

mei studies

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POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY OF LISBON | ESCS SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES | UNESCO Chair Communication, Media Information Literacy and Citizenship | unesco Chair | LIACOM Laboratory of Applied Research in Communication and Media

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BEFORE NARRATIVE

Creative Mediation and Symbolic Meaning in Mediatized Communication

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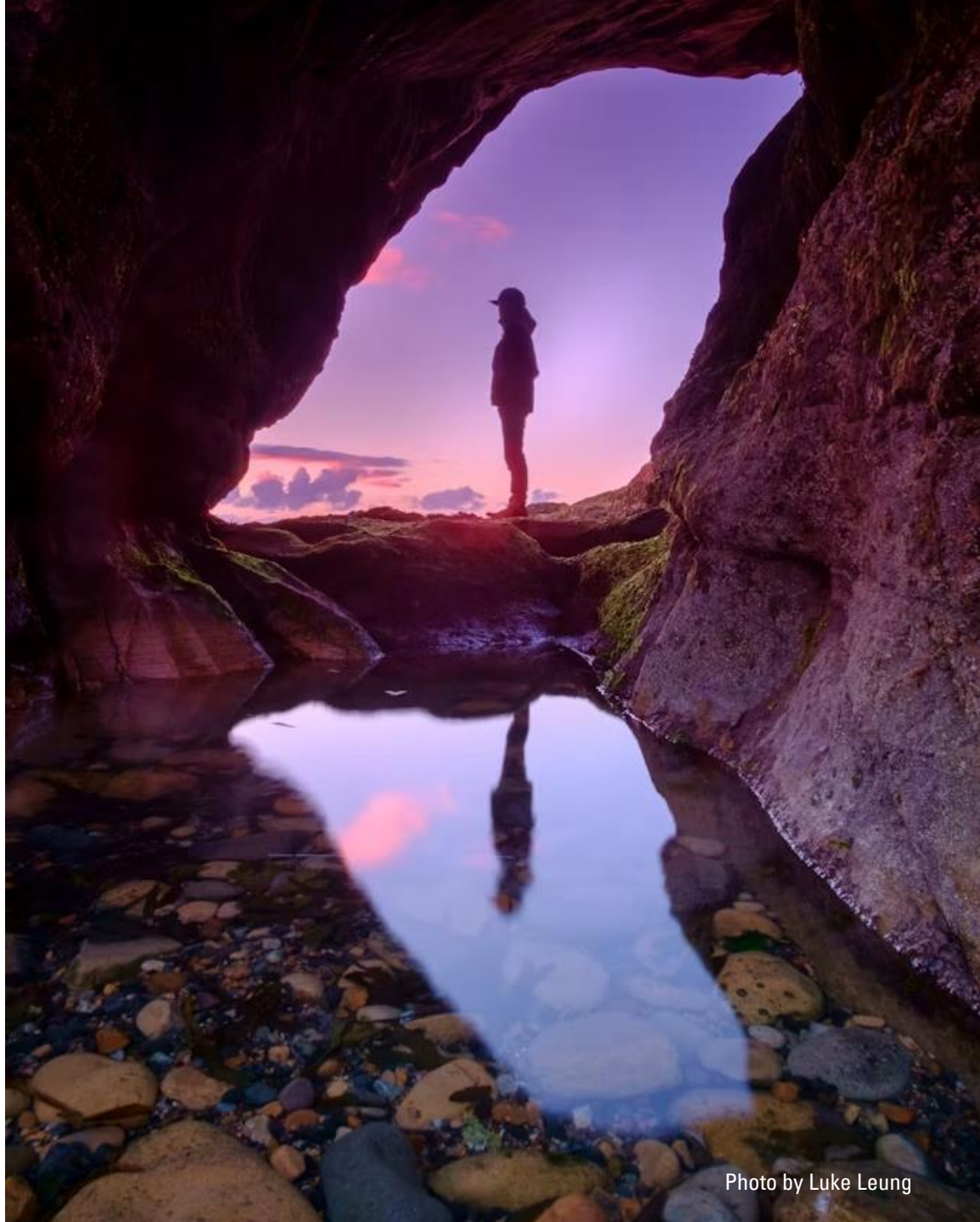

Photo by Luke Leung

BEFORE THE STORY

Where does meaning begin?

Narrative plays a central role in the organisation of meaning.

