Emerging Vectors of Narratology:
Toward Consolidation or Diversification? (A Response)

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Abstract
This is a response to the questions asked by Franco Passalacqua and Federico Pianzola as a follow-up of the 2013 ENN conference. The discussions that originated at the conference were rich and thought-provoking and so the editors of this special section of «Enthymema» decided to continue the dialogue about the state of the art and the future of narratology.

1. Do you think that narratology has entered a phase of consolidation? If yes, what does this consolidation consist of? What do you consider to be the most important aspect to pursue with the aim of consolidation?
2. In your opinion, in what ways can narratology be said to diversify?

One way of presenting the development of narratology as a discipline is to focus on its oscillations between what could be called consolidating and diversifying phases. The consolidating phases may be said to share three features: a general agreement on a theoretical paradigm concerning meaning making; a shared notion of what constitutes a paradigmatic or prototypical example of a narrative; an imperialistic and synthesizing move towards a unified theory of all narrative. The diversifying phases may be distinguished through negations of these three features but can also be positively described as engaging in multiple, heterogeneous theoretical dialogues, and as testing and questioning the limits of what narrative may or may not be.

Seen from our point of view, narratology is now in a phase dominated by diversification, a phase that began during the late 2000s and is still gaining momentum. Before giving some examples of the ways in which this diversification materializes today, a few words on these processes of oscillation as we see them are called for.

From its inception during the late 1960s, narratology, understood as a discipline studying narrative as narrative (both as an act and as an object), has been, a) only one among many approaches to narrative and b) at times preoccupied with a desire to come up with a unified theory of all narrative.

a) As Meister puts it in his overview of the field, narratology is «not *the* theory of narrative but rather *a* theory of narrative» ("Narratology"). Adopting axioms and methods from structuralism, Barthes, Todorov, Greimas, Genette, and others took primarily fictional, written narratives as their more or less explicitly selected case material. Prior to this, other traditions such as Russian formalism, German Erzähltheorie and

American rhetoric had been developing tools for analyzing and theorizing mainly fictional narration, while researchers from linguistics, most notably Labov, started using structuralist thinking to investigate the formal features of non-fictional narration in conversational story-telling. With the narrative turn of the late 1970s and into the 1980s and onwards – as Hyvärinen ("Towards a conceptual history of narrative") convincingly argues it makes sense to distinguish between several narrative turns – a massive proliferation of interest in narrative began, initially dominated by history, psychology, and management studies, later followed by sociology, legal studies, medicine, and cognitive science. Partly in dialogue with some of these emerging fields, partly inspired by other, often contextualizing insights, narratology has evolved into what most would agree to call a field of postclassical narratologies.

b) Narratology's desire for a unified theory of all narrative may, for the sake of exposition, be said to have strongly manifested itself twice during this evolution: with French structuralism in the 1960s and with the cognitive narratology of the late 1990s and 2000s. The synthesizing ambitions of classical narratology have been commented on by many, and the critical points are well known. The reasons for the dismissal of the ambitions of the stucturalist endeavor can be boiled down to, first, a critique of the limitations inherent in a de-contextualized and purely formal approach to narrative as a structure (and the concept of *structure* as such) and, secondly, a critique of the limited range of empirical data taken to be relevant for the establishment of general rules for the workings of narrative. While in principle open to all the «prodigious variety of genres» as expressed by Barthes, classical narratology was in reality a specialized poetics of written fiction.

