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# Narratology beyond Literary Criticism

Mediality, Disciplinarity

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# Narratology beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality – Disciplinarity

## Introduction

A glance at the current situation in literary criticism shows that narratology, pronounced dead twenty years ago, is remarkably alive and well. This fact has been noted repeatedly and with understandable self-satisfaction in the recent literature on research into narrative theory. Just how astonishing this rebirth is, however, becomes apparent only when we step back from literary criticism and the humanities to take a wider historical view of the developments in academic and theoretical circles that preceded it. The deeply symbolic year of 1968 marked the fall of the academic ancien régime. Partly in anticipation of this and partly in response to it, a number of new leading disciplines were raised to power in western Europe as sources of hope for the future. However much they may have differed from one another in political purpose (in theoretical circles or beyond), linguistics, political economy, psychoanalysis, and structuralist semiology—to name but a few of the superdisciplines of the time—clearly belonged to one and the same paradigm in terms of how they conceived of themselves: throughout, they sought to reveal universal, ahistorical regularities in human thought and action in their respective fields.

In the mid-1970s, however, a new epoch began, in which many disciplines explicitly distanced themselves from the search for universal patterns. The problems of context and historical contingency, previously ignored, were placed at the heart of the new theoretical systems. Some of the once-supreme approaches could not or would not adapt accordingly; they were either marginalized (e.g. orthodox Marxist political economy) or redefined themselves as disciplines concerned with empirical social data (e.g. linguistic discourse analysis). Others responded by embracing the post-structuralist and subsequent deconstructivist paradigms with open arms.

French narratology was one of the fields in which signs of this reorientation could be seen at an early stage. Roland Barthes's *S/Z* of 1970 is perhaps the best evidence of this. A fundamental methodological shift, however, did not take place until the mid-1980s. One reason for the delay was the fact that narratology had become international in the meantime.

When Derrida and Kristeva were leading figures in its homeland, the discussion of narratology in the English-speaking countries was covering an anachronistic combination of theories. Prince disseminated the formalist programme with his *Grammar of Stories* of 1973, after which some theorists engaged in retrospective reception of the structuralist and formalist classics (see for example Culler's *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* of 1975). Even as this programme was being discovered, however, other writers were considering how it might be reformulated and extended to cover new methods and media. Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* of 1978 is an example of this. It combines the most influential Anglo-American, Russian, and French approaches. The delaying effect of this methodological ambivalence becomes clear in the next part of our survey of Anglo-American publications. The first, highly influential American translation of Genette appeared in 1980 (*Narrative Discourse*). Prince published his definitive formalist classic, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*, in 1982. At the same time, a second American translation of Genette was published (*Figures of Literary Discourse*). Finally, Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* of 1983 provided a concise overall picture of what is now known as classical narratology prior to the caesura marked by Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* of 1984. In this book, Brooks presents an approach marked by its post-structuralist orientation and the fact that it is argued in terms of the aesthetics of effect and reception. The paradigm shift finally becomes apparent in all its enormity from 1985 onwards when Elaine Showalter (*The New Feminist Criticism* of 1985) and Susan Sniader Lanser (*Toward a Feminist Narratology* of 1986) begin the project of creating a feminist narratology. With uncompromising radicalism and forcefulness, this project denies the original concept of narratology as the science of narrative universals. This tradition, which has given birth to many of the later new narratologies, has survived to the present day.

In the mid-1980s, narratology, which was now showing increasing American influence, began to undergo a process of change marked by two tendencies. First, the turn away from formalism and structuralism meant that the narrative theory used in the study of literature began to draw on a wide range of theoretical paradigms. Second, narratological theories themselves were increasingly formulated and received with a view to particular applications, which could perfectly acceptably lie beyond the study of literature. The study of narratology had become a cross-disciplinary undertaking. Another, unrelated development should also be mentioned here: completely independent of the tradition whose evolution we have traced above, a variety of non-literary disciplines have shown an increasing

interest in narrative representation since as long ago as the early 1960s (e.g. socio-linguistic studies in the tradition of Labov and Waletzky). The same is true of the study of folk narrative, which goes back even further into the past.

The Narratology Research Group in Hamburg has held two conferences to date on the evolution and refinement of narratology as described above. The first—*What Is Narratology?*—took place in May 2002.<sup>1</sup> Its objective was to reconstruct the development of narratology and discuss the resultant choices open to and consequences facing us when we build and apply text-based narratological theories. The second conference followed in November 2003. The present book is named after its theme: *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism*. The aim here was to extend our models of and reflection on the development of narratological methodologies in two ways. First, we intended to investigate how narratological methods might contribute to the analysis and interpretation of symbolic representations in media other than the traditional, text-based medium of literature. Second, we asked: what is the position of narratology relative to other disciplines and their methodologies—put simply, where does narratology belong, who does it belong to, and who demands what of it?

