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# **HARNESSING THE POWER OF STORYTELLING**

Mechanisms for Change through Narrative Fiction

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# ABSTRACT

Pauliina Tulenheimo: Harnessing the Power of Storytelling: Mechanisms for Change through Narrative Fiction  
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The presence of stories in our environment has been noted in both societal and academic discourse of late and the concept of "narrative" has become a part of everyday language. The conversation around the impact of narrative fiction is often negative, such as video games being bad for children. This thesis focuses on narrative fiction specifically and suggests that it can actually be used as a resource through which society can evolve into being more understanding and open.

The subject is examined through a multidisciplinary lens utilizing philosophy, sociology and literary theory. The thesis looks at the way narrative fiction functions as a vessel for values and new ideas and how it influences general discourse and attitudes. It argues that narrative fiction can have an effect on the views of individuals and thus on culture on a larger scale as per Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality. The meeting point of truth and fiction is also pondered through Marxism. Especially in its original form, Marxism takes a cynical stand on the potential of social change through popularized mass culture but in its newer incarnations, the interpretation of art and fiction is more layered due to the concept of articulation.

In addition to exploring the viewpoints mentioned above, the purpose of this thesis is to find tools of ethical storytelling for authors of fiction. Hanna Meretoja's concepts of *non-subsumptive storytelling*, *sense of the possible*, and *perspective awareness* are central to this goal. Combining these elements creates a path towards ethical storytelling as it strives to portray its subjects in a comprehensive way instead of reducing them to stereotypes. The state of such storytelling is examined through the case study of queer representation in Western film and television. The work argues that, according to the model of social constructionism, correlation between positive fictional queer representation and changing societal attitudes is relevant, and that such change can be affected even within the parameters of the commercially driven entertainment industry.

Keywords: narrative fiction, social constructionism, marxist cultural studies, ethical storytelling

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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# 1 Introduction

Storytelling is often regarded as a fundamental human activity. For countless generations people have gathered to tell stories to each other, they have been used to instruct children and to keep history alive. Moreover, the way we look at the world around us is talked about in terms of narrative – as the saying “history is written by the victors” implies, even things regarded as historical facts are not always safe from bias in the retelling of them. In today’s social climate, “narrative” has become something of a buzzword – we recognize narratives all around us, whether they are wrapped in a political agenda, the angle of news reports, or even someone’s Instagram feed. Stories are everywhere, and it would be strange if something this ubiquitous did not leave a mark on the people surrounded by it. However, since a more general focus on narratives within the public sphere has had visibility as of late, this work centers on narrative fiction such as novels and fiction films.

Philosopher Herbert Marcuse wrote, “Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.” (1978, 32–33.) This bachelor’s thesis looks at how changing the world through art and susceptible minds might be done. While Marcuse’s thought can be read idealistically, it does apply to all directions. Although my intention is to focus on what I see as positive change (e.g., inclusion and equality), it should be noted that the same mechanisms can be – and have been – employed to advance bigoted or otherwise negatively seen views. I will investigate how storytelling can be used to implement societal change and what forces help or hinder this process.

The topic of this essay is multidisciplinary in many ways. It chiefly pertains to philosophy – ethics, philosophy of art and social philosophy – and literary studies with nods to sociology. Furthermore, within the area of aesthetics, this work raises questions of how art functions in general, what kind of knowledge can be learned through art and how (epistemology), and what the implication of the power of art is (ethics), to name some examples.

In this thesis, I argue that changing the minds of people with narrative fiction is possible, and it can be done by telling stories with ethical representation of characters and events. In my attempt to argue this, I will first introduce Marxist cultural studies, and next focus on the place of fiction within Berger and Luckmann’s (2011) theory of the social construction of reality. Section three is centered on epistemology and ethics and takes a look at what we might learn from fiction and how. It also discusses Hanna Meretoja’s concepts of *sense of the possible* (2017) and *non-subsumptive storytelling* (2018) as terms related to ethical storytelling. Finally, I will illustrate the points raised earlier in the essay with a case study of queer representation in film and television and reflect on how representation

correlates with changing attitudes toward queer issues and what causes and consequences the rising queer representation in television especially might have.

## 2 Society, structures and stories

To consciously create any kind of change in perceptions through fiction, one must be aware of the processes of perceiving and sense-making while consuming it. As philosophy is at its core a quest to make sense of the world, there are multiple approaches to this project. It is widely accepted that narrative in general is one of such sense-making tools (Meretoja 2018, 102). Narratives are everywhere, and as Michael Hanne (1994, 8) notes, an inner monologue is often shaped – in effect, edited – into a narrative where certain things are included and some omitted. Even our whole cultural environment can be argued to be a narrative – think of national narratives and the framing of historical writing, for example. Next, I will introduce two theories on the wider societal atmosphere to which narratives are, in one way or another, central.

### 2.1 Stories and the system: a Marxist criticism

The Marcuse quote about art changing the minds of people who can in turn change the world, cited in the introduction of this essay, is well aligned with a famous thought from Karl Marx, “philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx 1845). Due to this focus on the impacts of philosophy it seems fitting that Marxist cultural theory is present in this work, too. Even though these nicely compatible thoughts were written down almost a hundred years apart, it must be noted that as Marxism is an expansive school of thought and contains several branches, the following may not be applicable to every iteration of it. This section also uses the broad term “cultural product” in referring to works of art in various fields – of course, there is debate about the definitions of art and popular culture and whether those terms can both apply to one entity, and this problem is present here, too.

The traditional Marxist approach to analyzing cultural works follows in the same tracks as Marxist theory in general, centering around the idea of a capitalist society being divided into hierarchical classes whose interests inherently clash. The relation of cultural works to the historical conditions of their production is key – according to Marxism, “how a society produces its means of existence (its particular ‘mode of production’) ultimately determines the political, social, and cultural shape of that society and its possible future development” (Storey 2012, 59). Consequently, the cultural products

emerging from the culture are laced with its ideology: they support, explicitly or implicitly, the dominant groups benefiting from that economical organization (ibid., 3). And not only that – the mode of production can also define where culture is going.

