

## The Antinomies of Narratology and the Difficulty of Any Theoretical Consolidation

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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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### Keywords

Narratology, unnatural narrative, Boris Tomashevsky

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One of the achievements of Unnatural Narratology has been to document the crippling limitations of most narratological approaches' claims to universality. In doing so, it has exposed a deep rift in the nature of narrative itself. It has become apparent that there are three fundamentally different kinds of narrative: nonfiction, mimetic fiction (which essentially tries to imitate nonfiction), and unnatural (antimimetic) fiction, which violates mimetic practices and goals. The difficulty is to frame a theory that can encompass both a kind of representation and a travesty of that practice. One needs a very supple, dialectical approach to attempt such a feat. For the past seventy-five years, virtually every narratology has neglected, ignored, or dismissed unnatural narratives, and attempted to construct a universal, consolidated narratology that only nearly exclusively embraces nonfictional narratives and mimetic fiction. Now, such omissions are increasingly being identified as debilitating limitations of any theory or corpus, and a more inclusive and comprehensive approach is demanded. A mimetic theory cannot in principle do justice to antimimetic practices; it can only tell half the story. Narratology needs to embrace both.

This kind of dialectical narratology can be achieved – in fact, it has already been done early in the twentieth century in the work of the Russian Formalists. In 1925 Boris Tomashevsky wrote:

Two literary styles may be distinguished in terms of the perceptibility of [literary] devices. The first, characteristic of writers of the nineteenth century, is distinguished by an attempt to conceal the device; all of its motivation systems are designed to make the literary devices seem imperceptible, to make them seem as natural as possible – that is to develop the literary material so that its development is unperceived. But this is only one style, and not a general aesthetic rule. It is opposed to another style, an unrealistic style, which does not bother about concealing the devices and which frequently tries to make them obvious, as when a writer interrupts a speech he is reporting to say he did not hear how it ended, only to go on and report what he has no realistic way of knowing. (176)

We are finally embracing again the insights offered by Tomashevsky and other Russian formalists. The consequences of this move is the establishment of a dual poetics, one devoted to nonfictional and mimetic practices, the other to impossible and antimimetic practices. The two are of course related, but not in any simple way. In particular, we cannot think of the unnatural as merely some extension of the mimetic model, since it is instead a transformation and negation of that model. In practice, that means for the discussion of narrative we need traditional ideas of *fabula* and *sjuzet* for nonfictional and mimetic narratives, and we also need new terms and categories such as *multiple*, *infinite*, and *contradictory fabulas*, what I have termed «denarration», and *variable sjuzets*. I hope and expect that there is no turning back from this dual-perspective model.

The primary benefits of such an approach are two: at the level of theory, the benefit is a genuinely comprehensive narratology, rather than a merely partial one. At the level of analysis, it invites scholars to look for and deal with the unnatural in otherwise largely mimetic texts, and to view and analyze others, like *Don Quixote* or *Tom Jones*, as important examples of a mimetic poetics *and* at the same time an antimimetic poetics.

## Bibliography

- Tomashevsky, Boris. "Story, Plot, and Motivation." *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*. Ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus: Ohio State UP. 2002. 164–178. Print.