Narrative

Establishing exactly what constitutes a narrative is not an easy enterprise. We can start by considering the following definitions:

> One will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or a sequence of events. (Genette, 1982, p. 127)
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> The representation [...] of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two or several [...] narrators [...] to one, two or several narratees. (Prince, 2003a, p. 58)
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> Simply put, narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events. 'Event' is the key word here, though some people prefer the word 'action.' Without an event or an action, you may have a 'description,' an 'exposition,' an 'argument,' a 'lyric,' some combination of these or something else altogether, but you won't have a narrative. (Abbott, 2008, p. 13)

These are but three of the many attempts by scholars to come up with a comprehensive description of narrative. Besides the above, Toolan (2001, p. 1) also suggests that the layman's understanding of narratives as processes requiring a 'teller', something to tell (a 'tale'), and someone to tell it to (the 'addressee') leaves out some of the traits that should be integral to this notion. For instance, should narratives be reduced to these three elements, then, it would be hard to distinguish narratives from other communicative events such as conversations with friends, phone calls or celebratory speeches. For Toolan, one aspect in which narratives differ from the latter three is in the salient role played by

the teller of the story, so that processing the narrative is as much to learn about the occurrences in the tale as it is about experiencing how the telling entity presents it. Thus, Toolan's contribution to a definition states:

> A narrative is a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can 'learn'. (Toolan, 2001, p. 8)

Not only does this new proposal refer to the necessary presence of 'events' as Genette, Prince and Abbott do above too, but also, the purposeful sequentiality of such events is emphasized. Therefore, narratives presuppose that something needs to happen in a particular order, irrespective of whether the order in which events occur and the actual presentation (textual or otherwise) of those occurrences coincide; moreover, those happenings need to involve some cognizant beings from whose experiencing humans can learn. Here 'learn' appears to be used in the very broad sense of the type of benefit gained by recipients of that narrative (emotional, psychological, informative or cognitive). According to this definition, a ballet performance, as much as novels, short stories, oral narratives, folk tales, pantomime, films or comic strips can be categorized as different types of narrative. Definition endeavours, consequently, are not particularly scarce. In an attempt to tackle this issue, Mary-Laure Ryan (2007) has resorted to list a series of basic characteristics which determine the prototypical or marginal nature of a particular text as narrative, rather than its inclusion or not in the category since, as she explains herself, narratives are, by definition, 'fuzzy':

> Rather than regarding narrativity as a strictly binary feature, that is, as a property that a given text either has or doesn't have, the definition proposed below presents narrative texts as a fuzzy set allowing variable degrees of membership, but centered on prototypical cases that everybody recognizes as stories. (2007, p. 28)

Her list of conditions for narrative prototypicality includes:

> **Spatial dimension**: 1) Narrative must be about a world populated by individual existents.

Temporal dimension: 2) This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations. 3) The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.
Mental dimension: 4) Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world. 5) Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents.
Formal and pragmatic dimension: 6) The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure. 7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld. 8) The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience. (Ryan, 2007, p. 29)

In relation to this set, a ballet performance could, at least for some, be acknowledged as a more unorthodox member of the category of narrative under condition 6. The kind of causality generally experienced in the more traditional forms of narrative fiction could be said to be missing in particularly experimental performances of ballet more concerned with emotional reactions from the audience than with the sequentiality of the various acts and scenes. As Ryan states, we might still have enough components to include dance formats as narratives although we might need to situate them at the more marginal end of the cline.

Traditionally, narratologists have drawn a basic distinction between two aspects of narratives, differently termed by the various theorists, but which essentially encompass similar (if not totally equivalent) features. An initial differentiation was made between 'fabula' and 'sjuzhet' by the Russian Formalists (Propp, [1928] 1968; Tomashevsky, 1965). The French structuralists preferred to use 'histoire' and 'discours' respectively, whereas more contemporary narratologists have opted for 'story' and 'discourse' (Chatman, 1978). The dichotomy, thus, is established between fabula/histoire/story on the one hand, and sjuzhet/discours/discourse on the other. The first set conveys the sense of the chronological sequence of events as these would have logically occurred, whereas the second refers to the actual manifestation of those events, not necessarily (in fact, hardly ever) in the same order in which they took place. Wales makes a distinction between the 'deep structure' of a narrative versus the 'surface structure' (2001, p. 367). The terms here mentioned are not free from controversy either (see McIntyre, 2006 and Toolan, 2001 for a review on

this issue) so, as analysts we need to be aware of the variation in terminology and choose the most appropriate to serve our interests.

