

Narrative forms of action and the dangers of 'derivations' in narratology

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Abstract

This article attempts to define the form that action takes when it is the focus of narrative plot, in a manner that avoids certain detours in the interpretation of narrative phenomenon and its anthropological function. Two such detours are evoked at the outset. First, structuralist narratology has had a tendency to analyze the “actional” structures of the narrative *fabula* autonomously. This has led narratologists to lose sight of the function that actions have in conversational, or oral narrative, and to generalize a theory of action from this partial view. Second, cognitive theorists, despite having decompartmentalized narrative structures, have generally based their work on a schematic model of intentional action that is too general and too simplistic to properly determine the function that narrated actions fulfill. The author highlights the ways that certain forms of narrated action produce suspense or curiosity when used in conversational narrative. Drawing attention to the fundamental role of polemical actions in the dynamics of narration allows oppose two complementary conceptions of action: whereas “narrative” approaches highlight the uniqueness, the under-determinedness, or the surprising character of the narrated event, other forms of analysis seek to draw attention to the rules behind the apparent novelty of the event.

Keywords

Narratology, action theory, cognitive schema, Interdisciplinarity

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1. The interdisciplinarity of narratology: between action theory and narrative semiotics

This article's principal goal is to expose the dangers that result from a reductive interpretation of narrativity – dangers that more or less follow from what we might call (inter)disciplinary drift. This article aims to provide a basic definition of narrativity that would allow us to circumscribe this drift. Nevertheless, I would like to immediately add that my critique does not aim to reject the principle of interdisciplinarity, but on the contrary, to determine the conditions under which an interdisciplinary approach could enhance our understanding of stories. It is evident that narrativity, by its very nature, demands a grasp of traditionally distinct domains of knowledge. Effectively since Aristotle's *Poetics*, narrative has been defined as “mimesis,” which is to say, an “imitation of actions.” From the start, then, narrative is the object of a double vision: we must understand what constitutes an action and, at the same time, what is the function of the “arts of imitation.” These days the study

of “imitation” is taken up by semiotics, specifically, by theories aimed at uncovering the functions of language and discourse. If in this short essay (with my reliance on words like “text” or “discourse”) I appear to focus primarily on verbal narrative arts, I would like to assure the reader that I am using the notion of ‘story’ in a broader sense. My comments are thus applicable to any semiotic system capable of recounting a story, which is to say, any semiotic system capable of representing temporally consecutive actions.

By definition, narrative demands an approach that is both a theory of action and a theory of discourse or of representation (semiotic theory). In recent years this need for a hybrid approach has given birth to something called the “actional turn” in narratology, a movement represented by the work of Paul Ricœur on time and narrative identity (*Time and Narrative* and *Soi-même*), and, in Quebec, by the work of Bertrand Gervais (“Lecture de récits” and *Récits et actions*), which focuses on the “endonarrative” components in play in the comprehension of stories. In his response to the post-Heideggerian tradition of hermeneutics, Ricœur defined narrative intelligence: a synthesis of both a preliminary “competence” (or “prejudice” in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s terminology), necessary for the comprehension of texts, and a phenomenology of action, which represents the actional dimension of this competence.

While these two approaches (which focus respectively on forms of discourse and forms of action), were for a long time clearly distinct, they are slowly coming closer together. As theories of language have become more pragmatic, these two approaches have highlighted the fact that conversational speech is also discursive action (or ‘speech acts’ in the terms of Austin and Searle), and does not merely emerge from an assertive logic that aims at a representation of the world. Again, this perspective may be generalized to non-verbal arts if one takes account of the ‘rhetorical’ dimension, as Perelman puts it, of all semiotic production, or the pragmatic nature of such productions in their interaction with a recipient or interpreter.

