Reagan’s Mythical America
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Reagan’s Mythical America
Storytelling as Political Leadership

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This book is dedicated to professors
Vilho Harle
Ira Chernus
Mika Luoma-aho
. . . and the merry participants of EUK64.
I sometimes think that an awful lot of us in this country today, if not the world, are sort of like a writer who has come to a great plot problem and is really stuck and doesn’t know how to make it work and finally goes back and does a little studying of the pages previously written and discovers that maybe the plot was based on a false premise.

Ronald Wilson Reagan

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I tell this story just to remind you of the magical, intoxicating power of America. We may sometimes forget it, but others do not.

Ronald Wilson Reagan

Ronald Reagan has not been analyzed thoroughly with the tools of narratology as he should be. William F. Lewis wrote an excellent article about the use of narrative form in the Reagan presidency, but a full-length book has been sadly missing. One of my goals is to show how the narrative approach can be used in Reagan studies, and I have taken narratology as my key empirical orientation to Reagan’s texts and to explore his politics. I argue that politics creates such a work of fiction that the narrative approach dealing with stories as works of fiction can be used in the study of political narratives as well. Reagan’s own life and his experiences were a crucial part of all the stories he told, but this book does not contain even a summarized biography of Reagan. Facts about his life show up on the following pages only to illustrate the points I make. As I will show, perhaps these “facts” need to be questioned because Reagan had a tendency to romanticize his own life to a degree that almost nothing unpleasant can be found in those stories.

There have been many excellent studies on Reagan from the viewpoint of rhetoric. The renowned scholar of narratology, James Phelan, sees narrative as rhetoric and writes that the narrator is “telling a particular story to a particular audience in a particular situation for presumably, a particular purpose.” It is not only that narrative uses rhetoric or has a rhetorical dimension, but also the fact that narrative is not just a story but action as well. This works as a good definition of the political uses of narratives, albeit I consider rhetoric and narrative to be somewhat different methods of persuasion. Rhetoric seeks to rationalize and persuade the story recipient using the power of words themselves, while narrative can penetrate deeper into the psyche of the story recipient, and not so much to give reasons and arguments, but to incite emotions. To exaggerate, rhetoric aims to
convinced the brain, while narrative can be at best used to set the heart blazing. There is always a rhetorical dimension within any narrative, but there exists a power somewhere beyond the words of the stories told. Regardless of the words used in the telling, the story itself can touch something primeval within us. Rhetoric creates a new way to view the world but narrative opens up new vistas and creates new worlds as mental models in form of storyworlds, a concept I shall discuss later on in more detail. Here and now it suffices to say that rhetoric is a part of the narrative framework, but the power of narrative persuasion encompasses the world of rhetoric. As Lewis wrote, the predominance of narrative form in Reagan’s rhetoric has established the climate of interpretation used in understanding him. We need to be aware of the distinction between the perspectives of rationality and that of narrative. For Reagan stories were not just a rhetorical device; his entire message was a story.5

In order to make my methodological points and issues explicit, I wish to start with the fact that I write my study as an outsider. I cannot claim to be a part of the American culture so that I could see Reagan through the eyes of that culture and particular period of time Reagan occupied. Following the thoughts of Mikhail Bakhtin I can, nevertheless, use creative understanding in relation to Reagan’s America.6 For Bakhtin it is necessary for a person who understands to be located in time, space, and culture outside the object of creative understanding. One is not able to see one’s own exterior and comprehend it. Other people are needed for that. The exterior and interior of a given culture can only be fully and profoundly comprehended by outsideness and through the eyes of another culture and time. There will exist in this book a dialogue between two separate meanings and cultures, and this hopefully will result in asking questions that may not have been common in the American culture, and meanwhile Reagan’s mythical America will reveal new aspects of itself.7 I cannot choose to inhabit a position as a complete outsider, but must immerse myself in Reagan’s world to some degree, because there can exist no position for an observer outside the world he observes and indeed, the observation itself enters the world as a constituent part of what is being observed.8 There is no totally isolated vantage point distanced by time and space such as the Archimedean immovable point, from where this book could be the metaphorical lever with which to move the world or, rather in this case, the storyworld. Storyworlds cannot be better understood from the outside than mere utterances that compose the stories, which in turn guide the construction of storyworlds. The one who tries to understand enters into the dialogue as the third party.9
Every text is “plurivocal, open to several readings and to several constructions.” Narratives are interpretive in their nature, but at the same time require interpretation as well. This is because we have to interpret texts at every moment of our interaction with them and allow symbols and tools of semiotic systems to replace the actual primary experience, which we are denied forever. The act of imitating events and actions in a narrative needs the ability to ignore. Some aspects have to be left without consideration since human perception involves simplification. Not all words, sentences, or even narratives are important within a given text. So is the case of this book on Reagan. Because I am writing a narrative on the narrative of another narrator’s narratives, the end result is my own literary creation. All I have to work on are the texts that represent only a selected and simplified reality and it is this narrated reality that I need to turn into another narrative and the meanings of both narratives are ambiguous to begin with.

