Things in Narrative: A Philosophical Investigation

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Abstract: This paper explores how Paul Ricœur's hermeneutic theory of narrative – particularly his triadic model of mimesis – can be applied to the philosophy of technology to conceptualize technological mediation as a narrative process. Drawing on recent developments by Kaplan, Coeckelbergh, and Reijers, the study demonstrates that technologies do not merely serve instrumental purposes but actively participate in the narrative configuration of human temporality, identity, and meaning. Through the interpretive categories of textuality, literacy, temporality, and distancing, the paper offers a framework for understanding how technologies shape human experience by structuring it narratively. Building upon this framework, the article introduces the concept of narrative things – a proposed extension of narrative technology – to include all material entities, regardless of their design or origin. By analysing examples such as a constructed bridge and a fallen tree trunk, the paper shows how even non-technological objects can assume narrative significance through their integration into human practice and symbolic structures. This hermeneutical shift challenges reductive, instrumentalist definitions of technology and opens interpretive space for understanding the world as a dynamic field of meaning. Ultimately, the study advocates for a narrative hermeneutics, capable of articulating the meaningful role of all things in the storied constitution of human existence.

Keywords: hermeneutic, narrative, philosophy of technology, Paul Ricoeur, philosophy of things.

Introduction

Narrative is no longer outside the focus of philosophers, and they are slowly revealing its potential to meaningfully contribute to philosophical inquiry. But many contemporary philosophers emphasize clarity, logical structure, and precise language, favouring direct argumentation. On the other side, in the history of continental philosophy, figures such as Nietzsche (1892) and Camus (1942, 1951) employed narrative and literary forms that blur the line between philosophy and literature. Even the works of authors like Hegel can be read as narratives, as Rorty (2005) suggests. According to Michael Boylan (see Rorty 2019), literary narratives may even function as philosophy on their own. Why, then, has narrative largely been excluded from philosophical practice, even though philosophers routinely make use of it?

I suspect this neglection stems from narrative's inherent ambiguity. In academic philosophy, ambiguity is often seen as a liability: clarity and precision

are essential in order to persuade and withstand critique. Narratives, however, are open to interpretation; they rely heavily on shared background knowledge, which inevitably differs between individuals. While all interpretation involves a degree of subjectivity, narrative lacks the guided, step-by-step logic typical of philosophical texts and is thus open to diverse readings.

Yet this pursuit of clarity also has its limits. Certain dimensions of human experience, such as emotional or existential states, resist straightforward articulation. In such cases, narrative acts as a medium that can evoke these states in others. Because of this, thought experiments based on narratives have central role in moral philosophy and ethics, where it provides a source of intuitions.

Building on the work of Coeckelbergh and Reijers (e.g. 2020), who interpret Paul Ricœur's concept of narrative in the context of a hermeneutical approach to the philosophy of technology, I argue that narratives not only help us understand our relationship with technologies but also illuminate our broader interaction with the material world. This challenges the traditional concept of narrative technology, and I argue that this hermeneutical concept can be extended to include non-technological artifacts as well (cf. Verbeek 2015). If such extension proves to be valid, then narrative may serve as a rich resource for the comparative analysis of human relations and interactions with objects covering individuals through time.

In the first section, I introduce the concept of narrative and its connection to contemporary philosophy of technology. This excursion briefly reveals a conceptual problem with the notion of narrative and proposes the temporal definition that I use in the later sections. With this definition in mind, I introduce the concept of *narrative technologies* developed by Coeckelbergh and Reijers (2016) at the end of the first section.

Building on the introduced concept of narrative, I discuss the hermeneutical approach to narrative technologies in the second section. I trace the concept of narrative technologies back to its roots in the hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricœur and his theory of emplotment and triple mimesis (1984). On this basis, I further scrutinize the notion of narrative technologies in the work of Coeckelbergh and Reijers in order to unveil a fully matured conceptual framework, which I will further extend in the next section.

The third and final section explores whether the formerly revealed concept can be meaningfully expanded to include more than technologies, with the prospect of encompassing all kinds of things. To support this claim, I work with a definition of technology according to which a thing becomes a technology whenever it is used instrumentally to achieve some goal (Ihde 1990; Kroes 2012). To further support the claim, I lean to the notion of practice that provides a clear framework in which even natural things can become technologies, which directly supports my thesis that the concept of narrative technologies can be extended beyond the realm of technology.

Because of the interdisciplinary scope of this study, it contributes not only to the philosophy of technology but also to narratological research in the humanities.

Narrative and Philosophy of Technology

Having established the significance of narrative within broader philosophical discourse, we now turn to its specific role in the philosophy of technology. The term 'narrative' typically denotes a literary story or an author's account of real or realistic events, organized coherently and meaningfully. It is a way of organizing experiences and events into a coherent story that can act "as a form of explanation that tells us why an event happened, or why a character has behaved in a certain way." (Ritivoi 2009, 33) Narratives encompass various forms, including novellas, novels, short stories, essays, or even media commentaries, and they may also take the form of a subjective account of an event communicated to an audience.

