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Basic Concepts of Narrative Theory: A Polyphonic View

- David Herman/James Phelan/Peter J. Rabinowitz/Brian Richardson/Robyn Warhol, *Narrative Theory. Core Concepts & Critical Debates*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press 2012. XIV, 280 p. [Price EUR 31,95]. ISBN: 978-0-8142-5184-3.

From its beginnings in the 1960s narratology has been an interdisciplinary project. As a consequence, there have always been multiple approaches which have conceived of both narrative and narrative theory in different ways. Even within the narrower frame of the study of *literary* narratives basic categories such as author, plot, or character have never ceased to invite controversy. The plurality of models and definitions that have emerged from this continuous debate has ensured that the questions »what is narrative theory« and »how do the different perspectives and approaches relate to each other?« have remained at the heart of the discipline. Like many other introductory texts, handbooks, and edited volumes published over the years, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, co-authored by David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson and Robyn Warhol, revolves around those central questions. It situates itself within the long tradition of volumes setting out to both introduce and map major trends and approaches in narrative theory. However, the new book by Herman et al. does not present a typical book-length study of narrative theory. Neither does it take the form of a conventional collection of individual contributions addressing different issues or approaches, such as, for example, Greta Olson's excellent *Current Trends in Narratology*.¹ Instead, it stands out from the body of publications with similar scope and theme by exhibiting a rather unusual structure. Both the book's appeal as well as its potential limitations as a critical survey are grounded in its atypical arrangement of chapters.

1. Four Approaches to Narrative

In their preface Herman et al. point out that the publication of *Narrative Theory* forms, figuratively speaking, »the last chapter« in a conversation »that the five of us have been having for years« (x). In order to capture this scholarly dialogue, the authors decided upon a format that explicitly foregrounds conceptual plurality and critical debate. For this purpose they divide the book into two interrelated parts: In Part One (»Perspectives: Rhetorical, Feminist, Mind-Oriented, Antimimetic«) the authors investigate key concepts of narratology from the viewpoint of four different approaches: James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz outline a rhetorical approach to narrative theory, Robyn Warhol discusses a feminist perspective, while David Herman's approach is concerned with exploring »the nexus of narrative and mind«, and Brian Richardson presents an »antimimetic« perspective within the context of »unnatural narratology« (ix). While the book's first part, thus, primarily attempts to answer the question »what is narrative theory« from a polyphonic point of view, Part Two (»Responses«) foregrounds the relationship of the different perspectives to each other. In this section, each author presents a chapter in which he or she critically comments on the approaches introduced and championed by the other contributors. All of them explicitly point to the differences and similarities between their different takes on narratology. However, though this second part of the book foregrounds the notion of debate and exchange in a particularly emphatic way, the scholarly dia-

logue between Herman and his colleagues is already fundamentally inherent in Part One, which forms the bulk of the book.

This first section of the volume primarily outlines the four approaches to the study of narrative by way of discussing a number of key concepts. After a brief general introduction to each of the approaches in the opening chapter, the subsequent six chapters of Part One turn to a selection of some of the most important theoretical issues in narratology: authors, narrators, narration (ch. 2); time, plot, progression (ch. 3); narrative worlds, i.e. space, setting, perspective (ch. 4); character (ch. 5); reception and the reader (ch. 6); narrative and aesthetic values (ch. 7). While the total number of concepts addressed in this fashion is relatively small compared to such resources as *The Living Handbook of Narratology*,² the format chosen by Herman et al. has a distinct advantage: The authors in each chapter take turns discussing the same issues and thus present each concept from four different theoretical points of view. In this way, the book succeeds in vividly illustrating how contrasting definitions of the nature and purpose of narrative theory consequently entail differing notions of its core concepts. Moreover, this procedure introduces an element of comparison as it invites, perhaps even forces, the reader to contrast and relate the approaches with which he or she is confronted. The emerging notion of scholarly dialogue is fostered by the fact that the presentation of the different narratological points of view is explicitly composed with a view to the others. As Herman et al. point out in the preface, their contributions to Part One were written independently; yet, »we each worked with a strong sense of (and respect for) what the others would be saying, and with a commitment to framing our arguments in terms of this continuing discussion« (x). The book, in other words, presents four distinct voices which essentially work in counterpoint (cf. *ibid.*). In the spirit of the author's ongoing debate, *Narrative Theory* does not aim to provide final solutions or to reconcile the presented positions into a coherent account. Though the different contributions recurrently refer to each other, it ultimately remains the reader's task to trace and evaluate their differences and similarities.