In 1967 William Labov and Joshua Waletzky wrote a groundbreaking paper on the mechanisms of oral narratives as a way to transmit personal experience. Their emphasis, however, is not in the “products of expert storytellers that have been retold many times, but the original production of a representative sample of the population.” All Reagan’s narratives certainly belong to the former group of constant, practically professional retellings, but even then, some of the fundamentals of orally transmitted experience are involved. When it comes to those Reagan’s public papers that were originally presented as speeches, one must consider the Bakhtinian concept of utterances, which are the real compositional units of speech communication and need speech subjects of individual speaking people to exist. The length of a single utterance is determined by a change of the speaking subject. Therefore each of Reagan’s speeches consists of a single utterance and when discussing question-and-answer sessions, each response to a question forms an utterance. The length of an utterance is indeterminate, it can be only one word or, for example, an entire book. For an utterance there is an absolute beginning preceded by the utterances of others, and an absolute end followed by the responsive utterances of others. An utterance is a whole, and the change of the speaking subjects is only possible because the utterance has reached its finalization, that is, the speaker has said or written everything he wants to say at a particular moment.

Bakhtin nevertheless argues that a sentence as an utterance, or a part of it, can never be repeated and even used as a quotation; it is always a new utterance. Individual sentences can be repeated identically, but
the utterance as a whole is shaped by extra linguistic aspects and exists only in relation to other utterances. This naturally poses a challenge for use of Reagan’s quotations. New utterances have to be created, since some of the speeches are relatively long and not suitable for being reproduced here in their entirety. Therefore I must make the conscious choice of recreating utterances by shortening and cutting the original ones. Paul Ricoeur sees that the minimal meaningful unit for study in narrative discourse is a sentence, because discourse is organized in sentences. However, “Understanding a text is always more than the summation of its partial meanings.” Therefore words and sentences have to be combined to understand Reagan’s entire metastory as a unified text, a collage of smaller stories, while short quotations have been chosen for the purpose of illustration. Reagan himself gave a word of support for my choice of how to quote him while trying to remain true to his original purpose. Reagan said,

Anyone who expresses himself publicly from a platform of this kind must expect that his words can be used and repeated by anyone. Once they are uttered, there can be no restriction on those who can reproduce them. Nor would we have it any other way. I retract no statements of mine that I have made in the past. My principles remain what they always have been. I will stand behind all of the quotes, if they are honestly and completely quoted.

I have tried to remain honest to Reagan’s narration in making choices what to include and exclude from this book. There is no doubt that some of the “major” speeches such as the speech after the destruction of space shuttle Challenger are central to the narrative construction of the American self-image and also for anyone who wants to gain a comprehensive understanding of Reagan’s entire political metanarrative, but it is my argument that even speeches to smaller audiences and less publicity along with private discussions are important. To understand the goals of politics, one must recognize, following Lyotard, that “it is impossible to trust the analysis of public addresses.”

The desires and true intentions of the narrative political leader cannot, and indeed should not, be deciphered solely from the wording of his public addresses, the expressions he uses, or even his rhetorical flourish. If the analyst takes this approach, he must beware the fallibility of his analysis. But indeed the intentions and purposes behind any political narration are objects worthy of study since the narratives told by politicians are always told for a political purpose; either to inflict change or preserve the status quo. Public addresses
are traditionally in the American context the means of “spelling the policy out loud,” but there is no guarantee that there would not be a hidden agenda behind this barricade of words. The texts of important public addresses should be approached with extreme caution, since they are the most refined and thought-out expressions of the policy and less likely to offer any crack, which might be used to penetrate into the level of the intentions that lie behind the mere expression of those intentions. As Edelman writes, all public speeches and announcements are “heavily imbued with stylized and ritualistic components that justify policy to mass audiences.”

The most commonly found example is the inaugural speech of any president. According to John Kares Smith, the inaugural speeches fully consciously “recreates and reanimates the cosmogynic myth of the founding of the country: a litany of the great words and the great deeds of heroes past . . . a reaffirming of America as a special place chose by God for the enactment of divine purpose.” But from the viewpoint of narrative-based leadership of politics and the creation of myths, the inaugural speeches do carry a meaning. They are often the most illustrious verbal celebrations of the national unity and highly integrative in their nature. But the actual policy content within them is very limited. They define and strengthen identity but do not define actual political actions. One needs to peek behind the façade of ritualized and stylized aspect to deduct the purpose why a certain narrative was told instead of innumerable others that could have been put to use. There is an intention behind every story to uncover and in most cases it is this intention that actually adds the political element into the story.