It connects events, establishes temporal and causal relations, and organises dispersed elements into intelligible configurations.

But meaning may already be emerging before these elements form a story.

How does meaning emerge before it acquires narrative organisation?

References: Eco, U. (1979); Barthes, R. (1964, 1977, 1981).



Photo by Jazmin Quaynor



NARRATIVE ORGANISES MEANING

But it does not necessarily originate it

Narrative brings dispersed elements into an intelligible configuration.

It may:

connect events · introduce temporality · establish causal relations · create continuity

References: Santos, S., Santo, P. E., & Ferreira, S. (2021, 2023, 2024).

NARRATIVE ORGANISES MEANING

What may already be there?

Yet what eventually enters that configuration may already have acquired relevance.

An element has stood out.
A difference has been recognised.
A relation has begun to emerge.

What enters a narrative may therefore already be meaningful.



Photo by Barna Kovács

References: Eco, U. (1979); Barthes, R. (1964, 1977, 1981).

BEFORE DOES NOT MEAN EARLIER

An analytical perspective, not a temporal stage

Before Narrative does not describe a chronological moment preceding narrative.

Perception, interpretation and narrative may overlap, interact and reshape one another.



References: Eco, U. (1979); Gibson, J. J. (1979); Ingold, T. (2001).



BEFORE DOES NOT MEAN EARLIER

A level of analysis

What we already know may affect what becomes perceptually relevant.

An emerging relation may redirect attention.
An existing narrative may reorganise what becomes visible.

"Before" allows meaning to be examined without presupposing narrative organisation as its starting point.

References: Ingold, T. (2001); Rietveld, E., Denys, D., & van Westen, M. (2018).



Photo by Creative Christians

RELEVANCE

What begins to matter?

We do not encounter everything with the same intensity.

Within a situated encounter, some elements become more relevant than others: **a difference, a detail, a gesture, a contrast or an unexpected presence may attract attention.**

But becoming relevant is not yet the same as acquiring symbolic meaning.

RELEVANCE ≠ SYMBOLIC MEANING

References: Gibson, J. J. (1979); Ingold, T. (2001); Rietveld, E., Denys, D., & van Westen, M. (2018); van den Herik, J. C., & Rietveld, E. (2021).

RELATION

When does relevance become meaning?

An element may attract attention without yet acquiring symbolic value.

Meaning begins to emerge when what becomes relevant enters into relation with other elements, previous experience, cultural references or affective associations.

