



NARRA-
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INTRODUCTION TO THE
THEORY OF NARRATIVE

FOURTH EDITION

Mieke Bal



Already a seminal work and international classic, *Narratology* is revised and updated in this fourth edition to include a greater emphasis on literary texts.

Praise for previous editions

"The book is an excellent introduction to narratology. It is clearly and concisely written, and it explains the categories of narratology in a straightforward fashion."

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NARRATOLOGY

Introduction to the Theory of Narrative

Fourth Edition

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NARRATOLOGY

Introduction to the Theory of Narrative

Fourth Edition

Since its first publication in English in 1985, Mieke Bal's *Narratology* has become the international classic introduction to the theory of narrative texts. *Narratology* is a systematic account of narrative techniques and methods, and their transmission and reception, in which Bal distills years of study of the ways in which we understand literary works.

In this fourth edition, Bal updates the book to include a greater focus on literary narratives while also sharpening and tightening her language to make it the most readable and student-friendly edition to date. With changes prompted by ten years of feedback from scholars and teachers, *Narratology* remains the most important contribution to the study of the way narratives work, are formed, and are received.

MIEKE BAL is a cultural theorist, video artist, and Professor Emeritus in Literary Theory at the University of Amsterdam. Her website is at www.miekebal.org.

Preface to the First Edition

This introduction to narratology aims at presenting a systematic account of a theory of narrative for use in the study of literary and other narrative texts. It does not provide a survey of the major different trends in the field of narrative theory. There are other books available that provide such a survey. The choice for a systematic, hence limited, approach has been made for the sake of understanding, of the possibility of exchange of opinions, and of emancipation from intimidation. The choices I have made in this book were born from the conviction that a systematic account of one theory, which proceeds from definition, showing at every step its own structure and the necessity of its own phases, is easier for beginners in the field to understand than a plural survey of many different theories, involving names, terms, and, especially, heterogeneous arguments. For the same reason, names of predecessors have been reduced to the absolute minimum and, wherever possible, accounted for in special paragraphs at the ends of the chapters. The theory presented as a whole is also better accessible in the sense that whoever uses it will understand it the same way. This agreement of users has the advantage of a greater intersubjectivity. Teaching it becomes easier, learning it more feasible, because the risk of misunderstanding is reduced. Finally, the use of a method of analysis that every participant in a discussion can master helps students overcome the feeling of intimidation that a brilliant but unexpectedly structured interpretation by a teacher often entails. It is that feeling – the feeling that the teacher, while conveying the desire to master literature, may at the same time, by the very brilliance of his or her performance, intimidate – that brought me to the development of the present account. Once I was able to use a theory, I noticed a progression in the quality of my interpretations as well as in my capacity to teach.

These remarks lead to an instrumental view of theory, indeed of this particular type of theory, provided the "instrumental" refers to the practice of learning and teaching, not to the relation between the text and the theory alone. Conceived as a set of tools, as a means to express and specify one's interpretative reactions to a text, the theory presented here holds no claim to certainty. It is not from a positivistic desire for absolute, empirical knowledge that this theory and its instrumental character should be considered to have been generated. It is, quite the opposite, conceived as it is because interpretation, although not absolutely arbitrary since it does, or should, interact with a text, is in practice unlimited and free. Hence, I find, the need for a discourse that makes each interpretation expressible, accessible, communicable. Second, the tools proposed can be put to varied uses. I have myself used this theory for both aesthetic and political criticism, and found soon enough that these cannot, or should not, be separated. Hence, the need of more theory, beyond narratology: a theory that accounts for the functions and positions of texts of different backgrounds, genres, and historical periods. If the need for that broader kind of theory makes itself felt more acutely, narratology will have served its purpose just fine. One need not adhere to structuralism as a philosophy in order to be able to use the concepts and views presented in this book. Neither does one need to feel that adherence to, for example, a deconstructionist, Marxist, or feminist view of literature hinders the use of this book. I happen to use it myself for feminist criticism, and feel that it helps to make that approach the more convincing, because of the features a systematic account entails. The scope of narratology, in my view an indispensable tool, is a limited one.

The examples given are various. They come from different linguistic communities, including Dutch, my native language. Many Dutch examples have been replaced by others from more accessible literatures. A few, however, have been kept; they are provided with a short bibliographical note at the end of the book. Examples are drawn from different levels of aesthetic elaboration; not only from well-known literary novels but also from works of children's fiction and journalism; there are even fictitious examples. The latter form a kind of series.

