

Semiotics and Narrative

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Current State of the Field

We are living in what could be called the Age of the Narrative. I am continually struck by how pervasive the word *narrative* has become in everyday discourse. For example, the January 1990 issue of *Harper's* published the proceedings of a forum it held on the Democratic party. At one point Jack Hitt, a senior editor of the magazine, says:

Robert Reich, you once wrote that the difference between the parties is that Republicans 'have a story to tell that is compelling for people'. In 1980 it was the story of a threat to America—from communism, from a bloated government, from criminals, from social engineers. Can anyone at this table come up with an encompassing narrative for the 1992 Democratic nominee to tell?

The speaker is using *story* and *narrative* as synonyms, though traditionally the former has been the typical term in everyday discourse, while the latter is a more formal term, used in rhetoric and literary criticism.¹ Its current prominence in everyday discourse reflects its prominence in academic writings.

The listing of new scholarly books each week in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is bound to include at least one volume with the word 'narrative' in the title. These books are not concentrated in any one academic discipline, but are conventionally categorized as pertaining to literature, folklore, cinema studies, history, art, theater, linguistics, etc.

In addition to all the books appearing, journals are brimming with articles on narrative. It is not unusual for journals to devote entire issues to this topic; the journal *Style*, for one, has published several such issues (e.g., *Style* 22 [1], 1988).

Given the fact that this publication explosion has been the norm for a number of years, it may appear that narrative is a vital area of research. In many respects, however, this is a misleading impression. For one, in all this mass of publica-

tions there appears to be no seminal new idea or new approach to narrative. Much of the current work is derivative and secondary—an echo of work from what, retrospectively, might be termed the Golden Age of narrative studies, the period from approximately the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. (For a good annotated bibliography that covers this period, see Mathieu 1977.)

Some of the 'current' books appearing in English are actually translations of books, originally published in France, that derive from that period. For instance, Greimas' treatment of a Maupassant short story, originally published in 1976, has only recently appeared in English (Greimas 1988).² A number of other works are surveys of this earlier work, or general introductions (see, for instance, Bal 1985; Leitch 1986; Margolin 1989; Martin 1986; Toolan 1988). For anyone who has been involved in narrative study for any period of time, none of this work will be of strong interest.

A more serious objection against these surveys, and indeed against most current work, is that too often they echo a partisan and partial view of the narrative that can be traced back to the 'Golden Age' (a term that by no means should suggest Edenic perfection). The legacy of that era is a diversity of theories, terminologies, and analytic approaches, such that the notion of narrative itself has not become clarified, but more fragmented (cf. Mathieu 1986).

A recent work that mirrors many of these problems with the field of narrative study is *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Prince 1987). In the Preface Prince states that he has included in his dictionary only terms, or senses of terms, that are specific to 'narratology', excluding other terms that he felt belonged in other specialized dictionaries, such as rhetoric, linguistics, etc. Prince further notes that he has not provided an exhaustive listing of specific terms. His intent is to give an overview of the field by mainly including terms for which he claims wide currency and which can be used by 'narratologists' with different theoretical preferences. However, the claim for wide currency is compromised by Prince's acknowledgment that he has been partial to the work of French or French-inspired researchers and to terms that are used in connection with verbal rather than non-verbal narratives. In fact, even among French researchers, there is quite a bit of diversity in terminology. Many of the terms that make up the dictionary can be identified with a single researcher (and his school); for instance, terms such as *isotopy* and *actant* are associated with Greimas, and terms such as *extradiegetic* and *achrony* are associated with Genette.

As for key terms that are used by several researchers—terms such as *story* and *discourse*, and to a somewhat lesser degree, *narrativity*—there are some subtle differences in usage. Of greater import, a number of confusions have become associated with several of these terms, *story* and *discourse* in particular; but this is not evident from the entries in Prince's *Dictionary*. It is true that Prince states in the Preface that he has opted for brief entries since he believes that a dictionary should be only a starting place (1987: viii). However, his choice of the 'dictionary' format may have the unwanted effect of promulgating some unfortunate terminology.

If we look beyond French or French-inspired work on narrative, we find not just disagreement on the sense of certain terms, but a total lack of use of such supposedly key terms as *story* and *discourse*. Even Prince's preferred term for the field itself, *narratology*, is one that many researchers, myself included, are disinclined to embrace.