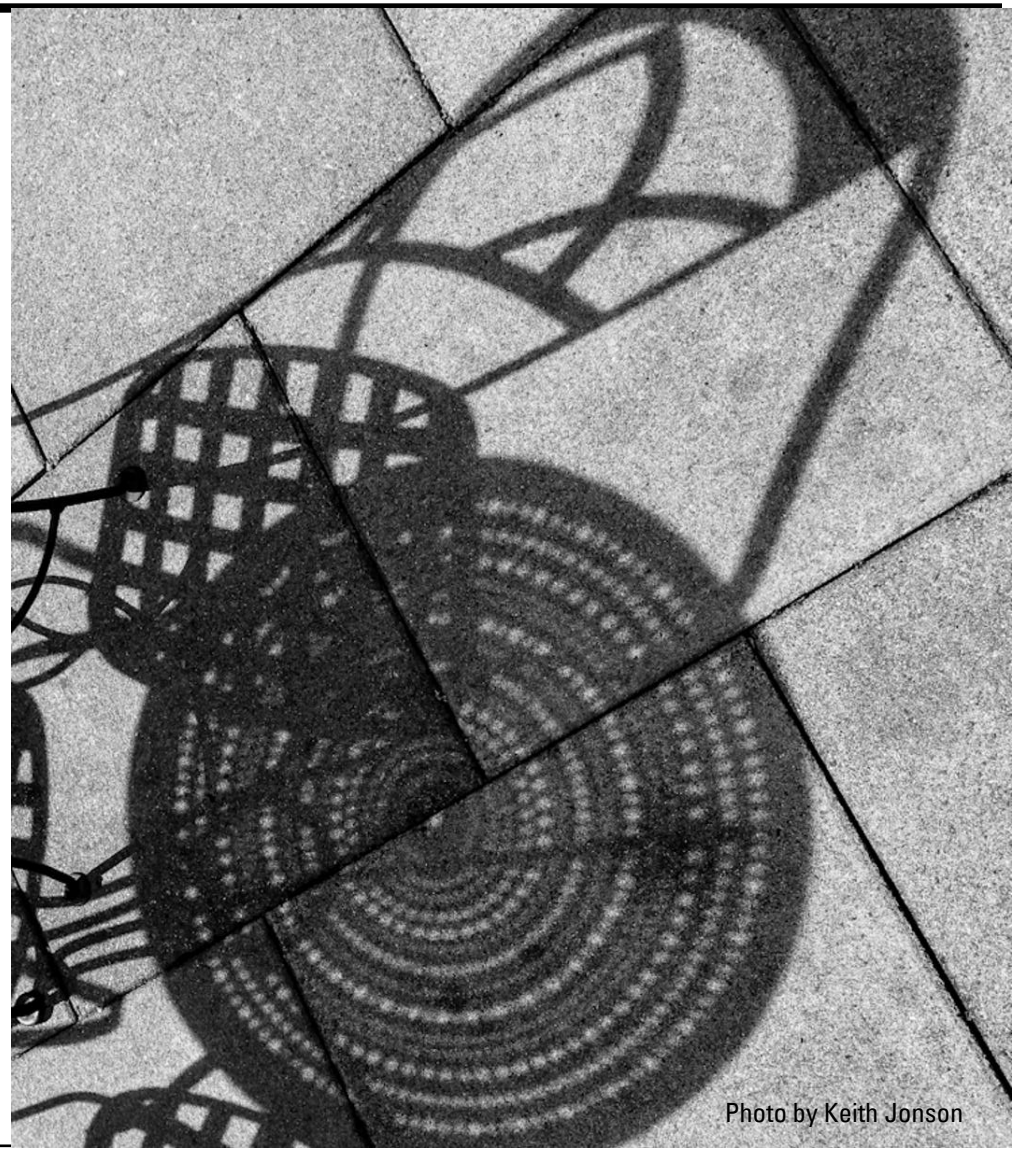

Photo by Keith Jonson

References: Eco, U. (1979); Kress, G. (2009).