Despite this apparent familiarity, the concept of narrative is far from straightforward; it is fraught with definitional challenges and interpretative complexity. This complexity becomes particularly significant when we turn our attention to the philosophy of technology. Here, exploring narrative not only helps illuminate the human experience of technology but also reveals how technology itself participates in shaping and mediating these experiences.

But the term narrative is increasingly overused, often applied to other communicative expressions such as opinions, arguments, perspectives, or intentions. This overextension represents a misapplication of the concept, inaccurately attributing the term to forms of expression that differ significantly from narratives. The root cause of this overuse lies in insufficient reflection on the distinctions between these forms, resulting in an unwarranted broadening of the term's scope (see Brooks 2022, 176).

Despite substantial knowledge about narratives and a general intuitive understanding of their nature, a precise definition remains elusive. To navigate this definitional plurality, narrative theorists have proposed various conceptual frameworks, each emerging from different philosophical premises and methodological approaches. These diverse perspectives highlight the complexity inherent in defining what constitutes a narrative. However, every definition encounters challenges that limit its applicability. To date, no universally accepted definition exists. Instead, existing definitions often suffer from either excessive narrowness – focusing exclusively on literary narratives and neglecting other forms such as audiovisual media – or excessive breadth, enabling almost any form of expression to be categorized as a narrative (see Lamarque 2004, 169, 394; Ryan 2007; Strawson 2004, 441).

Although there is no decisive definition of narrative yet, Ryan offers a compelling approach with her fuzzy-set definition (see Ryan 2007, 29-30). She sets spatial, temporal, pragmatic, mental and formal criteria tied to certain conditions, but it is more a guide to determine whether some text is a narrative,

than definition of narrative itself. Nevertheless, given the potential for ambiguity and to ensure conceptual clarity throughout this essay, it is necessary to provide at least a provisional working definition.

For the purposes of this essay, I define narrative as an organized, temporally oriented representation of states of affairs that are causally connected, have meaning as a whole and provide the recipient with new knowledge. I am aware that this definition is not sufficient in a philosophical sense, but it is better than a vague assertion. Nevertheless, it is not a devotion of this essay to define narrative rigorously, but for the sake of clarity it is necessary to have at least a working definition.

Despite the absence of a consensual definition, there is an inherent ambiguity regarding the very nature of narrative. Broadly speaking, a narrative is the product of the human activity of storytelling – often referred to as narrating. As a human-made construct, narrative possesses both material and social dimensions and may thus be regarded as an artifact. A book is a typical example of such a product, although verbal narratives, too, meet the material condition through the medium of communication. The social dimension of an artifact lies in its interpersonal character: a book, for instance, is a communicative act shared by an author with a recipient.

Beyond this artifact perspective, the term narrative can also denote a fundamental human capacity: the ability to make sense of discrete events by constructing causal connections and thereby creating a coherent and meaningful whole. There are at least two ways of approach to this type of narrative that can be scrutinized (see Ritivoi 2005, 231). One group of scholars, including, for example, Daniel Dennett, Louis Mink or Hayden White, considers that "narrative is a primary cognitive instrument" (Mink 1978, 131) used to impose meaningful structure on human reality. It is a "metacode, a human universal" which allows to organise experience and knowledge and "on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted." (White 1987, 1) The second group, in contrast, considers narrative as an ontological concept, fundamental to the human mode of existence and intrinsic to what it means to be human, as argued by philosophers such as Paul Ricœur, Charles Taylor or Alasdair MacIntyre. Taylor, for example, understands humans as 'self-interpreting animals' that understand themselves and the world by continuous interpretation (see Taylor 1985, 45).

In addition, Galen Strawson distinguishes between descriptive and normative dimensions of narrative in relation to human experience, which he terms the psychological Narrativity thesis and the ethical Narrativity thesis. The former claims that humans "see or live or experience their lives as a narrative," while the latter holds that "experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing." (Strawson 2004, 428)

Having outlined these key philosophical perspectives on narrative, we now turn to consider how these insights inform and enrich the study of narrative

within the philosophy of technology. One avenue is to study literature by authors such as Asimov, Huxley or Wells, because literature can act as a thought experiment (see Boylan 2019; Davies 2007). Alternatively, beyond literary narratives, we may theorize about technologies themselves as active participants in narrative construction, such as animation or generative language models (see Hall 2018, 1, 22). Moreover, an equally important perspective is to examine how technology emerges within the stories we tell about our everyday lives and society (see Coeckelbergh and Reijers 2016; Van del Laan, 2018; c.f. Coeckelbergh 2023). In the next section I will discuss the third account, so let me make a brief exposition first.

Contemporary philosophy of technology has often foregrounded the material dimensions of technology, treating technologies primarily as objects, while leaving linguistic and hermeneutic approaches comparatively underexplored (see Verbeek 2005, 12). However, a technological object alone does not reveal its full potential; it is through human engagement and practice that its meanings and possibilities come to light. A knife can be used to cut things, but also as a hammer or a drill. All possibilities for using an object cannot be derived from how it looks like, they reveal through practice.