In creating a piece of art and sharing it to the world one is extremely likely to use several different products made within the system and to contribute to creating profit for the dominant groups; even if a film was made independently of the studio system and distributed freely on YouTube, both the person uploading it and watching it would be supporting Google. Similarly, one can self-publish a novel but distributing it to the world requires at least a computer and a printer. Of course, art can be made without buying paper and pens but even organically created art is not free of its creator who can, at least in some sense, be said to be another kind of product of their culture.

The question naturally arises: if every cultural product, be it a novel, a film, or a song, always carries an implicit message for – or at least acceptance of – the system within which it was created, the status quo, how can it be used for change? It may be worth asking but accepting it as a fault in the logic of changing the world via art or fiction requires a cynical reading, even if Marxist thinkers themselves have written in a similar vein. Thinkers of the Frankfurt School such as Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer defined the term “culture industry” to denote the machinery behind the products of mass culture, the predictable films and popular songs that repeat the same patterns over and over and conform to the societal order (Storey 2012, 64). By this definition, it seems impossible that a product of mass culture could contain ingredients that could change the minds of future world-changers. Even though this theory can be (and has been) criticized for the elitist-seeming separation of mass culture and “authentic” culture, also known as high culture or art (ibid., 65), at least the distinction leaves room for a possibility to create high art that has an impact.

It is hard even for the defenders of the high/low art divide to discern definitively which types or pieces belong to each subset, and within aesthetics there are many different conceptions of art overall. The capitalist system tends to commodify and commercialize everything that comes its way and art is no exception; in any art museum you can find prints or postcards of its one-of-a-kind works for sale, and classical music can be used in the background of any advertisement. Does this cheapen the original piece of art? Is proper art untouchable in some way? The Frankfurt School holds out hope that “authentic” art with its anti-capitalist ideals may resurface onto the minds of the public one day (Storey 2012, 65). These views are easily seen as condescending, and it does seem that many neo-Marxist cultural critics saw audiences – the masses – as mostly passive consumers of the media they were offered. This might be partly true but certainly seems like an oversimplification.

## 2.2 Hegemony and post-Marxism

Antonio Gramsci used the term “hegemony” to describe a kind of negotiated consensus within society in which one group “seeks to present its own particular interests as the general interest of the society as a whole” (Storey 2012, 82). The social order is maintained by the ruling group – not by force but by moral and intellectual leadership (ibid., 83). Within cultural studies, this has been extended to cultural hegemony, in which the power dynamic is upheld by means of culture. For example, American television shows since the advent of the medium can be said to be part of such practices by initially showcasing a mostly one-sided version of the family and then slowly expanding on the idea: next to a white nuclear family of mother, father and two children, we have seen many alternatives of the model over the past decades. Based on the concept of hegemony here, television shows becoming more diverse is a result of a negotiation for more acknowledgment of people outside the norm of the 1940s and 1950s and as such *reflect* the public opinion. This begs the question of whether widening representation is just hegemonic negotiation, a capitalist concession, or whether it can really influence a wider structure.

In the past 30 years the discourse of Marxist cultural studies has evolved into post-Marxism, a school of thinking, spearheaded by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001; originally published in 1985), that both further develops and reclaims Marxist ideas towards a model in which an individual’s positioning in the world is more layered than merely rooted in traditional Marxist classes. Laclau and Mouffe take special interest in hegemony and add to it the concept of articulation. Articulation is the practice of applying meaning to culture (rather than culture having a meaning already fixed to it) and taking into consideration the fact that a piece of art may have different meanings in different contexts (Storey 2012, 87). An example of this is the American counterculture music during the Vietnam war in which songs with explicit anti-war and anti-establishment messages generated profits that were subsequently used by record companies to support the war effort. The counterculture movement had a cultural impact through its messaging but a more sinister one on the war, even if the nature of said impact was independent of the material itself (ibid., 88).

The earlier questions on how change is possible within the capitalist system and whether hegemonic concessions are actual change are at least partially solved by articulation. The recognition that works of art can have multiple meanings depending on their context makes room for the possibility of change. If a film has an anti-hegemonic message but it still profits the dominant class, two options arise: either it can spread its message further by exploiting the system it rebels against or the system

can exploit the message in order to profit. However, these options do not have to be mutually exclusive – the same film means different things to different groups of people. For example, a film can have a mainly economical meaning to the studio funding it while for its makers it might represent a way to get their message out to the audiences, and the audiences in turn may argue over what it says and means.

Certainly, change as understood through articulation is not all-encompassing or truly disruptive. Still, it is a potential vehicle for change, even though it might be slow. Even if a revolution of “authentic art” à la the Frankfurt School is on its way, it must arise from within the system itself simply because there is no true “outside” of the system. Culture can be seen as a perpetual battleground between social groups and when new negotiations succeed, popular culture moves forward, and an updated message can spread to television and smartphone screens everywhere. There remain valid questions on whether a change of this kind, a change on the terms of the hegemony, is actual change, but I would still argue that it is better than nothing.

### **2.3 Social constructionism: producing reality collectively**

To go further down the path of examining how society is structured and how changes to it might function, I will now turn to social constructionism. According to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (2011; originally published in 1966), human beings are in a dialectical relation to society: they both produce and are influenced by it (ibid., 135). Our behavior and habits are institutionalized to become part of objective reality, and we learn the ways of the world by socialization. Primary socialization happens in the family, secondary outside of it (ibid., 271). In this process, we learn by observing: what is the function of a fork and how it is operated, how does one communicate to others effectively, what kind of behavior is awarded and what is reprimanded. We learn what is normal and what deviates from it in each environment. But before delving into the theory’s relevancy to the larger subject at hand, I will briefly introduce its key arguments.

