

MA Course on Narratology

Week 1

Narratology: Views and Development

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Narratology: Definitions

Narratology is defined as **a humanities discipline**. It is the theory of the structures of narrative. To investigate a structure, or to present a 'structural description', the narratologist dissects the narrative phenomena into their component parts and then attempts to determine functions and relationships.

It is dedicated to the study of **Narrative representation** in terms of:

1. LOGIC
2. PRINCIPLES
3. PRACTICES

Herman (2007) broadly defines the discipline as follows: an approach to narrative inquiry developed during the heyday of structuralism in France. Instead of working to develop interpretations of individual narratives, narratologists focused on how to describe narrative viewed as a semiotic system – that is, as a system by virtue of which people are able to produce and understand stories.

Narratology: Definition

Any discipline should have the following bases:

1. Theories
2. Concepts
3. Analytic Procedures

These bases are used in narratology as heuristic tools to **PRODUCE** and **PROCESS** narratives in a multitude of **forms, media, contexts**, and **communicative practices**.

Narrative vs. Story

Narrative: anything that tells or presents a story, be it by oral or written text, picture, performance, or a combination of these. Narratives can be found in conversation, jokes, novels, plays, films, comic strips, etc.

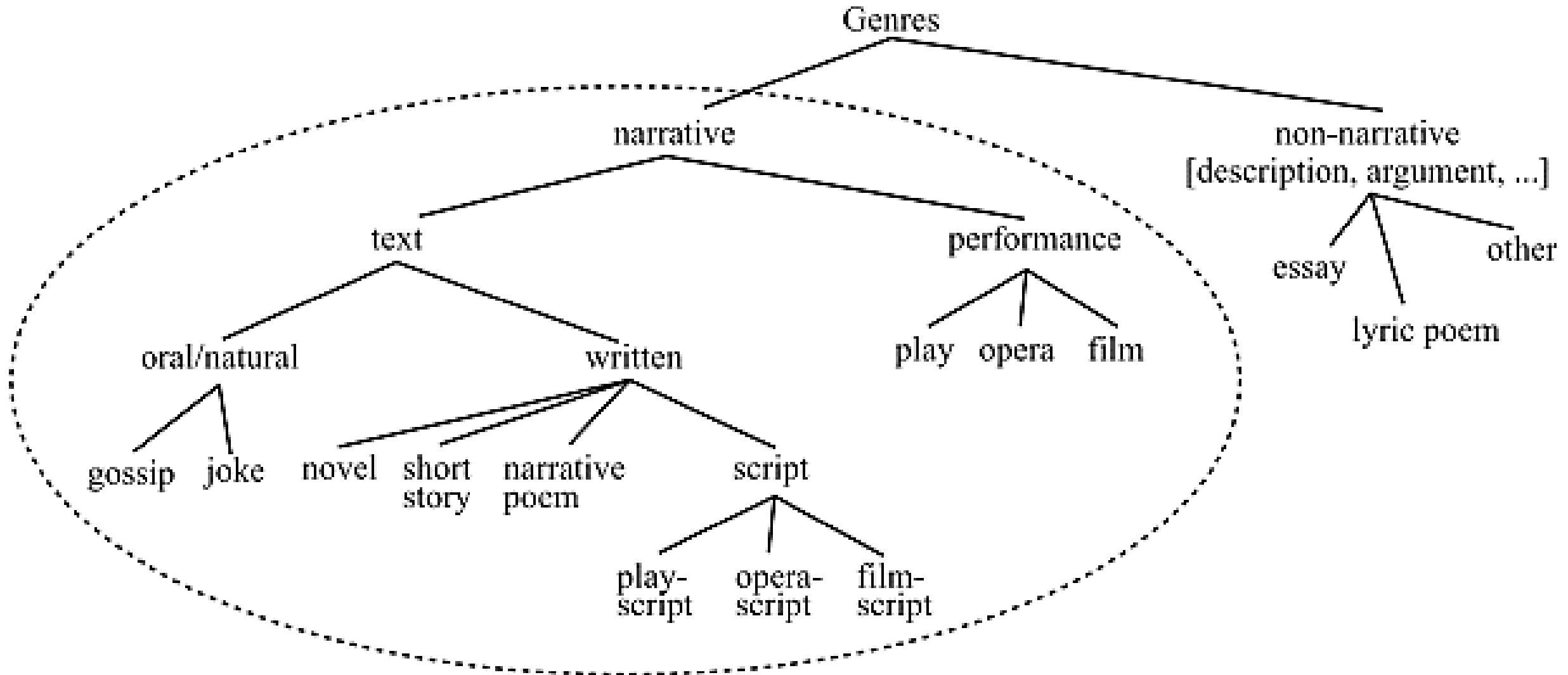
Story: a sequence of events involving characters. **Events** include both natural and non-natural happenings (such as floods and car accidents). Characters get involved by being **agents** (causers of events), **patients** or **beneficiaries** (being affected by events). Linguists further make a useful distinction between verbs which signal willful ('volitional') acts (*What does X do?* – jump from a bridge, watch a show) and verbs which signal non-volitional acts or experiences (*What does X experience?* – falling from a bridge, seeing an accident).