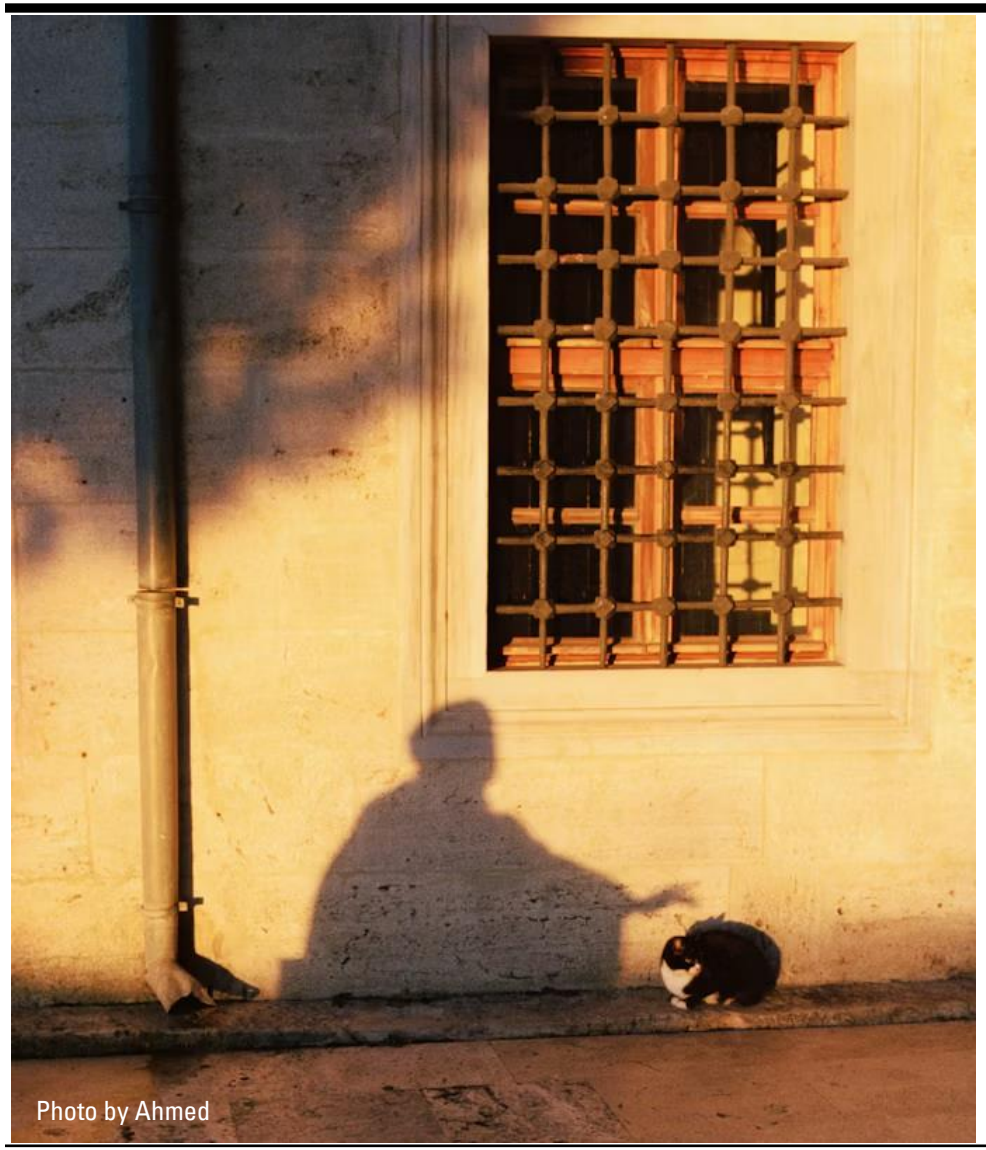

Photo by Ahmed

RELATION

Meaning beyond immediate presence

Through these relations, what is perceived may begin to refer beyond its immediate presence.

Meaning does not reside in isolated elements.

It emerges through the relations established between **what is perceived** and **experience**, **memory**, **culture** and **affect**.

MEANING IS CONSTITUTED IN THE RELATION.

References: Eco, U. (1979); Barthes, R. (1964, 1977, 1981).

SYMBOLIC MEANING

Meaning does not require a story

Symbolic meaning emerges when perceived elements are interpreted through relations, experience, cultural knowledge, memory, imagination and affect.

Yet symbolic meaning does not necessarily require narrative organisation.

Images make this particularly visible: multiple elements and potential relations may be simultaneously available to perception and interpretation **without forming a story**.