Nevertheless, even though we are not aware of it, technology reveals itself in the stories we tell and write about ourselves. Therefore, technology is becoming part of these narratives by an act of storytelling. These stories may undergo various types of examination, that can reveal how people cope with technology in their ordinary life. For example, David Kaplan argues that we can understand technology through the interpretation of narratives we made about them. It can "help us to understand how and why a technological device or system is designed the way it is." (Kaplan 2006, 50) It also can help to comprehend why technology is made in certain way by revealing a history of their development, or it can unveil a distribution of technologies (see Kaplan 2006, 51).

For example, Peter-Paul Verbeek argues that technologies are not neutral tools but actively "help to shape human actions and decisions." (2011, s. 33) His postphenomenological framework rejects the traditional separation between human subjects and material objects, proposing instead a process of mutual co-constitution. Within this framework, humans design and produce technological artefacts, but these artefacts, in turn, shape how humans relate to and experience the world. As Verbeek puts it, when a technological artefact is used, "it facilitates people's involvement with reality, and in doing so, it co-shapes how humans can be present in their world and their world for them" (2011, 7). He also emphasizes that humans actively change their environment and themselves through their creative material engagement, which shapes their minds, extends their bodies and constitutes their being over time (see Verbeek 2005; see also Verbeek 2011).

Technologies mediate our perception by shaping how the world manifests itself to us –magnifying certain aspects of reality while eclipsing others (see Verbeek 2005, 133). On the other hand, they mediate our action by translating

human intentions into specific behaviours, inviting certain practices while inhibiting others (c.f. 135). Therefore, technological mediation can be productively interpreted in a narrative sense, because it can be seen as a kind of narrative structure, where technologies help configure the 'plot' of human experience by altering the trajectories, possibilities, and constraints of how events unfold and how we interpret them.

While Verbeek doesn't use the term 'narrative technology' explicitly, Mark Coeckelbergh and Wessel Reijers do. They developed their concept of co-shaping human and technologies through engagement with a notion of narrative technologies. They emphasize that technologies possess a narrative capacity, meaning they not only shape how stories are told but also influence the narratives that arise from their use (see Coeckelbergh and Reijers 2016, 337). This means that the relation between humans and technologies is reciprocal because they influence each other. They build up this concept on mediation theory according to which some human actions are mediated by technology. For example, microscope observation is possible only by advanced technologies and engineering that allows us to construct appropriate devices. The design of these devices requires a distinctive way of use that shapes our experience with it, although the construction varies by our feedback, so technologies are shaped by us as well. Some technologies, like large language models (LLMs), react to our use in real time and appropriate themselves to specific way of use by single person. "[H]umans and technologies co-shape each other," Coeckelbergh and Reijers mention, and argue "that humans do not only read technologies, but technologies on the other hand 'read' the human." (2016, 336) To further mature this approach, they developed an extensive hermeneutical concept around narrative technologies (see Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020).

The concept of narrative technologies thus foregrounds the reciprocal shaping of humans and technologies within the sphere of mediated practices. By emphasizing how technologies not only influence the stories we tell but also adapt to and interpret human actions, this approach challenges traditional notions of technological agency and narrative as solely human endeavours. Yet, to fully grasp the implications of this reciprocal relation, it is necessary to situate it within a broader hermeneutic framework – one that attends to the ways narrative structures human identity and meaning beyond immediate technological contexts. The following section will therefore turn to Paul Ricœur's work on narrative, which provides a profound theoretical foundation for exploring the given conception developed by Reijers and Coeckelbergh.

Hermeneutical Approach to Narrative in Philosophy of Technology

Building upon the reciprocal dynamics of narrative technologies, the present discussion now shifts to a hermeneutic account of narrative, grounded in the philosophy of Paul Ricœur. His work offers a comprehensive account of narrative not merely as a mode of storytelling, but as a fundamental structure through

which human identity and temporality are constituted. Unlike approaches that focus primarily on narrative as a cognitive or communicative tool, Ricœur situates narrative at the heart of the human condition, conceiving it as a vital instrument through which individuals make sense of their fragmented experiences and construct coherent selfhood over time.

In his trilogy *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985, 1988), Ricœur develops a hermeneutical concept of narrative that transcends the traditional boundaries of literary text and emphasizes that narrativity also affects other areas of human existence, including "cosmology, geology and biology." (Ricœur 1984, 135)

He also developed a distinctive concept of narrative identity. Concisely, human identities are constituted by narratives. The persistence of identity is held together through constant change over time by personal stories, often shared with an audience, that keeps heterogenous aspects of life in a concordance of discordant elements (see Ricœur 1988). It is worth mentioning that this type of identity is public, because not only can we tell stories about selves but also the others can include us in their stories or even tell stories about us alone. According to Ricœur, human life and experience are fundamentally structured through narrative and mediated by language as the primary mode of articulation.

