
Management & Organizational History Stream

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Abstract

This paper on Siegfried Unseld, the late head of Suhrkamp publishing house in Frankfurt am Main and a prominent figure in Germany’s publishing trade, brings into focus a subject which is notably absent from management and organisational history alike: the function of the narrative. Whereas the linguistic turn has made quite an impact on the humanities, current business history has yet to take into account that language organises and structures our view of the world. Communication shapes reality. Entrepreneurs and firms are, in essence, semantic constructions involving complex interplay between public self-representation and media. In the following, Hayden White’s tropology is tested as a novel approach to business history. White’s ideas on the power of tropes proved helpful in understanding the deep structures of the discourse on the so-called “Suhrkamp-crisis” during the 1990’s. Strategies such as emplotment, the use of specific metaphors and an inherent sequence of tropes shaped the corporate image of Suhrkamp Verlag and built Siegfried Unseld’s reputation as a “publisher of the century”. Although tropology’s potential for historical analysis is limited to discourse analysis and to identifying as well as, to a certain degree, understanding shifts in mentality, it should be adopted as a complement to conventional approaches to management and organisational history.
Introduction

In a wooden box on his desk, Siegfried Unseld, late Grandseigneur of Germany’s publishing trade, kept a folded piece of paper. On this worn card, he had typed his personal motto: “Ins Gelingen verliebt sein und in die Mittel des Gelingens”\(^1\), which roughly translates to “Being in love with succeeding and the means to succeed.” Editor Raimund Fellinger relates this little anecdote in an anthology commemorating Siegfried Unseld, who died in 2002 after more than 40 years as the director of prestigious Suhrkamp Verlag. This anecdote is quite typical of Unseld, who prided himself in combining the virtues of businessman and patron. The way it is made known exemplifies a discursive strategy of entrepreneurial self-construction, as Suhrkamp’s management posthumously published this episode in a double effort of memorial and advertising. Businessmen and organisations are, in essence, semantic constructions and historians are well advised to gain insight into the linguistic rules.

Siegfried Unseld was quite a celebrity in his time. A larger-than-life figure both for his admirers and his most ardent critics, to some he was deemed brilliant – a “founding father of the federal republic”\(^2\) and related to Jove, no less\(^3\) – whereas others held him to be the “old Nick” (“Gottseibeiuns”)\(^4\) of Germany’s literary scene. Some regarded him as a very clever business executive with PR expertise. Suhrkamp, the literary publishing house founded by Peter Suhrkamp in 1950 and directed by Unseld as from 1959, has a reputation for shaping what British literary critic George Steiner has called “Suhrkamp culture” in post-war Germany, a key-term eagerly adopted by Suhrkamp’s public relations department: „Almost single-handed, by force of cultural-political vision and technical acumen, the publishing firm of Suhrkamp has created a modern philosophic canon. In so far as it has made widely available the most important, demanding, philosophical voices of the age, in so far as it has filled the bookshelves with the presence of that German-Jewish intellectual and nervous genius which Nazism sought to obliterate, the Suhrkamp initiative has been a permanent gain.“\(^5\) An increasing number of prominent authors such as Bert Brecht, Hermann Hesse, Theodor Adorno, Max Frisch, Martin Walser, Uwe Johnson and Isabel Allende, among others, brought prestige to the publishing house. Suhrkamp has thus gained a reputation for setting the agenda of intellectual discourse and for establishing literary standards which has far outweighed its economic capacity.

This paper does not set out to deconstruct a legend, however. It aims to achieve a deeper understanding of semantic processes that model entrepreneurs into icons of collective identity. Managers are, as Alfred Kieser and Cornelia Hegele put it, heroes and villains of our age with magazines praising their unique achievements. These

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\(^1\) This quote from philosopher Ernst Bloch is taken from an address given on the occasion of Bloch’s 90\(^{th}\) birthday on July 8\(^{th}\) 1975. Since the rather rough translation does not do Bloch – or Unseld – justice, the original words are given here: “Der objektiv-realen Möglichkeit in Geschichte wie Natur ist nun die Kraft des subjektiven, des Front-Faktors Rechnung zu tragen, genau um der Realisierung des Realisierenden willen. Hierbei mögen wie alle ins Gelingen und seine Mittel verliebt sein und ganz und gar nicht verliebt, sondern auf Kriegsfuß mit dem Scheitern.” See Raimund Fellinger, Editorische Notiz, in Ders., “Ins Gelingen verliebt sein und in die Mittel des Gelingens”. Siegfried Unseld zum Gedenken (Frankfurt am Main, 2003): 251.


articles are in form and function not unlike medieval legends of saints.  