The synthesizing ambitions of poststructuralist narratology have been most forcefully expressed by cognitive narratology. One of its earliest and still most prominent contributions, Monika Fludernik's 'Natural Narratology', set out to remedy the shortcomings of classical narratology's limited idea of what constituted a proper narrative. Taking naturally occurring stories such as spontaneous conversational storytelling as the prototypical type of narrative, Fludernik presented a model of narrative understanding that was sensible to meaning generated and changed by history, context, and reader inference; a model based on concepts being developed by the cognitive sciences, such as notions of schemas, frames and scripts. David Herman's influential and in many ways ground breaking work during the late 1990s and early 2000s took up the mantle from Fludernik and others and set out to make cognitive narratology «an interdisciplinary program for research» that «blends concepts and methods from narratology with ideas originating from psychology, artificial intelligence, the philosophy of mind, and other approaches to issues of cognition» (*Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences* 20). This move towards a new consolidation of narratology through a unified theory of narrative was taken with cognitive science as the theoretical paradigm and with spontaneous conversational storytelling as the prototype of the narrative act as well as the narrative form.

Turning now to our own work on narratives, a common concern during the last 5-8 years is an insistence that the unified theory of narrative proposed by cognitive narratology gain its impressive synthetic abilities only by giving up on distinctions that we take to be crucial to theories of what narratives are and how they function. Our moves towards diversification have been informed by three ideas.

First, the idea that parts of the theoretical paradigm of cognitive sciences is at best questionable. One example would be the notion of Theory of Mind, which is the idea that humans are able to understand desires and beliefs of other humans because of the

ability to theorize or simulate the existence of a mind in the other person, a process often referred to as real life mind-reading. By researchers such as Palmer, Zunshine and Herman the notion of Theory of Mind was imported into narratology to advance and prove the thesis that our engagements with fictional and non-fictional narratives operate according to similar logics, or as Herman put it: our «encounters with fictional minds are mediated by the same heuristics used to interpret everyday minds» (Herman, Introduction). Recent philosophical and psychological work on Theory of Mind has severely criticized the notion, however, to the point that many have simply abandoned it completely (Iversen, "Unnatural Minds").

Second, and connected to this, the idea that fiction or fictionalization makes a difference. While our understanding of fictional and non-fictional narratives on a very basic level may be said to draw upon operations taking place in the same brain and/or body, the differences between the meaning making procedures facilitated by fictionalized and non-fictionalized discourse are different on levels that matter more to a theory of narrative as well as to our everyday lives. The observation that we often or perhaps even mainly use protocols designed for real world use when engaging with fiction does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that we use only those protocols, especially when dealing with non-conventional narratives. The matters of fiction matter a great deal to actual work on narratives that diverge from norms and conventions, either for strategic or symptomatic reasons. In dealing with consciousness attribution in non-conventional narratives it becomes evident that we ascribe different statuses to fictive and non-fictive consciousnesses, and that these ascriptions often dictate different interpretational strategies with regard to our sense-making activity (Iversen, "Broken or Unnatural?").

Third, the idea that positioning conversational narratives as the prototypical narrative runs the risk of marginalizing forms and functions of narratives that subvert, play with, diverge from, question or challenge the parameters of natural telling and the natural as such, or even that the so called narratives are not necessarily primary to unnatural narratives but rather narratives subjected to specific conditions that do not apply to all narratives. Unnatural narratology was launched as an attempt to analyse such other narratives not as negations of the normal but as culturally, intellectually and emotionally important contributions in their own right (Alber et al.).

It is important to stress that several of the recent and ongoing moves towards diversification do not happen solely through a dismantling of the attempts to consolidate via a unified theory. Many of the narrative turn's approaches have developed concepts and notions that call for collaborations and combinations across what used to be a gap between pure narratology and other types of research on narratives. These developments are closely tied to the widening and diversification of the object of narratology: when leaving the safe haven of the autonomous, invented, written and complete narrative and venturing into fragmented, interventional, interactive and emerging types of narratives and narrative acts, collaborations with fields such as identity studies, linguistics, sociology and cultural studies become fruitful.

2a. Does diversification imply more double entry narratologies (cognitive n., feminist n., unnatural n., etc.)? If yes, what is still missing for a more complete account of narrative phenomena?

