

constructing complex interactional forms precisely through a return, with a difference, to the source of narrative interaction.

The barebones summaries of the articles offered above are but a glimpse at the complete arguments developed by each of the authors. Of the many features of this collection sure to strike the reader is the fact that without, in most cases, adopting the same precepts and criteria and without arriving at the conclusions or thematic unity one might expect of a school of thought or of a monograph, the contributions provide insight into the phenomenon of narrativity from several different angles in ways that are sometimes complementary and sometimes divergent, but at all times illuminating. The points of comparison to be made are too numerous and open-ended and the implications and cross references to be investigated too subtle and far-reaching for these questions to be taken up in any meaningful way in these introductory comments. We leave it now to the reader to explore the contributions to this volume and to theorize narrativity.

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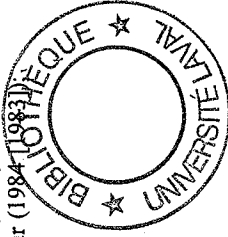
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Narrativehood, Narrativeness, Narrativity, Narratability

Narratology studies certain objects called narratives, what they have in common as well as how they may differ from one another, and there have been various (more or less restrictive) definitions of these objects, various answers to the question "What is a narrative?" Some theorists and researchers define narratives as verbal productions recounting one or more events while others define them as any kind of representations of events (including non-verbal ones relying on still or moving pictures, for example, gestures, or a combination thereof). Some maintain that they must involve causality, that they must be populated with individual beings and things, that they must be anchored in human experience, that they must constitute a whole. Others do not agree with most, some, or any of these prescriptions.¹ As for myself, I will adopt the following definition in my discussion: an object is a narrative if it is taken to be the logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events that do not presuppose or imply each other. This definition, which is both flexible and limiting, has many virtues (apart from not conflicting with widely held views about the nature of narratives). For instance, the definition distinguishes between narratives and non-narratives (and, more specifically, between narratives and the mere representation of an event or activity, the mere description of a process or state of affairs). It also distinguishes between narratives and so-called antinarratives (e.g. Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*) by assigning consistency to the former. Moreover, however constraining it may be, it leaves numerous aspects of the objects it isolates indeterminate and makes room for a good deal of diversity. It does not, for example, broach the truth or falsehood of narratives, their factuality or fictionality, their ordinariness or artistry. Nor does it specify the kind of topics they address and the kind of themes they develop. Nor does it limit their poten-

¹ See, for example, Bal (1997 [1985]); Barthes (1975 [1966]); Fludernik (1996); Genette (1980 [1972]); Herman (2002); Jannidis (2003); Revaz (1997); Ricœur (1984 [1983]); Ryan (1991); Schmid (2003).



tial magnitude or restrict their modes and media of representation. In addition, it will serve my demonstrative purposes.²

While this and other definitions answer the question "What is a narrative?", indicate which entities constitute narratives (specify the class of objects designated by the noun "narrative"), and thus characterize "narrative" extensionally (an aspect of *narrativity* that I will call *narrativehood*), they also answer a slightly different question—"What is narrative?"—pertaining to a quality rather than an entity, focusing on an adjective rather than a noun, designating a set of traits rather than objects, and thus characterizing narrative intensionally (an aspect of narrativity that I will call *narrativeness*): any object is qualifiable in indefinitely many ways, as indefinitely many things, and an object is (qualifiable as) narrative if it exhibits (some of) the traits associated with narratives and, more specifically, if it is the logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events, etc. Thus, narratologists have been significantly (though not exclusively) interested in what makes an object—and, in particular, a narrative—narrative. As early as 1964, in "Le message narratif," Claude Bremond remarked that "what Propp studies in the Russian tale [...] is an autonomous layer of signification, endowed with a structure which can be isolated from the whole of the message: *narrative*."³ In *Le récit*, Jean-Michel Adam underlines and develops this point. After bracketing the question of representational media, he identifies the narrative layer of signification as one of several textual types (the descriptive, the explicative, the conversational, etc.) found in texts. He also points out that texts are characterized by the combination of several types and the dominance of one of them.⁴ Similarly, in *Coming to Terms*, Seymour Chatman argues for thinking of texts in terms of text-types, which he defines as "underlying (or overriding) structures that can be actualized by different surface forms."⁵ For the purposes of his argument, Chatman focuses on three such structures: Narrative (which he capitalizes and explicitly distinguishes from "a narrative"), Description, Argument; he notes that they can coexist in the same text; and he shows how each can operate at the service of the others. For instance, Narrative operates at the service of Argument in La

