# INTRODUCTION

Zbigniew Karaszewski's artwork, based on aurochs, horses, and deer painted on the wall of Lascaux caves, France. Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported (CC BY SA 3.0), accessed December 16, 2024, at: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lascaux_painting.jpg; user: Prof saxx (2007).

# *INTRODUCTION**

> The first two decades of the twenty-first century unequivocally belong to the series. Their influence on the modes of telling the story of the world (and therefore on our way of understanding that story, too) is revolutionary.
>
> Olga Tokarczuk, *Nobel Lecture*[1]

Stories! We crave them, we seek them, we cannot live without them. Called "a pervasive and perpetual human characteristic, like language, like play,"[2] they appeared when sentient life and cognition began. Survival instincts, inevitably, fuelled first non-verbal, then verbal communication; sharing what was known – facts – and then, what was imagined – fiction. In the ancient caves of Chauvet, Arcy-sur-Cure, Lascaux, Altamira, Greater Sunda Islands, and in hundreds of other places, engraved, painted, and carved images of prehistoric animals, humans, and therianthropic figures preserve powerful and mysterious visual stories. Most of them were discovered only in the twentieth century; they still remain enigmatic and are only superficially decoded. Judging by the sophistication of the images,[3] the language skills of that period must have been significantly

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* Due to the nature of the material analysed in this volume, the Author chose to replace the series' editorial style sheet with a system adapted to the content.

[1] The phrase "unequivocally belong to," kindly suggested by Henry Stead, improves the original translation (Tokarczuk, 2019).

[2] A.S. Byatt, in her 2004 article in *The Guardian*, republished the same year, as the introduction to Maria Tatar's edition of *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*.

[3] "They've invented everything!" allegedly exclaimed Pablo Picasso after a visit to the Lascaux cave in 1940. This statement has been frequently quoted in various versions (see J. Jones, 2021), but without a confirmed source. If the assumption of neuroscientists that "complex language and sophisticated tool use and manufacture emerged at roughly the same time" (Lamm, 2014, 281) is valid, the high level of painting skills and tools apparent in cave art indicates that the cave artists were using a relatively sophisticated language.

complex,[4] reaching well beyond a simple exchange of basic information. Prehistoric cave art offers the first surviving manifestations of non-verbal storytelling. The hunting scene preserved in a cave on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi (Celebes) constitutes "the oldest [over 40 thousand years old] evidence for the communication of a narrative," while "the ability to invent fictional stories may have been the last and most crucial stage in the evolutionary history of human language and the development of modern-like patterns of cognition" (Aubert et al., 2019, 442).[5] At that time, *Homo narrans* was born.[6]

As life evolved, the need to share stories shaped storytelling modes, making them gradually more intricate, in parallel to the growing complexity of human existence. Stories had been ordering and explaining the surrounding world before science took over this never-ending task. However, there are areas of reality inaccessible to scientific methods. They continue to be interpreted from the individual perspective of storytellers, which, more than science, contributes to the awareness of what it might mean to be human. This process is necessarily

[4] According to evolutionary (Darwinist) psychology, "language evolved gradually from pre-existing cognitive capacities, contrary to the view of Chomsky and others that language and symbolic thought emerged abruptly, in a single step, within the past 100,000 years" (Corballis, 2013, 1). William Deresiewicz (2009) delivered a scathing critique of evolutionary psychology and its tendency to neglect contradictory evidence. He used as examples of literary Darwinists Joseph Carroll, Jonathan Gottschall, Denis Dutton, and Brian Boyd, best known as an expert on Vladimir Nabokov. Twelve years later, Elias Garcia-Pelegrin, Clive Wilkins, and Nicola S. Clayton (2021) reviewing the abundant and fascinating history of scholarship related to the evolution of language and storytelling skills, ignored Deresiewicz's arguments but highlighted the fact that the ideal suitability of language for storytelling did not preclude the existence of storytelling "prior to the evolution of language." Boyd, whom Deresiewicz calls "a clearer and more careful thinker than most of these other writers," states in a later paper that "humans almost from birth have story-craving minds" (2017). Jack Zipes, in his 2010 review of Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, joins Deresiewicz's negative assessment of literary Darwinism and criticizes Boyd for inexplicable exclusion from his study of folk and fairy tales, "myths, legends, and other short narratives" (Zipes, 2010, 152–161). Deresiewicz's and Zipes's criticisms do not detract from the enjoyment of following Boyd's reasoning, heavily coloured by his fascination with Homer, in the chapter "From Zeus to Seuss: Origins of Stories" (Boyd, 2009, 209–379). A similar opinion was expressed by Mathias Clasen (2012, 430–431) in his review of Boyd's 2009 book.

