J. Alexander Bareis

The State of the Art

- Peter Hühn/John Pier/Wolf Schmid/Jörg Schönert (eds.), Handbook of Narratology. (Narratologia 19) Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 2009. IX, 468 S. [Preis: EUR 129,95]. ISBN: 978-3-11-018947-6.

Preliminaries

In 2002, the first conference on narratology organized by the Hamburg-based Narratology Research Group took place, and the documentation of the conference was published one year later as the first volume in the newly founded series *Narratologia*. In 2009, the printed version of the *Handbook of Narratology* was published as number 19 in the same series. Since July 1st 2010 all of its entries are also available as *The Living Handbook of Narratology*,[1] an online and open access project hosted in a cooperation of the publishing house De Gruyter and Hamburg University Press, which receives funding from both the University and the German Research Foundation (DFG). The original Hamburg research group was founded in 1998 as an informal group of interest and received funding by the DFG from 2001 to 2010. In view of the handbook and numerous other impressive publications and activities conducted by members of the research group, one cannot but state that the research money was very well spent. The *Handbook of Narratology* and the ›living‹ online version prove impressively what can be achieved by collaboration and concentration of modes, means and measures of research in the humanities.

The printed version of the handbook contains 32 original entries on essential topics in narratology written by leading international researchers in the field. According to the editors' preface (IX), each entry consists of a (relatively) short definition of the topic »followed by a more detailed explication« and then proceeds with a discussion of different »approaches, positions, and controversies« of the term in question, recapitulating its historical change as well as suggesting topics for further research. Every entry also provides a solid bibliography on both cited works and suggestions for further reading. At the back, indices of terms and concepts as well as names, in addition to the cross-referencing of the articles, make the printed version quite easily accessible and convenient to work with.

The open access online version offers even more. In addition to the 32 original entries of the printed version, one new article has already been added while more are expected to follow.[2] Furthermore, the open access version contains a number of features typical of digital publishing, such as a full-text search option, a very convenient one-click-export of reference information, and will, according to Jan Christoph Meister who is the executive editor of the digital version, include digital humanities tools for text analysis.[3]

Overall, the entries of both the print and the online version of the handbook ensure a much better introduction to the core topics of narratology than would short entries in an encyclopedia, yet the handbook stops short of getting to the level of specialization necessary for articles in a scientific journal. Therefore, the handbook is the ideal choice for researchers looking for quick guidance and updates in the highly developed area of narratology.

Some Brief Criticism

If there is anything one could find worthy of criticism so far, it is the extreme brevity of the opening remarks in the preface of the printed version. Unfortunately, the editors do not provide the reader with insight into their mode of reasoning about elementary questions such as the grounds on which the entries of the handbook were chosen. This is also true of the »Editorial Information« of the ›living‹ handbook, which rather deals with technical information. One cannot but wonder how the intense discussions amongst the editors must have gone back and forth in order to decide which topics to select and which to omit. Which were the guidelines when the editors decided to fix the headings and topics of the 32 different entries? On what grounds did the editors finally decide? These questions are not meant to imply that the choice of articles is non-logical or ill-fitting. A number of topics is of course obvious: an entry on the narrator is mandatory, as well as ones on the reader, the author and the character, and this can be said about almost all of the other entries as well. Put differently, the choice of entries appears well-motivated and informative, yet certain questions remain: Why is there an entry on, e.g. cognitive narratology, but not on other approaches such as structuralist, rhetoric, postcolonial, or feminist narratology? Especially the latter strikes me as an oversight, which is underlined by the fact that only five of the overall 33 contributors are female.[4]

In addition to that, there are other entries that are less self-explanatory. For instance, topics such as ›Dialogism‹, ›Heteroglossia‹ (both heavily Bakhtinian), ›Performativity‹, ›Schemata‹ and ›Tellability‹ are all interesting research areas and are certainly worthy of the attention they receive, since they are vividly discussed in what could be called a broad understanding of narratology. On the other hand, they are not necessarily situated at the very heart of narratological research, even if this view naturally depends strongly on one's own understanding of what narratology is, or should be. Alternative topics easily come to mind, such as ›Narrative and Time‹, ›Voice‹, and maybe also ›Interpretation‹ and/or ›Intentionality‹, and, perhaps most importantly, ›Unreliable Narration‹ – even though this entry has already been added to the online version, and is also discussed briefly within the entry on the narrator by Uri Margolin in the printed version. To be totally clear: I can imagine a number of good reasons for including all of the entries in the printed version of the handbook, but unfortunately we are left without any guidance by the editors as to why certain topics were chosen while others had to stand aside in the first printed edition.