Given such terminological diversity and the fragmented theoretical conceptions of the narrative, it seems to me that what is sorely needed in narrative studies now is a consolidation of the gains made to date. A survey of current work would in itself serve little purpose. We need a reappraisal of the field, which would entail, in part, a fresh reading of key works. Only the first step toward such a reappraisal can be taken here. I will present a brief historical overview, and will indicate the range of possible approaches to narrative. This will provide a framework in which some of the key concepts can be examined and in which a sampling of current work can be seen in the context of relevant earlier work.

Certain areas of narrative research will be more or less excluded from this sampling. One is what can loosely be called 'applied' studies; e.g., the use of narrative materials by psychologists, cognitive scientists, or others in an attempt to understand how humans understand or process narratives, or how they acquire this ability. For a recent discussion, with references to work in this area, see Ide and Veronis (1990). Another area neglected here is the study of narration—i.e., the process in which a storyteller performs in front of an audience, taken in either a formal or an informal sense. (This type of narrative study is partially treated in Bauman 1986.) Our concern will be basically the text, and not the real-world situational context.

The Eve of the 'Golden Age'

Let us begin our reassessment of the field by examining the widely accepted view that modern narrative studies began with the work of a small group of French scholars which was published in a special issue (no. 8, 1966) of the journal *Communications* devoted to 'L'analyse structurale du récit'. This group included such well-known names as Barthes, Greimas, Todorov, Eco, and Metz. Their work is held to share a common stimulus: the appearance, in 1958, of the first English translation of Propp's 'morphological' (i.e., formal) study of the Russian fairytale, which had originally been published in Russia in 1928.

One might begin by asking why Propp's work was translated at that particular time. I have no definitive answer, except to suggest that interest in the narrative was already in the air. Incidentally, this interest in narrative was largely outside the literary establishment, which was still under the influence of New Criticism, with its focus on the language of poetry. It is true that the Neo-Aristotelian school, active during the 1950s, championed the study of plot and character, but it was definitely a minor voice, and its traditional approach was not particularly inspiring.

It should be remembered that Lévi-Strauss (1955) published his first important paper on the structural analysis of myth years before Propp's work appeared in translation. Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, in the Preface to the first English translation of Propp (1968 [1958]: xxi), mistakenly asserts that this work of Lévi-Strauss was influenced by Propp; but Lévi-Strauss (1960) corrected that error.

Also in the 1950s, the linguist Zellig Harris developed what he termed *discourse analysis* and carried out several sample analyses, one of which was of a narrative. Thurber's 'A very proper gander'. This analysis is reprinted as an Appendix to Harris (1963).

Harris' discourse analysis, Lévi-Strauss' programmatic paper on myth analysis, and Propp's study of the Russian fairytale all more or less equally influenced my own initial work on narrative analysis, undertaken for my doctoral dissertation (Hendricks 1965), which was essentially completed by the end of 1964. It was not until 1966 that I became aware of the work of the French scholars. When I later revised and expanded sections of my dissertation for publication, I utilized some of the findings of these scholars (Hendricks 1973, 1977a).

Obviously, when postulating an origin, one has to pick an arbitrary point, or risk an infinite regress. The publication of the English translation of Propp is

1958 was undoubtedly a milestone, and Propp is clearly a seminal figure. Also, the first major burst of creative activity in modern narrative studies did not occur until the 1960s. Yet we should not therefore conclude that this activity was initially confined to France and among scholars working directly under the influence of Propp's work.

Non-Proppian Approaches: Labov

One approach to narrative that emerged in the mid-1960s and has been influential up to the present, but which was not carried out under the influence of Propp, is that of the linguist William Labov. Perhaps his most important contribution has been stimulating interest in a type of narrative that previously had been neglected—what is now generally referred to as the *personal narrative* (an oral report of personal experience). However, Labov has had some impact on narrative study in general, as attested by the fact that Prince included some of Labov's terminology in his *Dictionary* (e.g., *point*, *narrative clause*).

In his earliest work, done in collaboration with Waletzky, Labov begins by noting that most of the prior work on narrative analysis involved 'complex' narratives; this includes not just written literary works, but oral forms such as the myth and the folktale, products of a long-standing tradition (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 12). Labov proposes beginning with 'the simplest and most fundamental narrative structures', which he feels are to be found in oral versions of personal experience told by people who are not expert storytellers.

