

## 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.

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*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?*

Narratology started as a consolidation of fields and approaches. From the Russian formalism of Shklovsky, Propp, and Jakobson, to the French structuralism of Greimas, Todorov, and Genette, to the wider contributions by Käte Hamburger, Meir Sternberg, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Gerald Prince, and David Herman, narratology seems in large part to have been an attempt to develop a discourse that would allow literary critics to refer concretely to narrative phenomena and ground their analytic method in a general scientific context. In this sense, narratology owes much to phenomenology and continental philosophy, which aimed to develop a method of inquiry wherein the humanities and the natural sciences can contribute to human knowledge on comparable terms. The most important aspect to pursue within the context of narratology, in my opinion, is its connection to methods developed within narrative theory, within the humanities in general, and within the larger context of scientific investigation. John Pier's current research on complexity is one such example and, I believe, shows the power of being able to consolidate insights gleaned outside of narrative theory while maintaining a rigorous understanding of the narratological tradition.

*2. In your opinion, in what ways can narratology be said to diversify?*

Narratology is always diversifying and consolidating at the same time. Its strength is its potential to consolidate diverse realms of science within an inquiry into narrative form, while founding a method to explore non-narrative topics and themes. Narrative is only one of many ways of organizing sense phenomena, formulating 'raw' experience in terms of the telling of events within a sequential order. When we examine how a

narrative is constructed – deconstructing not in order to annihilate its function but in order to understand how it holds together – we essentially study how it arranges the phenomenal elements of which it is made up. This gives us access to its non-narrative components. That is, applied to other scientific fields, narratology provides a discourse for the way that narrative is used to conceptualize and organize non-narrative phenomena.

The blind application of the narratological method, like the blind application of any method, is liable to cause confusion vis-à-vis the significance of narrative comprehension – our ability to understand certain phenomena through narrativization. If we lose sight of the narrative dynamic, its oscillating fusion of *sjuzhet* and *fabula*, we simultaneously misunderstand the fragile relationship between the stories we tell ourselves and the things we try to *know* by telling ourselves stories. Thus narratology as a discipline must be understood on its own terms, as a consolidating discourse and method for analyzing literary works of art, before it can be extended to other fields of inquiry, each of which presents a different kind of *knowing*.

*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?*

When developing an application of narratological discourse it is important to keep in mind that narratology's strength is to take from other disciplines and combine them into an analytic method. Concepts that come too readily from theoretical cannibalization within the discipline itself pose a threat to its vitality. One such example is so-called 'unnatural narratology'. Whereas the notion of 'natural' narratology truly widened the field by considering the narrative structure of oral traditions, the turn to 'unnatural' narratology, essentially nothing more than a return to literary analysis, presented itself as a discourse for «anti-mimetic» texts that go against the «parameters of traditional realism». This formulation elides the simple fact that all fictional narratives challenge mimetic understandings and that there exists no single mimetic standard. The very notion of 'unnaturalness' does injustice to literature since deviation from a norm is at the very heart of the literary arts and is what makes stories tellable. Narratology can continue to diversify as long as it stays clear of concepts that get bogged down in a desire to separate from other strands of research.

*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?*

Again, narratology is the study of narrative structure where narrative is one form of organizing experience – the processing of cognized sense phenomena. Insofar as narrative can help us understand other forms of organizing experience that are not strictly narrative, narratology can provide a method of analysis in other fields of inquiry. Einsteinian physics helped us understand what Virginia Woolf exemplified in her fiction and what Bakhtin theorized in terms of the chronotope: that time and space are inseparable. Narratology came and said that one of the ways that humans communicate existence in spacetime is in terms of narrative. It did so by analyzing works of art, which

themselves are intentional replications of ‘natural’ forms of organizing and communicating experience – to ourselves no less than to others.

This folding upon itself is intrinsic to the notion of narratology and can only serve to make us more familiar with the mystery of creative knowledge. Narratology is not a solution to narrative phenomena, and neither is it a method for defusing the narrative function, rather it is a system of coming to know narrative's creative potential. Narratology helps identify the elements of a work of art, recognize the way they are organized, and ultimately reconstruct the traces of actuated aesthetic intention that put it there – the ‘artistic gestures’ that constituted the artwork. Our retracing of these artistic gestures helps us conjure up the significance folded (intended) into them – reformulating narrative phenomena into literary works of art that tell us something about the world. When narratology is applied to other fields of inquiry, it cannot be as more than a tool that allows us access to this specific kind of cognitive engine.

*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?*

Without presuming to speak for others, I can offer my own approach as an example. In my research, I have attempted to pull from phenomenology, narratology, and reader-response theory in order to describe the dynamic of literary fiction as it plays out in the world – the way that literature provides a platform for indirect communication which opens for its readers spectra of significance. This model presumes aesthetic intention, which refers not to the significance of the work, but to its circumstance as an aesthetic ‘object’ created by one human for another human to appreciate. The text that appears in the world is the trace of the constituting consciousness which allows a second consciousness to reconstitute the aesthetic object – the narrative. Thus this model takes into account generative, textual, and receptive potentialities of a narrative literary work.

Using this model I have further focused on the preservation of inconsistencies within the coherent context of a literary work – a consideration of singular narrative instances that put into question the system that holds the structure together. My claim is that this kind of structure activates readers' critical abilities vis-à-vis the work's thematic content. The aim of such a conceptual framework is to highlight the tension between sometimes-irreconcilable normative horizons, especially moral, historical, and emotional forces. The aim of this approach is to describe in critical terms the various thematic and affective dynamics at work within a given literary work of art, allowing the reader conscious access to those aspects that lead them to develop their own normative sensibilities.

*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?*

Narratology, especially as consolidated by Genette, is the metaphorical materialization of an art form that has no tangible medium, through concepts that give its constitutive parts the impression of sense phenomena within a realm of virtual action. Order, duration, and frequency are notions connected with spacetime and so suggest a field on which narrative phenomena ‘appear’. Ideas like *focalization*, *infracture*, *mood*, and *voice* seek

to situate or qualify the ‘appearance’ of narrative phenomena within this field. As long as we remember that narratology is a method for discussing something that is in fact ephemeral, ‘concretized’ only by the attention of an active consciousness, we have a chance of harnessing the power of this method for helping us better know the mysteries we encounter in the world. As soon as we begin to look to narratology for answers we are lost. The most it can do – and, indeed, what it has done so well until now – is to give us a fantastically clear and nearly palpable way of describing and discussing something that is not there.