

# Concepts of Narrative

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Interdisciplinarity has been the name of the game for quite some time. One of the rich, but also problematic, tools for bridging gaps between disciplines is the concept of “narrative”. This essay will deal with different notions of “narrative”, broader and narrower interpretations of the term, and will then suggest my own view.

## Narratology and/vs. “the Narrative Turn”

The centrality of “narrative” in current thought and discourse derives mainly from narratology, poststructuralist literary and cultural theory, and constructivist approaches in the social sciences, but its meanings and implications vary according to its provenance. As someone who participated in the development of narratology, I find the present-day use of “narrative” across media and disciplines both exciting and somewhat bewildering. I came to this interdisciplinary junction with a fairly narrow definition in mind: “Someone telling someone else that something happened”, Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s definition (1981, 228) or – my own early definition – “the narration of a succession of fictional events” (1983, 2). These definitions, as well as many others, attribute two main characteristics to narratives: 1) events, governed by temporality, or – more precisely – a double temporality (the chronology of the events and their presentation in the text); 2) telling or narration, as an act of mediation or transmission which, in literature, is verbal.

Today, narratives are detected in film, drama, opera, music, and the visual arts. The last two are neither verbal nor governed by double temporality nor, strictly speaking, even by events. The first three are at least partly verbal, and often do represent events, but can they be said to *tell* them? Ever since Plato (or Socrates) “narrative” (*diegesis*) was distinguished from drama (*mimesis*) on the assumption that one tells, while the second shows. This distinction is interrogated today. To take one example, in a recent discussion of opera as “sung staged narrative” – an oxymoron, I think, to classical ears – Linda and Michael Hutcheon make the following

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statement: “[...] opera’s narratives appear, on the surface, to be ‘shown’ rather than ‘told’, to use the standard narratological distinction. But since this showing is multiply mediated, we will argue that it functions like a telling” (2005, 441). They also explicitly contend that “When stories and music interact, as they must in opera, they force us to adapt, rather than simply adopt, existing narratological models” (2005, 442).

Adaptation, rather than adoption, is even more strongly felt in the use of “narrative” across *disciplines*, though the term “adaptation” is sometimes misleading, because “narrative” does not always originate in narratology. Let us briefly look at three examples, concerning psychoanalysis and story-telling, ideology and narrative, and the notion of “storied lives”.

That narratives abound in psychoanalysis is obvious: the stories, or fragments of stories, the analysand tells the analyst, the analyst’s re-telling of these stories “along psychoanalytic lines” (Schafer’s expression, 1981, 31), the joint construction by both of a relatively coherent narrative, the case study written by the analyst (when there is one), and so on. The emphasis on the story-telling aspect of psychoanalysis by literary theorist Peter Brooks and psychoanalysts Roy Schafer and Donald Spence – to mention only a few names – has illuminated complexities that had often gone unnoticed earlier. At the same time, however, their use of “narrative” sometimes strikes a narratologist (*this* narratologist?) as too elastic. When Schafer, for example, says that any statement about the stories we tell ourselves is embedded within “the *story* that there is a self to tell something to” (1981, 31, my emphasis), he is substituting “story” for “assumption” or “hypothesis”. Not being an event, governed by double temporality, and not being narrated by anyone, in what sense is the assumption or hypothesis concerning the self a story? Similarly, after presenting his project, Schafer declares: “This is the theme and form of the present *narration*” (1981, 30, my emphasis), and I pedantically ask: what is the justification for calling Schafer’s own article a “narration”? Moreover, anticipating the Hutcheons on opera, Schafer claims that “As there is no hard-and-fast line between telling and showing, either in literary narrative or in psychoanalysis, the competent psychoanalyst deals with telling as a form of showing and with showing as a form of telling” (1981, 34). Thus, in the spirit of the joke he doesn’t quite tell, an analysand coming too early to the session betrays anxiety; one who is late conveys aggression; punctual arrival is a sure sign of compulsiveness, and changeable habits bespeak instability. All these “tell”, I observe, in a metaphoric way (although the metaphor is dead enough to be treated as if it were literal); they “tell” in the sense of “convey”, “signify”, “indicate”, not in that of “mediated or reported by words”.