SYMBOLIC MEANING ≠ NARRATIVE ORGANISATION

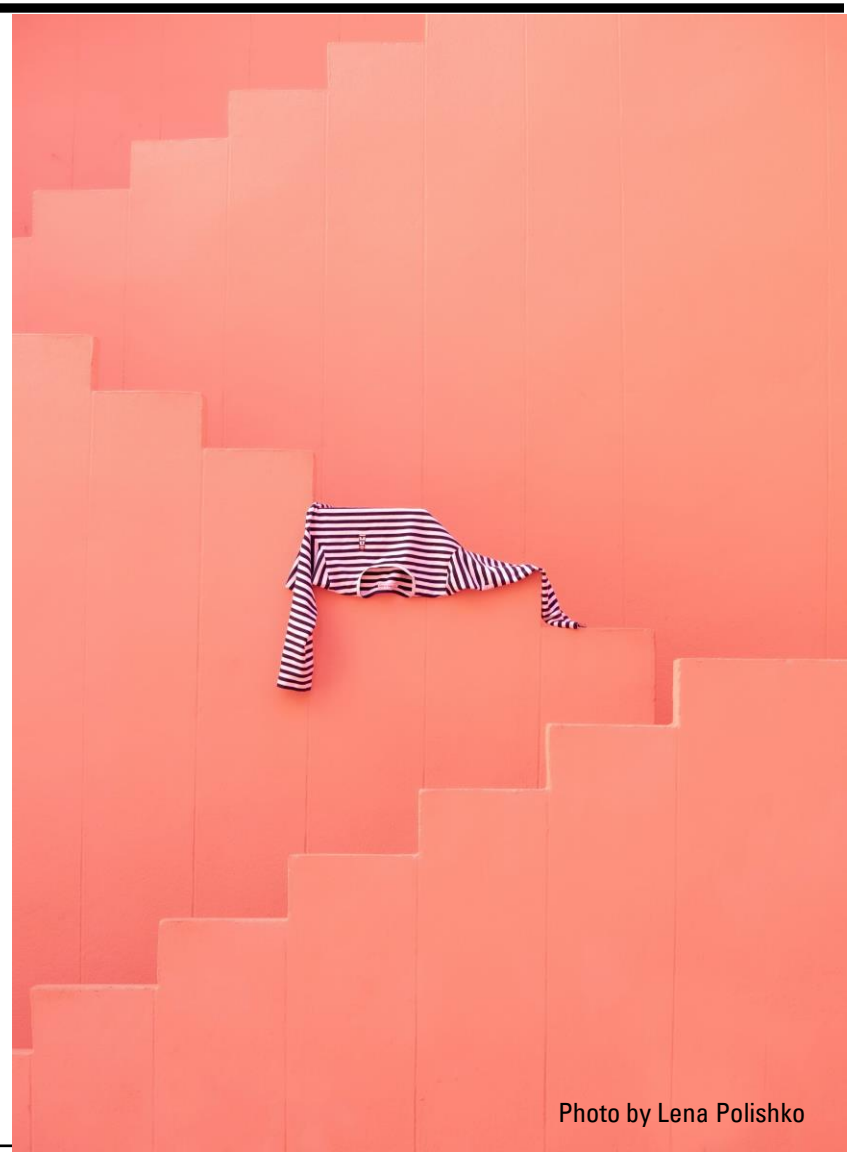

Photo by Lena Polishko

References: Barthes, R. (1964, 1977, 1981); Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2021); Aiello, G., & Parry, K. (2020).

