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INTRODUCTION

**Two Ontologies of Prose Literature,
Short Form versus Novel**

This study stems from a seemingly simple question: Why did short narrative forms such as the novella, fable, and fairy tale suddenly, yet widely emerge throughout Europe and the Americas in the decades around 1800? Attempts to answer this question have tended to take the form of simple chronology or sociohistorical speculation, assuming that these short forms were by-products of increasing literacy and of the arrival of reading culture. Such speculation points to the radical changes in reading culture of this period, during which authors experimented with genres, publishers and book traders diversified their products, reading practices broadened, and new pedagogical, religious, and journalistic uses for short pieces developed. The causes for the rise in short forms are myriad, goes the argument, and attempts to pin the emergence of the short form on a single causative factor are futile.

Sociohistorical answers, however, offer only metaliterary reasons for the rise of short forms and thus devalue literature's own role in shaping new genres and the communicative functions they embody. In fact, as we will see in the chapters of this book, there are fundamental and far-reaching causes for the rise of short narratives within the appearance of literature itself. In the language of literary studies, one could say that short forms partook of the deep phenomenological change that occurred between the fourteenth and seventeenth

centuries in how textual fiction behaved between the reader and the world. During this era, what is called classical and medieval “poetry” — drama, lyric, and epic works written in verse and abiding by the poetic rulebooks from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to Scaliger’s *Poetices libri septem* — was increasingly challenged by a new mode of speech that we still call “literature” — fictional prose narratives without meter or verse and written in various lengths and genres.

This new regime of literature in modernity has thus been described — quite accurately — as the arrival of prose.¹ Its implications, vast in scope, were nothing less than the replacement of the spoken word by printed text and of the reciting of poetry by the silent reading of prose. In doing so, prose literature fundamentally disrupted and reconfigured the relationship between reader and world, initiating a new phenomenality of the behavior and appearance of prose genres in the world. The phenomenality was broad and broadly felt, affecting everything from the material apparatuses of reading and the technologies governing the circulation of readable forms to its imaginarity, discursive, and social effects. To describe these changes, Michel Foucault, emphasizing that this new prose literature had altered the mode of social encounters in the world, chose to use the vague but accurate term of a new “ontology of literature.”² Not only did printed prose narratives challenge, through the changes they wrought in reading culture and print technology, the very validity of recited epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry, they also generated modern forms of discourse — epistemology, affect, power, sexuality, family, science, and representation — that we would today locate in academia, journalism, and law.

Arguably, the first genuinely modern genre to implement the new mediality of prose and its fluid discursivity successfully across fictional and nonfictional areas was the novel. This explains why it is often seen as the epitome of modern literature, representing the clearest difference in form and content from all versed genres of poetry, making it into a powerful and measurable force behind the sociohistorical changes in reading culture. Keeping Foucault’s

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concept of an ontology of modern literature in mind, however, the novel's success lies in the way it appears in the reader's world, in how it renders itself and its content as a virtual object, an imaginary realm, a parallel world. Describing it as a specific appearance, as a phenomenon, highlights the novel's unique quality: its ability to absorb its reader into the rich and detailed lives of one or more strangers because, as Hans Blumenberg has argued, it perfectly imitates the status of artificiality that reality itself has attained in modernity. According to Blumenberg's essay "The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel," the novel owes the condition for its own coming into being to the modern configuration of the lifeworld, of what since the seventeenth century and at least up to the digital age has been called "reality." Novels implement a version of reality by employing a narrative structure, for example that of biography, whose main achievement is to ensure a consistency among the distinct parts of a novel, that is, among its various figures, places, descriptions, chapters, and subplots. In modernity, "reality can no longer be considered an inherent quality of an object," writes Blumenberg, "but is the embodiment of a consistently applied *syntax of elements*. Reality presents itself now as ever before as a sort of text which takes on its particular form by obeying certain rules of internal consistency. Reality is for modernity a context."³ Novels are extensions of modern reality, according to Blumenberg's argument because they render a probable string of events around main characters so that the resulting text appears to the readers as just another, additional context to their own reality.