Berger and Luckmann (2011) posit that “the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for ‘knowledge’ in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such ‘knowledge’” (21). In other words, it is less concerned with absolute metaphysical truths than things which are regarded as truths. It is also important to note that social constructionism originated within sociology of knowledge rather than ontology (although it has significant connections to social ontology). As such, it uses terminology differently from what is



customary in philosophy. To be clear, it does not suggest that reality is an illusion or that physical reality (such as atoms) is a social construction. Instead, it argues that through certain steps and processes, our social reality is produced socially and upheld in the same manner: for example, we collectively act as if special pieces of paper or metal have an external worth to them, and that makes the existence of money objective reality (ibid., 268). Broadly, the production of reality happens through an ongoing process consisting of externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

Externalization is about what individuals do, say and express – our behavior, our ideas, our opinions. Those things are typified in the minds of others as kinds of things to be done, and through this typifying the action becomes habitualized and institutionalized. Institutions make up a society and can be further solidified by legitimation, cemented by law or other justifications. Through such processes the externalized actions are objectivated, they become part of objective, shared reality. This reality is then internalized by an individual who learns to take cues from it through socialization, thus converting it into their own subjective reality. An individual is never thoroughly socialized, however (Berger and Luckmann 2011, 303). The internalization process is characterized by competing institutions, and the outcome of that struggle depends on the subjective assertion of significance of the institutions and their proponents (ibid., 304–311). This threefold process is not straightforwardly sequential. Its parts are continuously and contemporarily in action, meaning that both society and the people in it affect each other constantly.

Let us examine the theory with the help of an example: gender. Many readers will have heard phrases such as “gender is a social construct”, perhaps with the addition “so it is not real.” According to the social constructionist, this latter statement is false and the former accurate. Gender as a social construct (as opposed to assigned sex) refers to all the building blocks that are associated with being a man or a woman, the smaller ideas that constitute the larger idea of “man” and “woman”. We externalize ideas of what a man or a woman does, what their roles are, and as those externalizations are recognized and agreed upon, they become objectivated. Berger and Luckmann (2011) describe the institution as something that “posits that action of type X will be performed by actors of type X” (122–123). In the case of gender, we might say that it is “womanly” to submit to men and therefore women are expected to do that. This idea is further explained, justified, and integrated with other institutions. We might, for example, create laws dictating that married women cannot have a driver’s license without the permission of their husbands. If this idea is what we have seen in our families since our births, we accept it as how things are, and we find ourselves with internalized ideas about women submitting to men.

Gender provides an interesting example on change, too. In many parts of the world, women's rights have changed considerably within the past century, and nowadays the topic of gender generates lots of conversation in the media. By looking at the development of gender roles, we can see that they have evolved even though they are still their own institutions. Moreover, there is room in the public conversation for there to exist other categories beside "woman" and "man". As individuals either affirm or reject the institutionalized versions of each role that are offered to them through socialization, they contribute towards a new version of the role (Berger and Luckmann 2011, 147). It is irrelevant whether they are aware of their position as producers of this knowledge. Constructs such as gender are very real in how they affect the way we see and act upon the world, other people, and ourselves; they have consequences. In the same way, money is a social construct as all its value comes from the collective upholding of it, and yet few people are willing to argue that money is not real.

#### **2.4 Changing reality within social constructionism**

Fictional stories are situated at an interesting place within this theory. In a way, social constructs *are* stories, narratives, angles, and therefore fiction has a chance just as fact to become objective reality, as contradictory as it may sound. But consider, what is racism based on if not fiction? Widely accepted inhumane treatment of minority groups has always been justified by constructions such as unfounded science. If stories such as white supremacy can become objective reality, is the same not possible for stories about inclusivity and equality? The difference, of course, is that while consuming fiction in the shape of a film or a novel one is conscious of the fictionality of the story. We do not accept *Game of Thrones* as objective reality. However, the institution of media can sneak inside *Game of Thrones* ideas that are objective reality, such as sexism, and comment on the idea or portray it in a way that allows internalization. Here is the power of the story.

As previously noted, we are collectively responsible for not only the creation but the upkeep of our reality. It should follow, then, that it is possible to change that reality by refusing to uphold old institutions and creating new ones. The perpetually incomplete socialization of the individual leaves room for their own thought and space for thinking forward. However, the changing of the tide is not a simple project. For something to become objective reality it needs to be accepted and adopted as practice by enough people – there is no fixed number, and because knowledge is not spread evenly among people, a change does not occur everywhere at the same time. With what Berger and Luckmann call the "social stock of knowledge," we are more familiar with things closer to us, be it by immediate surroundings, work or family members (Berger and Luckmann 2011, 100). This could

be seen to be the basis of people changing their views on, for example, LGBTQ issues when first confronting them in a previously cisgender, heterosexual world. It certainly makes intuitive sense that one thinks about things differently when personally confronted by them instead of existing either physically or mentally far from the subject at hand.

One solution I endorse for change through narrative fiction within the socially constructed reality is representation. Representation can be done in many ways and is not an automatic fix – more on that in later sections – but I believe it to be the base for change. Exposure to new viewpoints and new subjectivities through stories brings that world closer to the reader. Reading is, in its own way, an intimate endeavor; the reader, often solitary, is acquainted with a set of characters and in many cases given access to their thoughts. The same can be said for watching a film or a television show although possibly to a different degree. Welcoming fictional characters to occupy one’s mind is bringing their experience closer and examining it. The new experience might introduce new (perhaps fictional) institutions, and the reader can then look at them much like other new ideas they come across in the world. If those institutions are legitimized in a way that the reader finds agreeable, they or the possibility of their realization just might become part of the reader’s reality.

