

# The Shape of Things to Come

## An Interview with Maria Mäkelä

*DIEGESIS*: How would you define narrative research?

*Mäkelä*: Traditionally, ‘narrative research’ has mostly been used to refer to a particular method of collecting and analyzing personal stories in other than humanist research, for example in social sciences or psychology. This interview section of *DIEGESIS* used to be entitled “My Narratology,” but now you wish to widen the scope and the audience by renaming it and replacing ‘narratology’ with ‘narrative research.’ I’m all for this change and very happy and honoured to be the first colleague interviewed under this new title. Yet it’s not easy to find an appropriate term to denote the contemporary study of narratives across disciplines (since you asked, I guess this would be my simplest definition), is it? I’m constantly wavering between ‘narrative theory’ (Nah, that would exclude all empirical and applied studies!), ‘narrative studies’ (Doesn’t this risk being understood as some sort of narrative pedagogy?) and ‘interdisciplinary narrative theory / studies / etc.’ (But isn’t all humanist research interdisciplinary nowadays? And shouldn’t it be *transdisciplinary*?).

The only point that everyone seems to agree on is that narratology *tout court* will not do anymore! By abandoning the term narratology we move away from the much-criticized structuralist heritage and an undue emphasis on the Western literary canon. But let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater: in my experience, for many colleagues across disciplines, from historians to information systems researchers, it is precisely narratology that denotes a highly developed set of methods for an exact analysis of narrative texts. It is just that currently the methodological exchange between literary and linguistic narratology, the social scientific study of narratives, narrative psychology and philosophy, and cognitive and evolutionary narrative studies has reached a point where we can legitimately consider all this work as a transdisciplinary paradigm.

This trouble with naming the field also mirrors my own scholarly journey from a diligent disciple of narratology to a preacher of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary narrative studies, always eager to look for new audiences and collaborators. To give you a concrete sense of this change, I can tell you that I was a scholar of free indirect discourse from the beginning of my studies in the turn of the millennium until my PhD defence in 2011. After that and up until now I have applied narratology and narrative theory in the study of social media, reality television, journalism, business storytelling, politics – and most recently, information systems research. This development reflects, I think, a prototypical

paradigmatic change that many of us have undergone during the recent decade or two. This widening of the horizon is what David Herman (1999) envisioned as the primary task of postclassical narratology, and of all narratologists he was probably most influential in building connections to other research fields beyond the humanities...

*DIEGESIS*: How would you describe your research projects to a wider audience?

*Mäkelä*: First, to give you the necessary details: I head two ongoing narrative research projects that are transdisciplinary in nature. The Academy of Finland consortium is called *Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Narrative and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory* (2018–2022), and it brings together scholars from the Finnish universities of Tampere, Turku, and Helsinki; the subprojects in Turku and Helsinki are headed by Hanna Meretoja and Merja Polvinen. In Finland, research is increasingly dependent on externally funded research projects that should, moreover, be justified by their economic or societal “impact.” Therefore I have a ready ‘public description’ for you, which was already an obligatory part of the Academy of Finland application form!

“Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory” develops ideas and analytical instruments that will equip researchers, professional groups and non-academic audiences to navigate today’s social and textual environments that are dominated by storytelling. We put contemporary literary fiction in dialogue with the manipulative stories that spread around the internet, in order to reveal the dubious relationship that some narratives have with identity, truth, politics, and complex systems such as climate change. In order to confront these issues, we reveal the sophisticated story-critical ideas and techniques offered by works of contemporary fiction. The project brings together the nationally leading and internationally renowned scholars of narrative at the Universities of Tampere, Turku and Helsinki.

My own team at Tampere (including literary scholars Laura Karttunen and Samuli Björninen, philosopher Jukka Mikkonen, and political scientist Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen) deals with phenomena ranging from the discourse on the benefits of reading fiction to the analysis of social media story logic and narratives in post-truth politics, while our colleagues at Turku and Helsinki focus on the story-critical potential of metanarrative and speculative fiction, respectively. It was difficult to describe this setup in such a short space and in popular language. As you can see, we didn’t quite succeed – what are complex systems? And even more crucially: what is “story-critical”? We did have, however, previous encouraging experiences from using the term ‘story-critical’ in popular contexts in a way that resonated with public concerns.