We do not think of double entry narratologies as something desirable in and of itself. And we think that it is often the case that different interests are perfectly capable of sharing the same vocabulary and even many of the same assumptions. For example this

would seem to be the case for feminist narratology and rhetorical narratology where it is surely possible that a rhetorical analysis can highlight questions about, say, gender, and that a feminist approach can show new aspects of rhetorical situations (Lanser). The same may hold true for cognitive and rhetorical approaches (Phelan).

Then, some other approaches seem more fundamentally incompatible. This would hold true for instance for cognitive theory and most of unnatural narratology (even if Jan Alber is an exception in his attempt to combine the two).

One idea, we strongly want to resist, is the idea that one unified theory should and could explain all different kinds of narrative, literary and non-literary, fictional and non-fictional, and what we call natural and unnatural. We are especially wary about the guise in which we find this idea in many mind-oriented and cognitive approaches, where it seems to us to amount to an erasure of important differences. For instance much of the introduction to Herman's impressive anthology *The Emergence of Mind* is based on a refutation of what he calls the Exceptionality Thesis. He directly connects this thesis to the question of unnatural narratology and to theorists like Alber, Mäkelä, Richardson, and Skov Nielsen (11). Herman writes that «[…] the questioning of the Exceptionality Thesis is in a sense the starting point for all the approaches to fictional minds outlined by the chapters in this volume […]» (Introduction 18), and refers to almost every contributor in the volume as «anti-exceptionalist» (20, 21, 22). The exceptionality thesis, then, is the thesis that we approach fiction and non-fiction by means of different protocols for reasoning and with different interpretive strategies, and that, for example «[…] readers' experiences of fictional minds are different in kind from their experiences of the minds they encounter outside the domain of narrative fiction […]» (8).

For us the aim is certainly not to replace cognitive theories with unnatural ones, or to say that it is not the case that all narratives are natural, but that they are, instead, all unnatural. The difference is not that cognitive theory thinks all narratives are natural and we think the reverse. The difference is that we want to distinguish between what we consider fundamentally different narratives whereas most cognitive theory does not. Therefore, we do not think that the cognitive approach can stand alone, and we want to insist on the difference that some narratives make – especially for interpretation. To give just one example, we argue that when the mind-content of characters (other than of a character narrator herself/himself) are rendered it is *sometimes* necessary, *often* profitable and *nearly always* possible to use different interpretive protocols than those we use in everyday life.

This brings us to the very expression *unnatural narratives*, which for us first and foremost takes on meaning in relation to what it is not: natural narratives. Most prominently the term *natural* has been applied to narrative theory by Monika Fludernik in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. Here, she describes the term as follows: «*Natural narrative* is a term that has come to define 'naturally occurring' storytelling […] What will be called *natural narrative* in this book includes, mainly, spontaneous conversational storytelling a term which would be more appropriate but is rather unwieldy» (13).

This is the first and most important of three different meanings that feed into the term *natural narratology*. Its source is Labov and linguistic discourse analysis. The second meaning of the term *natural* comes from *Natürlichkeitstheorie* which uses the term to «[...] designate aspects of language which appear to be regulated and motivated by cognitive parameters based on man's experience of embodiedness in a real-world context» (17). Whereas both of these two meanings function as descriptive denominators of a certain kind of narrative or language, the third one is on a completely different level and refers to the readers' *reaction* towards certain types of narrative, literature or discourse. It comes

from Culler and his use of the term *naturalization* to designate readers' efforts to make the strange and deviant seem natural and thus to familiarize it: «Culler's naturalization in particular embraces the familiarization of the strange» (31). Again, there is no quarrel possible about the fact that natural narratives of the kind described by Fludernik exist, but three equally important points are that we should not necessarily privilege these and that we should certainly not think that all narratives are or behave like natural ones, and finally that readers are not forced to naturalize. Fludernik writes: «When readers read narrative texts, they project real-life parameters into the reading process and, if at all possible, treat the text as a real-life instance of narrating» ("New Wine in Old Bottles?" 623). It is worth noting, first, that as a descriptive statement as opposed to a normative statement about what readers *should* do, it hardly covers all readers, nor all lay readers; and second, that even if this is what many readers tend to do, we are not obliged to repeat the projection at a methodological level. Familiarization, or what Culler calls naturalization and Fludernik narrativization, is a choice, and whether the choice is conscious or automatic, it remains a choice and not a necessity. A different choice in the form of un-naturalizing interpretation is equally legitimate and rewarding in many texts.