Although this argument most certainly seems overstated, the idea merits further investigation. The first issue addressed here is methodological in nature. Hayden White's tropology has been adapted as a guide to a highly sensitive and discriminating mode of "readerly behaviour" in examining the sources. These included a large archive of newspaper articles ranging from the early 1970's to Unseld's death in 2002 as well as correspondence between authors and their publisher, essays and books in which Unseld explores his professional ethos. Tropes are considered a powerful way whereby language captures and creates reality. In which ways does the renaissance foursome of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony prefigure the example discussed below, the discourse on the so-called Suhrkamp-crisis in 1990's Germany? Another field of interest lies in the role of rhetoric in the complex interplay between participants of the given discourse. Which are the specific narrative conventions that prefigure the public discourse on firms and entrepreneurs? Which discursive strategies do businessmen employ to influence "hagiography" as well as "counter-legends"?

The "linguistic turn" has made little impression on economic history. Whereas problems connected with language have achieved prominence in general history, neither the strategy of textualisation nor the issue of rhetoric in historic representation became fashionable in organisational or management history. At a first glance, linguistic tactics would indeed seem inappropriate for a field of study that concerns itself with methods and kinds of documentation that deal with the general and the masses, rather than the particular and the individual, as Hans Kellner points out. Yet where statistical tables and balance sheets might be lacking in events to recount, they still follow specific semantics.

Hayden White put off many colleagues with rather polemic comments on history as a field of study only "aspiring" to the status as a science: "A discipline that produces narrative accounts of its subject matter as an end in itself seems theoretically unsound, one that investigates in data in the interest of telling a story about them appears methodological deficient." This statement has a harsh ring to it since the German language does not differentiate sharply between science (Naturwissenschaft) and humanities (Geisteswissenschaft). Jörn Rüsen observes that Hayden White's theory has been rejected with "a distinct undertone of..."
Some scholars criticised it for being too ambitious. As Reinhard Koselleck points out, “the methods and theory of history amount to more than a philological study”, and W.J. Mommsen argues that Historians may be bound to a certain perspective inherent to language but their methods would be subjected to constant revision during the process of research. F.R. Ankersmit, on the other hand, is one of those post-structuralists who criticise White for being inconsistent. White does not take relativism to its logical end, for he still acknowledges the existence of a reality that is independent of the individual’s perception. Other critics have objected to White's apparently simplistic combination of foursomes on various levels of text as too limited to substantiate such a far-reaching theory in which tropes actually prefigure any formal analysis of history. Beyond methodological debates, however, Hayden White's ideas have seldom been put into historiographical practise. Yet for this case study, his tropology proved to be a fine instrument for describing the deep structural content of a discourse that is generally poetic and specifically linguistic in nature. It reveals the interplay of self-projection and public opinion, a tension between the master trope synecdoche – describing the company by its owner's character traits – and a number of shifting tropes which distinguish the media discourse on corporate images.

In the following sections, the so-called Suhrkamp-crisis will be discussed. It is a prime example of how narrative conventions, stereotypes and metaphors shape public opinion. In December 1990 Siegfried Unseld and Joachim, his only son and designated successor as head of Suhrkamp Verlag, decided to go separate ways – a rift that was beyond mending. What started out as a mere family conflict assumed in the view of the public the proportions of an ancient drama. The unsolved question of succession became the object of an alarmed and sometimes malicious mediadebate. This collective parricide clashed with Unseld's vigorous self-representation, which will be considered in an excursus on his discursive strategies. The 1960’s and 1970’s hero worship of Siegfried Unseld seemed to make way for fierce criticism of the “Suhrkamp-patriarch”. Empirical study suggests that this discourse, too, followed a pattern Hayden White describes as inherent. At the outset the events were compared to the ancient drama of Oedipus, and then moved from this metaphorical description to metonymy, the process of reductive manipulation and formalisation, to the integrative synecdoche. It wasn’t before the end of the 90’s that the discussion took on a dispassionate and ironic stance that historicized Unseld as “publisher of the century”, elevating him into a realm almost beyond criticism. A critical assessment of the potential of White’s tropology for economic history concludes this paper.


\[^{14}\] Weber, White in Deutschland: 90.
Oedipus in the House of Spirits

Father and son had officially been equal partners in business since 1988, after which time Joachim Unseld had waited with growing impatience for his father to retire. Yet Siegfried Unseld was reluctant to abandon the helm so soon. Joachim's impatience became obvious when, on his father's 65th birthday, in proposing a toast he referred to the ancient custom of old men draining the hemlock cup. Siegfried Unseld was not amused.