In spite of these convergences (the importance of which I will demonstrate when I present my own thoughts on narrativity), narrative is still seen as a complex object. It puts in play at least two actional levels which require a combination of two specific types of approach. On the one hand, there is the discursive action, which implies a narrator and a recipient (or an interpreter, depending on whether one adopts a poetic or an aesthetic point of view). On the other hand, there is a represented action, which implies an agent theoretically separated from the narrator, whose adventures we can follow through the discursive representation given to us. Even in a conversation in which the speaker relates a personal anecdote, the protagonist represents the past state of the speaker (or the “actant” in Greimassian theory) which does not merge with the present speaker, and consequently these two planes always remain clearly distinct. I also think that in fictional stories with no traces of a narrator (those third person narratives of which Benveniste has argued that “the events seem to narrate themselves” (208), it is always possible to identify discursive strategies that belong to an implicit narrator distinct from the protagonist of the story. Consequently, it seems to me that, in the context of narrativity, this “duality” of the actional and discursive planes, however we term it, can be neither forgotten nor set aside. Doing so would lead us to lose sight of the meaning and the function of these structures, which interact to produce a unique event: the narrative.

We can grasp the basic interaction between the actional and the discursive planes by conceiving of narrative as follows: the perilous action of a protagonist helps us follow a story, and therefore contributes to the phenomenon of plot. Actions in plot create suspense, uncertainty, and an effect of tension, all of which guarantee the interest of the text

itself, ultimately ensuring that the recipient's attention does not fade before the denouement. Alternating between passionate friction and euphoric resolution, actions arrange the story sequentially, and take on both a phatic function and a thymic function in the discourse. At the same time, taken to its logical conclusion, ordered discourse places action in a *telos*. Plot thus makes it possible to retrospectively clarify causal links between what initially appeared as chaotic events, and to allot significance to the action dealt with in the story.

The important work of Paul Ricœur and Jacques Bres concludes that anthropomorphic action would not exist as we know it without the discursive acts that stage it. If discourse did not handle action, we would not be able to determine the duration of an action (its extent and reach within a textual configuration) nor its anticipated or actual completion, let alone its significance. Outside of the narrative's configurational dimension, agents underlying the actional dynamic are not true subjects (Sadoulet) and they do not retain their identities in the face of changes that affect them over time. In the case of the personal anecdote or autobiography (cf. Bruner 57–78), narrativity is operative in the establishment of facts, the determination of temporality, the search for meaning, and the subject's question for identity, all of which lead to the construction of a narrative identity.

Nonetheless, the introduction of action theory into literary study has often isolated the two planes, discursive and actional, which has led to considerable reduction in the understanding of narrativity. I will distinguish two problems. The first is structuralist narratologists' propensity to reduce narrative sequence to an immanent actional logic. The second, perpetrated by a significant portion of cognitive approaches to narrative, is marked by narrowness of description resulting from analytic schemas that are either too general or too simplistic. These tendencies (among others) have led some researchers to lose sight of the properly narrative dimension of the actions that they study. On the one hand, narratologists believe that their work on narrative allows them to describe an actional logic that is generalizable to all of the humanities. On the other hand, cognitivists think that they can analyze narrative using general models that define the structure of any form of intentional action. However we will see that neither the narratologists' inventories of roles nor the cognitive psychologists' schema of intentional action allows us to highlight the novelty and unpredictability that characterizes narrative action.

I will highlight approaches that describe actions such as they occur in the context of everyday life alongside studies that deal with narrative's role in mediating action, to underline the fact that action theory offers precious tools to narratology. But one must never forget that, in a certain sense, stories will always appear in tension with the schemas that enable everyday life and that underlie our relationship with a socially constructed reality.

2. The Logic of Action or the Logic of Narrative

The New Criticism, popular in France in the 1960s, aimed to free literary studies from the psychological and historicist perspectives that had dominated up until that time. Structuralist narratologists thus tended to isolate texts from their communicational context. The desire to consider the literary object solely in terms of its textual manifestation led them to apply the methods of structural linguistics broadly, and to investigate the way stories signify beyond the level of the sentence. Thus the transphrastic grammars of narrative were born. Their logical schemas were based primarily on a simplification and a generalization of the morphology of the folktale, terrain staked by Vladimir Propp in the 1920s.