Affecting the reader or viewer is not as easy as writing down that racism is bad. Heavy-handed morality lessons generally may not go down well with the audience; somehow, we people tend to be easier to win over when we do not acknowledge such an attempt to be happening. How, then, can this change be attempted in *how* the story is told?

### 3 Learning from fiction

Like any other branch of science, literary studies encompasses a complex web of different movements and theories with varying areas of interest. In narratology, the degree to which theories have shown interest in the reading experience and the impact of reading is inconsistent. For example, the New Criticism movement, with its roots in the 1920s, sought solely to focus on the text itself and leave out aspects like authorial intent and reader response. These unwanted views were named, respectively, intentional and affective fallacy. The preferred analytical method of the New Critics, close reading, is still a standard approach to literary studies. (Makaryk 1993, 120–122.) This is just one example of literary studies centering on narrative structures rather than the functionality of narratives; by contrast, it is often the focus of narrative research in social sciences (Meretoja and Davis 2018, 3). The latter approach ties stories and fiction to cultural practices and views them as a potential instrument of

power and is thus of interest for this work. In this section, I will look into how stories are told in order to wield power and change some minds.

### 3.1 Stories as conveyors of knowledge

The epistemological value of fiction is a point of contention. Stories, whether consumed as clearly fictional or in other narrative forms, communicate something from the storyteller to the audience. When this narrative form is categorized as news, the consumer of the narrative can be said to gain new knowledge from it, most often about the current state of the world (of course, in the so-called post-truth era, the definition of “news” has become muddy even in a layperson’s view). Can this principle be applied to fictional narratives consumed with full awareness of their fictionality – in other words, does the reader or spectator of fiction gain knowledge from it (outside of getting to know the narrative itself)?

It is important to note that “factual” narrative offerings such as news and history books are not free of editing and biases. In presenting their stories as truth, they are likely a more important tool of power than openly fictional stories and, as previously stated, these kinds of narratives have attracted much interest in recent research (e.g., Mäkelä et al., 2021). Michael Hanne (1994, 34–35) points out that there are elements of fictionality in so-called factual writing (such as historical writing) and likewise, elements of factuality in fictional texts (such as novels or films), and as such, the two are linked – the stories we hear interact with each other and form a network of knowledge and impressions of whose original sources are impossible to pinpoint.

Philosopher of history Louis O. Mink (1978, 133) calls storytelling “the form of complex discourse that is earliest accessible to children and by which they are largely acculturated” (as cited in Hanne 1994, 11), a statement which can easily be tied to the theory of social constructionism and the process of internalizing, learning the ways of the world. Although children must develop their sense of what is considered fact and what is fiction, I offer that, with this sense trained, we can gather different kinds of knowledge even from known fictional stories. We know not to take the *events* that we are told at face value but we gain impressions of the milieu of the story (for example, what life might have been like in Regency era England) and recognize the values or morals it implies (for example, one should not be too proud or make too hasty judgments). We know that the information presented within fiction must be examined through a critical lens as its creators are not morally bound to realistic representation in the same way as the authors of factual texts are (or should be).

Throughout centuries, stories have been used to intentionally teach morals or general truths about the world, in an attempt to instill knowledge into the audience. Indeed, a part of any story analysis we have been taught to make is determining the “moral of the story,” what the story is trying to teach the reader or listener. Fairytales have traditionally been used to teach children (in an accessible form, like Mink stated) about good and bad, what to avoid and what to aspire to. Other examples of this are fables such as those credited to Aesop, a storyteller from ancient Greece. This aspect has never left storytelling: still in today’s writing classes and guides writers are strongly encouraged to think about the message of their story, message here being a slight dilution of moral. Often these messages are warnings, as in many fairytales, and while a child listening to the ordeals of Little Red Riding Hood may understand it to be extremely unlikely for a wolf to disguise itself as her grandmother in a plot to eat her, the warning about the dangers of talking to strangers might come through.

One aspect to consider is authorial intent and what we are expected to know or “get” from fiction. This has been the subject of many a debate in literary studies; some schools have thought it to be key in literary analysis and criticism to find what exactly the author means with their work, some have dismissed the idea altogether. The poststructuralist theorist Roland Barthes (1977; originally published in 1967) famously, in an essay of the same name, wrote about and even advocated for the “death of the Author”, essentially handing the responsibility for interpretation to the reader. It is true that we as consumers of fiction are seldom privy to the author’s intention with the work, and it does not seem reasonable to expect us to also hold a detailed biography of the author or their views in our heads. This view places a great deal of power and responsibility to the receiver of the story and can indubitably lead to crossed wires with the author and the reader or viewer. Such examples can be found online on almost any piece of fiction, and in those cases, it is hard to say whether some interpretation is more or less true than another. After all, a meaning is real to its interpreter, and is informed by countless variables. This obviously presents a challenge to the author looking to change the world: is it possible to create an interpretationally airtight story only communicating what the author wants? Probably not. But is it something to aspire to at all, or merely a fool’s errand?

### **3.2 An author’s toolbox: perspective, possibility, and non-subsumptive storytelling**

In *The Power of the Story*, Hanne (1994) examines five cases of fiction changing the world around it. In four cases out of these five, the defining element of the stories is what he calls a “previously ‘untold story’”. These stories are thought to have shed light on conditions previously unknown to the general public, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe (2006; originally published

in 1852) alerting white Americans to the horrific conditions of American slavery. This is a prime example of what Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis (2018, 6) would call changing *perspective awareness*, widening the view of the life of others. Perspective awareness coupled with another concept of Meretoja's (2017), *sense of the possible*, ideally contributes to a richer imagination capable of envisioning change. Simply put, to be able to change things, one needs to have an idea of what needs changing, a belief that something can be done about it, and a vision of how things could be. According to Meretoja (2017, 90), the sense of the possible is something innate in every person that can, in different conditions, be expanded or diminished, and a part of its formation and fluctuation is what kinds of stories we consume.