These theoretical foundations have been further developed within the philosophy of technology, most notably by David M. Kaplan (see 2006, 49) in expanding the influence of Paul Ricœur's ideas within contemporary philosophy of technology. Kaplan identified several directions in which Ricœur's thought could be fruitful and proposed possibilities for further exploration. For instance, he suggests that Ricœur's hermeneutics, which employs the model of the text as a framework for understanding linguistic mediation of experience, can be applied to comprehend how people 'read' technologies.

According to Ricœur's model of the text (see Ricœur 1973), human actions can be interpreted similarly to texts because actions are intersubjective, whereas internal mental processes are accessible only to the subject themselves. Actions, being open to perception by other subjects, who may be considered their addresses, become objects of interpretation, akin to the way a text is interpreted by its reader (the addressee of the action). This interpretation imbues the action with new meanings, paralleling the dynamic of textual interpretation, as it updates and expands the action based on the interpreter's current experiences, thereby transcending the original act.

This analogy with reading a text holds under the condition that we accept the concept of the text's emancipation from its author. An emancipated text is open to the reader's interpretations, which ascribe it additional meanings. Thus, if human actions can be read and interpreted similarly to texts, the methods used for textual interpretation may also be used to interpret actions, because both involve analogous underlying structures (see Kaplan 2006, 43).

Building on these interpretive insights, *Time and Narrative* articulates a sophisticated theory of emplotment that elucidates the mediating role of narrative

in shaping human temporality. Grounded in Aristotelian mimesis (see Aristotle, 1925) Ricœur's model of emplotment explains how narratives transform heterogeneous events into coherent wholes, enabling human experience to be understood as both temporally structured and meaningfully ordered. Through the triadic process of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration, Ricœur (1984, 54) demonstrates how narrative emplotment does not merely recount events but actively constitutes human understanding of time itself. Thus, narrative becomes not just a literary device, but a fundamental mode through which temporal existence is grasped and interpreted.

The first stage in Ricœur's model of narrative emplotment, mimesis 1, refers to the pre-narrative understanding of human action grounded in our cultural and social repertoire. This stage presupposes three fundamental capacities: the ability to recognise the structural features of actions, to interpret their symbolic mediations, and to grasp their temporal dimensions. As such, mimesis 1 is not confined to the moment preceding textual engagement but reflects the broader narrative frameworks through which we interpret everyday experiences, from bureaucratic procedures to national and technological identities. This prefiguration of meaning underscores that human understanding is always already mediated by narrative structures (see 1984, 54) and remains only the point of departure in Ricœur's theory, which seeks to explore how these shared forms of life are narratively configured and transformed.

The phase of narrative configuration, mimesis 2, is the core of Ricœur's theory, as it denotes the process of emplotment – the mediation of prefigured experience through the structure of a plot. In this stage, heterogeneous elements of human action are organized into a coherent narrative whole that enables meaningful interpretation (see 1984, 65). The plot not only orders events chronologically, but also configures them into a non-chronological, intelligible totality, allowing the reader to 'follow' the story toward a plausible resolution (see 1984, 66). Through this dual temporal mediation, narrative transforms scattered experiences into a comprehensible and meaningful temporal structure.

Mimesis 3, or refiguration, marks the culmination of Ricœur's narrative model, where the world of the text intersects with the reader's lived reality, resulting in a transformation of understanding (see 1984, 71). This stage completes the hermeneutic circle by reintegrating the configured narrative into the reader's prefigured world, thus reshaping their perception of social and temporal experience. Ricœur emphasizes that this process is not tautological but rather a productive hermeneutic dynamic, wherein narrative structures illuminate the world of action, and our engagement with that world enriches narrative interpretation (see 1984, 76). Through this reciprocal movement, narrative becomes a site where meaning is continuously negotiated and renewed.

Kaplan's application of Ricœur's text model lays the groundwork for a broader integration of narrative theory into the philosophy of action. This opens

the way for Ricœur's triadic model of mimesis to be mobilised as a framework for understanding how narrative configures human experience over time.

Building on Ricœur's hermeneutics, Coeckelbergh and Reijers outline a framework for understanding technological mediation as a narrative process (see Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 88). Rejecting rigid distinctions between technical and narrative modes of understanding, the authors posit that human experience is fundamentally mediated by narrative structures, which are accessed through engagement with various material artefacts. This framework draws explicitly on Ricœur's threefold model of mimesis – prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration – reinterpreting it in the context of technology. By doing so, Coeckelbergh and Reijers show how technological artefacts can be understood as narrative agents that both reflect and shape human temporality, agency, and interpretation. Their model extends Ricœur's insight that narrative mediates the experience of time and action, proposing that technologies too participate in narrative emplotment, thereby constituting a dynamic hermeneutic relationship between users, technologies, and the socio-technical world they inhabit.

Reijers and Coeckelbergh (see 2020, 89) identify four concepts – textuality, literacy, temporality, and distancing – that are introduced to articulate how technologies configure human understanding. While textuality and literacy describe the degree to which technologies function like texts and the user's interpretive readiness, temporality and distancing capture how technologies shape temporal experience and mediate our relation to the world of action.