Propp's work is referred to and dismissed in a couple of sentences. Not only did Propp deal with 'complex' narratives, but his basic analytic unit, the function, is said to be a substantial piece of thematic material (1967: 13). Labov proposes a more basic unit, the narrative clause—which corresponds to clausal units of the narrative text itself. Thus, Labov deals with 'narrative discourse' in a literal way that does not really correspond to any of the French notions of 'narrative discourse'.

Labov presents for analysis a sample of fourteen narratives drawn from a much larger corpus. These were collected in connection with four linguistic studies aimed at correlating social characteristics with dialect and verbal facility. Most of the narratives in Labov's sample corpus were elicited by an interviewer, who asked the subject, 'Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of

being killed?' In some cases only the interviewer and the narrator were present; in others, members of the narrator's primary group were also present.

Labov's methodology in this early work is a mixture of some rather crude traditional notions about narrative structure, grammatical analysis, and a formal-logical analysis in terms of 'displacement sets'. The description of narrative structure it makes possible falls far short of the results obtained by researchers who had assimilated Propp's methodology. One might be tempted to assert that the meager results only reflect the corpus, where some of the 'narratives' consist of only a sentence. It does seem the case that Labov's methodology is designed to accommodate the lowest common denominator of his corpus. However, Labov (1982) reanalyzes some of these same narratives, and the results are more adequate, thanks to a more sophisticated methodology. Labov does not comment on the changes in his methodology—nor does he point out the fact that he has corrected errors in the transcription of some of the narratives that figured in his early collaboration with Waletzky.

Labov's work has elicited a fair amount of commentary (see, for instance, Hendricks 1989a; Robinson 1981; Watson 1973). However, the definitive critique has yet to be written. As already noted, one of Labov's most important contributions is in having stimulated interest in a previously neglected type of narrative, the oral personal narrative. This influence can be seen not only in the work of folklorists (e.g., Stahl 1983, 1989), but also in the work of linguists and others interested in conversation (e.g., Polanyi 1985) and the relation between spoken and written language (e.g., Tannen 1982). One linguist (Schiffrin 1981) has used some of the narratives collected by Labov and his associates to investigate the alternation of the historical present tense with the past tense. Incidentally, there is a sizable literature devoted, at least in part, to the role of grammatical tense in narrative—and not all of it is from a strictly linguistic viewpoint (see, for instance, Bronzwaer 1970; Hamburger 1973; Weinrich 1964; Wienold 1986).

Non-Proppian Approaches: Genette

The work of Labov and a couple of others aside, it is the case that in the mid-1960s France was the center of narrative study. Nevertheless, it is a distortion to assert that Propp was a direct influence on all of the contributors to the famous issue of *Communications*. For instance, Gérard Genette's (1966) contribution

owes nothing to Propp. Part of Genette's discussion goes back to the ultimate beginnings of Western thought on the narrative: Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Genette, a fairly prolific writer, has carved out a niche somewhat different from the others who contributed to the special issue of *Communications*. Prince's *Dictionary* recognizes one sense of *narratology* that pertains just to Genette's approach. In essence, Genette focuses on 'discourse', whereas those researchers influenced by Propp concentrate on 'story'.

The terms *discourse* (French *discours*) and *story* (French *histoire*), widely used by many 'narratologists', were apparently first applied to narrative by Todorov (1966), who credits Benveniste (1971 [1966]) with having first introduced the terms into linguistics. Todorov radically misconstrues Benveniste's terms; for instance, he assumes that the story-discourse distinction corresponds to the one the Russian Formalists drew between *fable* and *sujet* (Todorov 1966: 126). It would take a separate essay to trace all the confusions that have come to be clustered around these terms. (Ultimately, part of the blame for the confusion must be assigned to Benveniste himself.)

As for Genette's own particular terminology, let us consider a translation of a portion of a 1972 publication pertaining to 'Discours du récit' (Genette 1980). He begins by noting that the term 'narrative' (French *récit*) is ambiguous, and he distinguishes three senses:

- i) the oral or written discourse that tells of an event or series of events;
- ii) the content—the succession of events—that is the subject of narrative discourse, which is analyzed without regard to the medium through which we learn of the content;
- iii) the event that consists of someone recounting something—the act of narrating in itself. (1980: 25ff)

Genette, writing in French, has proposed a terminological fix for a problem that really does not have a counterpart in English. The first sense delineated above might seem to correspond to how the English word *narrative* is normally used, at least in non-technical discussions; but we will shortly see that it does not. As for the third sense, it corresponds to English *narration*. Note that it is this term that is ambiguous in English: it can refer either to the process or to the product.