² For my definitions and distinctions (though not for my terminology), I have particularly profited from Fludernik (1996); Herman (2002); Ryan (1991), (1992), (2005). I have also relied on my own work (1982), (1999), (2005).

³ Bremond (1964: 4).

⁴ Adam (1999 [1984]: 9–10).

⁵ Chatman (1990: 10–11).

Fontaine's "Phoebus and Boreas" whereas the reverse is true in the "Ithaca" episode of *Ulysses*.⁶ There is, indeed, much more than narrative in narratives (comic effects, touching images, psychological insights, philosophical developments), and narratology aspires to account for Narrative (among other things)—that is, for entities insofar as they are narrative, for narratives in their narrativeness. Given my definition of a narrative, for example, the presence (or absence) of events, their number, and their temporal, causal, or implicational links would be narratologically pertinent, but comic effects or psychological insights would probably not.

Several points can be made on the basis of these various takes and remarks about narrativehood and narrativeness, about narratives, narrative, and narrativity. On the one hand, consider an object A satisfying five of the six conditions for narrativehood singled out in my definition: it is the (1) logically consistent (2) representation of (3) two (4) asynchronous (5) events that presuppose or imply each other (given that last specification, it does not satisfy condition 6). A is not a narrative, and the same goes for an object B satisfying only four of the six conditions or for objects C, D, E, and F satisfying none of them. However, it would not be entirely unreasonable to maintain that A is probably closer to constituting a narrative than B and certainly closer to that state than C, D, E, and F. But things are perhaps more complicated. It is possible that the six specified conditions do not each have the same weight or importance: if event representation is central, asynchronism may weigh more than consistency, for instance, and the two-event requirement may weigh more than either. It is then possible for an object satisfying three conditions (beyond the central ones) to be closer to constituting a narrative than another object satisfying a different set of three conditions; and it is even possible for an object satisfying two conditions to be closer to constituting a narrative than an object satisfying three. On the other hand, if text-types are more or less dominant in different texts, it is not only possible for the Narrative type to be dominant in one text and ancillary in another; but it is also possible for the Narrative type to be dominant (or ancillary) in two different texts, albeit more so in one than in the other. Furthermore, it may occur that, because of its strong dominance in a given text, a quasi-Narrative type (say, a structure realizable by texts satisfying only five of my six definitional conditions) would give more narrative character or weight to that text (thus making it more

⁶ Ibid.: 6–21.

narrative, as it were) than the Narrative type would bestow on other texts because of its marked ancillarity in them.

The various possibilities I have mentioned point to the existence of degrees of narrativity, i.e. degrees of both narrativehood and narrativeness. Some objects are narratives; some are quasi-narratives; and some are not narratives. Some narratives are more narrative than others; some non-narratives are more narrative than others; and some are even more narrative than narratives. Now, though these various possibilities are a function of quantitative factors related to necessary and explicit definitional conditions (number of conditions satisfied, total weight of conditions satisfied, relative weight of Narrative type in a textual economy, etc.), some possibilities can (also) be a function of other, qualitative rather than quantitative, factors related to optional or definitionally implicit elements as well as necessary and definitionally explicit ones. These qualitative factors more or less significantly foreground the narrative identity of a given text, the nature or the import of a Narrative structure underlying it, that of some structural constituents, or that of some properties of the latter, and they thus affect the (degree of) narrativity of that text beyond any strict definitional considerations. Or else these qualitative factors derive from the fact that certain textual components without satisfying this or that definitional condition required for any narrative, tend more or less clearly to do so. In other words, the narrativity of a text is not merely equivalent to its narrativehood and narrativeness: it depends more generally on whatever makes a text more (or less) immediately identifiable as (a) narrative.