[5] It seems intuitively right that hunting tales are among the first surviving fictional narratives as even today they retain their notoriously exaggerated and quasi-fictional character. I find particularly impressive the ritually overstated records of hunting successes in the royal Assyrian inscriptions, e.g., Assurdan II (934–912 BCE) allegedly killed 120 lions, Adad-nirari II (911–891 BCE) three times as many – 360, Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) – 450 lions and 390 wild bulls, while Salmanasar III (858–824 BCE) boasted of killing 399 lions and 373 wild bulls (Bauer, 1933, 87–88; Cassin, 1981, 377–379; Olechowska, 2011, 275).

[6] The term *Homo narrans* was coined by the German ethnologist Kurt Ranke (1908–1985); see Uther, 2003, 146.

dynamic: people evolve, and their conditions change, and so do the stories mirroring people's environment, beliefs, needs, aspirations, and fears. In today's world, the crucial functions of stories include their ability to attract, captivate, and entertain readers, listeners, and viewers as well as satisfy the universally experienced hunger for narration; they are also expected to produce a deeply felt sensation of pleasure, a commodity in high demand.

Among many recent publications intended for non-specialists about how the brain works in relation to stories, two seem rather illuminating. The first, published in 2012, is a discussion of the theory of storytelling by Jonathan Gottschall supported by psychological and neuroscientific studies, among them research on brain scans observed during consumption of fiction and assessments of the command of social skills displayed by heavy consumers of fiction. When people consume stories, whether by listening, reading, or watching, they virtually transfer to fictional worlds and experience what the protagonists of these stories go through. Stories create and strengthen neural pathways required for appropriate reactions to challenges that may and do occur in real life. Bringing up the analogy of the flight simulator, a widely used and effective method of pilot training, Gottschall compares in the chapter "To Simulate Is to Do" consuming stories to a "life simulator," a safe method of exposing people to a wealth of virtual life experience and allowing them to face challenging dilemmas complete with solutions and related consequences (Gottschall, [2012] 2013, 59–67). The book focuses on the idea, highlighted also in the title,[7] that storytelling is the *differentia specifica* of the human species.

The second publication is the 2021 book by Angus Fletcher, entitled *Wonderworks: Literary Inventions and the Science of Stories*. It takes the reader on an easy stroll through forty-three centuries of literary texts, secure in the crucial importance of stories as corroborated by recent neuroscientific advances.[8] Fletcher, a neuroscientist doubling as a literary scholar, talks about human brains "being primarily narrative" and containing "action centers" powerfully affected and mobilized by stories that explain the world and illuminate challenges people face – "the problem of being human in a nonhuman world" (2021, 7). Stories "fix hearts and lift souls"; in their literary manifestation, they are:

[7] *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*.

[8] See also Raju Narisetti's interview with Fletcher, April 29, 2021, in McKinsey's "Author Talks" series, available online.

> a narrative-emotional technology that helped our ancestors cope with the psychological challenges posed by human biology. It was an invention for overcoming the doubt and the pain of just being us. […] It can still reckon with death and unshatter the psyche. It can still give us the stuff past the stars and the meaning immortal. (Fletcher, 2021, 9)

Throughout recorded history, stories have covered an infinite diversity of themes encompassing all that is, was, could, and could not be. Storytellers have been responding to the double challenge of providing relevant content and ensuring memorable performance: what to say and how to say it best, striving to achieve an optimal balance between their own needs and desires and the delight of their audiences, including their patron/sponsor. While the means available to storytellers multiplied and evolved, at times dramatically, the creative challenge, on the basic psychological level, remained the same. An ancient ἀοιδός (*aoidós*), a Hellenistic (or Byzantine) romance writer, a Celtic bard, a French *trouvère* or *jongleur*, a (*mutatis mutandis*) mendicant preacher of any order using in his sermons *exempla*, bestiaries, and lives of saints, an author of frame stories, of short stories, of fairy tales, of novels serialized in periodicals, creators of radio and television series, they all have dealt with different but largely comparable issues typical for the art and business of episodic narration in any era.

The relationship between the story, storyteller, and story recipient does not develop in a vacuum. It is shaped by "environmental" forces, such as, for instance, a wealthy patron's preference for a specific content, provision (availability) of space and time for telling the story, and the ear/eye readiness of the recipient. These are basically social, economic, and cultural factors that evolve and change from period to period, situating stories within their background and, at the same time, providing a 360° view of the phenomenon. The divide between active storytellers and passive story recipients has never been a strict dichotomy. Storytellers must learn their craft by listening to stories told by others. Once they master storytelling, they regularly revert to being recipients to broaden their repertory and improve their technique as well as satisfy their own hunger for stories. Active reception or appropriation of older stories is an obvious mechanism of storytellers' professional development and also a source of inspiration for content and form.