As for the second sense delineated above, I am not aware of any use of the English word *narrative* in this sense; however, it does correspond to a technical sense of *récit*, as used by certain French structuralists:

Ce que Propp étudie dans le conte russe...c'est une couche de signification autonome, dotée d'une structure qui peut être isolée de l'ensemble du message: le récit. (Bremond 1964: 4)

To avoid confusion, Genette proposes the following separate terms: *narrative* (French *récit*) for the first sense; *story* (French *histoire*) for the second; and *narrating* (French *narration*) for the third. He elaborates upon the term *narrative* as follows: it is used 'for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself' (1980: 27). When this sense is so clarified, it becomes obvious that it does not correspond to the normal sense of *narrative* in English, which includes both 'vehicle' and what is conveyed (to use an inexact figure of speech). He further adds that 'of the three levels we have just sorted out, the level of narrative discourse is the only one directly available to textual analysis...' (1980: 27). These added remarks should make it obvious that Genette's term *narrative* corresponds to what others refer to as *discourse*.

What may not be so obvious is how French *discours*, in the writings of the French 'narratologists', can differ from some of the senses in which English *discourse* is understood. Certainly, what Genette means by the analysis of narrative discourse is not at all what Harris means by the discourse analysis of a narrative. What interests Genette are various narrative techniques and devices. He is not interested in trying to establish any sort of correlation between such devices and the linguistic means by which they are conveyed (e.g., particular syntactic constructions).

Genette's work is firmly in the tradition of what in Anglo-American criticism is referred to as theory of the novel. Topics of concern include point of view, status of the (fictional) narrator, the handling of sequences of events in time, the amount of detail in which narrated events are presented, and so on. Genette offers a more refined vocabulary, which permits a more detailed analysis of these various techniques. For example, he has introduced the notion of focalization in order to make a clear distinction between 'who sees' in a narrative and 'who speaks'. For the latter, a basic distinction is made between a narrator who is a character in the story and one who is outside the story.

Genette deals with aspects of narrative that the analysts directly influenced by Propp have tended to neglect. In theory his work would complement theirs, but in practice Genette carries out his work in isolation. This fundamental weakness in Genette's methodology is unwittingly touched upon in Prince's entry for *narratology*, where Genette is said to disregard the level of story in itself and to focus on possible relations between story and narrative discourse. However, it is not possible to formulate an adequate relation between story and discourse without first analyzing the 'story'.

This methodological weakness is all too apparent in Genette (1980), which is not just a theoretical treatise on 'narrative discourse', but also a study of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Genette did not first undertake an analysis of the underlying narrative organization of Proust's work, nor did he draw upon one. It would be a Herculean task to undertake a detailed structural analysis of this work, which is over one thousand pages long. What Genette ends up doing is carrying out partial, *ad hoc*, impressionistic analyses of the plot structure in order to have something to relate the discourse to. Consider, for example, Genette's discussion of narrative 'speed', defined as the relationship between the duration of the story (measured in days, months, etc.) and the length of the text (measured in pages, etc.). Such an analysis, Genette notes, would be relevant only at the level of large narrative units. He proposes dividing the entire *Recherche* into eleven such units, some of which he titles (e.g., 'Gilbert', 'Balbec I', etc.). The only criterion he gives for such a division is the presence of an important temporal and/or spatial break (Genette 1980: 87ff).

For further discussion of Genette's work and commentary on it, see, for instance, Rimmon-Kenan (1983) and Ci (1988). Genette himself has apparently reconsidered some of his earlier work, in a book I have not yet read (Genette 1988).

On the Term 'Narratology'

Let us turn now to some basic issues relevant to 'narratology' in the first sense recognized by Prince's *Dictionary*: namely, the structuralist-inspired theory of narrative, which emerged under the stimulus of Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. Here the story-discourse distinction plays a central role, as does the related notion of narrativity—a notion that plays no role in Genette's work.

The first matter that merits comment is the term *narratology* itself. The term, adapted from French *narratologie*, does have somewhat widespread usage, but it has by no means been universally embraced. It is not a term that I care to use, for the following reasons. Some scholars regard narratology as a branch of poetics, in which case the objects of investigation are specifically literary. However, not all narratives should be regarded as literature. Furthermore, literary criticism, in general, is antithetical to science; consequently, what a critic has to say about narrative will not satisfy criteria for explicitness and systematicity that I feel narrative study should aspire to satisfy.

