Narratology (1960)

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Narratology is perhaps best understood as a term with a stricter and a looser sense. Broadly speaking, it is the name given to the critical and theoretical study of the numerous forms of narrative discourse, especially in literary and film studies. More precisely, however, it designates a theoretical movement with its origins in the French structuralist thought of the 1960s and 70s, to which most subsequent analyses of narrative have been indebted - hence the extension of the term.

The narratological approach is characterised by its overriding concern with narrative structure, and the close attention it pays to the effects that this structure has on the shaping and unfolding of narratives. It scrutinises the internal relations of a narrative's component parts, and dissects how these relations are constructed in practically any given aspect of the narrative text (such as plot, narration, sequence of events, and so on). For some narratologists, these structures are what bring narrative texts into being, and even provide them with meaning: if a text's narrative structure can be said to highlight a particular aspect of that text, it can also be said to highlight the structural mechanisms by which it does so. The text's structuration can therefore be read as a system of meaning in its own right which interacts with any apparent message the text contains. At its most ambitious, narratology tried to diagnose the same basic abstract structures at work in a huge variety of different narrative forms and texts.

Whilst narratology as a theoretical school evolved initially in France, its origins lie much earlier, in Russian formalism. In particular, Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (first published in Moscow in 1928; English trans. Laurence Scott, University of Texas Press, 1968) anticipated many of the methods of narratological analysis in its breakdown of a corpus of Russian folk tales into a finite number of constituent parts: thirty-one different morphological functions (mostly plot twists) and seven "spheres of action" (mostly characters). Stripping narratives down to their bare bones in this way was to become one of the mainstays of narratological analysis, but this step, arguably, was not the work's most decisive methodological breakthrough. In this seminal study, Propp distinguished between two crucially different aspects of the study of narrative, christening them *fabula* and *sjuzhet*. The *fabula* is, in simple terms, the content of the story, whilst the *sjuzhet* designates the form that the telling of the tale imposes upon that content. As a formalist, Propp argued that the latter was of paramount importance, and that the study of narrative form was the only viable methodological approach for comparative analysis of the folk tales. It was this insight that paved the way for a later generation of theorists, who founded the movement known as narratology.

The birth and early development of narratology is best understood within the context of structuralism. For the structuralists of the 1960s, the linguistic thought of Ferdinand de Saussure offered a model for understanding communication that could be appropriated and applied more broadly to cultural analysis. Working on the

assumption that narratives, being linguistic phenomena, contained structures that could be analysed as Saussure had analysed language, some of these scholars proceeded to construct a science of narratives: narratology. At its heart lay a binary distinction, derived from Saussure's classic dichotomy of "signifier" and "signified". This dichotomy was recast by various narratologists as "story" and "discourse" or "narrated" and "narrating" ("*récit*" and "*histoire*" in the original French). The former term designates the set of events recounted by the narrative, and has a status analogous to the signified in Saussurean linguistics. (This more or less corresponds to the *fabula* in Propp's terms). The latter term refers to the manner of their representation, i.e., the way in which the narrative is structured as a signifier. (In Propp's terms, this is analogous to the *sjuzhet*). It was on this second area that the majority of narratological study focused. Put simply, its concern was not with *what* a narrative represented, but with *how* it represented it. This methodological orientation is fundamental to an understanding of narratological thought.

As applied to literature, the narratologists' drive towards a systematic overview of narrative structure soon resulted in sophisticated categorisations of narrative time, narrative voice, and plot structure. Probably the clearest illustration of plot-based narratology is Roland Barthes's famous essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (first published in French as "L'Analyse structurale du récit" in *Communications*, 8, 1966; English translation available in his *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1977). The *locus classicus* of the narratological study of voice and time remains Gérard Genette's masterly analysis *Narrative Discourse* (first published in French as "Discours du Récit" in his *Figures III*, 1972; English trans. Jane E. Lewin, Blackwell, 1980). Based on a reading of Proust, Genette drew on narrative literature from a vast array of genres and eras to demonstrate the ways in which the underlying events of the story can be re-organised, re-arranged, and re-presented by the narrative discourse. The order of the events may be changed in the narrating, for example, or events may be narrated a different number of times from that of their occurrence. Unravelling the complexities of narrative structure in ways such as these formed the basis of the narratologists's project, and still informs a great deal of literary criticism today. Furthermore, Genette observed that the various positions of narrators dramatically affect our understanding of what they tell us. In this respect, his work surpasses the original structuralist dichotomy between "story" and "discourse" by adding a third dimension to it: that of narration itself. This additional category enabled Genette to differentiate not just between what is narrated and how it is narrated, but also *by whom* it is narrated (the perennial question "*Qui parle?*"). In doing so, he brought narratological analysis to bear on many traditional problems of literary criticism, like reliable or unreliable narration, point of view, and focalisation.