### Mediality

The call for papers on this ambitious project, whose objective was to link practical application with metatheoretical methodological reflection, met with a wide international response. Over fifty proposals for papers were submitted, of which only twelve could be selected for presentation at the conference. As the table of contents in this book shows, they dealt with a remarkably wide range of topics, including narrative representation in music, film, therapeutic discourse, computer games, and comics. Deliberately disconnecting the concept of narrativity from textual media proved, it can be seen, an extremely profitable move, and the editors are indebted to the contributors from various disciplines beyond literary criticism. By venturing into a narratological lion's den, they have made an important contribution to expanding our horizons. In the process, the conventional interpretations and use of several narratological concepts are inevitably undermined at times. Orthodox theorists of literary narrative might consider these concepts sacrosanct, but, in the context of cross-disciplinary dialogue, we should treat this disruption as an opportunity and stimulus

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Kindt/Hans-Harald Müller (eds.): *What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*. (Narratologia. Contributions to Narrative Theory/ Beiträge zur Erzähltheorie 1). Berlin/New York 2003.

to re-examine our own terminology rather than insisting on canonical definitions. Tolerance and a readiness to learn are desirable not least because the narratology of literary criticism itself contains a large number of conceptual imports and thus tends to extend rather than preserve terminological meanings anyway.

A less positive picture presents itself when we consider the second theme of the conference. We had hoped to encourage methodological metareflection on the consequences of deliberately extending narratological methods and their field of application, but, apart from a small number of exceptions, neither the papers nor the discussion lived up to this expectation. This criticism is directed neither at the authors and speakers, nor at the audience, but rather at ourselves, the organizers and editors. We had hoped that it would be relatively easy to turn the debate about the object domain of narratology into one about narratological theory itself on a reflexive metalevel, but this was probably a *deformation professionnelle* typical of literary critics. Such an intention would seem positively hubristic to natural scientists, and it must strike those involved in empirically or historically oriented human and social sciences as somewhat strange at best. In literary narratology, as in most forms of literary theory and criticism, theories are constructed primarily on the basis of reference to particular canonical texts rather than using corpus analysis. That is to say, they have a selective rather than empirical basis. And, when our methods are applied in the context of such selective material, progressing rapidly from analytical description to building theoretical models seems not only acceptable but positively desirable. Crossing so easily from the discourse of data to that of theory, however, cannot but seem unusual when we are working with empirical evidence, as is standard practice for many of the participants in the conference and contributors to this volume who have narratological but non-literary interests.

These self-critical remarks can be turned to our benefit. Our attempt to combine discussion of the object domain of narratology with reflection on its methods met with little success. But this need not be a cause for despondency—future narratological discussion should instead attempt to rectify two shortcomings that this failure has revealed. First, it is clear that we must, by means of informed reflection, examine the methodologies and evolution of narratology from a firmly metatheoretical perspective. Second—and this becomes particularly apparent with each new cross-disciplinary application of narratological theorems—the central concept of narratology itself, narrativity, is still not sufficiently well defined. The first essay in this volume makes interesting suggestions in this area. It and other, conceptually varied approaches to providing a more precise definition of our central concept deserve discussion in a context dedicated to this theme.

No narratologist would dispute the fact that narration is a cross-medial phenomenon. However, there have been few attempts to date to engage in a reflexive, metatheoretical discussion on how the phenomenon should be defined conceptually. This may be an important explanation for why present narratological theory contains suggestions for many divergent definitions, most of which are distinctly media-specific in nature (predominantly literary, text-based), and tends not to draw links between them. A brief glance at the numerous more traditional definitions, which derive the concept of narrativity from quasi-material properties of narrating texts, is enough to show the scale of disagreement about the definition of narrativity. Some supporters of this traditional kind of definition refer to the *discours* level of narratives (e.g. Stanzel or the Genette of the *Nouveau discours*), others find it more appropriate to elucidate the concept of narrativity using the elements of the *histoire* level of texts. Those in favour of the latter method are deeply divided over the question of whether the resultant definition should have the character of a formal description in the manner of Prince or be aesthetic and normative in nature, as in Lotman's tradition. There is also a series of definitions based on the theory that a proper definition of narrativity must make reference to both the plot and mediation levels of texts (e.g. Chatman or the Genette of the *Discours*). In contrast to these attempts at phenomenological explanation, recent years have seen the proposal of various functional definitions. They operate by identifying the function of narrativity. Their concepts of this function are usually postulated rather than developed by means of argument and can take very different forms in each particular case. These definitions are based, among other things, on the ontogenetic, socio-historical, cognitive, or metaphysical effects of narratives, or how they affect the aesthetics of reception (e.g. Fludernik, Herman, Ryan, Sternberg, Lanser, or Ricœur). Disagreement in the controversy surrounding the concept of narrativity is not, however, limited to the question of what features of artefacts and their functions a definition should be based on. The kind of definition best suited to help us grasp the phenomenon is also disputed. Whereas some treatments attempt to state necessary and sufficient conditions of narrativity, others consider it more appropriate to be guided by the concept of family resemblance or the ideas of prototype theory (Herman).

Against the background of this situation (the description of which does not make any claim to be complete), the following question arises: what kind and form of definition of narrativity would be theoretically compatible with a narratology that claims cross-medial relevance for its theory and methodology? Three minimal requirements that such a definition of narrativity must fulfil can be identified.