Textuality refers to the degree to which a technology resembles the paradigm of a text – that is, its capacity to structure and transform human understanding through narrative emplotment. Technologies exhibit varying levels of textuality: those that more actively "tell us something about ourselves and the world" (2020, 91) (such as ICTs and social media platforms) can be interpreted similarly to texts, while others (like hammers or bridges) participate more passively in our prefigured narratives (see 2020, 92). Textuality thus defines the interpretive horizon of technological hermeneutics – only technologies that approach the structure of a text allow for deep narrative interpretation. It shifts the focus from literal textual elements to the ways technologies organize human experiences, actions, and meanings into coherent narrative configurations.

Textuality also distinguishes between active or passive relations to emplotment. Active technologies actively participate in emplotment, are part of a narrative and are substantive to understanding narrative. Passive technologies are mostly prefigured and understood before the time of the narrative.

The concept of literacy refers to the degree to which individuals are capable of engaging with and co-authoring the narrative configurations enacted by technologies. Drawing on Ricœur's distinction between narrative configuration and commentary (see Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 94; see also Ricœur 1985, 68), literacy captures the interpretive proximity to two levels of technological narrativity: first-order narratives, which are configured by the technologies

themselves through their structure, design, and affordances; and second-order narratives, which describe, analyse, or reflect upon these primary configurations from an external or retrospective standpoint.

First-order narratives are embedded in the way a technology operates and presents itself to users – for instance, the sequence of interactions in a user interface or the constraints of an algorithmic decision-making process. These narratives shape user experience directly and implicitly. In contrast, second-order narratives are typically articulated by users, designers, or commentators who interpret or explain the technological operation, such as in manuals, critique, or academic discourse.

This distinction reveals a stratified field of access: some users – such as developers, designers, or expert operators – participate directly in shaping or modifying first-order technological narratives, while others remain at a distance, engaging primarily through second-order interpretations or symbolic associations.

Technological literacy, akin to digital literacy, thus reflects both epistemic and hermeneutic access to technological meaning-making. Also, the first-order structures of technological emplotment hold a specific authority in shaping how technologies configure human understanding and action (see Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 94). Accessibility is a category of literacy. Some technologies are accessible, others are inaccessible.

Temporality refers to the way time is configured through technological emplotment, specifically via two mechanisms: the enforcement or relaxation of sequential action, and the implementation of temporal 'connectors' (see 2020, 98) – such as dating, version control, and traceability. These mechanisms correspond to Ricœur's narrative conception of time, where human temporal experience is shaped not merely by chronological succession – the linear, sequential order of events (at first this happened, then that), corresponding to measurable or cosmic time – but also by configurational structures – the interpretive structure that organizes events into a meaningful whole (a plot), allowing us to understand how individual actions or occurrences relate to broader purposes, consequences, or moral insights – that render time intelligible and meaningful (see Ricœur 1984, 66).

According to these mechanisms, technologies structure temporality by determining the order of operations (e.g. steps when starting a car), but also by embedding events within systems that make them traceable, comparable, and historically locatable. This dual configuration of time enables technologies to act as mediators of both personal and public temporalities. For example, a calendar app does not simply mark time, but configures future expectations, responsibilities, and a narrative structure of daily life. Thus, temporality is fundamental to understanding how technologies participate in the narrative emplotment of human experience.

Rigid and dynamic forms of temporality correspond respectively to the two mechanisms outlined above. Technologies with rigid temporal structures enforce a fixed sequence of operations, such as automated production lines, whereas dynamic temporal structures, e.g., version-controlled software, allow for revisions and alterations, leading to potentially different outcomes (see Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 98-99). On the other hand, dynamic technologies do not have a given structure and allow us to change order of actions, but this leads to change of the outcome of the emplotment.

And finally, distancing refers to the degree to which technological configurations either engage users with the world of action or abstract from it (see Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 100). Drawing on Ricœur's distinction between historical and fictional narratives, distancing captures a continuum between two poles: on one end, configurations that foster imaginative variation and invite user involvement in open-ended narrative structures; on the other, configurations that 'stand for' events as if they actually occurred, thereby producing fixed, archival representations of reality (see Ricœur 1988, 177; cf. White 1987). These representational configurations abstract from lived experience, suppressing the interplay between future-oriented expectations and retrospective interpretations.

Distancing thus not only shapes the epistemological character of technological mediation but also its social dimension, as it modulates the intersubjective relations and interpretive freedom of those engaging with the technology (see Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020, 102). Importantly, the abstraction involved in high-distancing technologies may create an illusion of inevitability or factual closure, but, as Ricœur's philosophy of history argues, narrative explanation operates by retrodiction rather than prediction (see Ricœur 1984, 128) – by situating events within teleologically meaningful plots rather than deriving them from deterministic laws. Accordingly, technological mediation provides necessary, not sufficient, conditions for action: it configures possible courses of meaning and interpretation without determining them absolutely.

The category of distancing distinguishes between engaging and abstracting technologies. Engaging technologies are those that are in use by humans. On the other side, abstracting technologies are considered in terms of their internal structures and operations. Although humans may interact with them, explaining how they function requires describing the processes and interactions among their individual parts.

