

# **NARRATIVE THEORY**

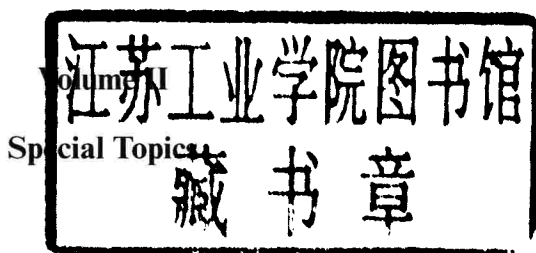
**CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN  
LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

**Edited by  
MIEKE BAL**

# NARRATIVE THEORY

Critical Concepts in Literary  
and Cultural Studies

*Edited by*  
*Mieke Bal*



 Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-31657-X (Set)  
ISBN 0-415-31659-6 (Volume II)

**Publisher's Note**

References within each chapter are as they appear in the  
original complete work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:

Ohio State University Press for permission to reprint Susan S. Lanser, '(Im)plying the Author', *Narrative* 9(2) (May 2001): 153–160.

*Style* for permission to reprint Monika Fludernik, 'Second-Person Narrative As a Test Case for Narratology: The Limits of Realism', *Style* 28(3) (Fall 1994): 445–479.

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint an extract from Monika Fludernik, 'Virgin Territories: The strategic expansion of deictic options', in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 223–249.

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Nanna Verhoeff for permission to reprint Nanna Verhoeff, 'Archival Poetics', *Screening the Past* 14 (December 2001): 19pp. <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast>.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME II

Volume I of this set contains key texts that map the main domains of which narrative theory is composed. A great number of other topics that are also frequently discussed do not fit into these broad categories however. This second volume begins with several of these.

The selection in Part I of this volume is, again, not meant to be comprehensive but the issues touched on are all passionately debated both within and outside narrative theory. As in the other parts of this volume, what the topics here – deixis, time, character/plot knot – have in common is that they relate narrative structure and style, the main themes of Volume I, to questions that, ultimately, have an ethical dimension, which itself becomes more prominent in Volume III. My choice of texts reflects the special reasons that scholars have had for insisting on issues and phenomena that might otherwise seem redundant or obsolete.

A good example is the question of the relevance of who wrote a text; a question that seemed, for a brief moment, to have been discarded but turned out to have been only temporarily bracketed with the rise of structuralism. In fact, the cumbersome question of the author has been hotly discussed ever since Roland Barthes proposed getting rid of it because it all but obscured the dense and rich structure of the narrative text itself. This rejection was also informed by the literary scholarship of the decades preceding the structuralist moment and the birth of narratology. Then, the author was the alpha and omega of criticism. Biography, social milieu and historical context were the primary objects of study. This led to a deterministic view according to which the meaning of a text was correlative to what an author had presumably intended in writing it. Barthes' resistance to this determinism and to the blindness to literary sophistication that it entailed was, therefore, necessary and timely.

Of course, any position that is as radical as murder – even if metaphorical – is bound to elicit resistance. Many protests came from defensive corners of a certain conservative humanism, where the imago of the genius artist remained firmly in place. There was also a lot of frustration in progressive political circles however. Now that, finally, women, blacks and other formerly

invisible groups were making their voices heard, those voices were declared dead: was that not a bit of a predicament, a bit suspect even? Personally, I am not convinced that re-introduction of the author into the text is necessary to solve these problems but there is surely reason for debate on this. I have included a single, short article in which this issue is raised from the point of view of feminism (*see* Volume II, Chapter 18).

A second central issue in Part I is that of realism. Narrative is, of course, far from bound to realism, whether a factual one (where truthfulness is a standard), a rhetorical one (where the goal is plausibility) or *vraisemblance*. What Barthes felicitously called the 'effect of the real' has remained a central category of the rhetoric of realism and is so frequently invoked that a bond between narrative and realism appears to be taken to exist (Barthes 1968, Genette 1969). Indeed, quite frequently narrativity and fictionality are even considered synonymous. This view is problematic but still standard enough that it cannot be ignored. The article selected here to relate narratology to the issue of realism has the added advantage of probing the theoretical relevance of certain narratological categories (*see* Volume II, Chapter 19). At stake is the seemingly marginal narrative form of 'second-person narrative'. Austrian narratologist Monika Fludernik connects this form with postmodern writing, thus also including a third problem, that of periodisation.

