

Emerging Vectors of Narratology: Toward Consolidation or Diversification?

Franco Passalacqua¹ and Federico Pianzola²

¹Università di Milano Bicocca

²Università degli Studi di Firenze

Abstract

This is an introduction to the interviews redacted 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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Contacts

fr.passa@gmail.com

f.pianzola@gmail.com

The call for papers for the 3rd ENN conference addressed its academic audience with an interesting remark about the state of the art of narratology: «It can be observed that postclassical narratology, in its initial phase, expanded the scope of inquiry of its predecessor to become multiple, interdisciplinary, transgeneric, transmedial. More recently, it appears that narratology has entered a phase of consolidation, but with a continued trend toward diversification» (Pier and Roussin 8). Such were the premises to the conference and the discussions that followed were rich and stimulating. We agree with these observations and we think that this is a time of increasing maturity and self-awareness for narratology, therefore we decided to follow up the conference and asked some scholars to reflect on the questions that started the dialogue, also addressing issues that arose during the confrontation. These were our questions:

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?
2. In your opinion, in what ways can narratology be said to diversify? 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? 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?
- 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? 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?¹

We think that narrative is the object of study of a research field that increasingly demands for confrontation between scholars and we are everyday more pleased to see that narratologists are willing to engage in debates about their research, asking questions, objecting to the work of others, and generating spin-offs nurtured by the vitality of this scientific community. This is the attitude that we had toward the work done by John Pier and Philippe Roussin: we took the remarks and questions they put forth as an introduction to the conference and ‘re-tweeted’ them. The huge and excellent participation to the conference was already a success, then why not give the opportunity to further reflect about such important and widely concerning issues?

During the conference several challenging topics of discussion were proposed and a vast array of different perspectives emerged. With this follow-up our aim is to collect some of those voices in order to present a sketch of the centripetal and centrifugal forces that range over narratology, both with respect to its role in the broader field of narrative studies and to the internal dynamics that inform narratology as a discipline. We asked these specific questions focusing on three aspects that hopefully could help in making narratological research a more sound and fruitful enterprise. Our first question wanted to prompt a reflection upon narratology as a discipline, concerning its present ‘identity’ but also looking toward the future. The second question is orientated to the acknowledgement of the actual pluralism within narratology, dealing with the harsh issue of confronting the purposes and scope of each subfield, and also taking into account the role of disciplines that studied narrative before the birth of narratology. Finally, the interaction of different branches of narratology brings up epistemological issues, like the incommensurability between alternative narratological ontologies and questions about theoretical and methodological bridges between different research perspectives.

The responses we received are thought-provoking and many contributors have even put forward other questions, a sign of a will to reflect about the wellbeing of theory and criticism in narrative studies. With the hope to further promote the debate, we would like now to make a few comments upon the answers, offering a brief overview of the highlights, shortcomings and points of divergence that emerge. Beside the opinions about narratology as either diversifying or consolidating, interesting interpretive positions are presented for an evaluation of the current narratological landscape. Although the answers are sometimes radically different from each other, three key aspects can be identified for each question that we asked: (1) *consolidation* is a notion that needs to be clarified in order to propose guidelines for the development of narratology; (2) there are various criteria of diversification within narratology and among narrative studies in general, and the possibility of dialogue between different positions is at stake; (3) Western narratology shows its limits vis-à-vis ‘non-conventional’ narratives, either because ‘unnatural’ or from traditions with a radically different *Weltanschauung*, like the Chinese one.

1. Consolidation

Regarding the notion of *consolidation*, Iversen and Nielsen, and Dawson, acknowledge that, despite their partiality, cognitive approaches have helped the process of expansion

¹ We prepared the interview in five languages and we are grateful to the colleagues that helped us with the translations: Sebastian Armbrust, Violeta Avetisian, Manja Kürschner, Gabriel Sevilla Llisterra.

and consolidation of the narrative paradigm in many disciplines. However, this process called attention to the issue of what is the role of narratology in the broader field of narrative studies. In this respect, according to Rossholm it is the shift of our theoretical activity toward a definition of the condition of possibility of narrative that can grant narratology its specificity. Narratology can consolidate its disciplinary identity focusing on foundational issues, namely on «what and how narrative features have contributed to the cultural success of the narrative irrespectively of the particular purpose of any narrative» (135). That is, Rossholm finds in a pragmatic criterion the chance of dialogue between different theories.

Another scholar who claims that narratology has a very specific object of study is Stromberg but, unlike Rossholm, he links it to the origin of the discipline: «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 *knowings*» (116). According to his perspective, the scientific program of narratology is to understand the temporal dynamic that informs the aesthetic configuration of a ‘raw’ experience. Other disciplines are interested in that «specific kind of cognitive engine» (117) called *narrative*, but narratology can preserve its identity focusing upon artistic narrative. Stromberg’s position is far from considering the model of ‘natural’ narrative as prototypical and presents similarities with what is expressed by Dawson and Skalin about the role of narratology among narrative studies. The former – perceiving an incommensurability between humanities and social sciences due to the incompatibility of methods (textual analysis vs. empirical inquiry) – claims that the specific object of narratological research is to be found «in narrative fiction, not in fiction as an example of narrative» (113). The latter denies the possibility of contamination between a narratology informed by poetics and other frameworks of narrative research, since there are ontological and epistemological incompatibilities between them. According to these scholars, there is a problematic threshold separating narratological researches about fiction and inquiries that consider narrative as a phenomenon with ‘universal’ distinctive features that can be studied by different perspectives.