For its complexity and adaptability, the novel has been treated as the most important genre of modern prose fiction. Yet the theory of the modern novel took many centuries of slow development, arguably until György Lukács wrote the first generally accepted attempt at such a theory in 1916. Given the lagging development of the theory of the novel, where did the theories of other, shorter prose genres stand since the inception of modern prose? Did they also take more than four centuries to come to fruition? Were theories like Lukács's

or arguments like Blumenberg's made for short narrative forms? How do short narrative forms behave in the world? What is the particular ontology of short narrative forms?

In contrast with the novel, there is no theory of short narrative forms that aims at a basic theory and an understanding of their ontology, even though the many genres of short narrative prose fiction have been thoroughly analyzed. One important reason short narrative forms have not been studied for their fundamental context and appearance is that they include a whole range of genres, from fable to fairy tale, from proverb to novella, from epiphany even to multimedia narratives, spanning modernity from the early modern revival of the classical fable in the seventeenth century to postliterary genres composed of prose text and images. Single genres have usually been covered in separate studies or articles; this study instead covers a nonexhaustive, but exemplary set of six short genres: fable, novella, proverb, fairy tale, epiphany, and postliterary story, selected because these range from the beginning to the end of what could be called short narrative prose's monopoly on short fiction. This monopoly is determined by the currency of prose, beginning after the decline of versification in the seventeenth century and lasting up to the current decline of textuality in the twenty-first.

One can begin to understand the phenomenality of the short form by tracking where and how it diverges from the novel. The short form's few pages are insufficient to immerse a reader in a detailed, absorbing life that a protagonist inhabits; the absorption into the richness of a new, unknown world, which the novel's hundreds or thousands of pages can induce sentence by sentence, is impossible for the short form. From this mere quantitative difference results the alternative economy of imagination in which the short form operates. Where the novel aims to simulate a fictional new world for the reader, such as the widely read adventure novels of early modernity successfully did, the short form must limit itself to drawing on settings and situations that already exist in the reader's world. Where the novel creates a parallel reality — whether life in a modern suburb or on a faraway planet in a

distant future — the short form creates a feedback loop, playing back to a reader bits of a familiar life, albeit in a transformed, surprising state. Because of their brevity, short forms can usually be read in a single sitting; this allows their phenomenality to be embedded as a single continuous experience within the reader's world.

Put simply, while novels *extract* readers *from* their current reality, short forms *occur to* readers and *enter into* their ongoing everyday reality. Whereas the novel's ontology as a fictional artwork is based on ensuring the separation of lived and imagined realities, the short form's ontology is designed to confuse any such separability of realities. Where a novel motivates its actions and events through the psychological, causal, and atmospheric impulses of the protagonists within the context of the protagonist's fictional life, the short form proposes its events and occurrences in such a way that readers must contextualize them with motivations found in their own lived reality. Short narrative forms are based on the ability to create a fictional replica of reality while at the same time tearing through those realities we thought we lived in — a poetological process that the visual storytelling artist Hito Steyerl has pointedly called “ripping reality.”¹⁴

Rhetorical Speech versus Topical Speech

Such fundamental but schematic considerations of the short form's ontology partly justify the short form's position as the novel's counterpart during the rise of narrative prose genres in early modernity. However, while this schematic perspective might help explain the Foucauldian interest of understanding modern literature as an ontology and a prose phenomenality, it does not explain why the short form and its paradigmatic modern genres such as the novella and the fable took so much longer than the novel to emerge. Again, sociohistorical arguments seem to offer a first explanation here, especially the fact that the spread of journalistic media such as broadsheets, newspapers, and other periodicals since the sixteenth century popularized shorter types of texts that reported on political, religious, criminal, medical, supernatural, and other extraordinary occurrences. Yet

such quantitative circumstances help explain only the spread and acceptance of short forms; they don't fully account for their active part in this rise, which is due to their inherently literary quality. To understand the communicative function that short forms took on and to decipher their rapid ascent in importance requires explanation of another, different development: the updating of the essential role of literature within the classical civic discourse of storytelling into new forms of civic discourse in modernity.

