

## **HOW MODAL NARRATIVES WORK**

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### ABSTRACT

Modal narratives are narratives that depend on modal themes – necessity, possibility, contingency – as their starting point and *raison d'être*. In futurology, such narratives are called scenarios; in history and political science, counterfactuals; in science fiction and fantasy; uchronia, allohistories or alternate histories. Modality is a pluralistic and interdisciplinary field of enquiry: the subject is explored in disciplines as diverse as quantum mechanics, philosophy and semantics, as well as futurology, history and literary studies.

Modal narratives are about what might have been, or what might yet be. They are not judged as true or false, but as informative because they focus upon causation, possibility and necessity. One aim is to sensitize analysts to the multiple possible worlds that might have been and could still emerge. Counterfactuals, for example, can thus be a heuristic device to understand the circumstances, events and actions of organizational history. Modal narratives do not aim to deal with wholly improbable events. They are a genre of narratives that have a rude plausibility but did not, or might not, happen. Their governing trope is the suggestion that the indeterminacy of history provides opportunities for alternative trajectories. Modal narratives are thus a form of conditional statement based on the logic of possible worlds. They are an antidote to determinism; giving full play to contingency and the alternatives available to actors, both known and unknown to them at the time. Their role is, finally, to keep explanations open by introducing multiple possibilities.

In this paper, we discuss certain normative methodological and philosophical features of modal narratives. We tackle the question: 'How do modal narratives work?' This is not necessarily to ask – although it is a related issue – 'what makes for a good modal narrative?'. We do not intend to list a specific set of criteria of goodness, such as that of Tetlock & Belkin (1996). Instead, we will argue that modal narratives accomplish their effects through operating within a zone of analytical manoeuvre created by the interplay of four tensions, related but distinct: estrangement versus plausibility; simplicity versus depthfulness; analysis versus narrative; realism versus imagination.

Darko Suvin's (1979) influential discussion of science fiction (SF) as a literary genre introduces the concept of cognitive estrangement. He argues (1979: 7)

that “SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s [and we might add, the reader’s] empirical environment”. This is accomplished by the introduction of a *novum*, a strange newness (1979: 5). We argue that modal narratives can also be precisely so characterised. Yet effective modal narratives need to be governed by cognitive plausibility in a stronger sense than that of Suvin. While we will not be able to say, with Becker (1998:18) that the story “has to get us from here to there in such a way that when we reach the end we say yes, that’s the way it has to end”, we must be able to say, yes, that’s one of the ways it might really end, or might have ended. Effective modal narratives, involving what Lewis (1979) called small miracles, are likely to involve *plausibilia*, not just *possibilia*.

This is not to assert, however, that the development of such narratives need remain in the closest possible world. Once tipped from the stability of the actual, they unfold under their own logics, configurations, interaction effects and mechanisms. Such depthful, textured narratives have been characterised as ‘superfactuals’ (Clark et al, 2004), whereby the multiple interaction of recursive factors pile onto one another very rapidly to take us far into an alternative empirical environment (see the ‘Project Hindsight’ case discussed in Booth et al., 2003; Clark et al., 2004). Nevertheless, these logics must be capable of analytical reconstruction if the narrative is not to sacrifice plausibility for estrangement alone.

This follows through into our third tension. Clark (2000: 113) argues that in organization studies and strategy, approaches to temporality and history often invoke the genre-label of ‘narrative’, implying “that the readers can relax their critical, sceptical facilities”. This invocation implies that narrative is somehow ‘thinner’ than analysis, more attenuated, ‘just’ a story. Modal narratives, to be convincing, must engage plausibly with events and their presentation, with both contingent and with determining forces and actions: “the requirement is for an analytic dualism that gives ‘equal’ attention to the pre-existing causal processes, mechanisms, and socio-structural conditions as well as the agentic unfolding of the new round of events” (Clark, 2000: 116). In this sense, to say that modal narratives should be analytically structured narratives is not only making a claim as to their mode of analysis and narration, but is also engaging with the ontology of such narratives: with critically appreciating the blending of chance, choice, process and design that is organizational history.

Finally, we see modal narratives as occupying a space framed by the interaction of realism and imagination. This is not an argument about the plausibility – or otherwise - of modal narratives but about their effects. In philosophy, Lewis (1986) adopts a position of strong modal realism – possible worlds do really exist beside our actual one. We have no access to these worlds, yet assuming their existence allows us to work fruitfully with a number of problems in our actual world. We have no access to the future; yet organizational foresight demands we attach a genealogy to possible future outcomes and developments to realise a ‘futurible’ (de Jouvenel, 1967).

Similarly, we have no access to the reality that was the past: yet history consists, as Dening (1996: *xvi*) reminds us, of restoring to the past those qualities of the present which it once possessed: to “give back to the past its present”.

In restoring to the past the sense of uncertainty historical agents faced in making choices, for example, modal narratives allow a re-telling through which may be obtained a more nuanced and subtle understanding of *which* actions, events, structures, routines and processes may be contingent, probabilistic, or deterministic, and *how*. In Collingwood’s (1939:100) terms, modal narratives informed by a commitment to an imaginative (re)enactment as well as to a disciplined logic of question and answer, enable us to learn for ourselves the nature of ‘the situation in which to act’.

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