However, the selection of topics signals an open approach and an open mind behind the choice of entries, which is further underlined by the fact that the expected additions to the *Living Handbook* will also be added to later print editions of the handbook.

Discussion of Selected Entries

This review is not the place to discuss all of the 32 entries on the 468 pages of the printed version. My choice of articles is of course highly subjective and coincides with my own research interests. That being said, there happens to be no need to postpone the deeper discussion of the complete set of articles very much longer, since the online version of the handbook is »published in a WiKi system and offers narratologists registered to do so the opportunity to comment on existing articles, suggest additions or corrections and submit new articles to the editors« – that is why it is called a ›living‹ handbook.[5] Even though all of these features are currently not available yet (checked December 13, 2010), they will certainly ensure the possibility of an ongoing debate and a most welcomed broadening of the thematic scope. Hopefully, the online version will provide some insights into the overall framework and the editors'

principles of selection as well. If not, prospect contributors will find it rather difficult to suggest meaningful contributions.

›Narratology‹

In certain ways, one could argue that the entry on the term ›narratology‹ by Jan Christoph Meister (329-350) serves as a sort of meta-introduction to the handbook. A surprise in this respect is the absence of Bakhtin in the explication by Meister, although Bakhtin's work is well represented in the *Handbook* in the entries on ›Heteroglossia‹ and ›Dialogism‹. Also worth mentioning is the fact that Meister explicitly lists Feminist narratology as one of the important contributions to poststructuralist narratology (cf. 339).

Yet another fact worth mentioning is that Meister's entry mirrors quite well the European and, in this particular case, the German affinity of the handbook. Meister repeatedly emphasizes the early German contributions to narrative theory and frequently refers to German and European research on a whole range of other topics.[6] This comment is not meant as any type of accusation of partial blindness or the favoring of national interests or anything alike on the part of the editors and contributors. Rather, it is meant to highlight the fact that the handbook clearly takes different approaches to some points if compared to, for example, Northern-American oriented publications such as the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. I do not regard this as a flaw *per se*. The *Handbook of Narratology* is in many ways a European product, edited by three German scholars from Hamburg and one English scholar who works in France, and with contributions from a whole range of researchers from all over Europe, but it also includes entries written by scholars from the United States.

When Meister comments on criticism to the concept of unreliable narration, he states that it was »rejected by structuralists such as Genette (1983)« (337), notably without an exact reference to the page(s) in Genette's 1983 seminal study *Nouveau discours du récit*. My own reading of Genette does not include, if I remember correctly, a dismissal of the concept of unreliable narration at all. To my knowledge, Genette does not even discuss the term systematically, but there are good reasons to believe that he implicitly acknowledges the concept of unreliable narration – *qua* a little piece of unreliable narration by himself. I will take the liberty of a minor excursion here, since I believe that this detail of Genette's seminal work has so far been neglected by narratologists.[7]

In the preface of *Nouveau discours du récit*, Gérard Genette discusses the question of why he only makes use of fictional narrative as textual example and, even more so, why he only makes use of one single fictional narrative, Marcel Proust's *Á la recherche du temps perdu*. Let me quote the English version of the preface here, which also makes for a marvelous piece of scientific prose:

> I had formed the intention – if I am not mistaken, during the winter (February to April) of 1969 at New Harbour, Rhode Hampshire, [Footnote in square brackets to indicate that it is the translator's comment: ›Geography in the style of Nabokov (see *Pale Fire*)‹] where I was frequently kept at ›home‹ by snowdrifts – of testing and systematizing some categories that I already caught occasional glimpses of, [Footnote with reference to *Figures II*] by working on the only text available in ›my‹ house (the three Pléiade volumes of the *Recherche*) and on the random scraps of a literary memory that was already somewhat in distress. A way, like any other – and doomed, indeed, to fail, but I fear that for an instant I had that imp(r)udent pretension – of emulating the manner, the sovereign manner, in which Erich Auerbach, deprived (elsewhere) of a library, one day wrote *Mimesis*. May my colleagues at Harkness University, who are justifiably proud of one of the best literary libraries in the world and who venture out to it in all kinds of weather, forgive me this doubly incongruous parallel, which appears here only for the sake of ›the true story‹.[8]