The conflict between father and son became public knowledge in December 1990. Trade journal Buchreport featured a headline on this “generation gap”, while the Suhrkamp management informed their staff that Joachim Unseld would “seek out new perspectives” for a six month period. The Suhrkamp press department tried to smooth things over. While the official note published by the company coolly stated that the concept of shared responsibility for the firm had proven unsatisfactory, yellow press immediately picked on the juicier and more private aspects of the dissent. It was Verena Auffermann’s commentary in prestigious Süddeutsche Zeitung, however, which set the tone for the evolving discourse. Auffermann introduced the metaphor of Oedipus into the public debate, thus adding the quality of age-old tragedy. Auffermann compared the events at Suhrkamp Verlag to the Oedipus theme. She used word fields of monarchy and power, which dominated the public debate later on. The semantics of classical tragedy and monarchy structured her commentary while the Oedipus metaphor referred to generation problems and Freudian analysis as an explanatory plot.

Auffermann applies the strategy that Hayden White refers to as “emplotment”. The dramatic plot was not “found” in the events but put there by narrative techniques. Auffermann thus endowed meaning and morale to the sequence of events. Thus composed, the Suhrkamp-conflict gained a discernible beginning, middle part and anticipated conclusion. Other journalists followed Aufferman's example and applied the Oedipus metaphor. Path dependency definitely played a major part in the developing discourse. The German weekly Die Zeit, as one example out of many, called the dispute between father and son an “operatic quarrel”, casting Unseld senior in the role as superior father, as an old man who “would not let go”. Rheinischer Merkur used the Oedipus-motif to explain the conflict as a family affair. Instead of restricting himself to the facts, this journalist speculated on the publisher’s scorned ex-wife to orchestrate parricide.

The public cast Siegfried Unseld in the proactive part according to a script that proclaimed “father disowns son”. Unseld senior reacted in a composed if bitter manner, yet ironic detachment did not convince interviewing journalists that it was his son, Joachim, whose impatience had provoked the conflict. The plot of “father throwing out insolent youth in an Academy-Award winnig drama” also served a social need to moralise, to identify a “culprit” and a “winner”. “Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?” asks Hayden White. It would seem like “morale” is precisely what society looks for in a story. Conventional storytelling would be considered incomplete and even implausible without a proper, that is moralising, closure.

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19 Hyden White, The Content of the Form: 25.
When father and son definitely announced the end of their co-operation in July 1991, the tabloids offered an all too facile explanation. Yellow press applied the metaphor of Oedipus to Unseld’s private life: “The Suhrkamp rift. Father, son and beautiful Ulla – it was bound to go wrong”.\(^{20}\) \textit{Bild Zeitung} compared the internal conflict to a “penny dreadful”, and “all because of a beautiful woman”. Joachim Unseld had never approved of his father’s relationship with the much younger author Ulla Berkéwicz, and tensions rose after the marriage of the publisher and the 38-year-old former actress. Using metaphors from the bible, \textit{Bild Zeitung} exaggerated the semantic construction of Siegfried Unseld as an overpowering, god-like father-figure. As a general trend, the motif of Oedipus blended into the background while variations of a lager-than-life father figure emerged as prominent metaphors. They are related to the drama of Oedipus and, of course, to its Freudian counterpart, in the manner of metonymy. They also refer to an archetypal plot of the ogre-like father-figure who clings to his throne and therefore disowns the ascending son.