Discourse Narratology and Story Narratology

According to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (the very founding-father of structuralism), any sign consists of a 'signifier' and a 'signified' – basically, a tangible *form or substance* and a non-tangible *meaning*. For a narrative text – a complex sign – the signifier is a 'discourse' (a mode of presentation) and the signified is a 'story' (an action sequence). Hence, narratological investigation usually pursues one of two basic orientations:

- **Discourse narratology:** analyzes the stylistic choices that determine the form or realization of a narrative text (or performance, in the case of films and plays). Also of interest are the pragmatic features that contextualize text or performance within the social and cultural framework of a narrative act.
- **Story narratology:** focuses on the action units that 'emplot' and arrange a stream of events into a trajectory of themes, motives and plot lines (Bremond 1970, Prince 1982, Pavel 1985a, Ryan 1991). The notion of emplotment plays a crucial role in the work of theorists like the historian Hayden White (1996 [1981]) and cultural philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur (1991) and Michel Foucault.

Narratology: A taxonomy of narrative genres.



Narratology: Development

Cornils and Schernus, (2003); Darby, (2001); Kindt and Müller, (2003) appear to agree on the existence of three major stages in the development of narratology, sometimes re-distributed and amalgamated into two. Herman (2007) opts for the latter option and distinguishes two main periods which he terms the 'classical' and 'postclassical' (p. 13) approaches to the study of narrative:

I use the term classical approaches to refer to the tradition of research that, rooted in Russian Formalist literary theory, was extended by structuralist narratologists starting in the mid 1960s, and refined and systematized up through the early 1980s by scholars such as Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, Wallace Martin, Gerald Prince, and others. I also include under the rubric of classical approaches work in the Anglo-American tradition of scholarship on fictional narrative; some of these scholars were influenced by and in turn influenced the Formalist-structuralist tradition. (Herman, 2007).

Narratology: Development

During its initial or “classical” phase, from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, narratologists were particularly interested in identifying and defining narrative universals. This tendency is still echoed in a concise 1993 definition of narratology as “the set of general statements on narrative genres, on the systematics of narrating (telling a story) and on the structure of plot” (Ryan & von Alphen 1993: 110). However, a decade later, narratology was alternatively described as (a) a **theory** (Prince 2003: 1),

(b) a **method** (Kindt & Müller 2003: 211),

(c) a **discipline** (Fludernik & Margolin 2004: 149).