Meretoja (2017) links the sense of the possible to the performative approach to narrative studies. The performative view is that "narratives do not merely represent reality but take part in shaping it" (ibid., 90). This, of course, echoes the idea of social constructionism. If we are to buy into this, it would imply that an author's way of changing the world is precisely through manipulating both the sense of the possible and perspective awareness. While an author may not have a say in how their story is received, they can choose what kind of representation of the world they create. As with the "untold story", in order for narrative fiction to expand the reader or viewer's sense of the possible, it must give them something to think about – something new, something they have not come across before. It might not be a big thing; for example, it could be a female character working in a traditionally male-associated field, or it could be a non-binary person just openly existing as a non-binary person. The threshold for more inclusive representation is not – at least currently – very high. For representation that ethically expands the audience's sense of the possible, Meretoja (ibid., 109) calls on non-subsumptive storytelling.

Non-subsumptive storytelling is a concept in the vein of phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition that stresses the "fundamental temporality of understanding". The tradition theorizes that all understanding follows in the tracks of a hermeneutic circle: our understanding is based on our previous experiences and conceptions and can be challenged by new information, and the general and the particular are in a dialectic relationship. Knowledge and language are temporal, and understanding something successfully only happens when "the concepts are transformed so that they do justice to whatever is being understood". (Meretoja 2017, 109.) This, too, is compatible with social constructionism, in which the constant dialectic is between the society and the individual, and our past internalizations inform our present and future ones as well as our externalizations.

As evident from the previous quote, a non-subsumptive model of understanding attempts to "do justice" to its subject matter. Meretoja (2018) links this to ethical storytelling. In philosophical

tradition, understanding has often been viewed as a subsumptive process in which new pieces of information are assimilated and appropriated into the individual's existing structure of knowledge. This happens through language – in a process that poststructuralists perceived violent and ethically problematic, as classification and naming are the base of language and show the power with which language can be operated to shape our views of the world. In the poststructuralist view, it can be said that subsumptive understanding erases the uniqueness of the new information. Non-subsumptive understanding, on the other hand, is an alternative that seeks to avoid homogenization and excessive generalization. (Meretoja 2018, 102–105.)

Although they do not use the terms *subsumptive* and *non-subsumptive*, Berger and Luckmann (2011, 63–65) write about a similar matter. They posit that when we come across new information, we try to incorporate it as part of our everyday knowledge, and run into problems if the incorporation is unsuccessful, possibly having to categorize that new knowledge within another reality beyond the common everyday life. They also write about language in a similar vein to the poststructuralist view: we “translate” foreign phenomena into terms that are based in everyday life, which makes them distorted (ibid., 67). This can be interpreted as a subsumptive model of knowledge. However, Berger and Luckmann see the possibility of non-subsumptive learning. Interaction with others includes seeing others as types (or a collection of typifications) by which we make sense of the world and the behavior of said others (such as their nationality or age) but as we interact with them face to face, their own persona and uniqueness break through these types, giving enormous weight to direct interaction in seeing people as individuals. (Ibid., 77–79.) As in practice one might be too restricted by their social circles to meet different kinds of people, a possible way to garner this understanding-inducing type-breaking might be fiction. Granted, it is not usually interactive in the way that human communication is, but as discussed earlier, reading or watching fiction can be seen as a collaboration between the author and the audiences.

Following the logic of subsumptive and non-subsumptive understanding, unethical storytelling is the kind that reinforces stereotypical understanding and in turn, ethical storytelling attempts to give the audience a chance to encounter new experiences in a way that encourages them to not just categorize them but to let them shape their existing conceptions. For example, a non-subsumptive way of meeting new people would be seeing them as individuals rather than representatives of their gender, race, or other group. Likewise, non-subsumptive storytelling practices could, for example, be intentional counter-narratives to hegemonic stereotypes. These stories could open our eyes to new possibilities and make us examine the things we already knew or thought we did with a fresh pair of eyes. The key is for the story to not offer ready-made answers and messages but encourage questions.

(Meretoja 2018, 107–118.) This makes the author’s work less daunting, perhaps. It gives a clear guideline on creating and representing characters: consider whether the story you are telling is something that might help understanding, think about whether it might expand or diminish the audience’s sense of the possible and perspective awareness. In short, in pursuit of ethical storytelling, an author should present the world in some kind of a new light.

### **3.3 Changing perspectives: application of Meretoja’s ideas**

An interesting example in the crossroads of the concepts discussed in this section is the Harry Potter series. For a long time, the books were celebrated as promoting a wider sense of the possible, and a 2014 study (Vezzali et al.) found that the readers of the children’s book series were more likely to have favorable views of stigmatized groups such as gay people. More recently, however, especially the online discourse on the novels has focused on how elements of them perpetuate Jewish stereotypes, how the novels lack diversity in many respects, and how even the whole setup of the battle between good and evil seems to actually be the battle between the non-ideal status quo and regression rather than progress and regression.

It could be argued that the series has improved the readers’ perspective awareness according to the hermeneutic circle; first, as the study notes, the readers have picked up on the explicit messages about siding with the underdog, working together against evil and so on, and later coming back to it, become more aware of the implicit messages on the background. The audience has taken something from the work, built upon that knowledge outside of it, then returned to it with a new perspective in a shifting construction of reality. Of course, this more critical view has been fueled by the series’ author’s anti-trans opinions coming to light in the past few years, as disagreeing, alienated fans have become more willing to re-examine the series. This has also led to varying responses from the fans regarding the “death of the author” – some have found it impossible to enjoy the Harry Potter series knowing what its creator thinks, some do not care either way, and others have differing degrees of separating the art from the artist.