The other project, *Storytelling in Information Systems Development* (Aaltonen Foundation 2019–2022), headed by myself, Samuli Pekkola from Information Systems, and Jari Stenvall from Administrative Science, also has a public description. In this case, its target audience are not only taxpayers and journalists but also information systems specialists who are typically not at all invested in narrative research:

The project takes a critical look at storytelling as a part of information systems development and applies narratological methods to the development of information systems and organizational management. Focusing on organizational storytelling, our goal is to create and apply new research and educational paradigms in the management and development of organizations. In our case study, we examine the procurement project of the client and patient information system Apotti, commissioned by the Hospital District of Helsinki (HUS) and the municipalities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. We take a closer look at the news coverage and documentation around Apotti, as well as details related to the development and procurement of the information system.

Much of the research in this project is still forthcoming. During the project, it has become increasingly evident that the patient information system Apotti under scrutiny, whose maintaining organization is moreover our project partner, is considered a massive failure among the users – doctors, nurses, and social workers. It is possible that the publication of our research results may evoke public debate and even end up as tokens in a controversy between information systems specialists, users, and taxpayers ultimately paying for these massive technological and organizational reformations. In case this happens, one wants one’s public description to be properly placed and easily searchable, with an appropriately neutral-critical wording and no blatantly evaluative hypotheses to one direction or another expressed.

*DIEGESIS*: What are the most innovative aspects of your current projects?

*Mäkelä*: *Instrumental Narratives* is a serious attempt at a paradigm shift within narrative research, toward critical and public engagement with the “compelling stories” of our social media fuelled narrative environments and commodified storytelling propagated by an entire industry of storytelling consultants and coaches. Particularly the research teams at Turku and Helsinki are now redefining the role of literary fiction amidst the storytelling boom that practically transforms everyone from journalists to politicians and businesses to non-profit organizations into ‘storytellers.’ At Tampere we continue to develop ‘story-critical’ narrative theory based on a crowdsourced corpus of ca. 1.000 reports by followers concerning “dubious, funny, or otherwise interesting examples of instrumental storytelling,” as our social media prompt from February 2017 has it. The crowdsourcing was conducted in my previous project entitled *Dangers of Narrative* (2017–2020) which practically went viral itself in Finland, thanks to our popular Facebook analyses of narratives that the followers had reported to us. The ongoing work in our Tampere team continues not only the research but also the active collaboration with various stakeholders ranging from journalists and artists to political organizations and the police. Currently I know of plans by several research groups around Europe who would like to apply our social media crowdsourcing method in putting together a corpus of popular narratives.

*Storytelling in Information Systems Development* is innovative by simply introducing narratological concepts such as “masterplot” (Abbott 2008), master and counter-narrative, and cognitive-narratological prototype definitions into the study of information systems research. Just like in *Instrumental Narratives*, also in this project the traffic between pragmatic applications and theory-forming is key.

*DIEGESIS*: In an ideal world, what could your project hope to achieve?

*Mäkelä*: In an ideal world, while successful in creating a new theoretical and methodological paradigm within narrative studies, we would also manage to repeat the popular success of my previous project *Dangers of Narrative* on a global scale: this would result in, for example, highly popular social media platforms hosted by narrative scholars that would issue a serious challenge to easy and uncritical popularizations of our research that support the commodification of storytelling while downplaying critical reading practices. We have already tried this with modest results: our *Instrumental Narratives* blog features entries by leading scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan, Jim Phelan, Brian McHale, and Peter Lamarque; and all entries deal with very popular phenomena. Yet I'm afraid the audience still consists of the usual suspects – more or less the same people who read *DIEGESIS*! What we lack now and what we used to have in *Dangers of Narrative* is an affective prompt for the audiences to participate in collecting and analyzing narratives. Social media feed on collective reactions to content, not dissemination of knowledge.