From the same author, I chose the article representing the next special topic, deixis, which is a linguistic category for words without external meaning, words that only have meaning in a specific situation or utterance (*see* Volume II, Chapter 20). The issue of deixis has been taken from the writings of linguist Emile Benveniste, an important French linguist who had a great influence on the Paris-based group of structuralist narratologists. A few articles from his collected essays (published in 1966) were immediately taken up by those narratologists who were interested in the duality of narrative as composed of plot and (represented) speech. What makes these linguistic categories important for narrative theory is the radical proposition put forward by Benveniste, that deixis, not reference, is the essence of language, because in deixis, subjectivity is linguistically constituted.<sup>1</sup> Instead of including Benveniste's original formulation, which is limited to the consideration of short, linguistic utterances, it seemed more productive to incorporate an article in which his theory is brought to bear on narrative specifically. Fludernik is one of the new generation of narratologists who did not turn from the structuralist foundations to post-structuralist critique, but who kept focusing on a project of a more or less 'scientific' narratology, framed within cognitive psychology. Her analysis connects deixis to a variety of narrative topics, from subjectivisation and the representation of consciousness to 'person' and time. Thus, Fludernik's article also connects to the next topic: narrative temporality.

Genette's tripartite treatment of time as chronology, duration and frequency cannot be fully represented, but the first and the third aspects have

each inspired many narratological analyses. Whereas deixis concerns the temporal anchoring of narrative events, the temporality known as chronology raises the issue of the coincidence between the linearity of language and historical time. On those notions, I have selected the first part of an extended series of works on temporality by Tel Aviv-based scholar Meir Sternberg, a specialist on modernist fiction as well as Biblical narrative (see Volume II, Chapter 21). It is one of the many valuable contributions on this theme from the group linked to the influential journal *Poetics Today*, of which, alas, I have had to include far too few.<sup>2</sup>

The final, special topic in this part is also related to temporality. After chronology, the theme of Sternberg's paper, the last article presents the frequency aspect, also an issue of time. The article (Volume II, Chapter 22), by J. Hillis Miller, offers an analysis of repetition, another topic on which much has been written. Miller connects repetition to larger problems of temporality. He also represents the deconstructionist mode of narratology, of which he, together with Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man, is an outstanding representative. Another reason for including it is the object analysed – Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. This modernist novel, like Faulkner's and Proust's works, has radically transformed narrative literature. It raises issues of remembrance and representability that will return *a propos* to trauma in Volume III. It also, in relation, demonstrates the problem of communication that radical subjectivity entails. Finally, Miller is a major writer in the debate on the ethics of narrative discussed later in this volume.

Part 2 of this volume is devoted to what I call 'paradigmatic' case studies. With this term I do not mean they have necessarily been leading examples, nor that they brought about a change of paradigm in the sense of Thomas Kuhn. I mean that *qua* case studies, they are paradigmatic: they are gear-shifts between theorising and analysis, proposing ways that theories can be used for analysis as well as ways that the texts continue to elude grasp; indeed, to resist theories. Thus, what makes these case studies paradigmatic is the change of the very notion of 'application' that they necessitate. Instead of applying a ready-made theory to a passive object, these case studies, explicitly or implicitly, suggest that theory and literary text are two interlocutors brought to bear upon one another. Thus, they announce the deconstruction of the distinction between theoretical and literary discourse. This distinction, even opposition, between what is often called 'primary' (the literary text) and 'secondary' (the theory), is in fact disingenuous lip service to the alleged primacy of literature. Instead, the text called 'primary' is more often than not subjected to a pre-established theoretical premise that overrules its specificity. The case studies presented in this section each attempt to overcome that distinction, demonstrating the point of theory for the literary text.

The genre of the theoretical demonstration is worth considering for its own sake. As I announced in the introduction to Volume I, structuralist narratology suffered from a high level of abstraction, whereby its readership,

and hence its use, was sometimes limited. Key figures in structuralism have, however, always worked with concrete case studies to develop their theories. Todorov's earliest book was a structural analysis of Boccaccio's *Decamerone*; Greimas's *Sémantique Structurale* (1966) made its greater impact, belatedly, when he demonstrated – and, of course, adjusted! – that theory ten years later, in a book-length analysis of a short story by Maupassant (Greimas 1976); Barthes' *S/Z* emerged from the author's doubts about the abstract plot-oriented models.