The first creative contact with narration occurs in early childhood, coinciding with the acquisition of language skills. Malcolm Gladwell's international bestseller

*The Tipping Point*[9] brought to the attention of a wider public the *Narratives from the Crib* (Nelson, [1989] 2006), a research project published in 1989 and conducted by Katherine Nelson, a developmental psychologist at Harvard University. It was based on 122 recordings (made over fifteen months) of stories Emily Oster, a two-year-old child, told herself before falling asleep. Inspired by an earlier study (Weir, 1962), this one revealed the importance of stories in early childhood manifested in monologues, crib speech, bed-time rituals essential in ordering reality, and specifically, in digesting real-life experience and recreating the world through narrative.[10] For Emily, storytelling was a tool that organized whatever happened on a given day in her life and expressed her expectations of what would and should happen the following day.[11] Children's dependence on stories, as creators and recipients, follows them into adulthood. The human need for stories, experienced by active creators or intellectually and emotionally engaged recipients, relies on imagination and familiarity with stories told in the past, often repeatedly, with or without variations. This need has always been with us during the millennia of human development and the entire lifespan of each human being. "Humans seem to have an adaptive predisposition for inventing, telling and consuming stories" (Aubert et al., 2019, 442).

In each period of history, this need has been satisfied by narratives well grounded in the corresponding reality. The television series became the privileged way to tell stories in the late twentieth century, initially sharing this position with film. In the twenty-first century, it left film behind. It multiplied its distribution platforms, becoming available on DVD, the Web, and international streaming services, watched on various screens, including computers and ubiquitous smartphones. This gradual departure from television as the leading distribution platform is reflected in recently favoured new terminology – audiovisual series or scripted show instead of television series (or serial). The position of the film has been somewhat blurred, first by theatrical movies being shown on television and then with the advent of the new platforms becoming available to watch for a fraction of the ticket price anytime and almost anywhere.

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[9] Gladwell ([2000] 2009, 118–121) discusses the success of the television show *Sesame Street* achieved through "the brilliance of its writing and the warmth and charisma of the Muppets," in spite of its neglect of narrative, "the most important of all ways of reaching young children" (121).

[10] See especially Chapter 1, authored by Nelson, and Chapter 2, written by Jerome Bruner and Joan Lucariello (Nelson, [1989] 2006, 27–97).

[11] The book was published again, seventeen years later, with a foreword by the grown-up Emily Oster herself, now an economist at Brown University (Nelson, [1989] 2006, v–vii; Tkaczyk, 2020, 149).

The view expressed by a recognized mistress of the narrative craft highlights the cognitive interpretation of human experience as a perennial function of narration. It encourages us to take a look back at the origins and development of post-oral storytelling as closely interconnected with the social and cultural evolution of *Homo sapiens*. In her Nobel Prize acceptance lecture on December 7, 2019, Olga Tokarczuk talked about "a wholly new way of telling the world's story" developed in audiovisual series but practised already well over 2,000 years ago "in the myths and Homeric tales." When great writers share their insights about storytelling, scholars should pay attention and confront creators' thoughts with their own.

Contrary to the crib stories of the two-year-old Emily, stories presented in television series are rarely true; even those offering authentic or historical events are fictionalized for various reasons. Emily's narratives had cognitive and developmental functions. Fans of audiovisual shows look at stories differently than either Emily or Philip Pullman's evil harpies, who valued truth and authenticity so much that they agreed to show the ghosts the way out of the land of the dead in exchange for true stories.[12] Twenty-first-century viewers primarily want to be entertained, even though, depending on the series' genre, scripted shows assume quite a few additional functions and values, including cognitive, developmental, and cultural.

After over seventy years of existence, television reached significant levels of complexity in some of its productions, and along with popular culture in general, acquired the approval of psychologists and cultural scholars. Traditional criticisms and accusations of low standards and mediocrity have been toned down, and the positive effects of watching television have been discussed and accepted since the late twentieth century. Steven Johnson's 2005 bestseller, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, is the result of this change of perspective. Similar reasoning more specifically targeting television serials was offered by Jennifer Hayward in her 1997 book, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*. This evolution of scholarly attitudes towards television is discussed at length in the 2017 insightful collective volume *Media of Serial Narrative* edited by Frank Kelleter. He calls serialization a storytelling practice

[12] In Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, people need stories even after they die. The new task and *modus operandi* is given to the Harpies by Lyra, who says that they will now "guide the ghosts from the landing place by the lake all the way through the land of the dead to the new opening out into the world. In exchange, they will tell you [the Harpies] their stories as a fair and just payment for this guidance" (Pullman, [1995, 1997, 2000] 2017, 782).

in popular-culture media. He analyses seriality in literature, film, and television venturing into non-English language productions, offering quite a few such examples, mainly German. Kelleter succinctly describes the foundation of the hunger for narration saying: "two basic impulses of storytelling – the satisfaction of conclusion and the appeal of renewal – are balanced through suspense and resolution" (Kelleter, 2017a, 9; see also Denson, 2011).