This constellation is typical for archaic and tribal myths. After the son is forced through an ordeal, he is united with his father once again. These are narratives of initiation, marking the step from adolescence to manhood. “For the ogre aspect of the father is a reflex of the victim’s own ego – derived from the sensational nursery scene that has been left behind, but projected before; and the fixating idolatry of that pedagogical nonthing [sic] is itself the fault that keeps one steeped in a sense of sin, sealing the potentially adult spirit from a better balanced, more realistic view of the father, and therewith of the world.”\(^{21}\) As Siegfried and Joachim Unseld were not reconciled, the narrative could not reach its conclusion and both father and son were confined to the role of tyrant and rebellious youth. In fact, journalists renewed the critique of immaturity over years to come. Power was attributed to the publisher using semantics borrowed from the aristocracy, a common way of describing wealth and influence of industrialists since the rise of \textit{bourgeoisie} in the 19th century. Terms like “dynasty” and “patriarch” are common stereotypes forming the discourse on 20th century’s economic elite. Joachim, on the other hand, was described as being “cut from too soft a wood” or lacking the personality it takes to direct Suhrkamp Verlag.\(^{22}\)

\textbf{Excursus: “Janus-faced” strategies}

Siegfried Unseld found that the discourse was quite beyond his control. Once the metaphor of Oedipus was established in public, the plot of drama was difficult if not impossible to counter. Sources indicate that a plot which evolves along narrative conventions is far more potent than any disclaimer. Familiarity adds plausibility, even if these familiar structures are borrowed from fictional genres such as myth and ancient drama. This lack of influence certainly was a new experience to the publisher who before had found his self-portrayal echoed by journalists for decades. The process was not reciprocal, since Unseld did not include elements from journalists into his own repertoire. This observation would have to be tested and qualified for each case, but the empirical trend is clear. This excursus discusses several examples of Unseld’s discursive strategies.


The most prominent feature of Unseld's self-representation is its stability. In an essay published in the late 1970's, he presents his views on the ethos of a publisher. It contains all crucial elements of his public self-presentation for decades to come. Unseld was an expert in presenting Suhrkamp-authors and himself, too, for the media. He frequently lectured on his ideal of publishing, he authored books, published essays and gave hundreds of interviews. Apart from talking about his vocation, the publishing trade, Unseld often lectured on authors and especially on Herman Hesse, who had been the subject of his doctoral thesis. A conservative man who took personal responsibility for “his” employees and authors, Unseld cast his self-description in the trope of synecdoche. The publisher, Unseld explained repeatedly, had to “invent” his firm constantly, representing or even initiating important literary and cultural trends of his time. The prevalence of synecdoche does not surprise as discourse on enterprises is usually structured around entrepreneurs who stand *pars pro toto* for their firm.

Siegfried Unseld used a highly figurative language. A limited set of metaphors and anecdotes changed but little during a period of observation from the 1970’s to 2003 and gradually evolved into figures of speech. Journalists would pick up those metaphors and present them not as quotes, but often as their own words, thus lending Unseld's self-advertisement an objective quality. Quite typical is Unseld's self-description as being “Janus-faced” - a literary publisher would have to integrate the contrary concepts of culture and capitalism. By attributing this virtue to him, Unseld presented himself as a charismatic trickster, a literary figure that embodies oppositions and contradiction. Unseld, who was tall and broadshouldered, also flirted with his image of “looking like a rugby-player whom a fair maiden seduced to literature” - a *bonmot* that supposedly stems from literary “Gruppe 47”. In Interviews, Unseld often called upon the “sacred commodity book”. This oxymoron is a quote from Bert Brecht's *Galileo Galilei*, yet the original's bitter irony was completely lost to Unseld, whose apparent naivety and lack of irony were proverbial. Other phrases included publishers as “male midwives of literature” or “best-selling lists as tombstones of serious literature”.

**Wheel of fortune**

Features editors put the topic of succession at Suhrkamp back on the agenda in 1996, when Gottfried Honnefelder, who had been conceived as a possible candidate (“crownprince”) to succeed Siegfried Unseld, quit and accepted a position at DuMont publishing house instead. Unseld, who was then 72 years of age, was again left without “heir”. Journalists construed this situation as a “foreshock” of a coming “earthquake” that might destroy the firm as a whole. A feeling of discontentment with modern German literature in general and especially with certain parts of the Suhrkamp programme added to the critique. After a “spring-programme that announces the arrival of autumn”, renowned literary reviewer Thomas E. Schmidt saw the publishing house as a whole in autumnal decline. This article opened act two of the alleged “Suhrkamp-crisis”.