Gradually, the definition of narrative sequence was reduced to the expression of a “segment” located on the plane of “human adventure” (Larivaille 384). Claude Bremond (*Logique*) has described this structure as a triad: a possibility is first posed, the possibility then gives way to action, and finally, a result is reached that either achieves or undermines the intention. Other similar formulas have been proposed. For Greimas, whose terminology underlines the structural homology between grammatical structures and actional structures, narrative sequence is primarily a question of defining the conjunctive course of a Subject on a quest for an Object.

In this type of approach to narrativity, the story’s sequence is assimilated into a logic of actional processes that does not account for the role that actions play in conversation. Whereas for Propp a “function” represents an action “defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action” (*Morphology* 21), narrative sequence, as conceived by the structuralist narratologists, no longer represents anything more than an immanent actional logic -- an underlying structure that makes it possible to reconstitute the mechanism of a narrated story, before it is taken over by discourse (cf. Bremond, *Logique*). As Meir Sternberg notes, narrative sequence, as treated by structuralist narratologists, thus appears “de-poeticized,” “de-motivated,” and “de-plotted” (*Telling I* 486).

The fundamental difference between the structuralist method and the Russian formalist method is the fact that the latter did not want to build an actional logic but sought instead to find the underlying form that defined the characteristics of a specific narrative genre: the Russian folktale. Propp, who postulated the existence of a common stock of stories in the corpus of Russian fairytales, tried to define the morphology of an “ideal type” that he imagined was at the base of the innumerable versions found in Russian folklore. To this end, Propp adopted the methods of the natural sciences, searching for the common features of a species that underlie the characteristics of each individual. Though the major presupposition of this research (that there exists a single, original type underneath the numerous instances) remains debatable, Propp never takes steps to push his study beyond the boundaries of narrativity, except when he suggests that the original story may derive from an ancestral rite (*Historical Roots*).

Ultimately, structuralist work confuses the analysis of narrative with the establishment of an elementary logic of action, and thus loses sight of the specificity of its object of study. Structuralist narratology is designed to analyze the representation of action in discourse, not action itself. Yet this is clearly Bremond’s ambition. Bremond asserts that beyond “oral forms of narrative folklore...the enterprise begun by Propp...converges with that of Pike in the search for a ‘unified theory of the structure of human behavior’” (*Logique*, 80). We see this tendency in Greimas as well, where the actantial schema seeks to define all types of speech, not just language related to narrativity. All intentional actions and all messages can in effect be described in Greimas’ terms: subject and object, sender and recipient, additive and opponent. Greimas thus affirms that “having no ambition to deal with anything more than narrative discourse, [semiotics] naturally sought to build a narrative syntax. We realized that this syntax could be applied to all kinds of discourse, and that therefore all discourse is ‘narrative.’ Since then, narrativity has found itself emptied of its conceptual content” (*Du sens II* 17–18).

The dissolution of narrativity into a logic of action is thus not an appropriation from without (for example, an attempt by analytical philosophy, sociology, or psychology to consume the domains of linguistics, semiotics, or literature). On the contrary, it is the result of an internal force, initiated by narratologists themselves, who denied the specificity of their own object of study. This is not a case of interdisciplinarity gone bad, but rather

that of a discipline that lost its identity as it approached the territory of other disciplines which, for their part, have remained relatively indifferent.

When we reduce narrative sequence to an “existential segment,” we cease to grasp its function in conversation or its impact on the “force of speech” (cf. Perelman). Both William Labov’s work on “evaluative procedures” in conversational stories and Charles Grivel’s work on novelistic interest clearly show that stories, whether fictitious or factual, literary or conversational, do not recount nonsense, nor do they not proceed haphazardly. For this reason we must remain attentive to the fact that “narrated actions” may not conform to a communal logic of action, and that it would most likely be incorrect to confuse the logic of the story with the true logic of action as interactionist sociologists conceive of it. It is also essential to identify the aspects of the conceptual network of action at work in conversation. Cognitivists have advanced towards this realization, but have risked being reductionist in the process.