My interest – it should be clear – is not in arguing with Schafer, but in using him as an example of the broad acceptance of “narrative” in some quarters of psychoanalysis. I now move to political discourse, drawing my example not from professional writing but from a newspaper. I do this on purpose, because it seems to me significant that “narrative” has become a catchy term in everyday discourse. “The Struggle over the Narrative” was the title of a recent essay in the Israeli daily newspaper, *Ha’aretz*. The essay itself dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On the face of it, the conflict concerns land, nationality, religion, power, human rights, but in what sense can it be conceived of as a struggle over the *narrative*? A relatively simple answer would be that each of the groups participating in the conflict has its own story, i.e. its own version of history as a succession of events – not a far cry from the narratological concept of “narrative”. Thus, the dominant Israeli story would focus on a return to the land that was once ours, whereas the dominant Palestinian narrative would emphasize uninterrupted inhabitation. But the title has further implications. By using the term “narrative”, it suggests the existence of competing “truths”, each carrying persuasion for the group upholding it (and see Hayden White about “competing narratives” 1992, 39). Moreover, it implies that each version is not a neutral account of events, but an attempt to naturalize what is, at bottom, an ideological stance. Although the newspaper does not refer to any theoretical framework, it does foreground the ideological baggage disguised by the narrative configuration. However, the emphasis on the ideological or political work narratives perform often underplays the formal properties dear to narratologists. Who, for example, *narrates* the ideological construct in question? The hegemony, some would say, but the hegemony only narrates in a metaphoric and necessarily implicit way (otherwise it would not be an effective disguise).

Perhaps the most interesting, as well as intriguing, case made for a narrative without a narrator concerns human life, and this will be my third example. Obviously, our lives are full of instances of telling stories to others as well as to ourselves. But this is not all; many of our pursuits are shaped like narratives in having beginnings, middles, and ends, operating as a succession of events, sometimes recalling a past occurrence, sometimes anticipating an event in the future. The well-known literary critic, Barbara Hardy, made a hyperbolic claim for the narrative structure of most of our activities: “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (1968, 5). This affinity becomes identity in Jerome Bruner’s title “Life as Narrative” (1987), Theodore Sarbin’s sub-title “The Storied Nature of Human Conduct” (1986), and the expression “storied lives” coined by Richard L. Ochberg (1994).

In fact, as a recent essay in the *TLS* (Strawson, 15 October 2004, 13–15) has rightly pointed out, the postulation of affinity between life and narrative sometimes takes the form of an empirical statement, sometimes of a normative thesis, and sometimes both. The empirical statement – emerging from Bruner (e.g. 1987), Sarbin (1986), Ochberg (1994), and others – is that people typically experience their lives as a narrative of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories. The normative thesis – developed, for example, by Charles Taylor (1989), Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and Paul Ricoeur (1981, 1991, 1992) – says (and I simplify) that a richly narrative outlook on one’s life is essential to living well, to true and full personhood. Thus Ricoeur: “How, indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in the form of a narrative?” (1992, 158).

## Narratological Anticipations

In contrast, perhaps, to the critical tone informing the foregoing presentation, I now wish to suggest that the potential for broadening the concept of narrative lay dormant in narratology itself. Even in the heyday of structuralist narratology, the term “narrative” was used to designate at least two different concepts: what the Russian Formalists called “*fabula*”, i.e., the abstracted events in the order of their presumed “occurrence”, and what they called “*sjuzet*”, i.e., the organization of these events in the text. Studies like Bremond’s “La logique des possibles narratifs” (1966) and *Logique du récit* (1973), Greimas’ “Narrative grammar: Units and levels” (1971) and Pavel’s “Some remarks on narrative grammars” (1973) all focus on the *fabula*, sometimes called “*histoire*” (e.g. Todorov 1966) and sometimes “*récit*” (e.g. Barthes 1966) in French, often “story” in English. On the other hand, Genette’s seminal study of the *sjuzet* (with the *fabula* as a touchstone) is translated into English as *Narrative Discourse* (1980, orig. 1972)<sup>1</sup>, and Bal’s label for the level of structural and verbal shaping of the events is “Narrative Text” (1977).