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24 Siegfried Unseld, “Die Aufgaben des literarischen Verlegers”: 17
25 A Trickster is a common character in African or Native American folktales who embodies opposite poles. He’s a people's champion, a joker/healer, a challenger of the gods and usually very charismatic.
Suhrkamp's personnel problems were interpreted as symptoms of general ailments that resulted from Siegfried Unseld's style of leadership. Most articles called him a "patriarch": The "lonely patriarch in a house of spirits" who clung to his post and stopped those who didn't get along with him or thought too independently. All problems originated with him, who directed the company with the "stubbornness of old age" and "like a 19th-century patriarch". The convention to structure a narration around a single person influenced the media discourse to a high degree. Siegfried Unseld stood *pars pro toto* for Suhrkamp Verlag, both in his self-description and in the public view. This might indicate as to why the unsolved problem of succession seemed so unsettling. The narration's sequence, Siegfried Unseld's life, was drawing to an end. He was beyond 70, after all. How would or could the story – the publishing house – continue after the protagonist's death? From the perspective of narration, a person had to follow Unseld as publisher in order to ensure continuity. A narration could not relate to a group or committee, and thus Unseld's plan to install a foundation which would advise future management was met with reserve.

A plot of waxing and waning, as seen in the metaphor of "autumn", set the tone for the ongoing discourse. It is a conventional narrative pattern of western culture. The wheel of fortune ascends and then forces man to decline after a moment of triumph. Unseld's success as publisher seemed to encourage journalists to foresee doom. A common discursive strategy in this debate was to idealise past glories in order to diminish present merits. The catch-phrase "Suhrkamp culture" is referred to in this context, a phrase first used by literary critic George Steiner in a review on the 1950's Adorno-edition and later adopted as a slogan by Suhrkamp's publicity department. *Tempi passati.* The same holds true for references to *edition suhrkamp*, an avant-garde book series that set the agenda for intellectual debates in the 1960's and 1970's but now seemed to decline into semi-relevance.

Yet the pattern of ascend and decline disguised the simple and somewhat bland reality – triumph was not followed by a steep fall but by business as usual. It would seem like routine is beyond words, literally speaking. In fact, the utter lack of obvious economic or literary problems stands in sharp contrast to the agitated media-debate. A steady flow of literary prices awarded to Suhrkamp-authors suggested that no slide into trivialism ruined Suhrkamp's standards. No signs of imminent economic problems substantiated the public expectations of decline. In short: The Suhrkamp-crisis existed in the media alone, it was insubstantial, a spook fabricated from narrative conventions. And yet – the debate affected Suhrkamp's corporate image and thus achieved substance.

In interviews, Siegfried Unseld firmly rejected the notion of any decline in modern German literature or in his company. He used to reply with a metaphor: "Dame Cassandra" would always accompany literature, yet literature would prevail. Often Unseld would refer to Marshall MacLuhan who had foreseen the end of the "Gutenberg galaxy" for the 1980's - "Now MacLuhan is dead and gone and almost forgotten, yet books still exist". While these and other aphorisms became the publisher's trademark, he gained little influence on the direction in which the public

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debate would evolve. It followed an inherent pattern which, according to Hayden White, is of an archetypal quality.

Hayden White identifies four basic tropes which permit the characterisation of figurative discourse. They also function as paradigms of the operations by which consciousness can prefigure areas of experience.\(^{30}\) Representational metaphor characterises objects in the manner of analogy and is associated with formist explanations, whereas reductionist metonymy substitutes a part for the whole and represents a mechanist view. Integrative synecdoche characterises a phenomenon by using the part to symbolise some quality presumed to inhere the totality, therefore promoting intrinsicality, and negational irony is the trope of scepticism and relativism.\(^{31}\) White identifies a closed-cycle development within a tradition of discourse which evolves from metaphor, through metonymy and synecdoche into an ironic apprehension of the “irreducible relativism of all knowledge.”\(^{32}\)