3. From outline to plot: the limits of schema theory

Since the work of Bartlett in the 1930’s, psychologists have studied the phenomenon of memorization, and have particularly highlighted the role of mental designs that hierarchically organize our memories while transforming and structuring experience. In the field of narrativity, this approach has given birth to schema theory, the outline of which Mandler and Johnson first sketched in 1977. Schema theory rests primarily on the description of stages accompanying the development of an intentional action carried to its end. This process can be summarized in the following manner: a trigger provokes a subject’s reaction, prompting the subject to define a goal or establish a plan; the attempt to execute this plan leads to a result which is, in turn, the object of a final evaluation and potentially, a new reaction.

The structure of the episode according to “schema” theory:

Beginning

- Trigger
- Reaction (or internal answer)

Middle

- Goal (or internal plan)
- Attempt (putting the plan in action)

End

- Result (or direct consequences)
- Reaction (or evaluation of the result)

This structure is not essentially different than the triad described by Bremond, except that the cognitive approach underlines the structure’s function in conversation. Schema Theory defines the competence of the interpreter and the producer of the story, which explains how narration is structured and how it can be understood and memorized. Therefore it pertains not only to the immanent structure of the text, but to a mental diagram that organizes the production and interpretation of stories as well.

More recently, Bertrand Gervais has analyzed the role that intentional action plays on the level of plot. Gervais asserts that “the goal is what allows action to inscribe itself in plot, in a teleonomic structure” (*Récits* 96). As a result, Gervais underlines the ties between

the “teleological structure” of intentional action and the interpretive process polarized by the wait for an outcome. Gervais adds that “when the plan [i.e. the group of intentional actions] is designated in advance, the reader is placed in a descending cognitive attitude.[...] The plan is an abstract organization of intentional actions put in sequence, which structures the reader’s anticipation of the ensuing actions” (*Récits* 336).

For Gervais, there are certain fundamental effects of reading (such as curiosity and suspense) that depend on a cognitive grasp of the intentional structure of action. Either the intention is provisionally hidden to create a mystery, or it is revealed in such a way as to make the interpreter wonder what will result from an action. Gervais asserts that “suspense is thus the anticipation of what will come, combined with an uncertainty of what is happening,” and “this tension can...be the result of a play on the cognitive dimension of action, or on its practical consequences...its results, its effects on the world” (*Récits* 345–47).

Gervais’ description of the bond between the sequential structure of actions and their cognitive and affective functions (the effects of suspense, surprise, and curiosity that define a narrative as such) on the level of conversation is precisely what was lacking in traditional narratological approaches. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this insistence on the function of narrated actions threatens to overload a conceptual framework designed only to account for the development of intentional actions. An expanded perspective would highlight not only the effects of provisionally hiding the goal, but also the effect that depends on the delayed designation of an identity, a place, a mysterious object, etc. It would also be necessary to account for the dynamic function that accidents play: natural disasters whose consequences are unforeseeable, conflicts and breaches of contract, disobedience to orders, etc.

It seems to me that it is on this last point that the principal danger of an inter- or trans-disciplinary approach is felt. Such dangers appear when a discipline imports a pre-constructed mode of analysis applicable to another field -- as with schemas of intentional action -- without first understanding its original context and purpose. I will conclude this critique by trying to underline the form which action takes in narrative, and I will try to draw a possible synthesis between action and the theory of narrative discourse.

4. Narrative action and quotidian action

In conversation, as I have suggested before, plot essentially consists of stirring the recipient’s anticipation and sense of uncertainty. This type of interpretative activity, which is the basis of narrative sequence, corresponds to what Eco and Sebeok define as an “under-coded abduction” that is confronted, on an extensional level, with the text “to come.” This discursive effect thus has both a passive dimension dependent on the text’s provisional indetermination and the uncertainty felt by the interpreter (curiosity or suspense), and an active dimension – an anticipation of the text determined by the interpreter’s individual cognitive competencies. At this level it is possible to define two distinct types of anticipation, which in turn make it possible to differentiate, on a cognitive level, two forms of plot and two specific connections with the semantics of action: prognosis and diagnosis.