This section has explored how Paul Ricœur's narrative theory provides a philosophical bases for a framework to understanding technological mediation as a narrative process. Ricœur's triadic model of mimesis – prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration – not only explains how human temporality is narratively constituted but also enables the extension of narrative understanding beyond literary texts to encompass the broader structures of actions.

Through the integration of Ricœur's hermeneutics with contemporary philosophy of technology, particularly as articulated by Kaplan, Coeckelbergh, and

Reijers, we have seen how technologies can be interpreted as narrative agents that actively configure human understanding and experience.

Four key conceptual dimensions – textuality, literacy, temporality, and distancing – were introduced to articulate the modes in which technologies resemble texts, the interpretive proximity to users, the structuring of time, and the degree of abstraction from the world of action. Rather than deterministically shaping human behaviour, technologies function as narrative structures that offer conditions for meaning making, which are always open to reinterpretation and contestation. Hence, understanding technological mediation through Ricœur's narrative lens enables a richer, more nuanced account of how humans live with, through and by technologies in a shared temporal and symbolic order.

This integration of narrative theory into the philosophy of technology not only expands our understanding of how technological artifacts mediate meaning but also foregrounds the interpretive agency of users within these mediations. It invites further reflection on the narrative dimensions of emerging technologies and opens the door for more nuanced ethical and phenomenological evaluations.

This section demonstrates that a Ricœurian hermeneutic approach provides not merely a metaphorical lens, but a robust conceptual framework for analyzing how technologies structure experience. Future work might explore how specific technologies – such as AI systems or algorithmic infrastructures – reshape narrative identity in new, unprecedented ways.

Things in Narrative

Rather than focusing on the differences between things and technology, this section argues that the concept of narrative technology can be meaningfully extended to encompass all material things. Contemporary mediation theory and postphenomenology (Ihde 1990; Verbeek 2005; Reijers and Coeckelbergh 2020) operate under an overlooked technocentric bias. By defining material mediation almost exclusively through the lens of human design, engineering, and intentional craft, current frameworks inadvertently create a problematic ontological binary: designed artifacts are granted active, plot-shaping agency, while non-designed material entities are relegated to a passive, inert backdrop. This creates a significant tension when accounting for the full spectrum of human experience. It fails to explain how the non-designed material environment structurally configures human temporality, choice, and meaning making without prior human inscription.

Therefore, inspired by Coeckelbergh's narrative technologies, I propose the notion of narrative things, which are non-designed material entities, to capture this broader category. Assessing the plausibility of this extension, I will first examine the philosophical distinction between technologies and things. Subsequently, I will apply key hermeneutic categories – textuality, literacy, temporality, and distancing – to both conventional technologies and non-designed artefacts.

To advance this inquiry, it is necessary to temporarily step outside the strictly hermeneutic framework. Beyond this perspective, philosophical definitions of technology often emphasize its practical, instrumental, and social dimensions. Analytic philosophy of technology, for instance, typically defines technology as a collection of artefacts, methods, and processes developed through human ingenuity to solve problems or achieve specific objectives. Within this view, technology is rooted in engineering practices and is primarily concerned with the design, production, and use of tools, machines, and systems to manipulate the environment and fulfil human aims (see Hilpinen 1992; see also Kroes 2012).

Accordingly, technology may be understood as a set of artefacts that, through use and practice, serve specific goals. To illustrate this, a stone lying on the ground is not inherently a technology; yet, if I pick it up and throw it to hit a squeaky bandicoot, it undergoes a functional shift and becomes a technology. This suggests that technological status is inherently purposive emerging from an object's integration into human activity directed toward a specific goal.

Consequently, a thing becomes a technology through human interaction. As Ihde argues, technology is not simply an independent object or instrument, rather, it becomes meaningful as technology only while it is integrated into human activity – that means it is used, interpreted, and incorporated into praxis (Ihde 1990). Challenging the traditional view of technology as merely applied science, Ihde maintains that technology must be understood through the ways it is constitutive of into human practices and experiences (see Ihde 1990, 20).

Following Ricœur (1984), emplotment is not a literary device added to events retrospectively but the process that configures heterogeneous elements – agents, intentions, actions, circumstances, and material conditions – into a meaningful whole. Human action is therefore already pre-narratively structured through goals, motives, and situations (mimesis 1), making it inherently open to narrative configuration.

From this perspective, material things never enter practice as neutral physical objects. Once integrated into action, they acquire a structural role within the unfolding activity: they enable, constrain, or redirect human intentions. In doing so, they contribute to three essential dimensions of narrative configuration. First, they shape the causal and temporal structure of action by determining what can happen next. Second, they mediate its teleological organization by enabling or obstructing the realization of particular goals. Third, they participate in the synthesis of heterogeneous elements that Ricœur identifies as the defining function of emplotment (mimesis 2). Removing the material object would therefore alter not only the practical situation but also the narrative structure through which that situation becomes intelligible.

Consequently, by participation in human practice, things participate in narratives, because practice itself possesses a proto-narrative organization. They do not merely appear within stories, but through their practical entanglement

with human agency, they actively contribute to the narrative configuration of experience.