In the sense of “*fabula*”, narrative is medium-independent, though narratologists disagree on whether it should be seen as raw material for textual elaboration or as a construct, abstracted from the text. Be it as it may, “narrative” in this sense was “always already” (to use a Derridean turn-of-phrase) open to shaping in different media. As early as 1966, Barthes said in his “Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative”:

Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed among different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting [...] stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation (Engl. transl. 1977, 79).

Not only are the events amenable to representation in different media; their very scope has been open to interpretation both within narratology and beyond. While the term used to refer to actions in the external world in proto-narratological theories like Propp’s (1968, orig. 1928), it has later come to include internal occurrences like falling in love, thinking, hesitating (see, for example, Chatman’s analysis of Joyce’s *Eveline* 1969). This brought psychological narratives under the purview of narratology, but also became the basis for further broadening: if falling in love, thinking, hesitation are events, why wouldn’t an argument – a speech *act*, after all – also be considered an event? And if so, what prevents us from calling philosophical discourse “narrative”? Indeed, abetted by the deconstructive tendency to analyse

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<sup>1</sup> The French is *Discours du récit*, *récit* being used here for something like *sjuzet*, whereas the same term was used for the equivalent of the *fabula* by Barthes. Rather confusing for a discipline that had scientific aspirations.

philosophy as literature, present-day theorists often write about Plato's narrative, Wittgenstein's narrative, and the like. Many today take "narrative" to mean "a mode of knowledge" or a "cognitive scheme" by which we perceive and interpret the world. Such a view does not necessarily stem from narratology. It can be seen as rooted in the etymology of "narrative", originating in the Sanskrit *gna* and coming into English via the Latin *gnarus*, "signifiers associated with the passing on of knowledge by one who knows" (Kreiswirth, 2000, 304).

Whereas "narrative" as *fabula* is medium-independent and hence amenable to shaping in different media, "narrative" as *sjuzet* was originally conceived as language-bound and therefore found its way into other disciplines concerned with verbal articulation. However, narrative as *sjuzet* was originally understood as *artistic* composition, while its transposition to other disciplines retained "composition" or "organization" but dispensed with "artistic". Thus, Hayden White distinguishes between annals, chronicles, and narrative history as manifestations of degrees of narrative organization, the organizing features he enumerates being "a central subject", "well marked beginning, middle, and end", "peripeteia", an "identifiable narrative voice", "coherence", "closure", and "the impulse to moralize reality" (1981). People are fascinated with narratives, White argues, because in them "reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience" (1981, 20, White's emphasis). Coherence also plays a central role in Brooks' description of the psychoanalyst's re-shaping of the fragmentary stories presented by analysands: "First of all, the psychoanalyst is ever concerned with the stories told by his patients, who are patients precisely because of the weakness of the narrative discourses that they present: the incoherence, inconsistency, and lack of explanatory force in the way they tell their lives" (1994, 47). And again, this time explicitly in terms of *fabula* and *sjuzet*, in his discussion of *Law's Stories*: "The courtroom lawyer's task would seem to be to take an often fragmentary and confusing *fabula* and turn it into a seamless, convincing *sjuzet*" (1996, 17).

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of the Broad Use of "Narrative"**

What are the advantages of the broad use of "narrative" and what are its problems? First advantage, it evokes commonalities between media and disciplines, similarities that may have been overlooked otherwise. These may be a "symptom" of some underlying "deep structures" of the human mind, but they also potentially enhance our understanding of the respective manifestations by comparison with each other. Second, the very transposition of a given concept from one discipline to another may sometimes invite a re-thinking of the concept, term, or method within the discipline from which it was borrowed – a refreshing, though often unsettling – effect. Third, because such uses of "narrative" are often underpinned by poststructuralist or constructivist world views, they present a challenge to positivistic and founda-