Gerald Ford wrote in his memoirs that Reagan was “one of the few political leaders I have ever met whose public speeches revealed more than his private conversations.” To overcome the dilemma of how to use Reagan’s public and private texts I have made the choice of immersing myself as thoroughly into them as possible. For this work I have read everything Reagan said publicly during his two-term presidency: all his prepresidential radio speeches; all the campaign speeches that are available at the vast archives of Ronald Reagan Presidential Library; and in addition his two autobiographies, the edited collections of his letters to individual people, and his diaries. In the case of the diary the narrator and the narratee are the same person, even if the diary is ultimately intended for someone else’s eyes. The narrator of the diary may narrate events for his own edification and memory as well as work out his problems on paper, but essentially he is talking to himself. When one uses autobiographical material as data, it is
necessary to understand that is not important to determine whether biographical coherence is reality or merely an illusion. What really matters is how a person creates coherence to his life in an autobiography. “The sources of this coherence, the narratives that lie behind them, and the larger ideologies that structure them must be uncovered.” An autobiography is just another story, and the metanarratives that create its coherence are the most interesting factors.

Unfortunately it is impossible to arrive at a pure and unmediated story. The story I read from Reagan’s papers is subtly different from any other reader’s story and ultimately even the story I try to compose and recreate will result in another discourse than that of the original. While I create a new story within a new discourse, it is my claim that these nevertheless operate on the level of the storyworlds that Reagan created. To better get the true voice of Reagan included in the storytelling I follow Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of including “extraliterary utterances and their rejoinders” such as diaries and letters and things Reagan has told to biographers. In other words I create a unified utterance from heterogeneous utterances, where not only my voice and Reagan’s can be heard or read, but a multitude of others as well. Thus, getting the voice of Reagan foregrounded as much as possible is essential to avoid this becoming simply my narrative. In trying to understand Reagan’s utterances, I become myself a participant in the dialogue their interrelations form. Barbara Czarniawska claims that “after all, reading is writing anew.” I cannot help writing a new story even if I try to keep as close to Reagan’s as possible. But, “storytelling, to put the argument simply is what we do with our research materials.”

It is hard to hazard a guess as to whether the politics created Ronald Reagan, the person, or whether the person created the policies. The two processes happened simultaneously so that the life story of Reagan (which is necessarily not the one told in autobiographies) worked to create his political stories and policies, and on the other hand, the necessity for political coherence shaped the persona of the citizen-politician Reagan as well. But as Niebuhr wrote, “every ‘shepherd king’ in history is more king and less shepherd than he pretends.” There are roles a politician has to play. He can stick to the role of a stereotypical politician or attempt to break free from the bounds provided by that role. Changing the image of the role is hard after it has been established. Reagan compared politics to acting,

In the movie business, actors often get what we call typecast; that is, the studios come to think of you as playing certain kinds of roles, so
those are the kinds of roles they give you. And no matter how hard you try, you just can’t get them to think of you in any other way. Well, politics is a little like that, too. So, I’ve had a lot of time and reason to think about my role not just as a citizen turned politician but as an actor turned politician. In looking back, I believe that acting did help prepare me for the work I do now.32

Perhaps one of the reasons why the public relations move by Spencer and Roberts’s company to label Reagan as a “citizen-politician” had such an appeal for Reagan was that it is, after all, “politics as Hollywood plot line.”33 Stephen Weatherford and Lorraine M. McDonnell have claimed that seeing Reagan as more actor than politician underestimates his impact by failing to take seriously the role political ideology plays.34 One should in research evaluate and compare the ideas behind policies, their implementation, and the effects. They claim that the American political culture is so pragmatic that ideology is “scarce enough in electoral campaigns, the ideologue in power is an unprecedented occurrence.”35

While Reagan’s presidency undoubtedly can be characterized as performed or enacted at least to some degree, one cannot assert that Reagan was or even could have been solely a product of his aides or the citizenry. Reagan was an ideologue and he had his own values and policies. Despite the fact that the great rags-to-riches myth of an all-American success is personified in his life story, he was the actual person who created and crafted the policies he wanted to pursue. Because so much of Reagan’s policies centered on stories and telling them, it is natural that he was himself drawn into the storyworld creation of his citizenry and was partially recreated there anew into a picture of what the story recipients wanted to see in their president. Essentially Reagan was the narrator and reasonably successful controller of the stories he told, and thus more than a speaking figurehead created to respond to the call of the citizenry.