This archetypal sequence structures the discourse on the “Suhrkamp-Cirsis”. Whereas all metaphors are used in parallel, specific terms dominate at any given time. I would interpret these shifts as evolution from metonymy – the all-powerful father-figure which relates to the ancient drama of Oedipus – to synecdoche: the patriarch. The discourse now emphasises the use and abuse of power which signifies the firm's internal conflict. The perspective changed from explaining by comparing the events to the Greek drama of Oedipus to a focus on various personis dramae. At the same time journalists began to take an ironic stance. The public debate on the alleged “Suhrkamp-crisis” was interpreted as a semantic construction and questioned as such. This would be in accordance with Hayden White's thesis of archetypal tropes governing any discourse. Sources indicate that opinion leaders grew weary of the issue. Magazine Spiegel mocked: “The Suhrkamp crisis is as old and as proverbial as Suhrkamp culture [...] Suhrkamp has risen from the ashes more than once.”\(^{33}\) Suhrkamp’s editor in chief, Raimung Fellinger, was quoted in Zürcher Tages-Anzeiger joking that the media’s sometimes irrational preoccupation with the firm was not unlike “the British and their royals”.\(^{34}\)

Sources indicate that this period of growing ironic detachment allowed Siegfried Unseld to eventually introduce new arguments into the ongoing debate. “Where is this alleged crisis?” asked political magazine Der Spiegel after featuring a lengthy interview with the publisher in Mai 1997.\(^{35}\) In this interview which had quite an impact, Unseld presented himself unruffled by public reproaches on his management and literary programme. Suhrkamp-authors were still setting the tone for literary and cultural debates – but grand intellectual debates as in the 1960’s and 1970’s were long since passé. Only a couple of days later, journalist Wolfgang Niess followed this line of argument in a commentary on Suhrkamp: “The Suhrkamp-crisis doesn’t exist. Instead there is a lack of intellectual debate in Germany [...].”\(^{36}\)

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\(^{32}\) Hayden White, *Metahistory*: 38.


In the autumn of 1997 another potential publisher left Suhrkamp after only a year of co-operation: Thedel von Wallmoden had been associated with Suhrkamp Verlag as a consultant. Thomas E. Schmidt commented on Wallmoden's interlude. His attempt to pick up the thread of his influential “autumn”-article did not lack belligerence, but still it reveals the shifts in public mood: “It's bad luck: Discontent with elitist culture is projected onto Suhrkamp Verlag. It's a synonym of fears for the last intact norms of the educated classes and of tedious with heavy reading which requires concentration and effort.”

Christoph Buchwald's entry into Suhrkamp Verlag marked the turn of the tide in public debate. Unseld headhunted the 45-year-old deputy publisher of Luchterhand publishing in Munich. The press greeted the new “crown prince” (“Kronprinz”) with enthusiasm: “The pilot comes aboard” wrote Der Tagesspiegel, a “prime choice” echoed Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Buchwald embodied “a symbiosis of tradition and innovation which will be needed to ensure future independence [from greedy corporate groups]”. Alas, the prince fell from favour after less than two years. German Press Agency dpa reported on November 29th 2000 that Christoph Buchwald had quit his position at Suhrkamp after dividing with Siegfried Unseld over new authors and over composing the literary program. Unseld presented a new solution to the problem of succession: A foundation was to inherit his company shares and his wife Ulla Berkéwicz would act as chairwoman. No alarmed voices were raised in public and no sniping commentaries were printed. Although all previous elements of discourse could still be found in the sources, the general reaction in the media was calm. The term “crisis” did not gain prominence again, and the formerly fashionable plot of ascend and decline seemed to have lost its appeal to journalists. Unseld was called “king” and “patriarch” again, but now the metaphors were used in a positive sense. Verena Auffermann's commentary is quite representative: “Maybe [Buchwald] was the wrong man again, maybe it is impossible to replace Siegfried Unseld at all. Suhrkamp is Unseld and Unseld is Suhrkamp [...]”. Suhrkamp is Unseld – the discourse shifted to synecdoche again, the cycle was complete.

The lenient view of the staff changes at Suhrkamp publishing can be interpreted as an echo of the pomp and circumstance with which German media honoured the publishing house as a cultural monument on its 50th anniversary. It also echoes the eulogies on the occasion of Siegfried Unseld's 75th birthday in 1999. The “patriarch” or “godfather”, as some critics had called Unseld before, now was known as “king” of Germany's literary scene. Lengthy portraits emphasised Unseld's energetic personality. He was praised as “one of the old school”, a “Grandseigneur” who took care of “his” authors instead of greedily seeking easy profits. Journalists now rejected their earlier critique as “Suhrkamp bashing” or “Suhrkamp mobbing”. Other writers openly declared their being sick and tired of debating over Suhrkamp's

