

The Evolution Of Narratology

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Abstract

The following material is the typescript version of a discussion on The 3rd ENN Conference in Paris, held by two of its participants. The discussion was carried in the format of a Skype session on September 21, 2013. It was initiated and structured by Ludmila Tataru within the framework of the state assignment of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science.

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L.T. – Looking back to the conference in Paris, I would characterize it as a tremendously important event for narratologists worldwide, giving them a unique chance to reflect on the current trends in narrative theory. The first thing to be noted is that the conference was really well-organized, considering both the vast scope of the problem area – “Emergent Vectors of Narratology” – and the impressive number of the presenters. But don't you think the numerous sections and panels the conference was split up into was also a kind of, say, a discomfort, demanding a serious effort also on the part of the participants to be as strictly organized, to make a choice, which of the equally appealing sections to rush to depriving themselves of the chance to enjoy the others? What's your general impression on the conference, also in terms of its organization? Maybe it could have been planned for a longer period, say 4 days instead of 2?

J.A.G.L. – A threshold has been crossed, perhaps, and the ENN, although still technically a network and not an association, is beginning to work in a format more similar to that of the big international associations, say the MLA or ESSE, thankfully at a smaller scale this time round, keep your fingers crossed. These conferences are more like a cluster of intersecting conferences, with each individual tracing a unique path through them. It's a more natural choice given the number of participants, and there is still a measure of unity thanks to the plenary lectures, which I think should be preserved, with no simultaneity there. Perhaps 2 ½ or 3 days will be necessary next time, but rather than a choice I dare say there will be even more papers presented. I tend to see these issues almost in terms of fluid dynamics and physical pressure. If it remains a (barely) manageable event, so much the better. Otherwise, natural selection (or is it intelligent design) will make room for more local or more specific events in the academic ecosystem. Literary narratologies, say, as against more multidisciplinary events.

L.T. – You are absolutely right, the ENN conference was actually much more than a conference, it was a masterfully designed cluster of mini-conferences, and its design

gave an accurate picture of the basic tendencies the current postclassical narratology is living through worldwide – one consisting in its continuous consolidation, that is, a transition from a universal meta-discipline into ‘a discipline’ in the full sense of the term, the other being the ways the new postclassical narratologies might take to further diversify. In the Preamble to the Conference Program one of the possible directions to forecast the future of narratology ran as follows: «Does diversification imply more double-entry narratologies, or does it, perhaps simultaneously, involve a look at the various scientific cultures underlying research programs in narrative theory, past and present, but also non-Western?» (*Emerging Vectors* 8-9). Which of the two possibilities do you think would dominate, or will they continue to complement each other?

J.A.G.L. – I dare say they will, although every researcher and thus every panel or sub-conference will place more emphasis on one or the other. Getting more global and more diversified is a sign of health, but we should always keep in mind the structural origins of the discipline; if we move too far away from that core we may be moving into another discipline altogether, with only a passing narratological interest. Narrative, taken at various degrees of specificity, is to remain of course as the core object of study, however interdisciplinary narratology might be. Various media and genres are indispensable for a contemporary research – and although literary narratives in a wide sense (including myth, history, drama and then film, etc.) provided the initial core of concern for narratology, we may expect this balance to shift somewhat as literature and the Gutenberg era are gradually displaced from center stage by the impact of information and communication technologies. Various cybernarratologies will become more prominent than they are. And interdisciplinary narrative studies, of nonnarrative phenomena exhibiting nonetheless a measure of narrativity – e.g. narrative economics, medicine, social sciences – will keep on proliferating, which is a good thing. There is much scope for cross-fertilization, as we academics tend to cling to our area of specialization. Such self-imposed restrictions have both positive and negative effects, of course they make us specialists in the first place, but they also tend to curtail inventiveness, curiosity about other disciplines, and theoretical adventurousness. I dare say that most of the people attending the ENN conference would identify ‘classical’ structuralist narratology as providing a focus for the discipline which is both conceptual and historical, having to do with their own development as theorists as well. But being aware of the pervasiveness of narrative cognition and communicative strategies developing in other disciplines, both in the social sciences and the harder sciences, we may expect to interact as narratologists with people who do not come from Barthes and Genette but rather from the storytelling craze (sorry, paradigm) in business studies, or from narrative medicine and psychotherapy, and do not think of structuralist semiotics as being at the core of the discipline in any way. Do you experience yourself the work of these critics, as well as Bakhtin, Lotman, or the Russian formalists, not to mention Aristotle, as providing a kind of core for the discipline in an age of overinformation?