The concept of **discipline** subsumes **theory** and **method**, acknowledging narratology’s dual nature as both a theoretical and an application-oriented academic approach to narrative. Narratology is no longer a single theory, but rather comprises a group of related theories (cf. Herman ed. 1999). This has motivated some to conclude that narratology is in fact **a textual theory** whose scope extends beyond narratives and to claim that “none of the distinctions introduced by narratology to text theory is specific to any genre” (Titzmann 2003: 201).

Coining of the Term “Narratology”

1. The French term *narratologie* was coined by Todorov (1969: 10), who argued for a shift in focus from the surface level of text based narrative (i.e. concrete discourse as realized in the form of letters, words and sentences) to the general logical and structural properties of narrative as a *univers de representations*.
2. Todorov called for a new type of generalizing theory that could be applied to all domains of narrative, and in fact for a hypothetical “science that does not exist yet; let’s call it NARRATOLOGY, or science of narrative.”
3. One of the reasons for the scientific community’s hesitant acceptance of the name “narratology” was the proliferation of related and more general concepts as well as of alternative research agendas concerned with narrative.
4. In Germany, the terms *Erzähltheorie* and *Erzählforschung* were already well established and had been in use since the mid-1950s (Lämmert 1955), which might also explain why Ihwe’s 1972 attempt to introduce the term “narrativics” (*Narrativik*) met with limited success.
5. Among the Russian avant-garde, for whom poetry dominated literature, the call for a “theory of prose” amounted to a plea for a revaluation of the other hemisphere.
6. Important American contributions such as Booth ([1961] 1983) or Chatman (1978, 1990a) evolved from the tradition of New Criticism and rhetoric.
7. Finally, French narratologists were rooted in structural linguistics and semiology (Greimas [1966] 1983), in logic (Bremond 1973), or in rhetorical and traditional grammatical categories Genette ([1972] 1983).



Precursors: Plato

In *The Republic*, Plato differentiated literary genres on the basis of the genre-specific constellation of two fundamental modes of speech:

1. *mimesis*: the direct imitation of speech in the form of the characters' verbatim dialogues and monologues,
2. *diegesis*: which comprises all utterances attributable to the author.

According to Plato, the lyric genre is restricted to the use of *diegesis* and the dramatic genre to the use of *mimesis*, with only the epic genre combining both. This fundamental distinction of the two principal modes of narrating not only anticipated the 20th-century opposition *showing* vs. *telling*, but it also prefigured one of the three analytical dimensions adopted by Genette ([1972] 1983), namely *voice*.

Precursors: Aristotle

Aristotle's *Poetics* presented a second criterion that has remained fundamental for the understanding of narrative: the distinction between the totality of events taking place in **a depicted world** and the *de facto* narrated **plot** or *muthos*. He pointed out that the latter is always a construct presenting a subset of events, chosen and arranged according to **aesthetic considerations**. This resulted in the *Poetics*' functional approach to fictional protagonists and their actions, the latter explained as governed by the aesthetic and logical requirements of the overall *muthos*.

3.2.2 The Normative Paradigm: 17th to early 20th-century Theories of the Novel

Prose narrative became an accepted part of the literary canon only from the 18th century onward. Focusing on aspects of **thematics** and **didactics**, the main question motivating its early theorists was, therefore, **normative**: would the new literary form stand up to the qualitative standards of the ancient epics (long narrative poem)? This concern continued to dominate many theories of the paradigmatic narrative genre right into the early 20th century.

Re-introducing the Formal Paradigm: Spielhagen and Friedemann

Spielhagen ([1876]):

1. Distinguishing novel and novella in terms of the complexity and functionality of characters and the different economies of action and plot design.
2. Taxonomic distinction between first- and third-person narration.
3. Reflected on the author-narrator relation.

Friedemann ([1910])

1. The narrating instance as an inherent feature of any narrative.
2. Defined the essence of narrative in structural terms.
3. Taking the principle of Plato's phenomenological definition of the epos one step further.