As far as *Storytelling in Information Systems Development* is concerned, the ideal dream result would be a practical, narrative-theory-based model for what we call *user requirement solicitation*; in an ideal world, the collaboration between narrative and information systems researchers would help the information systems developer to better understand users' needs that are often presented in the form of highly experiential and personal stories that construct the information system as an antagonist.

*DIEGESIS*: What is the future of narrative research?

*Mäkelä*: The future of narrative research lies in three directions. First, engaging with storytellers and audiences across various spheres of life. Second, reimagining the ways we collect, present, and analyze our research corpora. The rehearsals on free indirect discourse in Jane Austen and focalization in Ernest Hemingway will not satisfy future generations whose scholarly outlook is global and transdisciplinary. Third, doing things together. Interdisciplinary collaboration and representative corpora require teamwork and large, increasingly international research projects. Again, none of this should mean losing the precious babies of narratological precision and the literary art of storytelling with the bathwater. They simply need to be reimagined and reappropriated in new and emerging contexts.

*DIEGESIS*: Imagine the perfect Tweet someone would post about your project.

*Mäkelä*: "I disagree with Maria Mäkelä and her team on the following points." And then a long thread of tweets to follow where the tweeter carefully elaborates on all the points she disagrees on. In the social media fuelled publicity that now also dominates the forms for disseminating research results and engaging with non-academic audiences, what I miss the most is honest and respectful debate

that would not escalate into completely polarized positions. What if the social media logic of appreciation and dislike trickles to the academic realm? Liking and sharing do not support scholarly debate but instead foster unintelligent self-advertisement, flattery, and networking for networking's sake ("I will now like Jim Phelan's post and hope that he'll like me back").

Our *Dangers of Narrative* project was as popular on Finnish social media as a humanist research project could possibly be, but even as a research project we were constantly challenged by affective fluctuations and binarities. At first it was a lot of fun, on the one hand to receive likes, shares, fan letters, and praise from influencers and ordinary users alike, and on the other hand to be simply "disliked" or even "cancelled" as politically suspect by those storytellers whose narratives we publicly criticized. Soon we realized, however, that one of the crucial tasks of the project would be to redirect the attention gained through social media into more elaborate forms of dialogue. When the project funding ended at the end of 2020, in addition to research publications, blog entries, columns, interviews, and more than 500 Facebook analyses, we had published a popular 'story-critical' manual in Finnish entitled *Kertomuksen vaarat* [*Dangers of Narrative*] based on collaboration with more than 30 professionals coming from other research disciplines and various spheres of life outside the academia: journalism, politics, business, the arts, healthcare and the police.

Both the affects and the interest in the forms and uses of narrative live on in Finnish publicity and debate, and *Dangers of Narrative* is still a 'brand' that many people recognize. Despite the self-criticism I have voiced here, I consider this the single most important accomplishment of my career as a narrative theorist, yet something that I could never have accomplished alone, without a research team of great minds – many of them decidedly different from my own.<sup>1</sup>

Maria Mäkelä, PhD, is Senior Lecturer in Comparative Literature and former director of *Narrare: Centre for Interdisciplinary Narrative Studies* (2016–2020) at Tampere University, Finland. She was Visiting Professor at the *Centre for Fictionality Studies* at Aarhus University in 2014 and 2018, and president of the *International Society for the Study of Narrative* in 2019. Her publications deal with storification and the storytelling boom; the neoliberal logic of narrative and fiction; exemplarity; consciousness, voice, and realism across media; the literary tradition of adultery; authorial ethos; and critical applications of postclassical narratologies. Her research corpus ranges from French seventeenth-century novels to contemporary fiction, and from reality television and social media to corporate storytelling. Her newest publications include *Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory* (2022), co-edited with Paul Dawson.

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<sup>1</sup> The members of my *Dangers of Narrative* research team are Samuli Björninen, Laura Karttunen, Matias Nurminen, Juha Raipola, Tytti Rantanen, and our research assistant (now a PhD researcher) Ville Hämäläinen.