L.T. – Well, I certainly do, and I suspect that, as a scholar, to be more exact, a Russian scholar, I am not the only one who still feels rather like a victim who has survived the explosion the ‘original narratology’ has undergone within the past twenty years. I absolutely share today's broad agreement that narratives are cognitive structures equipping us with basic tools needed to adapt to the environment, to understand our place in it. It is this vision of narrative as a sense-making instrument that is of key interest not only to literary studies but also to psychology, linguistics, cultural studies,

sociolinguistics, media studies, sociology, history, philosophy, education, religious studies, etc. On the other hand, the universal character of narrative and its influence on a diversity of disciplines lead to a diversity of interpretations and heterogeneous, often metaphoric definitions. In other words, incorporating narrative into the unlimited context of up-to-date research areas might hinder a vision of its essential features, of seeing it as a clearly outlined object. Cognitive narratology is more a 'fuzzy set' of heuristic schemes than a systematic framework for inquiry (I am using a 'free quotation' from a David Herman's article on cognitive narratology), and looking back at the core discipline, at the frameworks of narrative research on which the work of classical narratologists was built is essential to overcome that giddiness, that 'feeling at a loss' when it comes to looking for a method of investigation. It is obvious that 'cognitology' has provided new knowledge, new concepts, tools and methods that were unavailable to story analysts such as Barthes, Genette and Todorov during the heyday of the structuralist revolution and it would be a limitation to ignore them while engaging into a narrative analysis today, be it a Dickensian novel, a new documentary or a soap opera.

I agree with you that interdisciplinary narratology is a fantastic opportunity for the scholars to enjoy the fruits of 'cross-fertilization' and the ENN conference was an immensely valuable demonstration of how that process is developing. Of those presentations I have heard I would single out three that are relevant to the issue of 'cross-fertilization': 1) John Pier's account of complexity underlying some deep structures common to narratives, living organisms and processes of natural existence like thermodynamic equilibrium/disequilibrium etc.; 2) your lecture on historicity and narrative mapping and 3) a presentation done by Ralf Schneider from Bielefeld University who considered the expediency of further diversification of cognitive narratology into a «neuro-Narratology» which might explore the question to what extent neuro-biological models of studying human brain and nervous system might shed light on the questions challenging narratologists today. Well, while the first two presentations were strongly advocating further consolidations of narratology and natural sciences, the third one gave evidence to serious problems narratologists will face while appropriating the findings of other disciplines. It's clear by now that narratologists will need to interweave insights from a range of fields, including psychology, neurobiology, media studies, linguistics, philosophy, AI and also natural sciences. Well, the perspective is exciting but ... a bit scary. Do you think all scholars of narrative will be really required to study all manifestations of narrative, across all possible communicative situations and storytelling media with an extra necessity to plunge into studies of neurobiology or thermodynamics?

J.A.G.L. – I think we will specialize and concentrate our attention on those developments we find most relevant to the work at hand, our specific area of interest or object of study. But literary scholars, and scholars in the humanities in general, have become more familiar with advances in cognitive science or neurology, in evolutionary anthropology, and also in physics, at an elementary level at least. Retaking C. P. Snow's critique of the division between the «two cultures» of humanities and the sciences, the last two decades have witnessed the prominence and dynamism of the 'Third Culture' – approaches to the humanities which try to build bridges with the sciences, stressing the central relevance of contemporary scientific discoveries as we rethink human cognition, behaviour, and identity. And there is as well an increasing awareness of the ecological limitations of human cultures (including in their turn the more limited epiphenomena of 'high culture' productions). In an age of proliferating information, globalization and

ecological crisis we cannot ignore these developments, they are an atmosphere we breathe in, and the very phenomena they focus on are becoming more and more pressing issues, circumscribing our activity in ever-increasing ways. Even theorists concentrating on a specific and deliberately 'old-fashioned' subject will see it transformed under their very eyes by the pressure of information technologies and global economy.

L.T. – Absolutely, culture rules. A possible way out of the currently hallucinating globalism is that scholars working with particular kinds of stories get involved in joint projects with theorists from other fields, bringing different perspectives to bear on one and the same narrative question. Literary narratologists studying printed fictional texts, for instance, can help illuminating how the structures and functions of mental processes involved in this sphere of communication can shed light on the relevant structures and functions of the brain or on laws of physics.