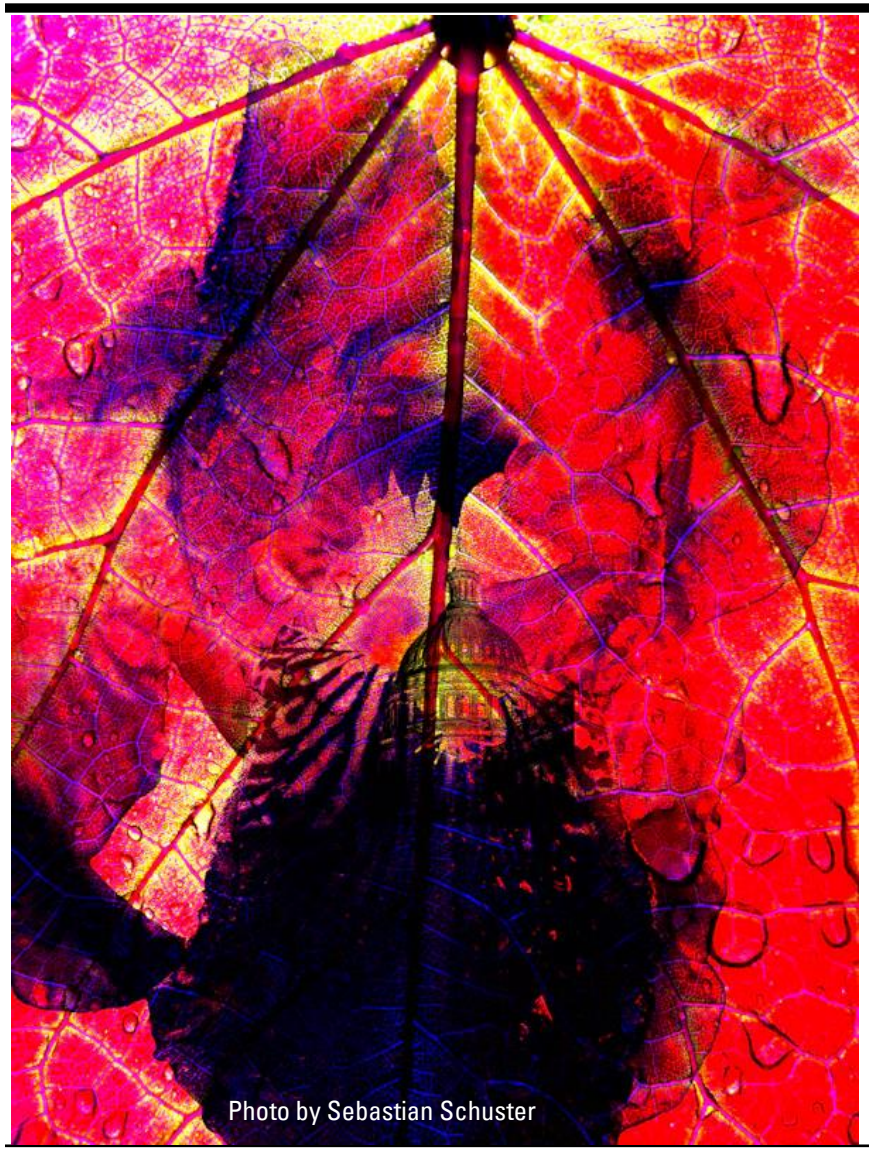
Photo by Sebastian Schuster

CREATIVE MEDIATION

Meaning as a relational process

Within the *Before Narrative* framework, *Creative Mediation* is reinterpreted as a relational process through which elements may become relevant, enter into relations and acquire symbolic meaning.

These processes may **overlap, interact** and **reshape one another**, rather than forming successive stages.

Narrative may emerge from these relations, but it is not their necessary outcome.

MEANING HAS CONDITIONS, BUT NO SINGLE ORIGIN.

References: Kress, G. (2009); Bucher, H.-J. (2025).

MEDIATIZED COMMUNICATION

Media participate in the conditions of meaning

Much of what we see, know and share reaches us through **images, screens, interfaces and devices** embedded in everyday life.

Media are not merely channels through which already constituted meanings circulate. They participate in the conditions of visibility, proximity and association under which elements become available to perception and interpretation.

They may shape the relations that become possible without determining the meaning that will emerge.

MEDIA CONDITION MEANING. THEY DO NOT DETERMINE IT.



Photo by Nick Fancher

References: Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017); Hepp, A. (2020).

NOT A SEQUENCE

Meaning does not unfold in fixed stages

Perception, Creative Mediation, symbolic meaning and narrative **do not form a linear sequence**.

What we already know may affect what becomes perceptually relevant; an emerging relation may redirect attention; and meaning may reshape the interpretation of the whole.

Narrative may also act retrospectively, **reorganising what becomes visible and meaningful**.

THE PROCESS ALLOWS FOR MOVEMENT, OVERLAP AND RETURN.

References: Bucher, H.-J. (2025); Ingold, T. (2001).



Photo by Dynamic Wang


Photo by Marina Reich

MEANING WITHOUT RESOLUTION

Ambiguity does not mean absence of meaning

Not all relations become stable or fully articulated.

Some may remain **fragmentary, ambiguous** or **provisional** and still produce meaning.

Narrative can organise relations into more coherent configurations, but coherence is not a condition for signification.

MEANING DOES NOT HAVE TO BECOME A STORY.

References: Eco, U. (1979); Bucher, H.-J. (2025).

NARRATIVE AS A POSSIBLE CONFIGURATION

When meaning takes narrative form

Narrative can bring emerging relations into a configuration in which **events, temporalities** and **causal connections** become intelligible as a story.

It may **articulate, transform** or **stabilise** meanings that have emerged through other relations.

But not every meaningful configuration becomes narrative.

NARRATIVE IS A POSSIBILITY OF MEANING,
NOT ITS NECESSARY DESTINATION.



Photo by Mesut Yalçın

References: Santos, S., Santo, P. E., & Ferreira, S. (2021, 2023, 2024); Laudun, J. (2026).

BEFORE NARRATIVE

What becomes visible when narrative is not the starting point?

Before Narrative makes it possible to examine how meaning emerges without presupposing narrative organisation as its starting point.

It brings into view relevance, relations and symbolic meaning that may already be taking shape within situated and mediatized experience.

These processes may converge towards narrative organisation, or **remain open, provisional** and **non-narrative**.

MEANING MAY ALREADY BE UNDER WAY
BEFORE THERE IS A STORY.

References: Eco, U. (1979); Ingold, T. (2001); Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017).



Photo by Bharath Kumar

MEANING BEFORE THE STORY

What Before Narrative makes visible

Meaning does not have a single origin.

It may emerge through **situated attention, relations, experience and mediation**, without following a fixed sequence or necessarily acquiring narrative form.

Before Narrative does not diminish the importance of narrative. It makes visible what narrative is not required to originate.

SOME ELEMENTS BEGIN TO COUNT BEFORE THEY FIND THEIR PLACE WITHIN A STORY.



Photo by Dynamic Wang

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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