Another important aspect of *Narrative Theory* apart from its focus on conceptual plurality is that the authors strive to ground their theoretical observations in analytical practice. Each of them employs a particular narrative text in order to illustrate the interpretive scope and potential of his or her particular perspective. At first, the decision to work with different texts seems somewhat surprising. For the sake of comparison it would have been sensible for the authors to engage in readings of the same works. However, the usage of different narratives serves to reflect and highlight the disparate focus of the approaches presented in the volume. All of them do not only conceptually differ from each other but also pursue different interpretative goals. Phelan and Rabinowitz, for example, use Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* in order to outline their rhetorical approach which conceives of narrative as a rhetorical act, i.e. »a multidimensional purposive communication from a teller to an audience« (3). Robyn Warhol's feminist approach works with Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. Her analysis is less concerned with abstract reflections on the general nature of narrative. She rather attempts to show how the novel »deconstructs binary oppositions underlying mainstream assumptions about gender, sexuality, and class« (11). David Herman, who explores the nexus of narrative and mind, employs Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* to propose a heuristic framework based on the idea of »narrative worldmaking«. Although he avoids the term cognitive narratology in order to distance himself from reductionist versions of cognitivism, his approach is clearly inspired by cognitive theorists such as Richard Gerrig. The analytical perspective he outlines is primarily interested in how storytellers »prompt interpreters to engage in the process of co-creating narrative worlds« (15). In this context, he develops an intentionalist model that is based on an understanding of narrative as »a mode of situated communicative action, which can be analysed on the basis of textual performances, [...] in terms of *reasons for acting*« [44; *Herman's*

emphasis]. Finally, Brian Richardson draws on Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to illustrate his conception of ›antimimetic‹ and ›unnatural‹ narratives. Both terms, which he uses synonymously, refer to texts that foreground their own artificiality and constructedness, and problematise or break ontological boundaries. Richardson argues that despite a long tradition and a large number of unnatural narratives in literary history, there is an ill-conceived overall bias in narratology towards ›representational‹ or ›mimetic‹ aspects of narrative. With the development of an ›unnatural narratology‹ he seeks to challenge this bias by taking emphatic notice of antimimetic texts and making them a substantial part of narrative theory.

2. Complexity Through Multiperspectivity

The structure of the book with its polyphonic and iterative treatment of narratological concepts makes it an interesting read in several ways. By employing different perspectives it ensures a more multifaceted discussion than most introductions or handbooks to narrative theory are able to offer. After all, the central constituents of narrative, such as fictional character, are notoriously difficult to treat in a comprehensive way because of their multidimensional nature. Usually, theoretical accounts or introductions therefore tend to privilege certain facets of those issues, while they simultaneously pay less attention to other, though otherwise equally important, aspects. Viewed individually this also applies to each of the approaches outlined in *Narrative Theory*. Staying with the example of character, David Herman, for instance, understands characters as »textually grounded models of individuals«, and analyses them as fictional »members of the category of ›persons‹« (125). Accordingly, his perspective on fictional entities, like that of other cognitive scholars such as Uri Margolin or Ralf Schneider, stresses the correspondences between characters and real persons in terms of their mental processing. Consequently, one of the most important aspects of character, from Herman's perspective, is that they are based on mental »models of what a person is and of how persons relate to the world at large« (ibid.). In contrast, Robyn Warhole's feminist approach is less interested in the mental processes underlying acts of narrative worldmaking. She conceives of characters in a more traditionally structuralist way as mere »marks on the page« (119) that perform certain functions in a narrative. As a feminist narratologist, her approach is primarily concerned with characters as »creatures of the discourse of gender« (121). Unlike Herman and Warhole, the rhetorical perspective forwarded by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz highlights the multidimensional nature of character. In their opinion, characters, on the one hand, resemble ›real‹ people in certain ways; on the other hand, they are also artificial constructs that perform various functions in terms of (1) the story's plot and (2) the ethical and philosophical issues staged by the narrative. Phelan and Rabinowitz emphasise that attention should be paid to all of those aspects and they are particularly interested in the relationship that emerges between those issues. Finally, Brian Richardson adds another facet to the discussion by pointing to the intertextual dimension of character. As his fascination first and foremost lies with unnatural storytelling, his contribution chiefly suggests that narratology needs to pay particular attention to the ›antimimetic‹ aspects of character portrayal. Only in this way, he argues, can justice be done to many (postmodern) texts such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

The example of the discussion of character shows how *Narrative Theory* treats the complexity of narratological questions by presenting each concept from four different points of view. In this way, the book not only ensures a broad discussion of those questions but also palpably illustrates how each choice of approach leads to a certain way of theoretically framing the core components of narrative. The parallel arrangement of four different accounts thus reveals the inescapable incompleteness of any particular perspective by foregrounding its blind spots. Hence, the book forcefully promotes the idea of scholarly dialogue and theoretical pluralism

as the only way of adequately addressing the inherent complexity of concepts such as character. Moreover, by presenting four distinct and at times dissonant voices, the book does not allow the reader to take a passive stance towards the information offered. Its structure rather forces him or her to actively engage in the discussion. As the book does not feature a superimposed authoritative voice, readers have to develop their own position towards the approaches with which they are presented. This makes *Narrative Theory* a highly rewarding reading experience for those interested in the intricacies of narratological debates. However, the book's complicated structure unfortunately also poses a serious challenge to those new to the study of narrative. Its intriguing composition has a number of disadvantages, particularly with respect to its function as a survey or introductory text.