Therefore, I argue that expanding these hermeneutic categories to non-technological things is highly fruitful. The framework need not be restricted to technological artefacts; instead, extending it can offer profound insights into human existence and our being-in-the-world.

To ground this framework, let me consider the example of a bridge. As Rijers and Coeckelbergh (2020, 166) note, a narrative describing a bridge, such as stating that it facilitates trade between the two sides of a river, closely aligns with the account of its practical use. One might say, for instance: "I use the bridge daily to transport goods to a business on the opposite bank."

The framework of narrative technology suggests that, once constructed, a bridge becomes a passive element of prefigured knowledge, as it is shaping the spatial context in which narratives unfold. However, during its construction phase, the bridge plays an active role in the narratives of those involved in its creation, thereby directly participating in the process of configuration.

Generally, a bridge represents an accessible technology, as its function and use belong to common knowledge. In the brief narrative above, the protagonist inherently understands how to navigate across it. From the perspective of temporality, the bridge can be considered a dynamic technology, as it allows for flexible use and a free succession of events. Conversely, if one were to take a hammer and chisel and begin inscribing words into the stone railing of it, each strike would leave a permanent trace of that action. In this context, the bridge functions as a rigid technology, because these actions have a given structure which is not variable.

Finally, the concept of distancing reveals that a bridge may become abstracted from its primary function when it is used mindlessly, such as when a person crosses it without conscious recognition of it as a technology designed to cross a river without getting wet. However, it does not abstract to the same extent as more complex systems like banking infrastructures or the internet. Notably, during its construction, the bridge remains engaging, as it is a shared component of active, goal-oriented human action.

While the bridge serves as an illustrative case of a conventional technology, its narrative dimensions reveal that the interpretive framework of narrative technology need not be confined to artefacts traditionally classified as technological. This raises a pivotal question: can the same conceptual tools be applied to things? To explore this, I introduce the analogy of a fallen tree trunk functioning as a bridge, examining how things beyond human designed technologies can participate in narrative emplotment and thus be understood as narrative things as well.

Evidently, a simple object such as a tree trunk fallen across a stream can function as a bridge when someone uses it to cross water. Although it was not

constructed by humans, it becomes a technology insofar as it enables a person to cross the stream more easily, which means it is used purposely to achieve a distinctive goal. As Mitcham (1994) implies, the object becomes a technology for two reasons: first, practice confers conceptual significance upon it, and second, it serves a goal. Yet, the more pressing philosophical issue lies not in the object's goal-oriented function, but in how its mere presence configures human action and experience narratively.

Crucially, the narrative approach does not require an object to be utilized instrumentally or to serve a specific human goal. Rather than prioritizing function or intention, it foregrounds how an object becomes integrated into a temporally and symbolically meaningful structure of human experience. From this perspective, things become narrative participants even when they are not actively used as tools. They configure the space of action, shape temporal sequences, or acquire interpretive significance within a broader story. Thus, the narrative status of a thing depends not on its technological function but on its role within emplotment.

A more fundamental issue concerns the concept of practice. As Ihde (1990) and Kroes (2012) argue, an object becomes a technology only through its use by human agents in pursuit of particular goals. On this instrumental account, technology is constituted by use rather than by the object itself. However, such a conception restricts the range of situations in which things can participate in the narrative emplotment, as it excludes objects that shape experience without being intentionally employed as technology.

While instrumental use marks a pragmatic shift from thing to technology, the narrative approach highlights the object's embedding within a meaningful temporal and symbolic structure. A tree trunk is thus not merely a makeshift bridge but a narrative node – a focal point within a broader structure of meaning-making, a nexus where human action, interpretation, and temporal sequencing converge. That is an element through which human experience is configured and interpreted.

On the example of a tree trunk serving occasionally as a natural bridge, it can be shown how the previously developed framework can be applied to things. Beginning with the concept of textuality, it depends on how close a thing is to a paradigm of text. As the fallen trunk is not very textual, it is not part of a narrative in this way. But it reconfigures and configures narrative's spatial arrangement, therefore the other categories are more relevant.

Regarding literacy, the trunk is accessible, as it is clear what it does, how it can be used, and what consequences may arise from interacting with it. From the perspective of temporality, it is dynamic because it can freely alter the sequence of events within a narrative. And within the context of distancing, it is engaging, as it actively shapes human actions. For example, if I am sailing and the trunk blocks my way, I must decide whether to sail under it, drag the boat over it, or carry it along the shore.

Consequently, the view that things often appear merely passive within narratives is an unavoidable consequence of philosophies of technology that define technology strictly in terms of human practice. By adopting the perspective of narrative things, we liberate the framework from this technological bias. This shift allows us to treat all things as narrative participants, regardless of their technological provenance.

This change of perspective not only dissolves the rigid boundary between artefact and technology but also invites a reconceptualization of materiality itself as always already embedded in narrative structures. Once emancipated from the exclusive domain of technology, these interpretive categories can be applied universally to the material – or, one might say, natural – world. This approach aligns with Peter-Paul Verbeek's project in *What Things Do* (2005). Whereas Verbeek focuses primarily on artefacts and technological mediation, I propose a broader, more flexible hermeneutical conception of things, that expands our scope without sacrificing explanatory power.