A first clue to the rise of short forms can be taken from a crucial intuition by Hannah Arendt. In her studies of the public sphere, she set in opposition two fundamental types of speech: rhetorical speech, which demands and ensures political authority; and topical speech, which is the discourse practice of participants in a political argument or conversation. In siding with Arendt and her insistence on the political necessity of topical forms of speech as opposed to rhetorical speech, this study moves beyond Arendt's project by not simply assuming a modern history of the decline of topical speech and its political function. On the contrary, I argue that after the dissolution of the *ars topica* in the eighteenth century, various forms of literary speech took up the discursive role of topical speech that Aristotle had already identified. I show that during modernity, this topical function has been realized by various types of short forms. Instead of offering a history of the decline of the *ars topica*, as Arendt described it, this book proposes a genealogy of various parallel lines of literary short forms — from the eighteenth-century fable to the twentieth-century epiphany and the twenty-first-century postliterary story — that attempted, on both “high” and “low” levels of culture, to exercise again the social function of topical speech.

Aristotle distinguished rhetorical speech, the monologue of the one before the many, from topical speech, the polylogue of the many with each other. Where rhetoric's authority demands long arcs and sufficient space for intricate and detailed accounts, topical speech's efficacy demands pointed brevity and pragmatism so that interlocutors can respond to each other with short accounts and personal

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remarks. This topical form of speech was the original function of what was known as *ars topica*, the skill of arguing dynamically and in brief among citizens of the Greek polis. As Arendt noted, only the discourse of rhetoric remained hegemonic throughout antiquity, the medieval period, and modernity. Because the *ars topica* was increasingly used for legal and formal disputations, for example by Cicero and Quintilian, it eventually fell from its position coequal with rhetoric and slowly waned. Through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it devolved to little more than a toolbox of *topoi* in humanistic systems of knowledge and decorum, offering lists of fixed phrases, clichés, and arguments for occasional discourse of the learned; its original function as a socially pragmatic form of speaking vanished. It took the innovations of prose style — unversed speech, the combination of orality and literacy, interest in everyday characters, and narrative form — to reinvent a genre of short, popular, pragmatic, and social storytelling around 1800, a development that reactivated the topical function, even if it no longer carried the label of *ars topica*.

In the span of only a few decades, the fable, the novella, the fairy tale, the literary proverb, and similar small forms emerged in the literary landscape of the late eighteenth century, evoking issues of civic life in a horizontal mode that went against rhetorical verticality. The trend toward these quotidian narratives is most visible in the long nineteenth-century history of the novella, from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Conversations of German Refugees (Unterhaltung deutscher Ausgewanderten, 1795)* to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice (1912)*. Readable in one sitting of a few hours, the novella extended the limits of the anecdote genre but retained the popular and prosaic style of the folk story. Novellas became the paradigm of revived topical speech, drawing readers into contemporary issues of civic life such as war, racism, law, and divine justice.

But other less prominent short literary forms, such as the prose fable, the literary proverb, and the fairy tale also used topical speech for other quotidian functions, such as argumentation or the change of perception. By these and other forms, the afterlife of the *ars topica*

was continued into the twentieth century, where its particular use of literature was seen increasingly as a tool to reflect on the status of literature as a medium. Whether it is through the short-form experiments by modernist writers such as James Joyce and Daniil Kharms, which resulted in clean-cut versions of pragmatic micronarratives, or through actual theories of short-form narrations such as those of Russian formalism or the New Criticism, the short form was used as topical discursive argument, particularly with respect to the role of literature in society.

