

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

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Abstract

This is a response to some of 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.

Keywords

Narratology, Chinese narrative, cultural specificity

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I would like to note certain reservation about ‘consolidation’ as a word that describes the current state of narrative studies in general. Narratology is now a synonym of narrative studies, an umbrella designation that embraces almost everything in activities of representation and interpretation. What can be accepted as some consensus (Can we call that consolidation?) is: narrative is extradiegetic, metalinguistic, trans-textual, paratextual, intertextual, and extra-textual. In consequence, we have many narratologies, feminist narratology, postcolonial narratology, rhetorical narratology, cognitive narratology, comparative narratology, film narratology, and the list can go on and on. Narratology so far, in such a broad sense, is an on-going process towards various directions.

I regard this process as both an inward turn to some revisionary and self-conscious critique of the classical mode and an opening up towards a new epoch of literature which demands continual renewal of methodological concepts and assumptions. In narrative studies, the fundamental definition of *narrative* is just such an example. What are we to understand by *narrative*? To say that narrative is everything representational and referential surely breaks the boundaries in humanities, but does this enhance a better understanding of the objects of study or provide new enlightenment on us as subjects of knowing? These questions are fundamental but vexing, especially when we look back and think about the point of departure when narratology was regarded as a theory in itself. In Hillis Miller’s view, narratological concentration on formal distinctions are not useful in themselves unless they lead to better readings or to better teachings of literary works because «Narratological distinctions and refinements are not valuable in themselves, as ‘science’» (125). But for David Herman, «Narratology’s basic premise is that a common, more or less implicit, mode of narrative explains people’s ability to understand communicative performance and types of artifacts as stories» (14). What is at stake is not the hermeneutic dispute between explanation (of a scientific linguistic base) and understanding (of interpretation in humanities) but rather a conflict between a demand for a disciplinary research into the interior of storyworlds and an appeal to the usefulness of narratological criticism that interprets the exterior of text (verbal or non-verbal).

One case relevant to this discussion is the idea of an expansive narratology as advocated by Susan Lanser in her article “Toward a Feminist Narratology” (1986). As a tentative attempt at bringing into narratological framework feminist concerns, she uses a letter allegedly written by a young bride as an example to show how subtext and undertext are structurally embedded within the text as rhetorical devices for engaging different readers/narratees. In other words, what is assumed as textually explicit is a subterfuge for distancing female audience from interpreting as guided by the plot as constructed in the discourse. Lanser’s revisionary reading is provocative in that it directs our attention to convergence of narratology and its contribution to interpretation and criticism.

As other forms of knowledge, narratology as a theory and literary criticism belong to the huge field of interpretation. My own reflection on the issue is a hypothesis that narratological research be maintained within a theoretical framework that deals with the mechanism of story experience in its production and reception. By probing deep into the narrative mechanism of storytelling and its rhetorical power over its recipient, we might know better how narrative universals (as partly uncovered by classical narratology) can be relocated in different domains of criticism and interpretation. Indeed, there is already such a tendency towards consolidation by exploring the cognitive mechanism of story experience.

In her book *Towards a “Natural Narratology”*, Monika Fludernik redefines narrativity by exploring the relationship between people’s cognitive experience of storytelling and its reception in real world. In her argument, story experience is cognitively configured in the idea of narrativity, which primarily consists of sequentiality of story events, intention of telling, and naturalization of the communicative paradigm between storytelling and reception. This cognitive approach is significant in many ways. What impresses me is a renewed idea of mimesis. In Fludernik’s formulation, mimesis in cognitive narratology is not to be identified as imitation of the external world but rather «the artificial and illusionary projection of a semiotic structure which the reader recuperates in terms of a fictional reality» (35). Mimesis here is a recuperation of the cognitive parameters «gleaned from real-world experience» because there is «an implicit though incomplete homologization of the fictional world and the real worlds» (35). This emphasis on an implicit and partial homology between world and words may lead us to a better understanding of the relationship between the textual representation as explicitly there in front of us and some absent causes that can only be located in specific contexts, including narrative genre, narrative and interpretive tradition.

Of course, such an effort at consolidating a common pursuit of narrative mechanisms necessarily sends us back to considerations of other forms of differences outside the storyworld. As a Chinese teaching narratology in my own country, I might add at this point the current divergent development in narratologies has not touched upon those differences in Chinese narrative tradition. This huge topic requires volumes of work for explanation and elaboration but let me be specific just on one point: methodology in narrative, however universal its claims, is not always transposable to the study of form in a culture. Narrative forms are intrinsically bound up with narrative tradition.