Even if narratology is not regarded as restricted to literary texts, it still puts the emphasis on narratives *per se*, thus isolating the study of narrative from that of all other types of text. In my view, the study of narrative should be regarded as part of discourse analysis—in the sense of a theory of texts—where one task would be to show how narrative fits into a general typology of texts. Discourse analysis, in turn, should be seen as a part of semiotics; for elaboration, see Hendricks (1988).

It might be objected that my position is not that different from many narratologists, insofar as they regard narratology as the study of *narrativity*. This term is defined in Prince's *Dictionary* as the set of properties characterizing narrative and distinguishing it from nonnarrative. (Prince also suggests that a narrative may have degrees of narrativity, dependent in part on the receiver's response to it—which makes the notion a strange one indeed.) However, a reference to 'nonnarratives' is not the same thing as a typology of text types. An adequate typology has yet to be developed.

The above definition of *narrativity* echoes the first part of Greimas and Courtés' (1977) entry for *narrativité*. However, they go on to generalize the notion of narrativity so that it is considered to be the organizing principle of *all* discourse.

Greimas sees discourse organized at the abstract ('deep') level of semiotic structures. What needs to be stressed here is that he equates these semiotic structures with narrative structures (see the entry on *parcours génératif* in Greimas and Courtés 1977). If we look at examples of Greimas' (1983) analyses of expository texts, it is obvious that he has merely imposed narrative categories on such texts. Thus the fundamental distinction between narrative discourse and expository discourse is obliterated.

It should also be noted that Greimas' conception of discourse cannot be assimilated to what, say, Zellig Harris means by discourse. Greimas differentiates 'discursivization' from 'textualization', the latter resulting in what Harris would

call discourse. Greimas' notion of discourse is comparable to Hjelmslev's notion of process as distinct from system. For further discussion of aspects of Greimas' work, see Hendricks 1977b and 1989b.

Suppose we shift focus and regard narrativity not differentially, but positively—as what all narratives in fact have in common. One objection is that this deflects attention from the diversity that exists within narratives, but which has not yet been adequately attended to. Elsewhere I have posited the existence of two basically different types of narrative structure, which I termed *dramatic* and *instrumental* (1975, 1989a). I remain convinced that this is an important distinction, but one that needs to be refined and, surely, extended. However, to the best of my knowledge no other researchers have explored this issue.

I am now acutely aware of how problematic the choice of the term *dramatic* is to refer to a type of narrative structure. The relation between the narrative and drama is still very much an unsettled issue (cf. Mathieu 1986). Also, I am now aware of the problematic nature of the relation between fiction on the one hand, and such forms as history, autobiography, etc., on the other. To refer to all of these forms as narrative is to overlook some basic differences—which do not necessarily correspond to the traditional distinction between fact and fiction (Hendricks 1990).

On the Notion 'Narrativity'

My objections to the term *narratology* are vulnerable to at least one criticism by the narratologists. I regard narrative as part of the general study of texts, but many narratologists see narrativity as an abstract quality that transcends the domain of the purely verbal—i.e., it is seen as independent of any particular medium of realization. In their view the study of narrative is thus not limited to verbal texts, but can include paintings, ballet, films, etc. Some researchers apparently regard narrative as inherently a semiotic topic solely on the basis of this abstract notion of narrativity.

Since a significant number of recent publications are devoted to an extension of narrative analysis into the nonverbal domain, we need to subject this aspect of the narrativity to closer scrutiny. A convenient point of departure is the following statement by Seymour Chatman (1981: 117), who has helped disseminate the work of some of the French researchers: 'One of the most important observations to come out of narratology is that narrative itself is a deep structure quite indepen-

dent of its medium.' A couple of points need to be made about this quotation. One is that Chatman here reverts to using the term *narrative* in the sense that Genette found confusing and replaced with *story* (French *histoire*).

Actually, Chatman himself has made prominent use of the *story-discourse* distinction. Not only has he carried over into English the confusions associated with their use by French scholars, but he has added some of his own. For instance, he (Chatman 1975: 299ff.) assimilates the story-discourse distinction to Hjelmslev's distinction between the content plane and the expression plane. The content plane is the locus of story components (plot and character); the expression plane, the locus of narrative discourse. Further, drawing upon Hjelmslev's distinction within each plane between form and substance, Chatman suggests that the form of expression consists of elements shared by narratives in any medium whatsoever, whereas the substance of expression consists of the various media that can communicate stories (e.g., a natural language such as English, pantomime, the cinema, ballet, etc.).