In the English version, the translator, Jane E. Lewin, added a footnote to Genette's choice of place, New Harbour, Rhode Hampshire, and called it »Geography in the style of Nabokov (See *Pale Fire*)«. As a matter of fact, there is no such place as New Harbour, Rhode Hampshire, not even in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which is about a professor of literature called John Shade, who works at the University of New Wye in the state of Appalachia. All of these are fictitious places, and obviously so are the places where Genette is ›snowed in‹ all by himself, cut off from the excellent library, sitting in his ›home‹ with only the *Pléiade*-edition of Proust's great narrative.

Probably only few have invested any further thought into this little piece, which we might want to call a joke, or a mistake, or, and that would be my suggestion, a piece of unreliable narration in Genette's narrative on narration. Yet another point in my line of argument is the fact that Nabokov's narrative by and of Kinbote/Botkin and professor Shade and his poem is a highly unreliable one, playing, among other things, with the identity of both the narrator(s) and the characters, questioning again and again the reliability of the narrative.

So what Genette does is not to reject the concept of unreliable narration – quite the opposite: he actually rather exemplifies it by making a reference to one of its most elaborate and classic examples. What Genette does in the 1983 publication, though, is that he explicitly rebuts the concept of the implied author, which has become a necessary part of a rhetorical narratology dealing explicitly with unreliable narration, as introduced by Wayne C. Booth. But that is another matter – a rejection of the concept of the implied author does not necessarily entail the rejection of any possible concept of unreliable narration.

›Fictional vs. Factual Narration‹

I will continue with a few comments on the entry by Jean-Marie Schaeffer on »Fictional vs. Factual Narration« (98-114). Schaeffer gives a splendid overview of this highly complex and multi-facetted research area that cuts across various fields. Without being able to discuss the entry at the level of detail it deserves, two aspects can be critically commented on: First, in his argumentation on what he chooses to label »The semantic definition of the Fact/Fiction Difference« (104), Schaeffer reinstates a dichotomic view on fiction and fact which by now has been critically discussed a number of times;[9] second, his argument for the necessity of non-factual content in fictional discourse is rather based on an assumption about what readers usually accept: »[A] narrative in which every sentence is true (referentially) and which nevertheless pretends to be fiction would not be easily accepted as a fiction« (105). On the contrary, one could argue that this most probably happens all the time – we are just not necessarily aware that discourse, that is paratextually labeled as fiction might also be referentially true at the same time. Furthermore, what readers accept is highly variable from a diachronic point of view. Expectations on truthfulness in fictional narratives are changing over time.

This neglection of a diachronic perspective is especially surprising since Schaeffer later on raises some highly interesting points concerning the historical development of narrative forms. He suggests in the last section on »Simulation, Immersion and the Fact/Fiction Divide« that there might be a connection between the ability of fictional narratives to facilitate immersion and mental simulation and the development of certain narrative techniques, especially concerning third-person, heterodiegetic narration. The rise of techniques such as free indirect discourse or so-called ›unspeakable sentences‹ *sensu* Hamburger and Banfield could, according to Schaeffer, be explained in the light of the liberation of epistemic constraints to truth-value during the evolution of third-person fiction.

Finally, Schaeffer's entry is the only one of all the 32 entries that does not have a final chapter on further topics of research. Obviously, this is merely a minor editorial oversight, which can be easily corrected in the online version of the Living Handbook. Until now, though, the online entry also lacks the further-research section.

›Illusion (Aesthetic)‹

The question of fictionality also plays a prominent role in the entry on »Illusion (Aesthetic)« by Werner Wolf. There are two points in his contribution that I want to discuss in detail. These points are terminological and theoretical. The terminological question I want to raise is that Wolf uses the term ›aesthetic illusion‹, despite the fact that most researchers nowadays use the term ›immersion‹, as Wolf himself concedes (cf. 154). The term ›illusion‹, which Wolf discusses at length, but not until section 3.1, strikes me as partially misleading. A number of researchers have decided not to use the term for the description of a mental state that very often should be described as including a mental awareness of an artefact's representational status.