tional assumptions that often prevailed in the disciplines under consideration. They offer a conception of these disciplines not as sciences that discover and describe facts “out there” but as hermeneutic activities. What used to be called “data” are now seen not as “encountered” but as “constituted”, “constructed”. If facts or events are “constructed”, it follows that there is always more than one possible construct. In the words of the historian Hayden White, there are always “competing narratives” (1992, 39). In this sense, the concept of “narrative” is often, explicitly or implicitly, tinged with connotations of “fiction” which were central in my aforementioned definition of 1983. An emphasis on the plurality of stories is, among other things, a reaction against such concepts as “truth”, “reality”, “theory”, or “validity in interpretation”. Power, rather than validity, is often seen as the factor informing choice among alternatives. It is in relation to power that the broad concept of narrative has a fourth contribution. In some social-political contexts, “narrative” is seen as a way of giving voice to minorities or disadvantaged groups, generally repressed and silenced by the hegemony. These connotations of “narrative” are particularly prominent in feminism, post-colonialism, legal studies, and the medical humanities. It should, perhaps, be mentioned that Catharine MacKinnon, the radical feminist law professor, warns against the double-edgedness of “narrative” in such contexts. Although stories can give voice to individuals and groups that are often marginalized by the hegemony, they can also lose their political power by being interpreted as “merely stories”: “Even when accounts remain rooted in a critique of hierarchy, storytelling has real dangers. One of these is accepting a place at the margin [...] Instead of telling power it is wrong, tell it a story. No offense” (1996, 235).

In addition to local reservations concerning “narrative” in specific contexts, I would like to raise two mutually related general problems that are probably the other side of the commonalities and the variety I have praised so far. The first has already been raised in print, in the form of a skeptical question, by Martin Kreiswirth: “Indeed, can the various discursive formations labeled narratives in these diverse fields be seen as the same sort of things?” (2000, 295). In other words, there is room for worry that the use of the same term may mislead us into thinking that we are dealing with the same phenomenon. No need to worry, some will be quick to retort, for isn’t a network of similarities among elements without any feature shared in common by all precisely what Wittgenstein called “family resemblance”? And is “family resemblance” not an adequate description of the pluralistic use of “narrative” in our days?

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces the concept of “family resemblance” as part of the game-analogy by dint of which he illuminates the radically heterogeneous character of language:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” – but *look* and see whether there is anything that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that (Engl. transl. 1978, 31, his emphases).

Only after explaining and discussing the analogy of games does Wittgenstein introduce the new analogy concerning the family:

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblance”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: “games” form a family (1978, 32).

Concepts of narrative in different media and disciplines, one can argue, also form a family, its members sharing a potential network of similarities.

This is, perhaps, one direction in which Kreiswirth’s question may be answered, but it leaves another problem unresolved: the specificity of narrative. While going along with Wittgenstein, I would still like to know what resemblances characterize the members of the family of “narratives”. It seems to me that interpretations of Wittgenstein tend to over-emphasize the absence of one property common to all elements at the expense of an examination of the network (or series) of similarities and relationships among the elements (for a similar argument in connection to genre, see Fishelov 1993, 60–61). In other words, I am still looking for something like the old-fashioned notion of *differentia specifica*, and I suspect that the specificity of narrative may be correlated with a certain dominant relation among its elements. Degrees of narrativity may thus depend on the dominance of certain features of “family resemblance” within a configuration said to be a narrative.

## A Modest Proposal

At the risk of limiting the total openness often attributed to Wittgenstein’s notion, I would characterize narrative by two necessary features, plus an additional, dynamic and variable cluster of optional characteristics. In my view, a “discursive formation” (Kreiswirth’s term) is a narrative when double temporality and a transmitting (or mediating) agency are dominant in it. As I suggested in the final chapter composed for the 2002 edition of my *Narrative Fiction* (orig. 1983), narratives are governed by a dual time-scheme owing to the ontological gap between the succession of signs and the temporality of the events (in whatever expanded definition). As distinct from that edition of the book, however, I substitute “transmitting agency” for “narrator” here in order to make room for phenomena like film, characterized not by a narrating voice but by a composite mediating agency: scriptor, director, producer, director of photography, editor, etc. Optional characteristics, resemblances that are often mentioned in discourse about narrative, are: beginnings-middles-and-ends, closure, coherence, causality, addressee. In the absence of either double temporality or a transmitting agency, or in case of a predominance of optional over necessary features, I would prefer to speak of “narrative elements” rather than “a narrative”. Thus there may be narrative elements in a philosophical argument, but I would be reluctant to call such an argument a narrative, because it lacks double