J.A.G.L. – And vice-versa, too, the literary scholars are discovering new concerns and new theoretical dimensions in the cognitive makeup of the age-old literary canon, and new insights on the significance of structures, signs, units and their parallelisms or contrasts, embeddings, images... These are not phenomena which are defined once and for all, their cognitive makeup keeps changing as new disciplines are brought to bear on them. Take, for instance, the concept of the gaze in focalization or film studies; I dare say it will be radically transformed by current work being done in the area of mirror neurons.

L.T. – Mirror neurons and focalization – sounds thrilling, I'd like to have another chat about that. Now I'd rather ask you a personal question, José Ángel – how would you define your 'qualification', as a scholar? Is your interest in the evolutionary theory a consequence of your literary studies and your involvement into the study of narrative, or vice versa?

J.A.G.L. – In a way, I guess I just move along with the crowd, as I sense there is a significant displacement of paradigms, some people would say a scientific revolution, brought about by the combined pressures of the Internet and the global crisis (which are two sides of the same coin of course). We are becoming increasingly aware of the way information technology, global economy and biotechnology circumscribe our activities. In a way, we are becoming more conscious of the historicity, the economic rootedness, and the narrative dimensions too, of our pretensions to knowledge. But, to focus more specifically on my personal interest in evolution, it began already when I was a small child – in the 'age of dinosaurs' so to speak. Seeing human history as only a chapter of the history of the life on Earth is an exercise in defamiliarization – and an insight into the deeper implications of evolution has been intellectually unsettling for me as for many other people. As to the contact with narrative theory, I suppose I must have been influenced by scholars like Gillian Beer before more recent thinkers such as Joseph Carroll or Brian Boyd. Science fiction has also been a long-lasting intellectual fascination. And, from the field of science, I must mention among first-hand sources the immensely entertaining and wide-ranging work of Stephen Jay Gould, an evolutionary theorist highly aware of the cultural context of science and of the narrative dimension in evolutionary theory. I cannot begin to praise his immense *Structure of Evolutionary Theory*.

L.T. – What are some of the theoretical works on evolution you would single out as particularly influential for your conception of «Big history», and for narrative theory in general?

J.A.G.L. – Well, Big history is now fast becoming a growing academic sub-speciality or meeting ground, with Bill Gates's sponsorship for a world-wide educational programme. The major works I would single out are David Christian's *Maps of Time* and Fred Spier's *Big History and the Future of Humanity*. These writers have done an excellent work of synthesis and coordination of the various disciplines required to deal with the diverse phases of big history, at a cosmological level first, then dealing with physics, astronomy and Earth sciences, geography, biology, evolutionary theory, anthropology, history and economics... No wonder many scholars feel that they might be biting more than they can chew. But the need for such discipline in our age of global pressures was so evident that in a sense these scholars have only been stating the obvious, or filling up a void whose shape was perfectly known in advance. Some physicists, astronomers and cosmologists, such as Stephen Hawking, Lawrence Krauss and Brian Greene have dealt with similar issues from their more specialized viewpoints, and so have some high-profile advocates of the Third Culture like Daniel Dennett, Steven Pinker and Richard Dawkins. The intellectual programme put forward by E. O. Wilson in his book and concept of *Consilience* is an authoritative, paradigm-inspiring intervention from the standpoint of evolutionary sociobiology. And more recently I have to mention Lee Smolin's *Time Reborn*, published this year, which puts forward and extension of evolutionary theory to basic physics and the laws of nature – and cannot but increase the importance and future implications of all the disciplines dealing with the representation of time, among them narratology. And, to jump backwards, as I pointed out in my lecture, nineteenth-century theories of cosmic evolution in Herbert Spencer and other maligned old-fashioned evolutionists are still waiting to be reevaluated as ground-breaking conceptual mappings of our big history. I strive to see the common ground, as well as the differences, between these approaches and other influential ‘mappers’ of human development such as Hegel, Marx, and Darwin.

L.T. – José Ángel, now that I am listening to you my vague image of a universal narratologist is gaining shape – you are just an embodiment of it! In your lecture at the 2013 ENN conference you highlighted the necessity to view every particular story told within human communicative practice as part of the global history, as an event of the natural story of the Universe. And now I am convinced narratologists, in their majority, tend to undervalue the profound implications the theory of evolution has for narrative theory. Could you highlight these implications once again?