Let us look at a specific example: *Glamorama* by Bret Easton Ellis is in some respects a classical doppelgänger-narrative. The protagonist and first person narrator Victor Ward apparently has a double, and gradually this double takes over his identity. In the end one Victor – and everything seems to indicate that he is the one we have followed throughout most of the book – dies in Italy while the other Victor, his double, enjoys life in New York. The really odd and unnatural thing about *Glamorama*, however, is that not only does the double overtake the identity of the first-person narrator on the thematic level and in the narrated universe; he even becomes the enunciator of the pronoun *I*. The double becomes the narrating narrator and thus takes over part of the narration.

This phenomenon certainly does not correspond to any real-world, natural discourse. And the understanding of just the basic events and the storyline in *Glamorama* hinges crucially on understanding this pronominal takeover.

The more general point is that some works – *Glamorama* among them – can be interpreted as unnatural in the sense that they designate and refer to a character with the first person pronoun *I* without *emanating* from that character. This form can be interpreted as unusual, strange or experimental, and our more general claim is that it is paradigmatic for unnaturalness that we find even in some of the most traditional fictional first person forms, such as, for example, the classic detective novel. Take, for instance, the following short excerpt from Chandler:

> The next morning was bright, clear and sunny. I woke up with a motorman's glove in my mouth, drank two cups of coffee and went through the morning papers. [...] I was shaking the wrinkles out of my damp suit when the phone rang. (40)

There is no zero focalization here and no transgressions of point of view. This prose is not experimental with regards to the narrative situation. Yet, what exactly is the relationship between mood and voice; between character and words? It seems equally unlikely that Marlowe should ever write, speak or think exactly these words during or after the action. The reader would be hard pressed to imagine that he thinks this to himself using the preterit tense while hung-over. To imagine instead that Marlowe, in his old age, would occupy himself with autobiographical writings during quiet nights collides with the picture of Marlowe provided. Thus, every time it says in the text, for example,

«I walked», «I drank a whiskey», *I* refers to Marlowe, but Marlowe himself is not saying anything about what he did or drank. This, at least, is our contention. It is un-naturalizing in its assumption. It is an interpretational choice competing with other choices that might want to connect character and words and to ask – also in this case – about the occasion and purposes of the narration at the character's level. From an unnatural point of view, we need not impose real-world necessities on all fictional narratives. We need not put all narratives into communicational models based on real-life storytelling situations.

One consequence is that the reader can interpret mind-representations as authoritatively rendered in a way that distinguishes them from any representation of real minds and that foregrounds the difference between invented and reported story worlds and minds. What connects the *unconventional* and unnatural first person narratives like *Glamorama* with *conventional*, unnatural third person with zero focalization is that they allow the reader to make interpretational choices that are un-naturalizing in the sense that she can trust as authoritative and reliable what would in real life be impossible, implausible or, at the very least, subject to doubt.

2b. Or does diversification, perhaps simultaneously, involve a look at the various scientific cultures underlying research programs in narrative theory, past and present, but also non-Western? As theoreticians address issues of cognition and context in narrative, in what ways should the role of poetics and rhetoric in narratology be rethought?