Meretoja and Davis (2018, 6) note that it is difficult to study changing perspective awareness, especially regarding whether the effects are long-lasting and whether they lead to ethical action. Considering that it might be advantageous for the individual to uphold the hegemony, ethical action is certainly no direct consequence to ethical thought. Meretoja and Davis (2018, 7) go on to state that storytelling is world-making, a conscious project of constructing an imaginary world, and that there are “no ethically neutral narratives”. In this way it is parallel to social constructionism, apart from the



process of creating a story often being a solitary pursuit. Even if the creator of a story only has a limited amount of control over reader response, they hold the power to make choices regarding the portrayal of characters and events. Stories are representative either way, regardless of whether the author spends time thinking about it. For a story to have any chance in developing perspective awareness or widening the audience's sense of the possible in a positive sense, that representation should be ethical. Even though stereotypes might be useful and even poignant in some settings, such as satire, for representation to be ethical, characters and situations should be portrayed in a way that highlights their uniqueness in a lifelike manner and does not reduce them to stereotypes.

## 4 Creating change through ethical representation

Representation in media has for some years now been a hot topic as production companies and even the Oscars have launched diversity initiatives (Feinberg 2020). Unfortunately, it is difficult to discern the effects of media representation. The ubiquity of narratives and stories in our world and the way we make sense of it makes empirical testing on their singular, specific impacts unreliable and correlational rather than causal by nature: our interpretations and impressions are formed based on our previous experience, and different people can experience the same things differently. Much of the research material on the importance of representation is based on self-reporting, and the issues create a chicken-or-egg type of conundrum: has media representation changed to reflect cultural trends or has it, in fact, affected them. It seems most likely that the influence goes both ways. As such, I think it is justified to look at the available data. In this section, I will use polls and studies on attitudes toward queer people in conjunction with a look into how the queer community, especially the gay male community, has been represented in media. The history and development of this representation makes it an apt example to illustrate the subject of this text.

### **4.1. A brief history of queer representation in film and television**

The way queer people have been represented in cinema and television has varied through times. Nevertheless, representation has always been there one way or another, often covertly. Nowadays the presence of queer characters in a Western television show, for example, is not rare but almost expected; in the dawn of the motion pictures this representation looked quite different. Film and television – like fiction in general – have also been used to draw attention to societal matters such as equal rights. Then again, Hollywood films of the so-called Golden Age were famously required to

abide the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as Hays Code. While such restrictions are no longer in effect, their echoes still remain. How has queer representation in Western film and television changed over the years and how close does it get to being ethical? What kind of barriers are holding it back?

Gay male representation European films of the 1910s and 1920s, Shane Brown (2016, 21–22) posits, was largely influenced by two competing theories on homosexuality that hailed from Weimar Republic Berlin, and during that era, most European films with gay characters were German. Even though homosexuality was a crime in Germany at the time, Berlin became a central European city for the queer community, indicating that the atmosphere was right for a more ethical representation of its members in cinema. Indeed, Brown (*ibid.*, 47) finds that the gay characters of the time could well be “wholly rounded individuals with feelings, personalities and faults similar to heterosexual ones”, which, surprisingly from a modern perspective, seems to be the ideal of non-subsumptive storytelling.

Pre-Code Hollywood films saw the issue of how masculinity presented in media brought to the center of representation matters (a battle which, tiringly, is still being fought). This obviously affects queer representation as well, and because of distinct lack of explicitly gay characters or films with queer themes, it is difficult to analyze the subject. (Brown 2016, 50–51.) Problems with authorial intent arise: which characters were meant to be read as queer? Does the intention matter if the effect is the same either way? Regardless of the intent, some character stereotypes did develop that are especially now thought of as gay stereotypes. Brown (2016) notes that in American silent cinema, these characters “appear to have a happier existence than the gay characters in [European films of the time]” (56). The defining difference is the use of the implicitly gay character for comedy rather than demands for social change. While we have no certain data on the effects of such portrayal, one can imagine that gay characters as a laughing stock did not help with the societal acceptance of the queer community.

For thirty-four years between 1934 and 1968, representation of many kinds was severely limited in Hollywood movies due to the Code: for example, married couples would be depicted with separate beds, addiction to narcotics would not be seen, bad deeds needed punishing. Interracial and same-sex relationships were banned altogether. (Kohnen 2015, 44; Hart 2013, 12.) Because of this, a new codified language for cinema was developed: for example, a kiss fading to black and the characters smoking cigarettes in the next shot would signal to the moviegoer that the characters slept together. Similarly, gay characters were coded in different ways to include gay subtext in the films. (Hart 2013, 12.) Consequently, gay stories existed in the sidelines, never made explicit. This reflects societal

attitudes toward queerness, and the Production Code and the values it upheld are clear examples of institutions of social constructionism being legitimized.

The era of the Production Code was also an era of great change in society. The Post-War USA, which was rising as a global mass entertainment leader of the West, was interested in sexuality in a new way, both mainstream popular culture and different countercultures grew stronger, and, as Vito Russo put it in his book *The Celluloid Closet* (1981, 99), “pop psychology was rampant”. In the 1940s and 1950s, homosexuality was often considered an illness, and answers were sought in psychology. In turn, homosexuality was used as an implicit explanation for a character’s violent tendencies (ibid., 99), as depicted in some Hitchcock films. Shifting gender roles were also linked to the depiction of lesbians: an independent woman was hinted to have a “perversion” of some sort (ibid., 100), and “all lesbians were outsiders ... and in each film the myth of the predatory but lonely lesbian was reinforced” (ibid., 102). This obviously goes against Meretoja’s non-subsumptive model of storytelling: the audiences were invited and encouraged to stereotype the queer community, and its accurate portrayal was undervalued next to a thrill of a psychological mystery or the ease of an existing character shorthand.