An alternative gaze is offered by Shen, who sees a process of consolidation in the complementarity between different theories and approaches. Contextualized postclassical narratologies are consolidating the work of classical studies upon narrative using decontextualized concepts and tools developed by earlier theories, an operation which is unavoidable given that theorization and classification are necessarily abstract operations – but we dare say that whether this is favourable or not is a matter open to discussion. Furthermore, concurrent theories can consolidate each other, like, for instance, in the case of cognitive and rhetorical stands about the issue of ‘narrative unreliability’, and in the case of Chinese narratology consolidating Western modes of discourse presentation.

2. Diversification

Regarding diversification, two topics discussed by the contributors are the role of narratologies that question the prototypical model of ‘natural’ narrative, and the epistemological commensurability between various research frameworks. For instance, on one hand Dawson thinks that diversification is crucial in order to «avoid homogenizing consensus» and «institutional entrenchment» (110) in the process of consolidation. On the other hand, Iversen and Nielsen claim that diversification is

necessary in order to resist the strong influence of cognitivist narratologies, which are questionable because they rely on problematic assumptions drawn from cognitive sciences, and because the conversational/natural model is not the basis of all narratives – as shown by many fictional narratives. Therefore, allowing diversification means acknowledging the theoretical and hermeneutic value of narratological paradigms alternative to the ‘natural’ one.

Similarly, but for some aspects in a completely different fashion, Skalin claims that cognitive narratology is at odds with narrative poetics. Defining narrative in terms of mental and neuronal processes, cognitive narratology is interested in the conditions of possibility of narrative and for that reason it can hardly dialogue with a narratology that defines its object of study in terms of meaning and intentions informing narrative practice. Skalin argues for a radical ontological pluralism within narrative studies: narrative theories are incommensurable because «their concepts and methods are strictly context-dependent» (131), that is, the context in which we use a narrative is fundamental to understand the narrative properties of an object/activity.

3. Prototypicality and unconventionality

Complementarity, integrability, incompatibility, incommensurability are all concepts relevant to many aspects of the reflection about the dynamics of diversification and consolidation of narratology, and the contributions offered in this section point out an issue that is problematic for the future of a consolidated narratology: is it possible and auspicious to have a theory of narrative that can account for all kinds of narrative, even those ‘unnatural’ and non-Western?

In the last years, the discussion about ‘unnatural’ narrative and the development of an ‘unnatural’ narratology have raised many doubts about a supposed basic conformity of all narratives to a prototypical ‘natural’ narrative. But doubts about the specificity of this research arise as well: should it be interpreted as a study of ‘unnatural’ motifs and techniques of narrative or does it assume that a different logic underlies ‘unnatural’ narratives (Skalin 131)? The same question should concern many double-entry narratologies: do we have narratives that are ontologically different or do we have different methods and lenses that we use in various research contexts to look at the same kind of phenomena?

The question is not otiose at all as it is showed by Shen’s and Wang’s remarks about Chinese narrative. The otherness of Chinese culture and language – absence of tense markers and of «perceivable linguistic difference between (free) direct discourse and (free) indirect discourse or even narratorial statement» (Shen 143); «co-existence and interplay of two modes: the narrative and the poetic» (Wang 138) – compared to Western traditions poses some problems that can seriously compromise the ‘universality’ and soundness of established narrative theories. In fact, sometimes it might be better to consider «Chinese structures more in their own right (Yang), since such structures may be deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy, Chinese culture and the Chinese narrative tradition and may be fundamentally different from their Western counterparts» (Shen 143). To various extents the same thing might hold true for other narratives as well, that is, if we want to find narrative universal perhaps we should not be looking for ‘structures’ and immanent properties. In this respect, our proposal for the promotion of the dialogue between different narratological research projects is to adopt a

constructivist epistemology as the common basis of different narratological subfields (Passalacqua and Pianzola).

To sum up, we observed that the dynamics of diversification and consolidation happen along both the temporal and spatial axis: diachronically through the increasing awareness of the historicity of narrative theories;² synchronically as a topology of researches informed by thematic, cultural and ontological particularities. What emerges from this small-scale survey is that: (1) the role of narratology in the wide field of narrative studies can be conceived in different ways, mainly circumscribing its object of study or consolidating its epistemology and concepts; (2) the diversification of narratology has strong consequences on the commensurability and integrability of different theories; (3) the spread of double-entry narratologies calls attention to the limits of concepts, theories and hermeneutic tools, and to the need for a reflection upon ontological commitments in narratology.

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² See Ballerio, just to mention a recent work that undertakes what some of the contributors pointed out to be a necessary enterprise for narratology, i.e. the study of the historical development of narrative forms and concepts.