When it comes to the narrative theories used in this text a short explanation is in order. I have not found a single theorist who would write at least in length of the narratives of the political leadership and the stories used to lead people.36 It will be a part of the novelty and contribution of this book to show how culturally dominant narratives and myths offer tools for political leadership. I go from theorist to another, discarding some thoughts and bringing some to this text. This is due to reason of necessity since in each theoretic approach to narratology there is something valuable to increase understanding of the power of stories. And the theorists themselves do not remain set
in stone either. One example of this can be found within the writings of Roland Barthes, who began as a structuralist, slowly discarding it and moving to find jouissance and even eroticism in the free textual play.\textsuperscript{37} While I do not go so far as to suggest that there would be erotic pleasure in political texts for the reader, I claim that the story escapes from the restrictive structuralist boundaries of the text.

Northrop Frye defined literature as an area of verbal imitation between events and ideas. Poetry faces simultaneously “the world of \textit{praxis} or action, a world of events occurring in time. In the opposite direction, it faces the world of \textit{theoria}, of images and ideas, the conceptual or visualizable world spread out in space, or mental space.”\textsuperscript{38} Poetics is then something, which exists between the immanent and material world, partly action, partly ideas, and with the function to imitate actions in words in the world of ideas. It exists between rational thoughts and the dreams and visions of the unconscious. It creates something and this creation, the actual poem or literary product, reflects the higher world of pure ideas. Politics ideally aims at making the world better and its ultimate goal is to “create a heaven on earth.” Storytelling can be a powerful political force because of its position between the often sad reality and the vision of what is conceptually possible, and it can reflect a better state of being for mankind. Poetics is, or can be, the stuff of political visions of a better future. It does not need to limit itself to depicting what is, but what \textit{could} be.

It is a sad fact, that narratology and the study of narrative discourse are too often centered on invented stories or fictional narratives. Gerard Genette was among the first theorists to focus his attention to whether the applicability of results or even methods of narratology fit into examining factual narratives, or rather fact-based narratives.\textsuperscript{39} But it is one of the main functions of good stories to appear as if they were not fabrications of anyone’s imagination but instead true and fact-based. Stories often aim at blurring the distinction of fact and fiction, and as becomes apparent, even the “truth” of the narrative is not a clear-cut thing. The methods of studying purely fictional narratives can be used effectively to study political narratives without distortions to the stories told. One can even argue for the idea of fictionality in politics. It is not just that Reagan, as he appeared to us, was a narrated or fictional personality but that the world of politics becomes fictional when it is narrated to us. Since we most often cannot see or tangibly feel what is going on in politics, we rely on the stories told about the political process. This is most evident in the realm of international politics, since the actions in that realm are often far removed from the sphere of our daily life. We read the stories
in the newspaper and see the visual narrations on the news, and can never be sure that we have been given the “true” story. The story that creates the news may have been modified and altered, but in any case, it is a story, description of states, actions and events, which has been put together or emplotted by someone, so that it would be easier for us to again emplot for the benefit of our own understanding and ultimately digestion.

Since the story of events in the realm of politics does not arrive to us in unmediated form, it is better to take it with a pinch of salt. If we start to doubt the “truth” of the news, it is only one more step to take to view them as fictional, at least to the degree that the things described are embellished to make them more reportable, and the whole array of theories concerning fictional narratives are at our disposal. The political narrative does not indeed need to be true to follow the “reality” as we know it, since it can abide by another set of rules. Since it is a story, it only needs to be plausible enough to appear lifelike. Things do not need to be true as long as they appear to be true and this is a great asset for all political narratives. By treating political matters as fictional and only plausible, the politician is able to some degree supplant the “real” world of politics with a storyworld.

I will discuss many matters that are so tightly bound with each other that separations are artificial. Religious beliefs blend into myths about being American, which have influenced the culture that is in turn a shaper of the ideologies policies rest upon. This creates a web of meanings and one aspect cannot be picked out for closer study and leave the meaning in itself intact. In the realm of politics the web of beliefs, customs, and common sensical worldview join together to create a metatext, where each is partially justified by the others through intertextual means and the entire metatext will act as the legitimizer of political action. It is this entire metatext one needs to comprehend to make sense of how Reagan used parts of it in his creation of the mythical America.

The actual person of Ronald Wilson Reagan, born a poor son of a midwest shoe seller remains hidden from our eyes. This is an attempt to study Ronald Reagan, president, political narrator, storyteller, and, yes, mythmaker. The actual person, stripped of his politics and the stories he spun around himself, remains a mystery. This is because of the power of narratives in creating the public Reagan as contrasted to the private person. Reagan was an actor and his public persona was a role, drafted by himself as well as the expectations of the citizenry and the demands of how to succeed in carrying out the presidency. The stories that whirled around recreating and shaping him anew again
and again are part of his mythical America and the person stripped of these stories is of no consequence in this book. To summarize what is to come in the course of the next two hundred pages or so; I can do no better than to quote Bruce Lincoln, who described his own work by saying,

_In the following pages, my chief goal is to tell a story about the stories others have told about the stories of others still, and my point is that one should treat all these narratives with considerable care and caution._\textsuperscript{40}