Let us begin with the latter question, which presupposes a temporal development in narratology from formal to functional interests. While we might agree to such a sketch when concerned with the unifying phases of narratology – from structuralist to cognitive narratology – we would hesitate to equate this sketch with the full range of narratology as a discipline for several reasons. First, the dichotomies set up by the sketch call for conceptual elaborations if they are to carry much weight. What is implied in the concept of *cognition* as opposed to the concept of *poetics*? What understanding of *rhetoric* would be opposed to or very different from *context* and vice versa? Secondly, the focus on the unifying trends of narratological research leave much important work on narratives out, including work that precisely sets out to bridges dichotomies such as the ones hinted at here. One of the important side effects of the often eclectic processes of diversification is the need to reflect upon the scientific adherence and heritage of what is being brought together to explain the forms and functions of specific types of narrative. These processes enabled the incorporation and further development of parts of some contributions without necessarily buying into every precondition of the paradigm from which they were inspired. A small example of such a process could be the way parts of the newly developed reading tools from cognitive narrative (such as the idea of *experientiality* or the notion of *social minds*) have influenced readings of unnatural narratives (Iversen, "In flaming flames"; "Broken or Unnatural?").

3a. With respect to question 2, what contributions can each narratology or narrative theory bring to the others? To what extent can concepts and methods travel and be shared among different theories? And between narratology and other disciplines?

The interdisciplinary openness and the capability of fostering travels between approaches to meaning making remains a key to the relevance and impact of postclassical narratologies. Most recent work in the discipline is in close dialogue with multiple approaches and assumptions. Our work on unnatural narratives and the specificity of fictional narratives is clearly indebted in many ways to the work of Cohn, Fludernik, McHale, Culler, Phelan and others and we have been fortunate to see our work having some influence the other way just as it also influences parts of other subfields of narratology.

One example of this interaction is the collaboration established between us and rhetorical narrative theorists like James Phelan and Richard Walsh resulting in joint articles and in Phelan contributing to the recent *Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*. At the centre of these collaborations are discoveries following in the wake of the extrication of fictionality from fiction in the generic sense that Walsh initiated in his groundbreaking 2007 book. One such discovery being that fictionality in the form of the intentional use of invented narratives is overwhelmingly prevalent in numerous areas of society, politics and culture. It is a vehicle for negotiating values, weighing options, and informing beliefs and opinions. Yet, fictionality is almost completely unstudied and often even unacknowledged outside the field of generic fiction where we expect to find it. This discovery has the potential to thoroughly impact several disciplines. It allows us to examine, e.g., how fictionality is used in modern politics as a means to persuade, argue, build ethos, etc. An obvious example being the ways in which Barack Obama very deliberately uses fictionality as a rhetorical strategy. The referring to his opponent as suffering from the non-existing disease «Romnesia» and the alleged presentation of his birth video being two examples. It also opens for questions such as how fictionality can be an indispensable part of telling about a historical past that often involves atrocities that it would seem scandalous to fictionalize. Art Spiegelman's instantly canonized graphic novel *Maus*, where Jews are portrayed as mice, Germans as cats, etc., is a key example of the impact of a work that uses fictionalization in order to present an atrocious past. And it reflects back on our understanding of generic fictions such as novels and allows for questions like: why and how can generic fiction affect our understanding of and reasoning about what is true and real and influence the terms – ethical, emotional, ideological – in which we do so?

3b. Do you think that narratology as a consolidating discipline should be concerned by issues of incommensurability due to the different ontologies and epistemologies underlying each theory or research program?

This last question is difficult for us to answer since it seems to presuppose that narratology is a consolidating discipline. We think that descriptively it is not the case and normatively it should not be the case that narratology must consolidate itself as one unified monolithical theory. Therefore we think that narrative theory should be very concerned with the different ontologies and epistemologies – not only and maybe not so much of each theory or program, but also with the different ontologies and epistemologies of different forms of narrative. It is our contention that we lose out on a lot about fictional narratives if we treat them as if they were non-fictional, and that similar differences persist between visual and non-visual, natural and un-natural, situated and un-situated etc. We are confident that there is much and very exciting work to be done to examine and to compare, partly mono-disciplinarily, partly interdisciplinarily,

how fictionality and how narrative manifest themselves across media and genres in political, philosophical, literary, historical, and conversational discourse without erasing the differences between them.

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