After the decline of the *ars topica*, beginning around 1700, an epistemological shift occurred that followed the Cartesian model of a subject-centered perception of the world. This shift changed the status and function of literature. Short forms reclaimed for prose what only lyric and drama had been thought capable of in the old poetics: they speak directly to what is present, to the here and now of the reader. John Locke's epistemological writings are among those demonstrating this shift from the waning humanist *ars topica* to the new topical speech. While in antiquity, the *locus communis*, or commonplace, had been another term for "topos," Locke turned this concept inside out, discouraging students from learning merely "topical" knowledge and pressing them — and ultimately forcing philosophers and scholars, as well — to write their own short, commonplace, microstories that drew for relevance on their own immediate experience. Locke's shift indicates the first of a set of theoretical transformations that continued through Giambattista Vico's *New Science* and up to the first aesthetic theory, by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1750, which gradually created the conditions for the afterlife of the *ars topica* in short literary forms. Only with the return of this mode of addressing the present — spatially, historically, and socially — that writers such as Guy de Maupassant, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nikolai Gogol helped establish could Theodor Storm, one of Germany's most enduringly popular novella writers, point in 1851 to the powerful effect that novellas had on their readers by calling the novella "the sister of drama."

In a first step, *Civic Storytelling* traces the inception and disappearance of the *ars topica* — from Aristotle to Baumgarten — to describe what I call the “topical function” of speech. I claim that the topical function survived the end of the *ars topica* because it comprises both the thematic, practical ability of speech to address the here and now of the speaker and the immediate eliciting of responses and reactions from potential interlocutors. The old poetics, rhetoric, and the novel simply could not speak in brief to the living, present moment. For that, Enlightenment writers such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing were compelled to turn to the Aesopic fable as a tool of literary pragmatism. While the fable’s revival failed, and the genre remained limited to the Aesopic canon, this experiment demonstrated the eighteenth-century desire for a new form of storytelling whose orientation was to the immediate. Such use of the fable resembled the classical fable, which had once been recited not as an illustration of an attached moral, but in lieu of an argument.

From the German novella around 1800 to the Joycean epiphany, the topical function established a new pragmatic version of prose literature in the world. The novel famously makes the reader enter another world, thus developing the reader’s judgment, and the anecdote helps the reader see the world from the point of view of the other and thus liberates the reader from his or her natural world. In contrast, the short form, as defined here, accomplishes something that has often been ignored as an important and even more constitutive quality of a speaker’s and an audience’s daily discourse: the ability to concentrate on their own world and situation. Short forms draw us into their force field by demanding that we respond and react to what they signal and that we then cope with real-world issues on their behalf. Short topical forms generally demand no change of everyday perspective; they address us not as idealized readers, but as everyday participants living everyday lives. To this day, short forms, exemplified even by their multimedia incarnations, continue to perform a topical function and to behave like autonomous actors. Reading them renders the world inescapably present.



The formation of short narrative forms in modernity as a result of the disappearance of the ancient *ars topica* is the focus of Chapter 1, “The *Ars Topica*, Its Disappearance, and Its Afterlife.” The original Aristotelian *ars topica* comprised procedures that solved intellectual and quotidian problems through preexisting short stratagems of language. This “art” of using topoi shaped the skill of employing language within pragmatic contexts, but the topical function of short forms of speech did not cease to exist when the overall *ars topica* expired. Through the epistemological changes in the seventeenth century, what I call the topical function of speech became liberated from mere rhetorical and dialectical uses and was acquired by the newly arising form of discourse that we know today as literature.