However, the proposed generalization from technological artefacts to things at large carries profound theoretical implications. By arguing that things can be embedded in meaningful narrative structures, this concept advances a relational hermeneutic ontology that extends the ontological turn in hermeneutics initiated by Martin Heidegger and further articulated by Paul Ricœur, whose narrative philosophy underpins Coeckelbergh's account of technology.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger ([1927] 1962) demonstrates that humans never encounter the world as a collection of neutral, isolated objects (Vorhandenheit); rather, we are always already immersed in a meaningful, equipmental totality (Zeugganzheit) constituted by our practical concerns. Material entities are meaningful because they belong to a 'worldhood' (Weltlichkeit) defined by assignments and relations of usability. Ricœur (1984) operationalizes this insight for narrative theory through the concept of prefiguration, as mentioned above, wherein human action is always already symbolically and temporally structured prior to any formal text. By proposing the category of narrative things, I expand this hermeneutic lineage that material entities such as things, although not a text in the literal sense, are open to interpretation in a text-like manner because they co-constitute the existential horizons within which human narratives are constituted.

Consequently, this ontological shift does not merely expand the application of narrative technology; rather, it revises a core assumption implicit in contemporary mediation theory and introduces a genuinely new analytical distinction. It is true that postphenomenological mediation theory can be seen as exhibiting a subtle technocentric bias, insofar as it tends to assume that, for an object to meaningfully mediate human experience and action, it must be intentionally designed or produced by humans. By contrast, the proposed concept redefines the scope of narrative mediation by emancipating mediation from human design.

To make this distinction clear: narrative technologies are artefacts thenarrative capacity of which is tethered to a designed function or use (e.g., a constructed bridge designed to facilitate trade), while narrative things are non-designed material entities thenarrative capacity of which emerges from their situational contingency, human practice and material resistance within human emplotment (e.g., a fallen trunk that abruptly reconfigures a sailor's journey, or can be used as a bridge to cross the river).

This distinction demonstrates that mediation is not an exclusive property of human designed artifacts, but a capacity of materiality itself when entangled with human practice. Ultimately, this proposal does not dilute mediation theory; it radicalizes it, showing that things do not need to be technologies to act as active, plot-shaping participants in the human narrative.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the potential of Paul Ricœur's narrative theory, particularly his triadic model of mimesis, as a foundational framework for understanding not only narrative in literature or identity, but also technological mediation as a narrative phenomenon. Through the integration of Ricœur's hermeneutics with contemporary perspectives in the philosophy of technology, especially those of Kaplan, Coeckelbergh, and Reijers, I have shown that technologies do not merely serve instrumental purposes but actively participate in the configuration of human temporality, identity, and meaning. By introducing the categories of textuality, literacy, temporality, and distancing, the narrative approach offers a nuanced lens through which to interpret technology as mediators of experience rather than as neutral tools.

Building upon this framework, I have argued for an extension of the concept of narrative technology beyond the confines of technology to encompass all things, what I have provisionally termed as a concept of narrative things. This shift acknowledges that things, regardless of their origin or intentional design, can assume narratively significant roles – not because of what they are, but because of how they figure within human experience. The example of a tree trunk functioning as a bridge illustrates how a non-technological object can assume technological and narrative relevance through human interaction and contextual interpretation. In such cases, the distinction between things and technologies is less about what a thing is, ontologically speaking, and more about how it is placed and interpreted within narrative and hermeneutic structures.

Importantly, this broader perspective challenges the tendency within the philosophy of technology to define technology strictly in terms of human goals and instrumental use. By rethinking things as participants in narrative emplotment, we open interpretive space for understanding the world not as a collection of passive objects or functional tools, but as a dynamic field of meaning, structured and restructured through the stories we live and tell. The categories of narrative hermeneutics, once confined to texts and later applied to technologies, thus find

new relevance when extended to the realm of things, offering a framework that is both conceptually expansive and ontologically inclusive.

In doing so, the last section lays the groundwork for future inquiries into how narrative theory might illuminate other domains of material and symbolic life. By demonstrating that a non-designed entity (such as a fallen trunk) can possess the exact same narrative capacity as a designed technology (such as a bridge), a fundamental assumption is exposed in the current literature: the belief that mediation is a property embedded into an object by a human creator. Instead, I argue that narrative capacity is a property of all things, regardless if they are made by human or natural. This move broadens the scope of postphenomenology and mediation theory by advancing a non-technocentric account of mediation that is not limited to human-designed artefacts.

The hermeneutical categories elaborated here not only contribute to the interpretive analysis of technology but also invite a reconsideration of the broader ecology of things that shape, and are shaped by, human understanding. This opens a promising direction for narrative hermeneutics: one that does not draw a hard line between technologies and other entities but instead seeks to articulate how all things – natural or artificial, designed or found – can be rendered meaningful within the storied structures that shape how we live, act, and understand the world around us.

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