It will not be possible here to go into the problems with this model of the narrative. Suffice it to say that Chatman's use of the form-substance distinction bears no resemblance to the technical sense in linguistics. For example, in linguistics formal units of expression might be phonemes, with the substance being actual sounds produced in speaking. It is hard to imagine what Chatman would regard as formal units that could be realized either as language or as dance movements, or whatever. Note, however, that at one point he suggests that the substance of narrative expression may itself be a semiotic system. Here Chatman's remarks could be reinterpreted in light of the semiotic model of narrative I have proposed, which I adapted from Hjelmslev's notion of a connotative semiotic. Glimmers of that model can be seen in Hendricks 1973, but it is more fully developed in Hendricks 1980, with implications for its refinement sketched in Hendricks 1989b. Within the framework of my semiotic model, however, it is not certain that narrative structure can be regarded as ultimately nonlinguistic.

Let us return to Chatman's statement quoted above, viz., 'One of the most important observations *to come out of* narratology is that narrative itself is a deep structure quite independent of its medium' (emphasis added). The wording here implies that the statement is either a theoretical conclusion or an empirical generalization—but in point of fact it is an *assumption* that was made at the very beginning of modern work on narrative. Consider the following remarks:

Ce que Propp étudie dans le conte russe ... c'est une couche de signification autonome, dotée d'une structure qui peut être isolée de l'ensemble du message: le récit. Par suite, toute espèce de message narratif, quel que soit le procédé d'expression qu'il emploie, relève de la même approche à ce même niveau. Il faut et il suffit qu'il raconte une histoire. La structure de celle-ci est indépendante des techniques qui la prennent en charge. Elle se laisse transporter de l'une à l'autre sans rien perdre de ses propriétés essentielles: le sujet d'un conte peut servir d'argument pour un ballet, celui d'un roman peut être porté à la scène ou à l'écran, on peut raconter un film à ceux qui ne l'ont pas vu. Ce sont des mots qu'on lit, ce sont des images qu'on voit, ce sont des gestes qu'on déchiffre, mais à travers eux, c'est une histoire qu'on suit; et ce peut être la même histoire. (Bremond 1964: 4)

The idea articulated here by Bremond has been repeated by different scholars numerous times over the past 25 years.

We might pause a moment to wonder whether this idea sprang full-blown from Bremond, or whether it has a history. One clue is provided in the following observation by Jakobson (1960: 350-51):

It is evident that many devices studied by poetics are not confined to verbal art. We can refer to the possibility of transposing *Wuthering Heights* into a motion picture, medieval legends into frescoes and miniatures, or *L'après-midi d'un faune* into music, ballet, and graphic art.... In short, many poetic features belong not only to the science of language but to the whole theory of signs, that is, to general semiotics.

Since Jakobson was a leading member of the Russian Formalist movement and of the Prague School, it is likely that this idea has its roots there.³

Jakobson's remarks can be read in a way that differs slightly from the position Bremond articulates. To say that a novel can be 'transposed' into a motion picture does not necessarily imply that the *same* (narrative) structure underlies both the novel and the film. Bremond, however, makes that strong claim. A weak notion of narrativity would simply claim that works in different 'media' can have their underlying structural organization represented using a common vocabulary of theoretical entities.

It is not clear why Bremond makes the particular strong claim that he does, since his actual work does not depend upon it. To the best of my knowledge, Bremond has worked only with verbal narratives and has never attempted to apply his ideas to, say, a film.

Cinema and Narrativity

In the same issue of *Communications* in which Bremond's article appears there is a long contribution by Christian Metz (1964), who has emerged as a leading figure in the semiotics of the cinema. (This essay and other early writings have appeared in English translation—see Metz 1974a.) Metz's major concern here is not with narrative structure *per se*, but with various theoretical issues centering on the relation between cinema and language, a concern culminating in Metz (1974b).

One striking thing about this early essay, which is about 40 pages long, is that Propp is mentioned only once, in passing (Metz 1964: 86). This reference occurs in the context of Metz's having observed that although the cinema knows only the 'sentence' (i.e., cinematic 'language' lacks the double articulation of human language), there are other areas of research in which the sentence is the smallest unit. For example, he notes that Lévi-Strauss has defined the smallest unit of myth, the mytheme, as an assertion (consisting of a subject and a predicate). Likewise, Propp's basic unit, the function, is, Metz notes, the nominalization of a sentence predicate.