The 1960s saw the rise of gay filmmakers “apart from the superstructure of a film industry interested primarily in economic return” (Russo 1981, 164). (Notice here how Russo uses the Marxist-originating term *superstructure*, something to be addressed later.) While European cinema took more liberties, in the American mainstream things were not evolving. Even after the Production Code was altered to allow depictions of homosexuality, gay relationships were portrayed as “inherently violent” (ibid.). Queer characters were either “cured” or doomed, often ending up dead either by murder or suicide (ibid., 161–167). To this day, “bury your gays” is a known trope, a cliché about homosexuality being somehow punished in film or television. The sheer fact that cinema has had such an overarching effect on creating these usually harmful stereotypes shows that it has the power to influence people’s thoughts. Surely this power could be used for good, as well. Indeed, television seems to have helped in advancing positive attitudes towards queer people. Russo (1981, 223), in reference to shows of the 1970s, notes that putting homophobic slurs “in the mouths of ... obvious bigots categorized those terms in the public mind as unacceptable and made homophobia a concrete threat that involved the slander of increasingly real people”. This is no small victory – it is a changing world.

#### **4.2 Transforming representation into a new reality**

Television, perhaps due to its more mundane nature of existing within people's homes and definitely because of its quicker production rate, has had its finger on the pulse of society more consistently than cinema. Despite a rocky start, by the 1970s gay characters were occasionally featured in sitcoms and dramas alike and often used to highlight gay liberation issues (Russo 1981, 224). More recently in the 1990s and 2000s, landmark television shows centering on gay men and lesbians appeared: *Ellen* and *Will & Grace* within the traditional sitcom framework, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* with a raunchier approach. These shows have all been credited for bringing forward a new take on queer characters – for telling previously untold stories. Of course, for television to have a hand in shaping opinions, activism elsewhere in society needs to have already happened; those responsible for final decisions on what to air must have already held more progressive views to display such attitudes. This shows the dialectical nature of societal change as per social constructionism.

In the case of *Ellen*, viewers of the show had stayed with the show for almost four seasons already before the main character played by Ellen DeGeneres came out in the show in 1997. The coming out didn't only happen on the TV screen but was speculated about and covered in magazines, newspapers and talk shows (Reed 2007, 9–10). Although the show's ratings dropped in the following season, leading to its cancellation, a poll conducted by *Variety* almost twenty years later found that Ellen DeGeneres had more influence over attitudes about gay rights in America than any other public figure – including former president Barack Obama whose term saw the legalization of same-sex marriage nation-wide in the United States, and who came in second (Lang 2015).

A 2012 study on the impact of framing conversations in the (non-fiction) media found that “the more stories on same-sex marriage and civil unions utilize words and phrases associated with equality, the more we see opposition to these policies decline” (Johnson 2012). Based on my earlier argument about the impact of stories in general I would say that this can be extended to fictional media as well; when LGBTQ issues are represented as equality issues in, say, a TV series, they can reach people in a way that questions their biases. A survey by Procter & Gamble and GLAAD (2020) supports this. It found that non-LGBTQ Americans were more likely to hold accepting views and be more supportive of LGBTQ people if they had also been exposed to LGBTQ people in media. This survey can be seen as a confirmation to an earlier study by Bond and Compton (2015) that found a connection between exposure to gay television characters and favorable attitudes toward gay equality.

Data suggests that support for gay marriage in the USA has risen steadily in the past 26 years. In 1996, only 27% of the respondents were in favor of equal rights same-sex marriage whereas that number in 2022 was 71% (McCarthy 2022). It feels safe to assume this growing acceptance of marriage equality applies to views on the overall attitudes toward the queer community and their

equality as a whole (although public conversation surrounding queer issues has also recently taken loud queerphobic turns). Now, due to the challenges discussed in the beginning of this section, it is practically impossible to determine any single factor creating this change. Rather, I would argue, it is likely to be the result of many factors and the key is the amplification of the message that these factors provide each other. We cannot be satisfied with an idealized concept of a society naturally progressing towards equality - something is driving it, and not always forward. Media representation is not the singular driving force, but it is a force nonetheless. Queer-accepting attitudes in certain pockets of society can lead to its storytellers and creators to include more ethical representation in their work which then spreads those views wider, leading to more acceptance, and the dialectical nature of social construction is at work.

The representation of queer characters in fictional stories has an impact on how real-life LGBTQ people are treated. More positive views of queerness have been externalized into narrative fiction and are now gaining ground as institutions, objective reality. Television and film as parts of mainstream media can play major roles in the objectification process, normalizing new points of view, just as in the past they have normalized things that the modern audiences find backwards. Through them, a more positive outlook on the queer community has been internalized by some people. As the world is still largely heteronormative, it would be erroneous to say that the acceptance of the queer community is completely objective reality, but the process of it becoming that has begun.

### **4.3 Ethical storytelling within the market?**

For a long time, cinema seemed quite disinterested in portraying queer people as people or taking their sexuality as anything but a plot point or a character flaw. Some explanations for this are offered by money and upholding cultural hegemony. Kohnen (2015, 44) points out that the Production Code was mostly not imposed on Hollywood from the outside but agreed upon within the industry, based on what it thought audiences wanted to and were ready to see. Perhaps this self-censoring was also self-preservation, a way to keep government out, but it was certainly also about money. The film industry – the term notably alluding to mass production – is a business. The entertainment business, in the economic sense, deems it rational to make films that will profit them. Hollywood films are also often characterized by their “American” values (perpetuating the cultural hegemony), and for a long time, anything but cisgender heterosexuality was othered. Queer people have been cast as villains, made stereotypes, then normalized as similar to straight people in all respects but sexual orientation,

and most recently, finally, made more complex, individual characters who can have both stereotypical and non-stereotypical traits and who can be main characters of the story.

