

Course:

‘Narratives, Propaganda and What Lies Behind Them’

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Is the word “*narrative*” a fashionable buzzword today?

Is a narrative simply a **story**, a **master narrative (grand récit)**, or does it reflect something deeper such as a **worldview**?

What is a Worldview?

A **worldview** refers to the overall set of personal values, ideas, and perspectives that shape how individuals interpret the world. These perspectives are based on **knowledge, traditions, experience, and emotions**. A worldview influences how people understand:

- the world around them
- their role as individuals
- society and social order
- sometimes even the meaning of life.

In this sense, a worldview functions as a **basic cultural orientation** shared by individuals, groups, or entire societies.

When such beliefs are reflected upon and organized into a coherent system, we can speak of a **structured worldview** or a **belief system**. These systems may be shared by communities, societies, or even across cultures—for example in **major religions or ideological movements**.

Worldviews are shaped by several factors:

- sociocultural traditions
- philosophical or religious ideas
- scientific knowledge
- and sometimes spiritual or esoteric beliefs.

Anthropologist **Claude Lévi-Strauss** described the holistic myth-based worldview of traditional societies as “**wild thinking**”. Today, scientific knowledge also plays an important role in shaping modern worldviews.

A related concept is **worldview** or “**view of the world**”, which may include broader explanations of social, cultural, and physical phenomena.

What is a Meta-Narrative or Grand Narrative?

A **meta-narrative** (or *grand narrative*) is a story that claims to explain the world in a comprehensive way.

In critical theory, particularly in postmodern philosophy, the concept refers to **large explanatory frameworks** that give meaning and legitimacy to societies. These narratives claim to organize historical experience and knowledge into one overarching explanation.

The philosopher **Jean-François Lyotard** famously argued in 1979 that **postmodern societies no longer trust these grand narratives**. Examples of such grand narratives include:

- the narrative of **Progress**
 - the **Enlightenment**
 - **Emancipation**
 - **Marxism**.
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What is a “Master Narrative”?

A **master narrative** is a dominant story about the past that shapes how a society understands its history and identity.

Historians such as **Hayden White** showed that historical writing is not purely scientific explanation—it also uses narrative structures.

Anthropologist **Claude Lévi-Strauss** contrasted the **master narratives of colonial powers** with the oral histories of marginalized groups. Written history often reflected the perspective of those in power.

Historians from the **Annales School** criticized traditional historical narratives and emphasized analytical approaches rather than simple storytelling.

A master narrative can be defined as:

- a **coherent historical story**
- told from a specific perspective
- that becomes **dominant in a society or culture**.

Master narratives often help answer questions of **collective identity**:
Who are we? Where do we come from?

However, when historians **deconstruct master narratives**, many accepted assumptions must be reconsidered.

Example

For a long time, the **European Middle Ages** were described as a “dark age” without knowledge or culture. Modern historians have shown that this narrative was misleading and that literacy and intellectual life were more widespread than previously assumed.

This example demonstrates that narratives often say **as much about the present as about the past**.

Key Idea for Media Studies

Narratives strongly shape **public discourse**, including in **social media**.

In many cases, narratives determine how people interpret events before they even examine facts.

What is Propaganda?

Propaganda often works through **narratives**.

It rarely relies on pure lies. Instead, it frequently uses:

- **half-truths**
- emotional storytelling
- simplified explanations of complex realities.

Effective propaganda builds a **complete narrative universe**.

For example, extremist groups such as **jihadist organizations** construct entire ideological worlds through storytelling. These narratives often resemble the structure of fictional universes—some analysts have even compared them to mythic storytelling structures similar to **Star Wars**, where the world is divided into absolute good and evil.

Final Question for Discussion

If narratives shape how people interpret reality, an important question remains:

What actually exists beyond narratives?

What are the **facts**, the **complex realities**, and the **international norms** that exist independently of these stories?