- (1) The definition must be intuitively adequate. A cross-medial definition of narrativity must be valid and meaningful for all media that contain representations and can be intuitively classed as narrating media.
- (2) The definition must be medium-neutral. A cross-medial definition of narrativity can only stipulate as necessary those criteria and categories that appear as features in all the forms of symbolic representation covered by (1). For example, if musical representations are intuitively classed as potentially narrative, condition (2) prohibits all definitions of narrativity that involve the category of character in the essentialist or mimetic sense of a human agent—this category is not convincingly marked in musical representations.
- (3) The definition must relate to symbolic material. A cross-medial definition of narrativity must not retreat to capturing narrativity in some linguistic expression (in the sense of Wittgenstein's language game) lacking reference to material objects. It must be possible to verify the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the criteria of narrativity as objective structural features of concrete tokens (texts, films, transcripts of speech, musical pieces, etc.) without the criteria becoming essentialist ones as a result.

In view of these minimal requirements, one of the most promising chances of developing a cross-medial definition of narrativity would seem to lie, at least at first glance, in functional and logical approaches—in definitions that are, in one form or another, based on feature sets that capture the relationship between cognitive, aesthetic, or other effects typical of narrative on the one hand and the logical structure underlying the phenomenology of all possible narrative realizations on the other.

### Disciplinarity

The various disciplines from beyond literary criticism have very different links with narrativity, which is itself, as we have said, still insufficiently defined and thus can be drawn on only as a pre-theoretical frame of reference. It is completely indisputable that historiography has a narrative character. In the case of music, on the other hand, there will be some disagreement (and such debate can only be profitable) as to whether musicologists can speak of narrativity in music in anything other than a purely metaphorical linguistic expression. Applied narratologies are now emerging across the entire spectrum of academic disciplines, and it would seem to be no more than a matter of time until we find ourselves faced with, say, a mathematical narratology or an inorganic narratology. This somewhat ridiculous prediction is intended to highlight a second and perfectly serious problem:

assuming that we do manage to develop a robust cross-medial concept of narrativity, what criteria would we then use to determine the status of the various approaches to and theories about the medium-specific forms of narrative? Are people necessarily narratologists, and are they necessarily doing narratology, if they are dealing with narrative phenomena in their particular fields? In other words, is narratology

- (4) a superdiscipline whose abstract object is narrativity in all its forms in the different media in which it occurs;
- (5) an interdisciplinary project in the context of which various individual disciplines can constantly inductively exchange and combine new object- and interest-specific definitions of narrativity; or
- (6) a formally defined procedure for elucidating its object, possessing interdisciplinary relevance and giving primacy to the category of narrativity in its theoretical system?

These possibilities can only be compared with one another if there is agreement regarding the criteria with which they should be evaluated. We would argue that particular consideration should be given to whether the possibilities listed above (which need not be the only ones) are institutionally realistic, cognitively profitable, and theoretically and conceptually plausible. We are inclined to favour the last possibility (6); we find the prospect of a superdiscipline institutionally unlikely, and we feel that the project of interdisciplinary discourse favoured in the present climate displays too much arbitrariness and too little transparency. We do not deny that culturalist and contextualist definitions of our subject matter result in a massive expansion of the object domain of narratology and thus encourage interdisciplinary exchange. On the other hand, a serious methodological problem must also be pointed out, one that featured in the debate about the concept of intertextuality prior to contextualism and culturalism: the concept of context itself still lacks anything approaching a satisfactory theoretical definition.

For this reason, the contextualization advocated so widely leads, sooner or later, to a methodological dilemma that threatens to undermine the scientific status of narratology itself. Thus, we suggest, the best future for narratology lies in retaining a critical awareness of the fact that it was originally intended to search for and study universals. The theoretical task facing contemporary narratology is not an easy one: it is easy to see that the phenomenon of narrativity occurs in different media; what we have to do is state what it actually is. It can be disputed whether such a statement should be couched in terms of cognitivism, aesthetics, the logic of representation, or perhaps a synthetic combination of some or all of these frameworks—but this does not change our conviction that a con-

text-sensitive formalism with reformed methods gives narratology a better chance of doing what it is intended to do than does a contextualism with inadequately controlled methods.

The six issues we have raised here under the headings of mediality and disciplinarity, and the arguments with which we have responded to them, have two purposes. First, we hope they will indicate the direction that should be taken by the theoretical reflection that we believe to be necessary in narratology. Second, and consequently, we have outlined an overarching set of questions against which the reader can consider the individual contributions gathered together in this book. These are the questions that gave rise to the idea of our conference on narratology beyond literary criticism in Hamburg. We thank all those who, regardless of differences in method and concepts, helped elucidate these questions, whether by writing papers or contributing to the discussion. When editing this volume, as when organizing the conference, we deliberately strove to resist the temptation of enforcing conceptual and methodological standardization. We do not suggest that the following essays speak the same language. But the reader will find nonetheless that they speak about the same thing—even if our picture of it is not yet as clear as it might be.

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