The work on narrative issues undertaken by the Russian Formalists can be illustrated by reference to Propp's ([1928] 1968) structuralist morphology. Based on his analysis of 115 Russian fairy tales, Propp suggests a framework of events (functions) as they occur in those fairy tales. Similar to a corpus linguist his main aim is to identify recurrent patterns and features (constants) against the background of deviating, random or unpredictable elements, which he calls variables (Toolan, 2006a, p. 461). He identified 31 recurrent functions, which are manifested in a fixed sequence, although some of those can also be seen as pairs. Therefore, the functions of characters in a story remain constant. Some examples of those functions are, for instance, the first one which identifies that 'one of the members of a family absents himself from home (an extreme exponent of this function represented by the death of one of the parents)', or function sixteen which stresses that 'the hero and villain join in direct combat' (Toolan, 2006a, p. 460). Among the seven basic character roles also singled out as constants in fairy tales are the following: villain, donor/provider, helper, princess (+father), dispatcher, hero (seeker or victim) and false hero. Characters may take on more than one role and one role may also be represented by more than one character. Propp's framework has been used especially in anthropological studies, and, strikingly, applied to genres as diverse as children's stories and crime series, although it has also been criticized for being too reductionist and for ignoring the various levels of detail that are part of a story. Yet, there exists a substantial degree of agreement on what readers (intuitively) regard as essential to a narrative, which suggests that some structure based on common sense does indeed exist. Although what could be called 'narrative competence' and 'culture-specific abilities' or 'intuitive knowledge' remain highly debatable notions, Propp's model can also be read as an example of how readers are able to rely on intuitions and to deduce or summarize the plot.

Barthes's ([1966] 1977) functional characterization of narratives illustrates the French structuralist take on issues relating to the concept of narrative. He distinguishes between three major levels of narrative structure: (a) functions (as in Propp); (b) actions (roughly, equivalent to characters – cf. Greimas's (1966) actants) and (c) narration (equivalent to *discours* or discourse). In Barthes's framework, functions create coherence in narratives and can be further subdivided into functions proper and indices. Indices give

the reader information about the characters' state of mind and the general atmosphere.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that the analysis of narratives has not been circumscribed to the fictional variety. The most famous take on natural narratives is that of Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972) in what has come to be known as the sociolinguistic approach. In his investigation of the narratives of ordinary people and of personal experience, Labov (1972, pp. 359–60) sees narratives as 'one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which [. . .] actually occurred'. One of Labov's ultimate aims in describing narratives from a sociological perspective was to relate the narrator's social characteristics – class, gender, age, ethnicity, geography – to the structure of the narrative. Labov and Waletzky (1967, p. 12) suggest an analytical framework which isolates 'the invariant structural units which are represented by a variety of superficial forms'. The clause is seen as the fundamental grammatical unit, which is accompanied by semantic functions. Clauses are combined with one another and grouped into sections with different functions. They answer, for example, questions, such as 'What happened next?' or 'What's the point?'.

Therefore, narratives can be said to follow a specific pattern perfectly encapsulated by Labov's famous 'diamond' picture which describes the progression of an oral narrative. Oral narratives are said to be built around the following six concepts: 'evaluation', 'resolution', 'coda', 'abstract', 'orientation' and 'complication action' (see Toolan, 2001, p. 149). The orientation, for instance, provides information about the setting or the context. The abstract 'is an initial clause that reports the entire sequence of events of the narrative' (Labov, 1997, p. 402). The coda is 'a functional device for returning the verbal perspective to the present moment' (Labov and Waletzky, 1967, p. 39). There may also be the 'climax', and the 'denouement', which convey the resolution of the action. Clauses which are not chronologically ordered would illustrate the complicating action and provide the referential function which reports a next event. The relevant question is that of 'What happened?'. The evaluative function of the narrative which answers the question 'What's the point?' is realized through clauses which tell the readers what to think about a person, place, etc.