When plot is based on curiosity, anticipation takes the form of a diagnosis of the initially under-determined narrative situation. The semantics of action are useful here, because they provide a “conceptual framework of action” (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*) or an “interactive scheme” (Gervais, *Récits*), which makes it possible for the interpreter to determine which form of incompleteness she is confronting. These networks or schemas

obviously put in play the dimensions of intention, the agent (and her status and role), the frame (or time and place in which events unfold), and motives or drives, but also the accessories necessary to or compatible with the action's completion. Naturally, some elements of the "conceptual network of action" can remain implicit or unspecified without impairing the interpreter's comprehension of the action, but context normally makes it clear when we are dealing with an obscurely "plotted" discourse. For example, if I say "Sophie is reading the newspaper," her reason, drive, intention, status, and role need not be further specified. If asked, I could try to explain why she reads the newspaper (to get information, to find a job, for fun, to find the weather forecast, etc), but asking "why" probably wouldn't be relevant in this case. But if I said "yesterday evening, a man smashed through my door with an axe while I slept..." the listener would be led to wonder about the identity and the motivations of this agent: was it a robbery attempt, a vendetta, an act of madness, a police officer making a forceful arrest, a fireman attempting to evacuate the building because of a fire? The under-determined character of the narrated situation becomes a way of weaving a plot and encouraging listeners to produce provisional diagnoses suggested by the action's uncertainty. The interactive scheme makes it possible to highlight places where the representation lacks the completeness of an intelligible action.

In suspenseful plots, anticipation takes the form of a dubious prognosis concerning the development of a given narrative situation. In the preceding example, once the narrative situation is disambiguated (for example, once we have figured out that the man with the axe is a fireman coming to save a victim from a fire) we are likely to wonder "Will he make it in?" and then "How will he do it?" "Will they make it out in time?" Action theory thus consists of articulating the sequences and under-coded designs that determine the manner in which we come, in a story or in everyday life, to anticipate the uncertain consequences of an action or an event.

Emphasis is thus laid on chronology, or what Sternberg calls the ontological obscurity of the future (*Telling II* 531). We can draw up an incomplete inventory of the different under-coded actional schemas that put the irreversibility of action in tension with the reversibility of action's possible developments. First, there is the schema of planned action highlighted by Mandler and Johnson, which describes situations in which the rupture of a routine forces an agent to conceive of a new plan in order to give form to an action whose outcome is uncertain. But this schema cannot sufficiently describe the rich processes that make it possible to create a tentative prognosis. As the success of disaster-movies demonstrate, the anticipation of a natural disaster and its consequences represents a prognosis that can structure a plot in the same manner as the anticipation of the result of a planned action. Similarly, when action is integrated into a normalized but relatively open interaction (such as a contract, a request for permission, an order or a prohibition), the possibility of disobedience (breaking a promise, cheating, *etc.*), provides a means of structuring a story (cf. Petitat, *Contes*; Petitat and Baroni, *Dynamique*; Dundes). In this inter-active context, the planning dimension plays a subsidiary role in the establishment of a prognosis. We are more likely to take account of the normative dimension of the situation, the possible reversibility which characterizes any norm, and regulations which aim to compensate for this potential imbalance. For example, we say to ourselves "he agreed to this contract, but it was foolish of him to do so. I would be surprised if he kept his promise. But if he breaks this promise, he risks being punished." This type of sequence perfectly describes the episode in which Cinderella asks her stepmother for permission to go to the ball. Cinderella's request is granted, but only under an impossible condition (that she finishes all the cleaning

beforehand). It is necessary to discreetly break the contract (with the help of the fairy godmother) in order for Cinderella to go to the dance.

This interactive dimension brings me finally to a schema involving several agents: the conflicted relation. The underdetermined character of this schema allows it to take on a central role in many plots. I will conclude this essay with an analysis of this polemic form of action, because it seems particularly representative of the transformation that action undergoes when it is made the object of narrative. Between the theories that take up action in its everyday context and those based on the study of stories, it is not only the nature of the event taken into account which differs, but the way in which the event is conceived, as well. Narrative discourse (autobiography, historiography, travel stories, literary fictions and anecdotes, films and cartoons) and modes of analysis aimed at narrated actions (narratology and narrative semiotics) highlight the singularity of the narrated event -- its surprising or under-determined character. On the other hand, forms of analysis that situate action within its everyday context (analytical philosophy, sociology, ethnomethodology, instruction manuals, recipes, etc) seek to determine the rule or the regularity behind the apparent “novelty” of the event. In the first case emphasis is placed on change, in the second, emphasis is placed on repetition.