3. The Volume's Scope

In their preface, Herman et al. stress that they have written *Narrative Theory* for both novices and adepts, i.e. for teachers, students and »specialists in narrative theory« (x). Furthermore, they express the hope that the book will serve as the basis for entire courses or at least substantial parts of such courses in narrative fiction and literary theory. As the authors undoubtedly are among the world's leading narratologists, this hope might not be immodest. Nevertheless, I believe that the work is neither really suited as an introduction, nor as a comprehensive survey of the field of narratology. The reasons for this have nothing to do with the authors' scholarly expertise but essentially result from the design of the book. Its structure, which is geared to force readers into continually comparing the four presented points of view, makes it somewhat challenging to coherently reconstruct any single approach. In this context, the fact that the authors use very different literary texts in order to illustrate their arguments does further complicate the attempt to contextualize and compare their approaches. None of this, of course, poses insurmountable difficulties to the scholar versed in narratology and textual analysis. Yet, many students new to this field of study might prefer a less complexly interwoven and dialogic form of text.

Another potential objection to *Narrative Theory*, particularly with regard to its function as a survey of narratological concepts and debates, is its highly selective nature. With 280 pages in length the book was obviously written in keeping with the idea of a handy course book. However, as each of the concepts is being examined from four different perspectives this means that the total number of issues that can be discussed in detail remains rather small. As a result, the authors engage only with a narrow and rather traditional selection of key elements in a thorough way – a situation that might not do justice to the wide scope of present-day narratology as a whole. The book, for example, barely touches upon many important concepts (e.g. metalepsis, suspense, metafiction, experientiality, etc.), while other key issues such as focalization only briefly feature in some of the accounts. The question of choice is obviously an inevitable problem for all scholarly works that engage with an entire field of study. Yet, the impression that *Narrative Theory* presents only a selective choice of »core concepts« is reinforced by the even more selective choice of »critical debates« the authors decide to revisit. One has to keep in mind that current narratology is marked by a remarkable profusion of new ways of engaging with narrative works. Those new perspectives have been widely acknowledged and addressed by a number of recent publications because they challenge and expand more classical approaches in different ways. Herman et al. do not only ignore most of those developments; they do not even attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of the very perspectives they claim to represent. David Herman, for example, openly acknowledges that existing approaches in cognitive narratology proceed in multiple ways (cf. 17). Although he has repeatedly demonstrated in the past that he is perfectly capable of sketching this particular

field of investigation in all of its complexity, he just briefly hints at its existence in *Narrative Theory*. The particular model he introduces here is very interesting; yet it is also highly idiosyncratic and does not strive to be representative for cognitive approaches as such. The same applies to Richardson's discussion of unnatural narratology which is different from other scholars' takes on this subject. In fact, all of the contributors merely present and discuss their own individual approaches with each other. The models and concepts of other narratologists do not seem to be a major concern of theirs in this book. As Herman et al. are prolific and outstanding scholars, their discussion is intriguing, multifaceted and profound in its theoretical and analytical complexity. At the same time, however, it is also an example of a somewhat self-referential kind of discourse.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, *Narrative Theory* is a well-written, challenging and inspiring discussion of fundamental questions of narrative theory. It is refreshingly different from other publications in the field and I wholeheartedly recommend it to all scholars and graduate students who are genuinely interested in the complex nature of narratology. The volume offers the unique opportunity to ›watch‹ some of the most famous experts in narrative theory engage in a discussion of four elaborate approaches they have developed with great theoretical expertise. However, on account of its almost ›private‹ dialogue the volume might be less suited as a general introduction or guide to contemporary narratology. Due to its structural complexity it might also prove to be too challenging a read for beginners in narrative theory. These limitations, however, are directly linked to the volume's intriguing design, i.e. they result from the very same source that makes the book otherwise such an innovative, dialogic and multifaceted work of scholarship. They do not therefore diminish the scholarly value of the volume by any means.

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Notes

¹ Cf. Greta Olson (ed.), *Current Trends in Narratology*, Berlin et al. 2012.

² Cf. Peter Hühn et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de (01.08.2013).

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