The date of appearance of this book qualifies its place in the discussion of literary studies. It comes late, if one considers it a result of structuralism. Coming after the vogue of anti- or post-structuralist theoretical works, it aims at an integration of different types of theories, at showing the necessity of a rational critical discourse within whatever

view of literature one may hold, and at pursuing steadily the study of narrative as a genre, which stretches far beyond literature in the narrow, aesthetic sense.

Soon after its appearance in Dutch, Christine van Boheemen found it useful in her teaching of English and American literature. She undertook the heavy task of adapting examples to an international audience, and of translating it into English without any guarantee of publication. If it appears today in its present form, it is due to her generous and competent efforts, for which I want to express my deep gratitude. I also thank Jonathan Culler, who believed in the enterprise from the start and encouraged me to pursue it, even when facing difficulties of sorts which I would rather spare the reader. The same holds for Henry Schogt and Paul Perron, loyal supporters in Toronto.

Nobody but myself is responsible for misunderstandings the theory presented here may provoke. Feedback of any kind will always be most welcome; it will help to increase the usefulness of the book for the audience it aims at: those who, beginners or not, share my interest in narrative as a mode of cultural self-expression.

1985

Preface to the Second Edition

Here is a sequel to the preface. Ten years later, the book was still enough in demand to warrant reprinting it. But I was less and less comfortable with it, and so I proposed to revise it. There were three problems with reprinting it as was. First of all, I was more and more uneasy about the tone of it, the references to "being sure" and all those remnants of the positivistic discourse of my training that inhere in structuralist thought. I also changed my opinion, or perhaps my mood, regarding the somewhat arid presentation of concepts with examples only relating to the concept being presented. This became so conspicuous as I became a bit looser in my own critical practice. Even more decisively, my recent work has been less oriented towards literary narrative than to narrative in such diverse domains as anthropology, visual art, and the critique of scholarship. And then, of course, there was the problem of all the newer work on narratology I had not known when I first wrote it.

These three problems had me wavering between rejecting it altogether and revising it; between slight and thorough revising. I have moved on to other things since I wrote this book. Yet, the demand for the book did make it obvious that it is an instrument functioning in the public domain that I cannot simply take away. Negotiating my way through all this, I have, I hope, solved two out of the three problems mentioned. I have changed the tone wherever I could, trying to emphasize more the role of narratology as a heuristic tool, not an objective grid providing certainty. To this alleviation there is one exception. I have decided to keep the somewhat illusory abbreviations, such as *en* = external narrator. These abbreviations were never meant to suggest greater certainty, only to suggest a mode of quick notation. Although I find them a bit off-putting myself, users have assured me that they are helpful. But readers

are, obviously, welcome to ignore them. Regarding the second problem, I have added examples of a very different kind from those in the earlier editions. In addition to ad hoc examples of just one concept at the time, I have inserted short samples of how I have myself "used" these concepts in works of criticism not given over to technical demonstration. These examples stand out as later additions and, whenever they are a bit longer, they are graphically marked off from the main text. Together, they form a range of works that show simultaneously how narratology can intervene in other disciplines as much as in literature, and what my own intellectual itinerary has been since I first published this book.

In trying to address the third problem, that of other work on narratology that has been published since 1985, I have been less happy. Narrative is more important than ever, not only in literary studies but also in history, where the awareness of narrative construction has grown tremendously; in cultural studies, where cultural memory, documented in mostly narrative form, is a popular subject of study; in film studies, which has itself bloomed over the past 10 years, with its inevitably narrative subject matter. But it seems that with the growth of the study of narrative, interest in what makes narratives "be" or "come across" as narrative has only declined. Partly, narratology is to blame for this discrepancy, with its positivistic claims, formalist limitations, and inaccessible, idiosyncratic jargon. It is my hope that more modest claims, together with a more accessible presentation and more insight into the way narratology can be used in conjunction with other concerns and theories, may arouse renewed interest in its possibilities.