It is worth noting, though, that not all narratologists were literary critics: Claude Lévi-Strauss, one of the earliest and most influential practitioners of narratology, was by training an anthropologist who developed a narratological model for the study of myth. His work attempted to identify certain universal structures at work behind the myths of vastly different cultures and eras. Dividing the stories into basic elements or "mythemes" (events like slaying monsters, incest, etc.), he went on to diagnose similar patterns in the relations between these units, and found them in an impressive variety of different mythologies. Lévi-Strauss viewed myth as if it were a kind of language with a grammatical structure. This structure was the key to unlocking the meaning of myth, and, he claimed, the same structure was present in myths from Native Americans to ancient Greeks. Furthermore, since, for Lévi-Strauss, the structure endowed the myths with their meaning, the myths could be said to be "about" these fundamental structures, which were tantamount to encoded messages exemplifying our relationship with the world. This method has been justly criticised for its deliberate indifference to the great cultural diversity of the myths studied, but this indifference lies at the very heart of the objectivity with which the narratologists sought to approach their subject matter.

Since Lévi-Strauss equated the structure of narratives such as myth with the structure of language itself, it is unsurprising that the discipline of linguistics has also been important in the evolution of narratology. To an extent, such an influence was inevitable, given the indebtedness of many narratologists to Saussure's thought. Some narratologists, however, went much further than this. A. J. Greimas in particular placed a very strong

emphasis on narratology's relationship with linguistic science, and formulated an "actantial" models of narrative structure and narrative semantics. Greimas, building on the work of Propp, sought to demonstrate that all narratives could be analysed in terms of the relations, at the level of deep grammatical structure, between just six "actants": Subject and Object, Receiver and Sender, and Helper and Opponent. The combinations and permutations of these actants' relations to each other could, in principle at least, describe and account for the structure of any number of narratives, in a manner that bears some resemblance to the transformational-generative grammar of Chomskian linguistics. Such a radically minimalist approach to narrative structure was bound to be controversial, especially since Greimas focussed so strongly on refining his actantial model that he barely discussed actual narratives themselves. But this was because these models, sophisticated as they are, were derived from linguistic science, and consequently aim at a level of abstraction far removed from the work of literary narratologists like Genette or Barthes. The two approaches meet in the work of Tzvetan Todorov (see his *The Poetics of Prose*, first published in French in 1971; English trans. Richard Miller, Blackwell, 1987), a narratologist whose insightful literary analyses are combined with interesting applications of structural linguistics.

Indeed, one of the greatest innovations of narratology lay in its interdisciplinary breadth. Narratological analysis did not confine itself to literary criticism, since narrative is not merely a phenomenon of literature, nor even entirely verbal. Christian Metz, for instance, has applied many narratological insights to the field of film theory, whilst emphasising that film began as a wordless, silent medium. Narratologists have devoted attention not only to myths, folk tales, and films, but also to paintings, history books, philosophical systems, comic strips, and any number of other narrative forms, literary and non-literary, verbal and non-verbal. In fact, the interdisciplinarity of contemporary critical theory owes a great deal to the narratologists.

As the narratological approach grew in intellectual prominence, it spread as a movement beyond France and throughout the western academy: to America, where Seymour Chatman built upon Genette's literary analyses (see his *Story and Discourse*, Cornell UP, 1978), and Gerald Prince drew upon Chomsky to refine the linguistic aspects of narratology (see his *Narratology: the Form and Functioning of Narrative*, Mouton, 1982); to Israel, where, as evident in the work of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, its structuralist approach was very influential (see her *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Methuen, 1983); and throughout Europe, exemplified in works like Mieke Bal's *Narratology* (trans. Christine van Boheemen, University of Toronto Press, 1985) and Monika Fludernik's *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (Routledge, 1996).

The popularity of the narratological project began to wane after the advent of deconstruction, and the ensuing loss of confidence in structuralism. Furthermore, its approach, which tended increasingly to schematise narrative components into categories and taxonomies, was eventually seen as limited (and limiting), and its persistent reduction of diverse narratives from different genres and cultures to the same rudimentary structures also came in for serious criticism. However, interest in these narrative forms and structures did anything but wane, and many theorists, though critical in some ways of its methodology, have nevertheless built on the insights of narratology, often by rethinking them through other theoretical viewpoints. Interesting examples of this would include deconstruction (see J. Hillis Miller, *Ariadne's Thread*, Yale University Press, 1992), feminism (see Susan Sniader Lanser, "Toward a Feminist Narratology', *Style*, 20:3, 1986, p. 341-363), psychoanalysis (see Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, Harvard University Press, 1984), and postmodernism (see Andrew Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

Two well-balanced and informative introductory readers are available, each containing many of the seminal texts of narratology, as well as charting more recent developments. See *Narratology: An Introduction*, ed. Susana Onega and José Ángel García Landa, Longman, 1996 and *The Narrative Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan, Routledge, 2000. For those daunted by the jargonistic terminology frequently employed by narratologists, Gerald Prince's A *Dictionary of Narratology*, University of Nebraska Press, 1987, should prove a useful aid.