To illustrate this point briefly, let me cite a ‘natural’ story from Chinese folklore in Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 196-219). Entitled “Lovebirds flying Southeast” (Peacocks Flying Southeast), this narrative poem tells the tragic love story of a married couple. As is narrated, the young were in deep love but were forced to separate by the mother-in-law. When the wife was forced by her own brother to remarry for money, the young

woman drowned herself, which triggered off the suicide of her husband. The narration of the story ends with a sentimental note about the burial ceremony of the two, and decorated with lyrical descriptions of how the dead transforms themselves into lovebirds (*Aix galericulata*) happily singing among the trees. In understanding the plot structure, Chinese scholars feel that Propp's binary model (prohibition vs. violation) fails to account for the impunity of the villain; neither is Fludernik's cognitive model applicable to the dominant lyrical descriptive mode. In fact, the binary model in Propp's systematic pairs is explicitly suggestive of a set of formulaic expressions in Confuciansim, while «naturalisation» in Fludernik's paradigm turns out to be understood when the concept is recontextualized in Chinese narrative history, a tradition frequently associated with the co-existence and interplay of two modes: the narrative and the poetic.

This brief observation is far from being enough to show the complexity of narrativity in its cognitive pattern as one fundamental mechanism of story experience, but I hope it points to the possibility that cognitive relativism is unavoidable. Perhaps this recognition is useful in shifting us to the construction of different alterity in narrative study. This is exactly what happens among Chinese narratologists in the recent years when classical narratology was introduced in various branches of learning.

In his book *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi claims that the refined technical terminology of Western narratology cannot adequately explain Chinese narrative tradition because Western narratology is linguistically based and Chinese is a language without tense markers, which makes plot and sequentiality in Chinese narrative texts different; more important, he argues, Chinese language is inherently bounded with a philosophical convergence of Confucius, Daoist and Buddhist ideas, which, requires a fundamentally different framework of interpretation (5). To illustrate the thesis, Yang refers to Chinese classical novels, revealing referentiality as a prior principle that guides history and storytelling as structurally connected. Yang's argument is only one of many that demonstrates how Chinese scholars use Western narratology (basically classical narratology) as a reference to foreground differences of various kinds in Chinese literature. In a similar vein, Chen Pingyuan argues that mimesis in Chinese narrative literature includes both diegesis and mimesis because in Chinese literary history there has never been a distinction between the probable and the possible (288). Apparently, these observations aim at uncovering the structured pattern of life-experience and its representation in Chinese language. All take language, storytelling, and extral-textual parameters as a complex compact set that requires a Chinese narratology for interpretation.

Such an endeavour should not be simplistically understood as a result of identity politics but rather a conscious attempt at theorizing the study of narrative as poetics. This is evidenced in *A Study of the Narrative Tradition in Chinese Literature*. Richly documented, the book delineates the historical development of Chinese narrative tradition, revealing the lyrical and the narrative as two mutually dependent traditions (Naibing 7).

These observations point to the relationship between narratology as a theory of narrative in general and the culturalization of theory. On the one hand, Chinese scholars arguing for a Chinese narratology advocate that the lexicographic system of difference in Chinese language entails a different epistemology and ontology of literature and narrative studies. On the other hand, arguments for a Chinese narratology frequently draw on classical narratology. The posing of a relation between narrative theory in general and Chinese narratology in particular is offered not as a deductive model for uncovering any essential difference in cognition or culture but as a provocation to an

inquiry into Western literary theory in general, for a comparative and synthetic project of narrative studies.

To end my reflections on the divergence/consolidation topic, I would like to quote from an article co-authored by Franco Passalacqua and Federico Pianzola because it speaks with clarity on what is at stake when we consider the possibility of a paradigm shift:

A theoretical alternative to the mimetic paradigm is the constructivist approach. From such viewpoint, the relationship between the structure of knowledge and reality is conceived as a dependency of the latter to the former, i.e. reality is constructed via a structure of knowledge. To adopt such epistemological perspective entails that our ontological commitment toward the narrated reality has a strong correlation to the structure of knowledge of whom is experiencing the narrative. (28)

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