Among the works of scholars such as Francis Bacon, Ortolof Fuchsberger, Peter Ramus, Locke, Vico, and Baumgarten, Locke’s writings contain the clearest indicators of this epistemological shift. Locke cautioned against collecting preexisting topoi from books — which, he asserts, makes a scholar “a topical man” — and advocated instead writing topoi from personal observation for future reuse in the form “commonplace books.” Locke, then, did not, as some might suggest, end the art of using short forms of writing like topoi; he only changed the type of knowledge the *ars topica* administered and abandoned its surface visibility. Vico and Baumgarten, in fact, tried to revive the *ars topica* by designing a *topica sensibile* and a *topica aethetica*, respectively, but in the first half of the eighteenth century, subjective notation and writing practices — literary discourse — had already taken over the topical function.

The fable was the first form that, during the late eighteenth century, was widely seen to have a topical function, despite belonging to the literary realm. That development is the topic of Chapter 2, “After the *Ars Topica*: The Failed Return of the Fable in Modernity.” While the exemplary nature of fables always remained a classical form of discourse, especially since Jean de La Fontaine’s revival, and thus could

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never actually fulfill this modern function, I show in two exemplary readings of Friedrich Hölderlin and Heinrich von Kleist that attempts to use the fable in such a modern way were a first indication that the existing set of short narratives was insufficient to master the task of solving topical problems of knowledge, philosophy, and life. Lessing suggested in the 1750s that the Aesopic fables should be read at face value, namely, as vivid accounts of realistic problems, not as didactic or allegorical illustrations of moralistic arguments. Shortly after 1800, Hölderlin and Kleist then actively experimented with the fable genre and discovered its topical potential as a mode of speech that could immediately speak to their own present. I show that by stripping the fable of its didactic framing, Hölderlin and Kleist led it back to its pre-Aristotelian concept of *ainos*—a story told in a specific instance for practical use. By demanding that modern poetic speech must be “praising what is present” (*das Gegenwärtige lobend*), as he writes in a programmatic Pindar translation, Hölderlin echoed the fable’s original *ainos* quality. Similarly, Kleist’s rhetorico-poetical treatise “On the Gradual Production of Thoughts while Speaking” (“Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden”) contains a fable at its heart, which demonstrates the topical immediacy of fabulatic speech that all future short narrative forms should manifest.

While Lessing, Hölderlin, and Kleist use the fable as an experimental site to work out in theory and practice how short forms can inherit the *ars topica*, I end the fable chapter with a postmodern rearview on these experiments. Looking back on the struggles of modern forms of discourse, in the 1980s, the philosopher Blumenberg conceived of the fable as a symptomatically overlooked modern form of storytelling that is both philosophical and poetical. Blumenberg confirmed in his explicit theory what is implicitly anticipated in the works of Hölderlin and Kleist.

Chapter 3, “Form: The Novella and the Agency of Short Narrative Forms,” presents the first of three case studies of modern genres to show how short narrative forms began to make use of the topical function. The novella, literary proverb, and fairy tale were

established as fixed literary forms during the nineteenth century, and each focused on a different quality of the *ars topica*. My close readings analyze how short narrative works and their specific genre semantics inherited the topical function through specific, applicable concepts in the reader's world.

Novellas have a specific form that renders the world and the protagonists irrelevant, focusing instead only on one particular incident. From Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Miguel de Cervantes's *Exemplary Novellas* (*Novelas ejemplares*), the tradition consisted primarily of isolated books before writers such as Gogol, Herman Melville, Maupassant, and Stefan Zweig made wide and often pointed use of the genre beginning in the nineteenth century. Looking back at this century, as Lukács had already done, André Jolles strikingly defined this form in 1921, arguing that in a novella, "it all comes down to what happens; the psychology and the characters of those acting and suffering do not interest us in themselves, but only inasmuch as what happens is caused by them." Through a theory of the novella and a close reading of Storm's novella *The Rider on the White Horse* (*Der Schimmelreiter*, 1888) — a famous and indeed paradigmatic instance of the nineteenth-century novella tradition — I show how the novella form is powerful enough to incorporate even the content of a novel, effectively forcing its author to organize narratively not a single episode, but his protagonist's whole life around one incident. I continue this formal study of the novella by also assessing its effects on a theoretical level, tracing how the novella form is partly responsible for the conception of an early narratology around 1800 by Friedrich Schlegel, which decisively shaped modern literary theory. To illustrate the influence that novellas also have in paraliterary versions, I analyze Foucault's use of the novella form as an epistemological backdrop in his description of the *lettre de cachet*, one of the novella's predecessors, which actively shaped criminal prosecutions around 1700. In such *lettres*, Parisian citizens narrated to the police single incidents about other individuals to denounce them as incorrigible criminals, prefiguring both the form of the novella and its practical