One textual qualitative factor would be the positiveness of the events depicted, since narratives are representations of events and not of their mere possibility or of their negation. Narratives live in certainty: this happened and then that; this happened because of that; this happened and it was linked to that. Though they need not preclude hesitations or speculations or negations—in fact, these factors can generate suspense or function as signs of objectivity or emphasize the qualities of what actually happened—and though, at least in their verbal manifestations, they can be hospitable to interrogative, conjectural, and negative sentences, narratives can perish under the effect of sustained indecision and ignorance. Another factor has to do with the discreteness of asynchronous events, since the more such discreteness obtains, the more asynchronism is emphasized. Consider, for example, “She ate and then she went to bed” as opposed to “She went to bed after eating,” or “She had a million dollars and then she lost it” as opposed to “She lost the million dollars she had.” Furthermore,

as indicated above, a definitional element may not be present in a given text but something more or less similar to it may be. Thus, even if a textual segment like “it rains and hails and snows” or like “it rains and rains and rains” does not quite function as a representation of asynchronous events, it is perhaps not that far from doing so. Of course, these qualitative factors—like the quantitative ones—may not be equally important. Of course too, their effect may vary from one textual economy to another.

Just as various textual factors (quantitative or qualitative, necessary or optional, operating at the level of the narrated or that of the narrating) make some objects closer to narratives than others or more prototypically narrative or more narrative-like than others, various contextual factors make some objects more readily viewable or processable as narrative(s). Consider, for instance, a text like “She was very rich and then she developed a passion for poker and then she lost all her money” as a response to “Tell me a story about her” or as a response to “Give an example of an English sentence made up of three conjoined sentences.”⁷

Context (along with text, no doubt) also influences the effectiveness *qua* narratives of various objects, their narrative value (as distinct from their narrative identity and character or their narrativity), what is characterized as their reportability or tellability (or *narratability*, as I will call it), and context—along with text—helps to answer questions such as “What makes a narrative worth producing?” or “What makes an object a successful, appealing, valuable narrative?” In his classic discussion of the “point” of a given narrative—the reason for which that narrative is produced and the essential matter it is getting at—William Labov emphasizes that “[p]ointless stories are met (in English) with the withering rejoinder ‘So what?’ Every good narrator is continually warding off this question: when his narrative is over, it should be unthinkable for a bystander to say ‘So what?’ Instead, the appropriate remark would be ‘He did?’ or similar means of registering the reportable character of the events of the narrative.”⁸ Now, it is often the case that, to some extent at least, the *raison d’être* of a narrative and its import, its significance, its worth, are indicated or suggested by so-called evaluative devices. Thus, the reflections of one character or another may underscore the unusual quality of the situations represented, the repetition of certain events may foreground their

⁷ There have been several interesting discussions of various factors affecting (categories akin to) narrativity. See, for instance, Coste (1989: 52–72); Herman (2002: 85–113); Ryan (1991: 48–174); Schmid (2003).

⁸ Labov (1972: 366).