Here, both Greimas and Barthes speak through shorter pieces, with an equally practical thrust (see Volume II, Chapters 23 and 24, respectively). Greimas summarises his method in a short study of another Maupassant story, while Barthes takes a short story by Poe to demonstrate, for a larger audience, what he had done before in *S/Z*. Given the turning point that the latter text has proved to be, it seemed a good idea to include Barbara Johnson (Volume II, Chapter 25), another deconstructionist, who also integrates psychoanalytic ideas into this (post-?)structuralist train of thought. Johnson is one of the most brilliant deconstructionist critics of her generation and, although most of her work is not explicitly narratological in concern, her interpretation of Barthes' text illuminates the way that narratological analysis is always also framed from the outside of its own theoretical framework.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan is the author of one of the early textbooks that successfully introduced narrative theory to a larger audience. The recently published, revised and expanded edition of this book testifies to an ongoing interest in such publications, especially among students, her primary audience (Rimmon-Kenan 1983).<sup>3</sup> I have included her analysis of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (see Volume II, Chapter 26) for two reasons. One is Faulkner's own importance with regard to the experimental writing of subjectivity in narrative, in ways that complement both Woolf's and Proust's experiments. The other is because Rimmon-Kenan integrates her earlier work on the logic of ambiguity with her narratological interest in voice and focalisation.

The last case study (see Volume II, Chapter 27) was taken from a book by prominent feminist critic Naomi Schor, who devoted much work to the feminine in the canonical literature of the French nineteenth century. Here, her text is Flaubert's orientalist novel, *Salammbô*, and her focus on the tiny, incongruous detail of a thin golden chain around the Princess's ankle. (Her other essays on the detail have been collected in a separate volume (Schor 1987).) In the book from which this essay was taken, she theorises the bond between three issues – narrative representation, the detail and realism – and connects them to the question of gender. The article I have selected here has additional relevance in view of Culler's essay in the section three (see Volume II, Chapter 28).

After the initial moment of exhilaration at the discovery that such an elusive object as narrative literature could be analysed with models derived

from scientific methods of reasoning, an increasingly vehement discussion arose around the ‘ethics’ of narrative. Ethics are, indeed, both crucial to the cultural importance of narrative literature and, it seems, impossible to pinpoint, in an analysis based on a systematic theory of narrativity. A self-respecting narrative theory cannot remain indifferent to these issues, especially since so much of narrative makes claims to realism, *vraisemblance* and even truth – as in journalism, for example. Part 3 of this volume approaches the issue of the ethics of narrative truth through a number of different inquiries. *A propos* of Flaubert, Jonathan Culler’s earliest book (Culler 1974) attends, with great subtlety, to the novelist’s play with meaning as detached from reference. The place of reference is a sore point in narrative theory, semiotics and semantics alike. Flaubert was a master in the exploitation of the indeterminacy of reference or, what Culler calls here, the ‘uses of uncertainty’. Given Culler’s later interest in deconstruction (which was not developed until after he wrote a masterful, comprehensive book on structuralist poetics), this topic in such a very early book is remarkable.<sup>4</sup>

Paul de Man, a major deconstructionist, who worked on narrative for most of his career, uses the narrative attitude in literature to probe the contradictions between truth as an ethical obligation and the ethics of truth as a problem. He often sets narrative structure and rhetorical figures up against each other. In the article included here – also chosen because it is devoted to the third major modernist, Proust – he erects an insurmountable conflict between metaphor and plot (*see* Volume II, Chapter 29). The need to include rhetorical figures in any thinking on narrative is, of course, strongly bound to the impossibility of defining any object as *purely* narrative. This is why I have refrained from offering a definition of narrative, which is what most narratologists would do, and why it is better to speak instead of narrativity as an aspect or attitude that can occur in many different cultural artifacts or events.