Although it would be nice to think that the change in queer representation is due to the entertainment industry as a whole beginning to move towards ethical storytelling, it is most likely that the defining feature is money. A Marxist cultural studies take on the issue would be the previously introduced hegemony. The industry can be broadly split into two sides, the executives and the creatives. Studio executives get to decide which films and shows are picked up for production and with what kind of a budget. Film production is still finding its footing in the new landscape of streaming but in any case, big-budget films are made for an increasingly global audience, with China emerging as the world's biggest movie market. With regard to more conservative markets like China, where films containing queer content are sometimes censored, the industry is still quite tied to self-imposed limitations on what sells (Pallotta and Haq 2022), showing that the commercial potential of fiction often steers towards subsumptive storytelling to the point of conservatism. On the other hand, companies are seeing more profit potential with queer-targeted material, too, giving more opportunities for those stories to be shared. Indeed, the most recent annual report on LGBTQ representation by GLAAD (2022) shows that LGBTQ representation in US television is higher than ever.

Even if we only consider the growing onscreen representation in film and television pandering, a concession of the hegemony to keep the masses from rebelling, the results of representation can still be good. Especially for a young person, seeing relatable characters in the media can lead to feeling more accepted and expanding their sense of the possible, giving them role models. The Marxist cultural studies concept of articulation can be applied here: works of narrative fiction can be art, entertainment and a consumer product all at the same time; they are multifaceted. An ethical or morally agreeable end result may not come from such motivations, and it means different things in different respects. Perhaps that is the best we can do for now – if, as noted earlier, any change must come from within the system, an author wanting to create change must in some respects work with it.

Although queer representation in US television is breaking records, we know from earlier depictions of such themes and characters and from the distinction between subsumptive and non-subsumptive storytelling highlighted by Hanna Meretoja that representation alone is not enough. It can be used to stigmatize, stereotype and even demonize a group of people, or it can be used to create further understanding. Ethical storytelling does justice to both its subject matter and its audience: it provides a chance to learn something new, expand perspective awareness.

In 2022, two romantic films that can be considered to feature non-subsumptive storytelling and center on gay male relationships were released. Romantic comedy *Bros* (Stoller 2022) includes a metanarrative about how gay male dating habits are not good material for a rom-com, in part because they deviate from the generic rom-com form and in part because straight audiences are not ready for that kind of deviation. This proves to be only partially true as the gay love story in the center of the film does hit most if not all of the rom-com beats. However, the film proves that those beats can be hit differently, and therein lies the argument of the film: gay men are not necessarily just like straight men and gay culture and straight culture are different, but that is all right. Or, as the main character puts it, “love is not love” (Stoller 2022). This is a move toward non-subsumptive storytelling, even if it might not go all the way. The film asks the viewer to accept and embrace gay culture as is and not as a version of straightness, but it does so within a genre and medium strongly associated with heteronormativity, packaging information in a familiar box. Similarly, *Fire Island* (Ahn 2022), a recent adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* applied the characters and plot of the (very straight) novel to gay culture, mixing different elements of it with the beloved Regency era classic. These are counter-narratives self-aware in their storytelling.

As one last notion about ethical storytelling I will offer that its contemporariness is key. In a simplified view, non-subsumptive knowledge is new knowledge, a new kind of knowledge, and it is inevitable that it will become old knowledge once it has been institutionalized. That does not mean that all fiction will age badly, but rather that it is a sign of progress that revolutionary ideas stop feeling revolutionary or even become outdated. However, as ethical storytelling is linked with narrative hermeneutics, it aims to create deeper understanding and steer audiences away from stereotyping, which means that it should not be used only for showing minorities in a good but rather in a human light, in all sorts of roles within fiction. Issues with representation rise from one-sided representation, and even if that representation is labelled positive, it can still create a tokenistic image of what is being represented (for example, the trope of the “gay best friend” in a romantic comedy) and end up being counterproductive.

## 5 Conclusion

It is too early to tell whether storytelling in general is moving toward more ethical modes as a whole but in examining the cultural landscape it does seem like we are living in a transitional period – be it for cynical economic reasons or other motivations. Even if the call for more diversity in both creating fiction and fictional representation is answered on the grounds of capitalist incentives, it can still have

an impact. Wider representation, when overseen with a non-subsumptive approach, is optimal for expanding the audience's sense of the possible and perspective awareness. As for the Marxist criticism, it is noteworthy that almost all creative works referenced in this work are undoubtedly capitalist products that can cynically be viewed as vehicles for advertisement (especially in the case of television). However, the post-Marxist angle of allowing multiple meanings to one work is applicable to these examples.

As we can see, affecting the world through fiction can be and has been done, and not only for propaganda but also for progressing values such as equality and inclusion. Although the intention of this essay is not to create normative guidelines for fiction but rather widen the perspective awareness of authors and creators themselves, there is ample ground to be covered in the ethical responsibility of such creators. Keeping in mind that ethically neutral stories do not exist, storytellers have an opportunity to strive for awareness and reflection over at least the most obvious meanings of their work and their potential impact on the world. This, in my view, need not be seen as a burden to carry but as an opportunity to advance the expansion of individual senses of the possible. (For another angle and more on the relationship of the author, the reader and the message, see Phelan 1996.)

It is good to remember that even though it might seem that the creators of a work of fiction hold the strings, there is power within the reader or the viewer as well. The reader or viewer of the story has power over how the story is read and how they react to it. Economically, there is also the power of choosing what to consume – audiences can decide what films to watch and what streaming services to subscribe to. At the end of the day, both the creators and the audiences can consult their own sense of ethics to guide their choices. Entertainment and art are not only watched or read, they are also felt. Though it may not be scientific, feeling that you are being laughed at in a film or a television show is a real feeling. But so is feeling that you are being recognized and valued. Which kind of stories about you would you rather have others see?



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