value, the use of disnarrated elements—explicitly referring to what did not take place but could have—may emphasize the quality of what did take place, and commentary by a narrator may directly state the point of the narrative.⁹ Furthermore, it may be that certain topics and themes are inherently interesting and that their mere narrative deployment makes a narrative worthwhile. A sexist French recipe for successful narratives valorizes ingredients like mystery, religion, sex, and aristocracy: “My God, said the Duchess, I am pregnant. Who done it?”¹⁰ and an old *Readers’ Digest* formula is supposed to stress—along with sex and religion—personal experience, travel, money, and the animal kingdom: “How I Made Love to a Rich Bear in the Alps and Found God.” Moreover, perhaps the very fact that any narrative brings together distinct events and links them temporally in a non-contradictory manner always sheds some light on the configurations or operations of time, thereby making a point. Yet, as Labov’s remarks (and my own experience) more than suggest, there are perfectly well-formed narratives (satisfying every condition for narrativehood) which depict and account for changes in situations and totalize them into sequences of interrelated parts but which are greeted nonetheless with “So what?” rather than “He did?” Moreover, important topics and themes like sex and mystery are neither specific to nor characteristic of narratives as opposed to non-narratives, and they do not always play equally well in Paris and Philadelphia. Conversely, perhaps any topic or theme—however local or insignificant—not only constitutes potential material for a narrative (is narrativizable) but also can be made narratively appealing (is narratable). Perhaps any set of events—however unimportant or trivial—not only is susceptible of narrativization but also can be endowed with narratability. In any case, that is what much fiction endeavors to show; and I, for one, find interesting any narrative that pertains to me. As for evaluative devices, they may not always prove quite appropriate or persuasive. After all, claiming that (sequences of) events are unusual, extraordinary, bizarre, unfortunately does not suffice to make them so. In short, even if narratability often depends on strictly textual factors—e.g. the nature of the events narrated and of their configurations (or, at the level of the narrating, the nature of the focalizations selected, of the speeds exploited, of the orders of presentation adopted)—it also always

⁹ On the notion of the disnarrated, see Prince (1988).

¹⁰ This is Margaret Boden’s English rendition of “Mon Dieu, dit la Marquise, je suis enceinte et ne sais pas de qui” (Boden 1977: 299), quoted in Ryan (1991: 154).

depends on contextual ones. Sometimes, a (spatio)temporal feature proves particularly significant: “Napoleon died” functions differently in 1821 France or England and in 2005. Sometimes, alethic status plays a crucial role, as Marie-Laure Ryan explains: “extraordinary events work better in factual than in fictional narrative, because they are too easy to make up.”¹¹

Sometimes too, the medium and circumstances of manifestation are important. Thus, two different manuscripts of the same narrative may be at different stages of disintegration; or the radio transmission of a story may be more powerful in the attic than in the cellar; or a narrative painting may be more visible in the morning light than in the evening. Frequently (not too say always), narratability is a function of the receiver. As Mary Louise Pratt points out, something like “Bill went to the bank today” is narratable if Bill is known to be a miser who has always mistrusted banks, but much less newsworthy if he is not.¹² More generally, different persons (or the same person on different occasions) can greet the same story with “So what?” or with “He did?” I may have heard this or that tale a hundred times or not even once; I may long to hear it anew, but then again I may not; I may want to learn what happened and why, but you may not; I may find an account of what took place fascinating, and you may disagree.

Note that there are, of course, many other contextual factors of narratability to take into account (context is inexhaustible and, however much a text contextualizes what it represents, it never does so completely). For example, there is the actual sender of a given narrative, as opposed to its author, its narrator, or this or that performer of the narrative. Suppose that someone mails me a narrative written by X featuring a narrator Y and which is to be read aloud to me by Z. The identity of the mailer may well affect my response to the narrative. Or, to focus on the author instead, suppose that X’s fame is great. This, too, may influence my evaluation. Note also that the narrative value of an object is not equivalent to its overall value. Whatever appeal Sartre’s *Nausea* may have, for instance, at least some of it is probably not narrative, but philosophical.

Further narratologically pertinent discriminations can no doubt be effected, and further narratologically pertinent domains can no doubt be discovered or explored. Still, even this brief discussion not only addresses basic questions regarding the character, form, and functioning of narratives, but it also generates many other (narratological) questions worth

¹¹ Ryan (2005: 590).

¹² Pratt (1977: 135).

exploring: on the nature, weight, and interaction of the factors affecting narrativity, for example; on the relation between particular representational media and narrativity (or narratability); on the acquisition of the capacity to manipulate narrativity; on the different kinds of factors relevant to narratability that different groups (or different genres) exploit; and so on and so forth. Indeed, the systematic study of what in an object and its setting (what in a text and its context) encourages its identification as (a) narrative, triggers the calling up of certain grids for processing it as such, and affects the value of such an invocation can clarify the character and specificity of narrative semiosis, the meaning and meaningfulness of narratives and narrative moments.

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