The issue of truth plays a major part in some disciplines, a minor part in others. Where literary studies may worry about authenticity, factual truth is not one of its main preoccupations. In history, by contrast, truth comes first, at least traditionally. A small dossier of historical narrativism and its problems is included in Volume IV, where psychoanalysis is presented as an example of an important intertext for narratology. Here, in Part 3, I have taken psychoanalysis in a different context: as a typical disciplinary field where truth is an important issue yet where ‘factual’ truth is not the one that counts. In the 1980s, Freud’s case history on the adolescent girl Dora – an incomplete case, since Dora broke off the treatment – attracted a lot of attention from within the context of gender studies. Precisely because narratology was not the main concern, Steven Marcus’s article on the ‘storiness’ of the case history raised the problem of the relation between narrativity and fictionality (*see* Volume II, Chapter 30). Does being a (literary) narrative, a contrived narrative representation, make the Dora case history into fiction?

The response by Dorrit Cohn allowed me to include a piece by the author of *Transparent Minds* (1978), an early narratological theory of subjectivism. Cohn's later book expresses a concern with the 'narrative turn', or the ease with which scientific and other non-fictional texts have been appropriated for narratological analysis. This is an interesting discussion – for me, primarily, because of the undercover problem of fictionality which seems so easy to include in the concept of narrativity. Doubtful as this may be on theoretical grounds, many who wish to make use of narratological concepts outside the field of literature may wish to form their own opinion about this. For, in the end, this question concerns the ethics of academic work itself.

The last chapter in this section broaches the question of ethics and truth from yet another angle. Shoshana Felman's analysis of Camus' *La chute* (*The Fall*) discusses this novel in terms of the ethical obligation to bear witness, of which Western culture became acutely aware in the wake of the Holocaust (see Volume II, Chapter 32). Is narrative, perhaps, inherently confessional? In other words, does the narrative form compel its readers to bear witness, to listen in to a confession otherwise not available? As the analysis unfolds, the concentric circles that characterise Amsterdam as a city come to form an allegory for the silencing that persists in social life, and of which the Allies' failure to act and prevent the deaths of millions is only an 'ordinary', albeit magnified, instance. Here, narrative space becomes the symbolic representation of acts not accomplished, of words not spoken. Moreover, the novel's narrative – a novel discretely written in the second person as discussed by Fludernik – becomes a case, in the legal sense of the term.

A short final section in this volume serves to disenchant those readers who expect too much of the systematic nature of narrative theory. I found it important to include these papers, none of which are 'properly' narratological, so as to counter the notion that only the predictable and systematic aspects of narrative can be analysed by means of the concepts and structures of narrative theory. In fact, all three papers take narrative theory as a sounding board and show the specific features of the texts under discussion through their awkward fit within narrative theory. As her title suggests, Cynthia Chase, an important deconstructionist critic, 'explodes' narrative theory (Volume II, Chapter 33). Yet the notion of narrative functions here as a direction for use, as a mode of reading that lays bare what Kleist's story appears to hide, yet in which he also seems to rub our noses.

Similarly, Andreas Huyssen's analysis of Rilke's famously difficult 'novel', *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* foregrounds the fragmented body as a site where narrative can be set up against itself (Volume II, Chapter 34). Both Chase's and Huyssen's texts focus on narratives of the early twentieth century, the era when mechanical thinking collided with mechanistic narrative expectations. In conclusion, Nanna Verhoeff uses narrative theory to examine how the films of her corpus – unfinished, incomplete or fragmented

bits from the earliest days of cinema – can best be characterised in their own terms (Volume II, Chapter 35). Thus, the most frequently alleged charge against narrative, that it universalises its own model of narrative, is effectively undermined.

Together then, rather than offering generalised conceptions of narrative, the texts in Volume II help the reader to think through specific problems and ideas pertaining to it. It is my hope that this volume will thus contribute to revising the stereotyping view of narrative theory that holds it to be generalising, mechanistic and positivistic.

### Notes

- 1 This duality is represented in Volume I through Parts 2 and 3, respectively. See also Benveniste 1966.
- 2 The article is related to his earlier book, see Sternberg 1978.
- 3 The Afterword to the revised and expanded edition, published by Routledge in 2002, is included in Volume I, Part 1. Another textbook still in use is my own *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Bal 1985).
- 4 Culler's itinerary can be summed up by the following key publications: Culler 1974, 1975, 1983.

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## INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME II

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## Part 1

# SPECIAL TOPICS: DEIXIS, TIME, CHARACTER/ PLOT KNOT