agency. Like *topoi*, novellas organize reality by providing frames of reference for their readers that can cause readers to act or behave in a certain way in the public sphere.

Chapter 4, “Argumentation: The Proverb as Micronarrative Agent,” presents the second case study: the afterlife of the topical argument in the nineteenth-century literary proverb. Contrary to the dismissal of the people’s proverb, which I briefly trace from Erasmus to Immanuel Kant, who called proverbs the “language of the rabble,” I show that Gustave Flaubert rediscovered the proverb as the people’s poetry by turning it into a minute literary genre. He began by writing a faux dictionary of proverbs and commonplaces, the *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas* (*Le dictionnaire des idées reçues*, c. 1850), which consists of a glossary of the banal and fictive opinions held by the public. Besides arguing that Flaubert thus created a literalized continuation of a topical Renaissance florilegium, I also show that this return of the proverb was Flaubert’s test drive for his unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, a grotesque novel about two copy clerks who decide to live by literalizing topical forms and topical systems of knowledge. From this general return of the proverb and of topical knowledge as an initiator of fictional narration, I move to Gottfried Keller’s discovery of the proverb as a prosaic, realistic speech of the people, intended to elevate it back to the respectable status it had lost during the baroque period. Half the novellas of his ten-novella cycle *The People of Seldwyla* (*Die Leute von Seldwyla*, 1856 and 1873/74) use proverbs to encapsulate the minimal plots that each story unfolds. My reading of the novella *Clothes Make the Man* (*Kleider machen Leute*, 1873/74) traces how this structure not only provides the novella with a meaningful format on the extradiegetic level, but also causes the novella to demonstrate on the intradiegetic level of its protagonists’ actions how proverbs can again become pragmatic arguments in daily life. Where Flaubert elevated proverbs to the socially relevant realm by taking them literally for parodic purposes, Keller’s novellas continue further by deeply investigating not only the topical structure of nineteenth-century everyday life, but also its receptivity to small narrative forms.

The last literary case study, Chapter 5, “Perception: The Fairy Tale as Topical Archive,” focuses on the discovery of the fairy tale as literary short narrative with the qualities to change or augment the perception of reality. After its being treated as a folkloristic tale or a magical story from Charles Perrault’s seventeenth century to the Grimm brothers’ nineteenth, I argue that the belated theoretical discovery of the fairy tale happened only in the 1920s, when literary theorists were analyzing literature through a study of its formal structure. Since Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), the original and most famous formalist fairy tale theory, is already so widely discussed, only part of the chapter is dedicated to him. Instead, I focus on Walter Benjamin’s nearly forgotten theory of the fairy tale, which he developed in combination with a theory of the legend or *Sage*.

Benjamin’s theory holds that each fairy tale centers on or encrypts a particular concept, idea, or practice, which it discloses only through its narrative. By reconstructing Benjamin’s readings, I show how he extracted the concept of “disappearing” (*Verschwinden*) from Goethe’s “The New Melusine” and the concept of “forgetting” (*Vergessen*) from Ludwig Tieck’s “The Fair-Haired Eckbert” — both of which are paradigmatic examples of literary fairy tales, or *Kunstmärchen*, in the German tradition — and how these and other readings later led him to work on an uncompleted book on fairy tales, the *Märchenbuch* project. In it, I argue, Benjamin wanted to collect the fairy tales that over the centuries had kept humanity’s crucial topoi safe, a function of the fairy tale he described by arguing that “the fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest.”⁵ In comparison with the novella and the proverb, I conclude that the fairy tale has universal topical force because, like an archive of the *Homo narrans* — humans as a storytelling species — fairy tales are applicable to different realities at different times as a reminder of the central notions of everyday human life.