But, whereas narratology has continued to be elaborated and discussed, little of the work I found was geared towards the beginning narratologist in the way I wanted this book to be. Most work on narrative texts is not based on narratological analysis, and those that are invariably fall back on Genette's classical theory, which I had integrated into this book in so far as it was helpful, and criticized in so far as it was not. The exception is the work based on Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which offers a different view on narrative. I have integrated this view as best I could without sacrificing consistency. I have continued to pay little attention to reception-oriented theory. This is not a statement on its importance but simply a matter of economy. Within the self-imposed limitations of this book, reception is not an issue of narratology per se, except where communicative figures such as narrator and focalizer can be assumed to have their symmetrical counterparts, their addressees.

Instead, it must be understood that the entire theory presented here is a readerly device, a heuristic tool, that provides focus to the expectations with which readers process narrative. In order to emphasize this I have reversed the order in which I presented the three layers – fabula, story, text – in the earlier edition. It is by way of the text that the reader has access to the story, of which the fabula is, so to speak, a memorial trace that remains with the reader after completion of the reading. Other new work has simply been added to the “Remarks and Sources” at the end of each chapter.

1997

Preface to the Third Edition

The changes in this third edition compared to the second are numerous. These consist mainly of small clarifications, new examples, and sharper formulations based on teaching experience, reviews of the earlier editions, and helpful comments by colleagues and students. In order to further increase readability, any formulations that now seemed redundant to me have been excised. Concepts that seemed easily to come across as arid, such as the formal categories of the analysis of time, have been presented with more nuance. Relations among the more detailed examples have been established, with the result that throughout the book, extensive analyses emerge without the length required for detailed case studies.

Systematic changes were inspired by three considerations: length, relevance, and updating. For this edition, it became first of all desirable to limit the increasing length of this book, so that it could remain available for students. To that effect, and to vary and update examples, I have decided to replace some of the long case studies I had added to the second by shorter ones. I also eliminated longer analyses of paintings. Although I remain convinced that this theoretical framework can be productive for such analyses, I am more sceptical than I was in 1997 about the interest among art historians to make more than casual use of it. For clarity's sake I limit the examples to discourse, literary or not, and film. But the inclusion of film comes not only from a desire to acknowledge the relevance of narratology for this increasingly important field. I have also, since the second edition, been engaged in making films, and thus encountered the narratological issues from within that medium, so to speak. The experience has been extremely useful, both to realize and to relativize, or rather, specify the importance of narratological issues for the construction – as much as for viewing – of visual narratives.

There was yet another, quite practical reason for the changes in examples. I also wished to integrate a few more literary case studies. These are meant to increase the visibility of the practical usefulness of the concepts offered, and the way they do, indeed, foreground literary considerations. At the suggestion of many I have also offered reflections on the relationship between fiction and reality, in order to enhance the relevance of narratological analysis in contemporary culture.

The concern for relevance also led to a few more drastic changes. While many sections have been modified internally, in Part One I added a section on "Description Contested" and in Part Two one on "Nuances of Anachrony," while some restructuring resulted in a new section, "Why Characters Resist Us." Both serve the purpose of integrating new debates, of foregrounding the relevance of the concepts presented, and of making more general discussions on texts visible. In the discussion of character I have offered a more detailed account on how characters emerge, both in the story and in the fabula. These additions have allowed me to introduce modernist texts, notoriously difficult to analyze narratologically. At the end of the three parts I have attempted to pull together the concepts and issues presented in each, sometimes through an extensive example. Especially Part Two ends on an analysis of a textual fragment in view of its "cinematic" quality.

In trying to address the ongoing need for updating – in other words, the need to take into account other work on narratology that has been published since 1985 – I have limited myself. Theoretical consistency is always at risk of becoming dogmatic. Yet, both theoretically and didactically, consistency is indispensable. With every new publication that I considered, I carefully weighed these two opposing considerations. Narrative is more important than ever, not only in literary studies but also in history, where the awareness of narrative construction has grown tremendously; in cultural analysis, where cultural memory, documented in mostly narrative form, is a popular subject of study; in film studies, which has itself bloomed over the past 20 years, with its inevitably narrative subject matter. But it seems that with the growth of the study of narrative, interest in what makes narratives "be" or "come across" as narrative, and to what effect, has only declined. Partly, narratology is to blame for this discrepancy, with its positivistic claims, formalist limitations, and inaccessible, idiosyncratic jargon. It is my hope that more modest claims, together with a more accessible presentation and more insight into the way narratology can be used in conjunction with other concerns and theories, may arouse renewed interest in its possibilities.