

Interview with Brian Richardson

Narratological Perspectives in the 21st Century

Fernando Texeira, Diego Pérez

How would you describe the context of narrative studies and the narrative theory at the time of the release of issue number 2, vol. 34, of *Style*?

BR: That was a very interesting period. A few people were fearing the decline or even the demise of narratology, but at this time (as we can see more clearly now) there were several different areas that were growing exponentially; these included cognitive narratology, queer narrative theory, the narratology of life writing, and the application of narrative theory to other areas like history, law, anthropology, medicine, theology. And of course, there was what I called “postmodern” but which soon became unnatural narratology. Many of these new directions were sufficiently established for Monika Fludernik to include them in her account, “Histories of Narrative Theory II: From Structuralism to the Present” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz in 2005 (pp 36-59). In many ways this article serves as a useful extension of my own conceptions.

In your “Recent Concepts of Narrative and the Narratives of Narrative Theory” you list at least 4 central concepts of the definition of narrative which you called, on that occasion, temporal, causal, minimal, and transactional. Among them, which one would you say has been more prominent in narrative studies in the past 20 years?

BR: I would say that the temporal and minimal definitions are clearly waning, the causal has held strong, while the transactional has been growing, in part because of continued and recent work by Monika Fludernik and Meir Sternberg. I should have included the rhetorical definition of narrative in that account, which is still

defended by James Phelan and his many disciples. The new work in that area has been based on prototypical narratives; this is utilized by a number of scholars associated with cognitive narratology; Marie-Laure Ryan has a good account of in her chapter, "Toward a Definition of Narrative" in the *Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (22-38). I discuss all these theories in a chapter on defining narrative in my latest book, *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-first Century*, pp 14-29.

Still on "Recent Concepts", you relativize what you call "the master narrative of the theory of narrative". However, in later works that took the history of narrative theory into account, some of which were seen in reference books like *What is Narratology?* (2003), edited by Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (2005), edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, or *The Handbook of Narratology* (2009), edited by Peter Hühn, invariably seem to repeat the formula of the master narrative even if it is to contest it. In your opinion, what is missing for more relevant work on different histories of narrative theory to emerge?

BR: Since Hegel we have thought of history in terms of linear development, so it's not surprising that many think of critical histories in this way. Since Hayden White, however, we have realized how easy it is to provide alternative ways to emplot our narratives, so narratologists don't really have an excuse for producing teleological trajectory that concludes with them. Sometimes, I'm sure, it proves irresistible to present oneself as the culmination of the history of narratology, even though one knows that one's position could be emplotted very differently. "Postclassical narratology" sounds so much better in this culture than neo-formalism.

In general, in big-name journals and publications on narrative theory, the name of Latin researchers seems to be scarce, either as published texts or as references. Bearing in mind that Latin America has produced important works on the narrative issue from the 1980s onwards (which coincides with the so-called post-classical narratologies) such as *Transculturación narrativa* (1984), by the Uruguayan Ángel Rama, or *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (1993), by the Cuban Roberto González Echevarría, how do you see these absences or omissions?

BR: I've learned that creating a bibliography is a great way to make enemies. One feels bad for decades about the important items that were inadvertently left off. However, I don't feel bad about omitting González Echevarría, since his work is more aligned with the theory of the novel than with narratology per se. In my anthology, *Narrative Beginnings*, I did publish an article by Carlos Riobó which cites *Myth and Archive*. The absence that I do feel badly about is Chilean Félix Martínez Bonati, whose work I had cited in my first monograph a few years earlier.

In your article with Monika Fludernik in the same 2000 *Style's* number, "Bibliography of Recent Works on Narrative", there are no trends listed from Latin America or names of Latin American intellectuals. What causes would you say, from your academic experience, that prevent the dialogue of these researchers with what is being currently produced on narrative theory in North America and Europe?

BR: To a large extent this is a question of familiarity. People think first of works they are familiar with, in our case it was North American, German, and French works. Others were added for the same reason: Bhabha, Cornis-Pope, Doležel, Masaku Mori, Dan Shen. In retrospect, we should have gone over the list and asked ourselves what groups or areas have we left off? I feel bad about omissions from Latin America and from China.

In 2000, you remarked that an interesting way to trace a history of narrative theory would be through the chronicle (as presented by Hayden White). Looking back today, in 2021, what advice would you give to a researcher who proposes to trace a history of narrative theory?

BR: One key method would be to imagine alternative ways of constructing such a history, and further noting whose interests would be best served by such histories. What would a cognitivist centered narrative look like and what would it exclude? What about feminist, rhetorical, digital, or unnatural (what I then called "postmodern") centered history look like? These considerations can help provide more inclusiveness.