While these three case studies establish the topical quality of short narrative forms by close readings and by implication, a

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culminating Chapter 6, “Epiphanies, Enacted Stories, and the Praxeology of Short Forms,” looks at two sites in the twentieth century where the inheritance of the *ars topica* in short narrative forms fully resurfaced in literary discourse. The first is James Joyce’s 1903 invention of a new genre of short narratives that he calls “epiphanies,” unpublished, hyperrealist depictions of scenes from everyday life. I argue that the sudden coming into existence of the epiphanies shows that by 1900, short narrative forms had fully inherited the qualities of a topical discourse. Since the epiphanies contain all three features of my case studies—a clear form, the posing of arguments, and the ability to change perception—I conclude that Joyce could invent the epiphany *ex nihilo* only because the literary discourse of his time had fully inherited and adapted the former *ars topica*.

In the second half of this chapter, I analyze how Arendt implicitly confirms this state of literary discourse on a philosophical level by calling for a form of public storytelling that she terms “enacted stories.” Arendt argues that only this new type of storytelling can successfully acquire the pragmatic capacity for truly political public discourse because it fully accounts for the present and the presence of the speaker. This argument leads Arendt back to the birth of the *ars topica* between Socrates and Aristotle. Arendt’s critique of the Aristotelian distinction between dialectic and rhetoric and her favoring of Socratic discourse among peers is in effect a plea to acknowledge the topical function that short narrative forms can have in the twentieth century. I conclude by framing the results of the study into a praxeological theory of literary forms that considers short narrative forms as “epistemic things” in the sense of conceptually indeterminate representations that are used in specific practices, as the historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger has defined the term. I argue that short narrative forms should be considered as having their own agency because the literary discourse up to the twentieth century has established them as tools of fiction that emerge in quotidian practices between reader and world.

In a coda, “Civic Storytelling and the Postliterary Image Life,” I offer contemporary examples for the ongoing iteration of the *ars*

topica, finally bringing the historical argument into the context of nonliterary narrative media. I show how Arendt's concept of the "enacted story" also lends itself to nontextual media in which multimedia storytelling combines image, sound, text, animation, and video. Here I examine media artist Steyerl's video stories, for example, her 2013 *How Not to Be Seen*, to show that these forms of storytelling, too, open the "space of appearance" that Arendt demanded from "enacted stories." Steyerl's works construct the narrative emergence of an integrative speaker, a concrete or abstract "I" that tells its story while she explicitly theorizes the arrival of a new form of storytelling — "stranger than fiction" and, at the same time, political in Arendt's sense.

Steyerl allows her postliterary stories to combine speech and action so that they achieve the renegotiation of what becomes public and of civic interest in the current era of online mass media. I also show that a similar effect is achieved by the collective storytelling projects appearing globally, which are focused on rendering, from a bottom-up perspective, realities affected by the current climate crisis. This climate storytelling is interested less in empirical data than in the agency of partly fictional narratives about climate realities told not just in text, but also in photos, videos, and other multimedia formats. By comparing different such projects, I offer a sister figure to the increasingly respected citizen scientist: the return of citizen storyteller, who recalls the civic practices last captured by Locke's seventeenth-century commonplace writing and excavated by Benjamin's 1920s fairy-tale theory for their return as folk practices necessary to democratic societies in the twenty-first century. With a list of other examples, I conclude that these new contemporary short forms reaffirm the function of topical storytelling against rhetoric's monologic hegemony. Civic storytellers today are increasingly powerful because they open and reestablish spaces of appearance among the fragmented, imagined, and neotribalistic communities of the globally connected era.

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