temporality. Likewise, I would hesitate to call an individual life a narrative, because it lacks a transmitting agency. In a similar vein, the historian Louis O. Mink asserts that “Stories are not lived, but told” (1987, 60) and Hayden White earlier declared: “It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult” (1981, 4).

What do I gain by such a move? By narrowing the scope of “narrative”, I am trying to defend the term against being emptied of all semantic content: if everything is narrative, nothing is. Furthermore, the introduction of “narrative elements” into formations that I would not call “a narrative” not only highlights commonalities but also invites the borrowing of narratological tools for the analysis of aspects that may otherwise remain insufficiently illuminated.

## Instead of a Conclusion

This being largely a position text, I deem it desirable to dispense with a conventional summation, because the position is explicitly stated and developed throughout the essay. Instead, I wish to conclude with a list of questions around which there have been heated debates in narrative studies across media and disciplines. There is a certain “family resemblance” among the questions, though some are directly addressed in my essay, some not.

1. What is “narrative”? What are the advantages and disadvantages of narrow vs. broad definitions of the term?
2. What kind of relation (if any) is there between narratives and reality (or “life”)? Do narratives impose structure on reality, or is reality itself “narratively structured”?
3. Narrative approaches tend to challenge concepts like “truth”, “fact”, “reality”, “referentiality”, “objectivity” and replace them by “stories”, “competing narratives”, “interpretation”, “construction”, “fiction”, “subjectivity”. What are the implications of these challenges and what (if any) are their limits?
4. What are the *ethical* implications of seeing reality as amenable to organization and interpretation by different stories, each having “its own truth”? Are these implications problematized by extreme historical events like the holocaust or personal events like child-abuse?
5. To what extent and in what ways does the concept of “narrative” undermine notions like “theory”, “rule”, “law”, or is narrative itself a form of theorizing?
6. To what extent and in what ways are narrative approaches based on conservative presuppositions (e.g. the emphasis on unity, coherence, closure)? And to what extent do they manifest a subversive, “post-modernist” impulse (e.g. the problematization of “truth” and “reality”)? Does the conception of narrative as form-giving and coherence-promoting limit it to “classical” stories, excluding post-modern ones? Does such a conception reinforce and perpetuate “classical”/conservative views concerning reality and personal identity?

7. What (if any) is the affinity between narrative and “the particular case”, as distinct from “the general”, “the rule”, “the law”? Is this connection necessary? Does it always exist?
8. What, if any, is the affinity between narrative and the discourse of minorities and underprivileged groups? Conversely, is the discourse of the hegemony – which we often call “reality” – also a kind of narrative? To what extent and in what ways does narrative serve as an anti-institutional tool?
9. What happens to concepts, terms, and methods when they are transposed from one discipline to another?
10. What are the manifestations of the temporal axis in narrative?
11. What is the connection between narrative and personal identity? What is the meaning of “narrative identity”, and to what extent can this concept be defended? What happens to narrative and to identity when some of their constitutive elements are ruptured (as in trauma)?
12. Can narratives be constructed *ex-nihilo*, or are they always (necessarily) based on pre-existing patterns or schemata (genres; “along psychoanalytic lines”, etc.)?
13. Is it possible to narrate without words? What are the differences between oral and written narratives, and what happens to “voice” when an oral story gets written down?
14. Does a narrative approach invite/necessitate a narrative form of writing? Conversely, is there a contradiction between a narrative approach and non-narrative writing? What (if anything) does one gain from the so-called “performative” aspect of narrative approaches?

Asking questions without answering them is not a common procedure in the humanities, but it does, I think, mirror the diversity and openness that characterize the state of the art concerning concepts and uses of “narrative” across media and disciplines, hence an apt inconclusive conclusion for this essay.

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