J.A.G.L. – I opened my lecture with a well-known phrase from Barthes: «The narratives of the world are numberless»; yet, all stories may be seen as chapters of a single story, the story of universal evolution as uncovered (or constructed) by contemporary science, with processes of human emergence and cultural development as a prominent backdrop to the understanding of any narrative process. Students in the humanities have always been conscious of the essential historicity of cultural phenomena, and that provides a foothold for future study, one, moreover, whose narratological implications must still be further analyzed. E.g., how is historicity shaped in its narrative dimensions? The work of Hayden White comes to mind of course. Evolutionary approaches to literary and cultural phenomena (as theorized by sociobiologists like E. O. Wilson and by evo-critics

like Joseph Carroll in the literary field) have led to a growing awareness that these literary and cultural phenomena are best accounted for within a consilient disciplinary framework. Historicity is thus seen from a new, enlarged perspective. From this consilient standpoint, human modes of communication must be contextualized as situated historical phenomena, and history as such is to be placed within the wider context of the evolution of human societies and of life generally (what is often called «big history», to use David Christian's term). Using the notions of *narrative mapping* and *narrative anchoring*, I try to draw from the aforementioned theoretical outlook a series of conclusions relevant to narratology, in particular to the narratological conceptualization of time and temporal schemata, and to the narrative understanding of evolutionary processes. The special importance of evolutionary and historicist conceptual frames regarding the production and analysis of narratives will be pointed out, and more specifically their significance for an adequate definition of narrative mapping and narrative anchoring. In a nutshell, narrative anchoring is understood here as the intertextual relationship situating a given evolutionary or historical process within the frame of larger evolutionary processes, for instance an individual story as being typical of a given historical process or situation, or as being framed by it; while narrative mapping is conceived as a wider cognitive process whereby a variety of narrative strategies, themselves historically situated, allow subjects to shape or interpret narratives and to anchor them historically or place them with respect to other narratives. A variety of culture-dependent conceptions of big history underpin the production, the reception and the critical analysis of any specific narrative, as well as any narrativizing strategy, in the sense that these conceptions provide both a general ideational background to the experiences depicted in the narratives, and a mental framework in which to situate (e.g. historicize) the narrative genres used in the depiction. Evolutionary theory is itself a major example of narrative mapping, and its emergent nature will provide a major focus for the paper. In this light, my lecture focused on Herbert Spencer's philosophical work as seen through the lens of its narratological significance, as a significant step in the narrativization of science, and in the development of a scientific narratology as well.

And, Ludmila, tit for tat, now I would like to ask you – how do you perceive your own career as a narratologist? Can you discern a trajectory, an evolution of some kind? (I can't keep evolution out of my mind you see). Do you look on your earlier approaches with the sense of increasing insight, or as a shift in interest and subject matter? Do you sense in your work any of the 'atmospheric' pressures I alluded to making you move in one sense or another? Are you becoming 'more of a narratologist' as you proceed with your work? Do you feel that other intellectual interests or cognitive curiosities might displace narratology in your attention, or would they inevitably combine with it and transform the way you deal with it? And, last but not least, can you discern or imagine the future? Regarding these issues, that is.

L.T. – I have certainly done my 'path' as a researcher. My educational background is basically linguistic and my *kandidatskaya dissertaziya* (the Russian analogue of Ph.D.) was supposed to be done in 'pure' text theory, with a bias to stylistics. However, the object I chose for a research, rather intuitively, was the rhythm of Joyce's *Dubliners*, so from the beginning I felt that urge to move beyond the language structure of a text. What I eventually did was a blending of text linguistics and theory of composition, but back then, in the early 1990s, I was not yet familiar with the term *narrative*, neither did I hear about the existence of a discipline called *narratology*! It was only in the early 2000s that I read the volume *Нарратология*, written by Wolf Schmid for the Russian readers, and I

made a discovery: that's what I was doing! Now that I look back at that period I see myself as a protagonist of a myth embarking on a dangerous adventure, leaving the safe ground of academically-based linguistics, still guided by the Soviet epistemology, to confront the unknown land where dwelt the 'monsters' of semiotics, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis. Having done a substantial reading on the studies of speech rhythm I realized that linguistic operative units of analysis – mostly prosodic in character – were too small, too fragmentary to be helpful to grasp the magic of Joyce's stories which rests on their compositional rhythm. The challenge was resolved when I came across works by Yuri Lotman, Yefim Etkind, Boris Uspensky, John Fowler, who adapted Uspensky's model of the point of view to the Western literary theory and a number of studies on Joyce. It was also a risky business to offer a thesis like mine, a borderline case of a thesis, to the judgment of the leading Russian scholars in Germanic lexicology, grammar and phonetics, who were members of the dissertation council at the Moscow Pedagogical University named after Lenin. But they were all people of immense erudition and reasonable liberalism and, to their honor and to my deep satisfaction, the discussion went on successfully.