From Catalogue to Formula: Aarne-Thompson vs. Propp

1. Late 19th-century literary history and theory equated narrative with literary narrative.
2. In the 1880s, the pioneers of a new empirical approach in folklore studies formed the “Finnish School,”
3. In 1910 Aarne, one of its members, published the first version of a catalogue known as the Aarne-Thompson-Index (Aarne & Thompson [1928] 1961), used internationally to the present day (Uther 2004). The expanded catalogue now lists 2,500 summarized variants of folk tales across eight categories.
4. A theoretical attempt to reduce literary narratives to basic principles was presented in Forster ([1927] 2005).
5. Focusing on empirical folk tales, Propp ([1928] 1968) presented a model of the elementary components of narratives and the way they are combined. Propp abstracted from the content plane altogether in order to describe a particular type of Russian fairy tales in terms of a sequence of thirty-one abstract “functions.”
6. Propp’s approach was to receive considerable attention
 - A. among the French structuralists who, while acknowledging the model’s originality, at the same time criticized it for its purely sequential, mono-linear logic of action and suggested replacing it with combinatory, multi-linear models (Lévi-Strauss 1976).
 - B. Partly on the basis of such revisions, Propp’s functional model served as a fundamental point of reference for the elaboration of “story grammars,”
 - C. Chomskian generative grammar: adopted by Prince 1973, 1980; van Dijk 1975; Pavel 1985), also by Artificial Intelligence (AI) researchers who tried to design artificial story telling systems (Rumelhart 1980; Bringsjord & Ferrucci 1999)

Narratology: The Classical Stage

The classical approaches to narratology is rooted in **Russian Formalist** literary theory and extended by structuralist narratologists in the mid 1960s. It was then refined and systematized up through the early 1980s by scholars such as **Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, Gerald Prince** and others. The Russian works (**Shklovsky's** distinction between **Fabula** and **sjuzhet** and **Propp's** Morphology of the Folktale (1968)) became referents on which further perspectives on narrative were subsequently built.

The classical period took its material from three sources:

- 1. the remnants of normative rhetoric and poetic.**
- 2. the practical knowledge of novelists**
- 3. the observations of literary critics.**

Narratology: Post Classical Stage

1. Narratology extends well into the 1990s under the influence of the new trends emerging from other humanities and social science disciplines such as **anthropology, psychoanalysis, cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology**.
2. The new term was coined by **Herman** in 1990s linking it with **cognate areas**.
3. Contemporary **“postclassical” narratology** cannot be reduced to a text theory.
4. Narratologists have paid increasing attention to the **historicity and contextuality of modes of narrative representation** as well as to its **pragmatic function across various media**.
5. **Narrative universals** have been extended to cover narrative’s **cognitive and epistemological functions**.

Post-classical Narratology and “New” Narratologies: 1990 to Present

1. A shift from text-based analysis to cognitive functions of oral and non-literary narrative
2. Heterogeneous methodology of narratology
3. Contextual Narratology
4. Transgeneric and intermedial approaches

Narratology as a methodology and its Relation to Other Discipline

1. Narratology is not the theory of narrative, but rather a theory of narrative (Bal and Prince).
2. The relation between narrative theory and narratology is **hierarchical and inclusive** (Nünning).
3. Narratology does qualify as **a discipline**. It has a defined object domain, explicit **models and theories**, a distinct descriptive terminology, transparent analytical procedures and the institutional infrastructure typical of disciplines: official organizations; specialized knowledge resources (journals, series, handbooks, dictionaries, bibliographies, web portals, etc.); a diverse scientific community engaging in national, international, and interdisciplinary research projects.
4. The application of narratological tools to extra-narratological research problems has become more and more widespread, resulting in a multitude of compound or “hyphenated” narratologies: **natural narratology, critical narratology, cognitive narratology, etc.**; Herman, Fehn, Fludernik.
5. Others focus on **thematic and ideology-critical concerns** (post-colonial narratology, feminist narratology).