Wolf is fully aware of the fact that ›illusion‹ evokes the notion of being unaware of the real state of affairs, which is a misleading connotation of a status that Wolf himself describes as »a latent rational distance resulting from a culturally acquired awareness of the difference between representation and reality« (144). Wolf argues that only his favored expression ›aesthetic illusion‹ fully secures the inclusion of both perspectives: being absorbed in a story world while simultaneously being aware that it is merely a story world.

I have my doubts about this line of argument. First of all, it is not entirely clear to me which aspects Wolf's preferred term is meant to cover. Wolf relies heavily on the theoretical framework of Kendall Walton, but does not make use of Walton's crucial term ›make-believe‹ in his explication. Walton's term expresses very well the double nature of the phenomenon. On the other hand, it is not entirely clear to me whether Wolf's ›aesthetic illusion‹ is actually meant to cover exactly the same phenomenon, since Wolf explicitly makes use of other terms employed by Walton, namely ›psychological participation‹ and ›involvement‹ (cf. 145). However, these terms of Walton cover merely parts of his understanding of ›make-believe‹.

The fact that Wolf never discusses Walton's term ›make-believe‹ as an alternative is particularly odd since he quotes Walton more than any other scholar – five times on the first two pages alone. If Wolf aims at the double notion of simultaneous awareness and immersion into a fictional world, the term ›make-believe‹ seems to be the better choice. If Wolf's main point of interest rather lies with the notion of being caught up in a story world, ›immersion‹ would have been the better choice.

My second point addresses the suggested unified validity of the concept of ›aesthetic illusion‹ in different media and genres. In his discussion of Ansgar Nünning's debated concept ›mimesis of narrating‹,[10] Wolf insists on the prevailing of »story, i.e. character and events, rather than narration« (157) as the center of illusion in narratives, and justifies this by pointing to the occurrence of ›aesthetic illusion‹ in various narrative domains, even in seemingly narratorless narrative forms such as drama and film. Since, in Wolf's opinion, these forms also show a high affinity to ›aesthetic illusion‹, but often lack narrators, this option is dismissed.

This line of argument strikes me as questionable: First of all, it is not entirely clear to me that the phenomenon Wolf labels ›aesthetic illusion‹ is the very same thing in the reception of both literature, film and drama. One could argue that there are good reasons to make important dif-

ferentiations between what is going on in the act of reception of a novel and the reception of a drama at the theatre. Secondly, there are good reasons to link the described phenomenon of aesthetic illusion (or rather immersion) to some form of mediation even in cases that seem narratorless in a strict sense. It could also be argued that all types of narrative always incline a kind of basic mediation. Being emotionally and cognitively engaged as described in the concept by Wolf suggests a strong affinity to mediation.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether Wolf's insistence on including both fictional and non-fictional narratives in the domain ›aesthetic illusion‹ actually holds true.[11] Wolf states that »narratological treatments of immersion, as, e. g. in Schaeffer & Vultur 2005« often overlook that there is »no restriction as to their being factual or fictional, narrative or descriptive« (149). This, first of all, strongly depends on which theory of fiction one subscribes to, but it seems reasonable to argue that any kind of ›aesthetic illusion‹ does contain at least partial elements of being fictional and/or narrative, since purely descriptive, non-narrative modes of representation seem to be artifacts of extremely low experientiality with hardly any possibility of getting immersed in them. They might be aesthetic, but certainly not illusion provoking. It is therefore no surprise that all the examples named by Wolf are counted as works of fiction in the theoretical frameworks of Walton, Currie, Lamarque/Olsen and a number of other scholars, and that most, if not all, of these examples are also characterized by a high degree of mediation.