Like television in general, series have often been contemptuously dismissed as commercially driven popular entertainment for the masses, emphasizing their commercial rather than entertainment potential. In consequence, they were readily denied the status of an art form. Their omnipresence, success, and undeniable appeal appear suspicious to scholars, an attitude that carries seeds of patronizing criticism. Television series have been accused of lacking artistic values and originality, to say nothing of the nefarious, addictive impact on personality and causing mental disorders among the susceptible *hoi polloi* of all ages. Popular culture in general, and, specifically, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, saw the low opinion and contempt for the series gradually reverse.[13] Several impressive productions gained unanimous praise from viewers, critics, and scholars.[14] Prime-time television series, and more recently series produced by streaming services, tell long, complex, and absorbing stories, able to involve and connect viewers better than movies, even those produced as cycles.

## The What, Why, and How of the Volume

A cultural scholar with a strong background in both Classics and media naturally tends to look for areas where these disciplines meet and observes the dynamics of such encounters. Having researched for several years classical inspirations in all types of texts for adolescents and young adults,[15] I realized that my fasci-

[13] The first widely popular television series which fascinated scholars, launched the first wave of academic interest, and found a place in university curricula was the 1997–2003 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. See also the PhD dissertation by Nandita Dutta (2020), based on Angela Ndalianis's theory of screen and entertainment media.

[14] The examples most frequently quoted here are *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *The Shield*, *Deadwood*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *House of Cards* (Hilmes et al., 2014, 26 et passim; Goodlad, 2018, 869–870; Kelleter, 2017b).

[15] See my papers, written for Katarzyna Marciniak's European Research Council project, where I discuss these themes in *Harry Potter* novels (2016), Joann Sfar's comic books (2020d), both editions of the *Clash of the Titans* – 1981 and 2010 – (2020a), Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz's

nation with television series could be channelled with a reasonable expectation of success into a study of the genre focusing on a specific time period and limited to shows in some ways inspired by Greek and Roman mythology. Results of the 2015–2022 European Research Council (ERC) project *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* provide a natural launching pad for such an endeavour. *Our Mythical Childhood*'s research targets all cultural texts inspired by Classical Antiquity and addressed to children, young adults, and their so-called crossover publics. The present inquiry constitutes a logical and promising avenue for classical reception studies targeting specifically audiovisual series, provided that most if not all such productions were identified and acknowledged.

My approach to the genre concurs with Tokarczuk's broad vision of the time-honoured survival and evolution of storytelling and with the scholarly obligation to recognize and study this legacy. It has been the cornerstone of my enthralment with the phenomenal appeal and power of attraction demonstrated by television series across all contemporary cultures and generations of viewers. Like any riveting tale, the story of today's audiovisual series would benefit from investigating its origins. The goal would be to determine what kind of storytelling had satisfied the human need for stories during the long centuries before the advent of television. Accordingly, Chapter 1 of the present study, entitled **"The Audiovisual Series: A Prequel,"** provides a chronological and analytical review of narrative genres sharing the same essential (but not the only) function of delighting and entertaining the public. Readers may approach the chapter as a rite of passage to better understand how oral storytelling (which already encompassed visual elements) became recorded in writing and finally achieved its currently dominant form of serialized audiovisual narrative. Observing the historical evolution of this kind of storytelling from antiquity to the present day may illuminate the reason why television series effortlessly stepped into the millennia-long process of satisfying human hunger for compelling stories.[16]

The sheer number of television series produced in the twenty-first century across languages and cultures defy an individual scholar's attempt at fully grasping the phenomenon and impose a reduction of the scope of research

*Once Upon a Time* (2021), *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (forthcoming a), Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and *The Book of Dust* (forthcoming b), and in various entries in the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* (e.g., on the BBC *Atlantis* and on Nick Willing's *Olympus*).

[16] See Martin M. Winkler's *Classical Literature on Screen: Affinities of Imagination* (2017, 1–4), on the genealogy of storytelling.