My following doctoral thesis, also done formally within general linguistics, was already a result of a conscious study of narrative theory, Russian and Western, and of cognitive linguistics. Of special importance to me were the books by Monika Fludernik, Ann Banfield, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laura Ryan, David Herman, Mieke Bal and of two Russian scholars, Valeri Tyupa and Elena Paducheva. By that time what you call 'cybernarrativization' affected my theoretical way far more than I could have imagined. Apart from what might be called a virtual bibliographic research, invaluable for a provincial scholar like me (I live in a small city in Central Russia, 200 km away from Saratov, the nearest centre of academic life), I also profited from a dialogue, in the form of electronic correspondence, with David Herman. That was an incredible experience. Then, having discovered *The Centre for Digital Story Telling* at Berkeley I got a stimulus to initiate, together with a colleague from the South Carolina University, Leon Gipson – a computer engineer, distance learning educator and a poet – a students' forum, "Russia and USA: A Dialogue of Cultures". The project was a thrilling way to teach my students of English to communicate with American peers via an exchange of short life stories. That cultural, again intuitive, interest was soon enhanced by the first Summer School of ACS (the Association for Cultural Studies) I had a fortune to attend at Ghent, in 2011. There I got an idea of the difference between the Russian *kulturologia* and the Western *cultural studies*. While the Russian approach to culture is more of a high-brow sort, laying more emphasis on the objects of classical arts, Western scholars are more democratic, more close to the everyday practices of communication, including cyber-space formats like fandom, online games, various intercrossovers of storytelling and popular culture... By 2011 I had already published an article on celebrity narratives, so the ACS event was most stimulating for my further exploits in storytelling other than high literature.

Well, to sum it up, my answer to the first five of your questions is a firm «Yes»: I hope I am evolving, reacting to the pressures you have alluded to. As to the alternative you suggested, my 'cognitive curiosities' would certainly continue to combine with narratology. But to me a 'theoretical analepsis', a reconsideration of, say, the Russian roots of narrative theory is a precondition. The formalist concepts of *sujet/fabula*, *ostranenie* (depersonalisation or defamiliarization), the Bakhtinian *chronotope* and *dialogue*, his concept of *speech genre*, Boris Uspensky's structuralist poetics of composition and, certainly, Lotman's structural-semiotic model of a literary text make up the 'core inventory' of tools to guide my exploration of the cognitive approaches to narratives.

As to the prognosis you are expecting on my part, I am too humble a futurologist to think my answer might be of much interest. Yet, I tend to think that the future of narratology will reflect the path gone by the schools of Russian Formalism and structuralism. The formalist theoretical model, despite its liminality, or, rather, thanks to it, was effectively translated into a variety of scientific contexts that followed, and will continue to be translated in the new contexts of the mental-oriented universal narratology. Lotman's model of literary text, initially synchronic-structural, was effectively combined with his diachronic vision of history and a keen interest in exact sciences. His later theory of semiosphere is an analogue to the Big History you're advocating. Semiosphere is a cultural-semiotic model of global vision anchoring every single story to the broad context of natural and cultural evolution, which is governed by cyclic dynamics and explosions. And as I tend to look for rhythmic laws in anything, I am positive that future narratology or narratologies will continue its/their path(s) exploring new lands, but, however far away from their formalist-structural roots they might go, the hardships they will confront will make them 'come back home', every time having learnt a new lesson. I also think the globalism of contemporary narratology will soon be counterbalanced, or opposed, by ethnographic and more narrowly focused disciplinary turns. There were cultural and historical precedents to it: e.g., the cosmopolitan modernism in Britain was opposed by a revival of interest among the writers and the people to the national folklore, the global power of the British Empire was constantly confronted by the colonial wars and you know how that story ended. The Soviet world power went through a similar process. That alternation of periodic back-and-forth movements is nothing but rhythm, a universal form of life and, consequently, of evolution.

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