Other entries

Again, all the entries of the *Handbook* hold a very high standard, and to highlight only a fraction of them seems inadequate. Also inadequate is the well-known tendency of reviewers to only discuss critical aspects at length, while stopping short of positive comments. But there is certainly a lot more that could be discussed in a positive manner. Below, I list a few more examples:

Burkhard Niederhoff's entries on both »Perspective/Point of View« and »Focalization«, which actually succeed in the nearly impossible task of entangling the jungle of different approaches to and suggestions in this highly debated core field of narratology; the equally enlightening entry on the »Narrator« by Uri Margolin, which, if at all, only could have been improved if the fundamental attack on the narrator by Klaus Weimar had been included;[12] the contribution of Nünning and Neumann highlighting the important difference of »Metanarration and Metafiction«; John Pier's excellent clarifications of the concept of »Metalepsis«; Jörg Schönert's concise summary of the huge topic of the »Author«; Fotis Jannidis highly informative entry on »Character«, giving by far the most concise definition in the entire handbook: »Character is a text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or human-like« (14); Michael Scheffel's entry on »Narrative Constitution«, which, to his credit, not only entangles the terminological traps of core terms of narratology from different languages, but also delivers a very worthwhile introduction to different approaches and schools in the history of narratology. By mentioning but a few, I do not aim to imply that these entries supersede the others in any way.

Closing remarks

The *Handbook of Narratology* and its virtual counterpart, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, are the current state of the art in narratology. Due to its high quality, the printed version alone already qualifies for a fundamental contribution to the field of narratology. The biggest

strength of the whole project, however, lies in the combination and the useful comprehension of entries written by leading scholars in the field and the publication of these contributions online, which offers the possibility of adding new entries as well as improving the existent entries by commentary in the open access online version.

The fact that a leading group of researchers in the humanities decide to offer their research results in this hybrid form is highly remarkable: a printed version with all the obvious advantages this entails, and an open access version with all the advantages of digital publishing. One cannot but hope that this, together with similar recent approaches, will set an example in the humanities, encouraging both other researchers and funding institutions as well as publishing houses to continue to publish with open access and with the highest ambitions concerning quality. If this is the future of the humanities, the future strikes me as promising.

J. Alexander Bareis
Lunds universitet
Språk- och litteraturcentrum

Notes

[1] Peter Hühn et al. (eds), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn (13.12.2010).

[2] Until today (13.12.2010), an entry on ›unreliable narration‹ by Dan Shen has been added.

[3] Peter Hühn et al., Editorial Information, in: P.H. et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Editorial_information (13.12.10). The digital humanities tools are at present, to my knowledge, not available yet.

[4] Obviously, quality should always be of the highest priority in choosing contributors. But then one cannot help but wonder if it is actually still the case in the year 2010 that merely 15% of the world's top narratologists are female?

[5] Peter Hühn et al. (eds), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Main_Page (13.12.2010).

[6] This becomes also evident in the entry on ›Narration in Various Disciplines‹ by Norbert Meuter, especially in his summary of the history of the concept in literary studies, which is basically limited to German contributions, with the exception of Aristotle (243-244). The section on Narration in Philosophy (248-251), on the other hand, is an equally narrowly focused, but highly illuminating discussion of the work of Ricœur. Notwithstanding, to summarize the use of narration in various disciplines in an article of roughly 20 pages is a nearly impossible task, and the need for selection is obvious.

[7] I have discussed this passage earlier, cf. J. Alexander Bareis, The Role of Fictionality for Narrative Theory, in: Lars-Åke Skalin (ed.), *Narrativity, Fictionality, and Literariness. The Narrative Turn and the Study of Literary Fiction*, Örebro 2008, 155-175, here 165-167.

[8] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* [1983], translated by Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca, N.Y. 1988, 11-12.

[9] Kendall Walton in his *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge, MA 1990 is the most prominent researcher arguing against this view. One could also add the seminal book by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature. A Philosophical Perspective*, Oxford 1994, which is not mentioned in the article.

[10] Cf. Ansgar Nünning, Mimesis des Erzählens. Prolegomena zu einer Wirkungsästhetik, Typologie und Funktionsgeschichte des Akts des Erzählens und der Metanarration, in: Jörg Helbig (ed.), *Erzählen und Erzähltheorie im 20. Jahrhundert: Festschrift für Wilhelm Füger*, Heidelberg 2001, 13-47.

[11] The question of fictionality in Wolf's main work on the topic has been critically discussed by, amongst other, Dirk Frank, *Narrative Gedankenspiele. Der metafiktionale Roman zwischen Modernismus und Postmodernismus*. Wiesbaden 2001, esp. 76-86.

[12] Klaus Weimar, Wo und was ist der Erzähler?, *Modern Language Notes* 109 (1994), 495-506.