37 Thomas E. Schmidt, “Aussitzer in der Niemandsbucht. Krisenbewältigung und -nichtbewältigung im Frankfurter Suhrkamp-Verlag. Wie wieder mal alles beim alten bleibt,” Süddeutsche Zeitung (7.11.1997). This quote from Schmidt's article does not translate well since it contains peculiar German concepts such as „Bildungsbürgertum“ and „Hochkultur“. I therefore give the full quote in German: “Der Verlag hat das Pech, zu einer Projektionsfläche für Ängste gegenüber den letzten noch intakten Nomern bürgerlicher Bildungskultur zu werden, für Überdruss am Lesen, das mit Konzentration und Anstrengung verbunden ist.”
internal problems: “Must we really comment on every toppling stool at Suhrkamp?” \cite{40}

Literary periodical “Literaturen” offered a down-to-earth explanation for the new leniency: “The crises at Suhrkamp just aren’t sexy.” \cite{41}

Today we witness a reprise of the discourse after Ulla Berkewicz seized control of her late husband’s publishing house and soon annoyed veteran authors and editors. The derogative semantics applied by (male) journalists to female entrepreneurs would indeed merit another case study. Up to present day, Suhrkamp publishing house is measured against the mythos Unseld constructed so well. The halo of “Suhrkamp culture” and the omnipresent reverence for the “publisher of the century” are both asset and liability for Suhrkamp Verlag.

Discussion

Language is not a neutral medium, and historians need to understand the ways in which it shapes our view of the world, and, in essence, reality. Methods of discourse analysis offer profound insight on the semantics of economy, as was demonstrated with the example of Siegfried Unseld and Suhrkamp publishing house. Hayden White’s tropology proved useful in studying the public debate as a specific dimension of business history. The influence of narrative and the specific role of tropes have emerged quite clearly in this case study. I would therefore suggest that discourse analysis should complement conventional approaches to business and organisational history.

Although this brief outline does not claim to be exhaustive, it showed certain limitations of tropology which need further discussion. Whereas the turns of discourse fit into the fourfold structure of tropes that White advocates, each shift in the debate could also be explained by a number of external events. Sources indicate, for example, that the ironic detachment and tendency to historicize which structured the debate on “Suhrkamp-crisis” on the turn of the millennium is a result of the festivities of Suhrkamp’s 50-year-anniversary in July 2000 and the numerous eulogies on the occasion of Siegfried Unseld 75th birthday in 1999. Similar external effects are found on the level of stereotypes and metaphors. One especially colourful example was a sudden surge of metaphors that compared Unseld to a “godfather” running his company like “cosa nostra” and therefore trusting the “consigliere” instead of his own blood. Textual criticism might be misleading, whereas a quick survey of contemporary cinema solved the puzzle – obviously, (male) journalists were inspired by Al Pacino’s portrayal of “The Godfather” in Francis Ford Coppola’s movie of the same name. \cite{42}

Important questions are not touched upon if the scholar holds too closely to Hayden White’s canon of tropology. One might turn to the works of Michel Foucault for theoretical guidance in analysing the hierarchy of power between the various parties engaged in discourse. The prosopographic dimensions should be addressed as well. After all, the individuals participating in the discourse were connected in several ways.

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— for example, the interdependency of literary critics, publisher and authors would have to be considered.

Historical discourse analysis would be helpful, however, with a central issue of business history — analysing the complex negotiations which characterise the firm’s decision-making processes. These would make a highly interesting field of study in which discourse analysis and methodological instruments of new institutional economics could be used and compared in parallel. New institutional economics, which have almost advanced to paradigm-status in German business history, tend to treat the firm either as a black box reacting to external stimuli such as market reports or see internal structures through the lens of the principal-agent-problem. But this model does not enlighten us in the question of complex decision-making processes. Discourse analysis, on the other hand, can help historians to understand semantic subsystems such as the accounts department, specific rules for accounting, org-charts or the firm’s historical “memory” etc. which provide relevant information for decisions. These problems were not addressed in this paper for lack of sources, as Suhrkamp management adheres to a most restrictive policy on its historical accounts.

Yet the restricted access to internal sources as seen above demonstrated the usefulness of discourse analysis for those cases in which documents are lost or whole archives destroyed, a problem often encountered in studies on small businesses or failed enterprises. If business historians should ever get past their preoccupation with successful — that is, still existing — large-scale companies, they would be well advised to consider the power or language.

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