In the field of narratology, the fundamentally under-determined character of conflict explains its productivity at the configurational level of narrative. In the 1920's, Tomashevsky affirmed that conflict plays a central function in narrative because it gives birth to “dramatic tension” – it creates apprehension for a release or a resolution. Tomashevsky describes the narrative function of conflict as follows: “since the coexistence of two conflicting forces is impossible, one must inevitably prevail. The later harmonious situation, which does not require further development, will neither evoke nor arouse the reader's anticipation. That is why the condition at the end of a work is so static” (71). Labov's commentary concerning the “evaluative procedures” is particularly eloquent on the function of the under-determination of events in conversation: “if the event becomes common enough, it is no longer a violation of an expected rule of behavior, and it is not reportable. The narrators of most of these stories were under social pressure to show that the events involved were truly dangerous and unusual, or that someone else really broke the normal rules in an outrageous and reportable way. Evaluative devices say to us: this was terrifying, dangerous, weird, wild, crazy; or amusing, hilarious, wonderful: more generally, that it was strange, uncommon, or unusual – that is, worth reporting. It was not ordinary, plain, humdrum, everyday, or run-of-the-mill” (Labov 370–71).

However, if conflict represents the tellable event par excellence, it must also be noted that conflict is not, fortunately, as abundant in our everyday life as in the stories we tell, or, at the very least, in stories generally presented in dramatic form. Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, who defined ethnomethodological analysis, thus notes that “all observable behaviors in daily exchanges are ‘routinized’: they rest on implicit norms that go without saying” (62). From this “sociological” point of view, even violent antagonisms appear ritualized: polemical actions are accompanied by efforts at cooperation, and one can see that a certain routine of conflict exists in everyday life. Our competition with a colleague, for example, implies certain behavioral rules and an arbitrary form of repetition: unless we completely lose control of ourselves, we will not savagely attack him, but we will find more insidious and effective means to beat him. Here, where Tomashevsky insisted that the uncertainty and under-determined character of the conflict made it possible to structure plot, the sociologists by contrast seek to draw attention to the repetition, the regularity, the norm which hides behind the apparent singularity of the event.

If we accept reality as constructed by socially accepted norms – but norms in constant evolution, because never finally established without clashing with our practical experiences – we can describe the complementary role of two types of discourse on action: on the one hand, a properly narrative discourse, and on the other, an objectification of actional rules and regularities that work in everyday life. Whereas an analysis of quotidian actions can succeed to exhume the norms which underlie praxis, narrative discourses, on the other hand (or discourses on narrativity) allow us to explore the insufficiency of these norms and routines when they run up against obstacles that force actions to diverge from their intended ends. Narrative surprise, suspense, and curiosity make it possible to put in place the limits of our “models of reality” when they confront the unfathomable possibilities of the world.

The task of the historian (which is complementary with that of the sociologist), is precisely to highlight, in an account of the collective past, the ways in which societies have been unable to reach perfect harmony, and have failed to anticipate all of the world’s challenges. Historical sociology attempts to show the reality of a people in a given period of history, but in order to succeed it must understand the dialectic between the constructed reality of everyday actions and the dynamics of historical change, a dialectic which can only be grasped by way of narrative structures (Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* vol.1; Petitat 1999).

Similarly, as ethnologists encounter difficulties in their attempts to describe and explain radically different lifestyles, they take recourse, more and more, to narrative forms that permit them to communicate irreducibly novel experiences. As a result, we can trace an important current of thought emerging in the human sciences, alongside the more traditional study of narrative arts. While existing methods of analyzing praxis seek to identify the mechanisms used to “stage everyday life” (Goffman 1973) in order to reveal the foundations of social consensus on which reality is constructed, this new approach draws on the notions of narrative mediation to grasp the novelty, the uniqueness, or the originality of action, whether of an individual, or of society as a whole.

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