

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.

Keywords

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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?*

The study of narrative has always been diverse. It just hasn't always been called *narratology*. Isn't Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* a kind of diachronic narrative study, as H. Porter Abbott has suggested? Isn't much of Hélène Cixous's work a study of narrative poetics? Doesn't any poetical – or even hermeneutical – reading of any narrative perform a kind of narratological work? There are certainly hints of consolidation or diversification in the narratological community, as one reads them. The *Society for the Study of Narrative Literature*, now the *International Society for the Study of Narrative*, alternates conferences between the USA and the UK. The *European Narratology Network's* 2013 conference in Paris something like tripled the ENN's regular attendance. Is this a sign of consolidation, or of diversification? I don't know, but I'm very happy to see so many people, from many different backgrounds and places, coming together to talk, for the most part, about narrative, in the singular, and to exchange ideas.

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

Narrative Studies (perhaps a more palatable name, as well as a broader notion), as an umbrella term for the study of a range of contemporary oral, written and digital narratives, might be seen not as a 'diversification' of narratology, but its hands-on laboratory.

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?

It's not that I think there can't be a grand over-arching theory of narrative – there can. Indeed, I believe there is. I say we go back (as my conference paper suggested) and fill in certain gaps left by classical theory. The gaps are there, and if we're not willing to do this work, we shouldn't be surprised to see narratology continue to diversify as other fields attack problems we have neglected. For me, early narratology's uneven attention to analysis of causality, temporality and spatiality seems a good place to start. Meanwhile, a longstanding disjoint between narrative theory and psychoanalytical theory has been somewhat compensated by narratology's outreach to cognitive theory, but the roots of both still need watering and continued appraisal. Another of the gaps in classical and postclassical narratology is the study of oral and electronic narratives. I write «is» in the previous sentence because I think both classical and postclassical narratology have room for development. Neither is a closed chapter.

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?

What one might suggest is something like an Anthropological Narratology, which would study narratives, but also how people, including researchers, use them in daily life, how they observe them, define them, trace their tracks, for whatever purpose.

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?

I find it unfortunate that basic, classical and rhetorical observations on narrative are not taught in some form at the secondary school level, along with subjects like grammar, geometry or chemistry. They're tools for a better understanding of the world, in almost any field. I think broad concepts of narrative theory are most likely to be shared by other disciplines when they are taught, foremost, as basic concepts.

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?

Yes, to an extent, narratology should be concerned with issues of incommensurability. Particularly when it comes to basic definitions of narrative itself. As a method, narratology is set up to study the genre of narrative. But should all its concepts be cleanly trans-medial? Perhaps medium-specificity, cultural specificity and use-specificity exist. If so, narratology might be both more modest in its approaches and more inquisitive to those of others.

Bibliography

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. Print.