [Sapiens](#), Alex Rosenberg in [How History Gets Things Wrong](#), Jordan Peterson in [Maps of Meaning](#), Jeremy Lent in [The Patterning Instinct](#). The base unit of a narrative is a "narreme", comparable to the "phoneme" (a unit of sound) in phonology (the linguistic study of sound). A narreme relates to the state of affairs in the world and the positioning of story development and events within a certain wider narrative framework.
- In his magnum opus [Truth and Method](#) (1960), Hans Georg Gadamer poses that different domains of life and various sciences have a different understanding of truth and method from a merely scientific one. The humanities have their method of hermeneutics – the art of interpretation – in which meaning is sought. In his final chapter "Language as horizon of a hermeneutic ontology", Gadamer contends that meaning is always linguistic in nature as man has always interpreted reality and himself from the perspective of a historical and cultural tradition.

## Connecting the dots

In our [Retroscope](#), in which we looked back on 2020, we wrote about the term “crisis”: a moment of truth when we must make decisive judgments on what is actually important and what isn’t. A crisis also always forces us to make a political and ethical choice to transform the current situation into a brighter, more positive future. This makes the coronavirus crisis a real crisis, which has set in motion important choices and developments in the domains of geopolitics, technology and culture. The question now is: how do we interpret the events of 2020, and how will we develop a narrative? This is a matter of how the coronavirus crisis can lead to a new consciousness and how we should understand ourselves. Firstly, we could characterize the coronavirus crisis as a “[formative experience](#)”, as a consequence of which a new generation will adopt a new set of values, norms and ideas. This is apparent in our scenarios from [the Resilient World](#) in the domains of technology, culture and geopolitics. The coronavirus crisis could also leave an imprint on our political, technical and social systems (just as the [Second World War](#) left an imprint on our socio-technical systems). “Imprint” is a term from biology and psychology, which refers to changing behavioral processes of humans (and animals) as a consequence of being exposed to external stimuli (e.g. [imprinting](#) in genetics and developmental psychology). The coronavirus crisis will also leave such an imprint on our subjective and objective consciousness. It’s important how we formulate and understand this in language and concepts, express it in metaphors, media and stories. For example, think of the long-term consequences of pandemics on the development of modern institutions and public government services such as healthcare, and how we should understand and assess these new forms of “biopower”. What’s crucial in this is the narrative we develop; the wider framework from which we consider and position the coronavirus crisis and its consequences within a narrative axis. Northrop Frye (1912-1991) was an important thinker in the comparative narratology in literature. In his masterpiece [Anatomy of Criticism](#) (1957), Frye analyzes the narrative categories and patterns in different literary traditions, and devises an “anatomy” of historical modes, ethical symbols and archetypal myths and rhetorical genres. How does this relate to the coronavirus crisis? And what can we expect from the so-called “post-corona narratives”? The coronavirus crisis is best perceived from the tragic mode. The Ancient tragedy is about how people relate to their fate and ill-fortune, which serves to inspire pity and fear in the audience in order to achieve “catharsis”: emotional purification. The comedy, by contrast, is marked by protagonists making blunders and mistakes, while still ending happily, thus achieving catharsis in the audience through

laughter, humor and enjoyment. The coronavirus crisis caught many people off guard, and is often seen as a manifestation of Fate (e.g. as a [religious reprimand](#) or [nature’s pushback](#) against the hubris of modern man). In this tragedy, we may apply the framework from Frye’s first essay to distinguish various tropes, such as the highly mimetic coronavirus tragedy (marked by the sacrifices people such as nurses make to fight the coronavirus) or the ironic tragedy (man’s weakness in the face of nature or other lifeforms). When we consider different types of “coronavirus symbols”, the first one we notice is the descriptive symbol of the virus that’s bringing humankind, and even entire “superorganisms” such as economic systems (e.g. healthcare or the economy) to their knees. The visual symbol ties in closely with the use of metaphors, such as the prison as a metaphor for working from home, or the desert for the empty cities during lockdown. The mythical symbol displays the relationship to other symbols of our time that, as we’ve argued before, are [metamodern](#) in nature. The anagogic symbol represents the spiritual value of the coronavirus crisis, and whether it will lead to a better, more enlightened future or not. The mental side of the experience of the coronavirus crisis is also considered, such as the moods inspired by the coronavirus or our ideals in this [post-corona world](#). This brings us to the archetypal myths: which original images, figures and ideas emerge in our visualization of the coronavirus crisis? Describing these moods, ideals, experiences, in short: the mental side of the coronavirus, isn’t about explaining or categorizing various psychological phenomena - the cognitive and neurosciences are much better equipped to do this - but helps reveal the meaning of our world and existence in society. This means we can expect new media that - implicitly or explicitly - are a result of the moods of the coronavirus crisis and quarantine, in the same vein as the “[post-9/11 media](#)” or the “[atomic culture](#)” that arose after the bombings in Japan and the [critical philosophy](#) (e.g. the Frankfurter Schule) that came into being in response to the Second World War. This shows that our visualization of the coronavirus crisis and the narrative we create about it is ultimately the product of how we interpret the historicity of the coronavirus crisis: is it the end of the world as we know it, thus an epoch of decay, or in fact the beginning of a better world and thus of spiritual reassessment? It’s interesting to see that “cyclical theories” such as the [generational dynamics](#) of Strauss and Howe, the theory concerning [technological revolutions](#) and [hegemonic cycles](#) and economic paradigm shifts point to such a turning point. They highlight that a post-corona world might look radically different, and that such a narrative might be constitutive or even performative in creating a better future.

## Implications

- **The coronavirus crisis could become a new “grand narrative” with which rifts could be closed. This will probably be [utopian in content](#), as a response to postmodern skepticism and modern naiveté. For this narrative to be told, it’s crucial that creative artists can get to work on this. Especially now that many of us are in social isolation, stuck at home without the possibility of seeing friends and family, it’s conceivable that the coronavirus crisis may lead to a period of enormous creativity and invention. [Film makers](#), for example, now have the time to consider new formats and pieces. We’ve written before that the Zeitgeist and a “structure of feeling” are manifesting in art, media and popular culture.**
- **Another important aspect of this visualization is [speculative design](#). Precisely because the coronavirus crisis is a real crisis that’s changing the course of the world and humankind, we can’t extrapolate the past and have to experiment with new images and forms of visualization. What [scenario thinking](#) is to theoretical thinking, speculative design is to visualization.**