In a later essay, Metz (1974a: 144) refers to Bremond's work and asserts his agreement with Bremond's postulation of narrative structure as an autonomous layer of meaning. However, at the same time Metz asserts that a given narrative receives a very different semiological treatment in the cinema than it would in a novel or a ballet. He concludes that there are two distinct enterprises: on the one hand there is a semiotics of narrative film, and on the other there is the structural analysis of narrativity.

The problem here, as I see it, is that the conception of a putative autonomous level of narrativity derives solely from analyses of verbal narrative. If one postulates a separate semiotics of narrative film, then, to be consistent, one should postulate a separate semiotics of verbal narrative. My initial impression from reading Metz is that nothing in his work supports the thesis that an autonomous

narrativity exists. It is certainly the case that none of the work on narrative structure inspired by Propp plays a role in Metz's discussion of film.

Let us consider a simplified overview of Metz's approach. First, he states that in every narrative whose vehicle is articulated language, the narrative unit is the sentence (Metz 1974a: 25). In the case of a (narrative) film, the image is the vehicle, with each image being equivalent to a sentence and not a word (1974a: 26). What Metz undertakes is a syntagmatic analysis of the image track of a film. He recognizes several categories of what he terms 'large syntagmatic units'. Each of these units is assumed to be directly related to a unit of the plot—the screen images constitute the signifiers, and the related plot events are the signifieds.

Metz draws a basic distinction between the autonomous shot and the 'syntagma', which consists of a sequence of shots. The autonomous shot is compared to a paragraph in written language which consists of only a single sentence (1974a: 124). As for the syntagmas proper, Metz distinguishes between the achronological and the chronological; and within the latter, between descriptive and narrative syntagmas. In a narrative syntagma, the temporal relationship between the objects seen in the images contains elements of consecutiveness and not just simultaneity. In the case of a descriptive syntagma, the only relation between the objects successively shown by the images is one of spatial coexistence (1974a: 127).

Metz's conception of the image track of a film strikes me as comparable to what I once referred to as the 'textual surface' of a narrative—that is, the sequence of sentences that constitutes a narrative text. And his analysis in terms of the large syntagmatic categories is comparable, in part, to my distinction, within the textual surface, between action assertions and description assertions (Hendricks 1973: chapter 7).

However, in my approach to verbal narrative such an analysis of the textual surface is merely a preliminary, or a means to the end of narrative analysis proper, where the plot is analyzed in terms of a 'narrative cycle' (adapted, in part, from Bremond's conception), supplemented by an analysis of roles of the *dramatis personae* (e.g., protagonist, antagonist—see for example Hendricks 1977a).

All of this—a narrative cycle leading from, say, a state of disequilibrium to a state of equilibrium, characters identified with such roles as protagonist and antagonist, etc.—is missing from Metz's discussion of the cinema. He never reaches the level of narrative structure that was the object of investigation by such researchers as Bremond. Thus Metz's work cannot be said to lend support to

Bremont's thesis of an autonomous level of narrative structure. (For some other responses to Metz, see Bollag 1988; Oswald 1984.)

It will be instructive to consider, in light of the above discussion of Metz's early work, an example of more recent work by someone who, drawing upon French 'narratology', has attempted to compare a verbal narrative with a filmed version. In Chatman's (1981: 118) opinion, 'the study of narrative has reached a point where the differences [in narrative structure across the different media] can emerge as objects of independent interest'. Chatman proposes comparing description and point of view by considering 'a bit of the short story which underlies a film by Jean Renoir, Maupassant's "Une partie de campagne" [A Country Excursion]' (1981: 119).

So far as I know, Chatman has never presented a detailed analysis of the structure of either the story or the film; he apparently simply assumes that a continuity exists and that it would be more interesting to focus on some of the differences entailed by the different media.

In the following remarks I will focus on Chatman's methodology, since I have neither read the story nor seen the film (usually referred to in English as *A Day in the Country*). It is a short film, about 40 minutes long, in which, according to some critics, at least three of Auguste Renoir's paintings are recaptured.

Chatman begins by citing the opening sentences of the Maupassant story (but in French and in his own English translation). After making a few observations about the passage, he turns to a discussion of the opening of the film. He notes that 'Ideally you would watch the film as you read this essay, but something of the effect, I hope, can be communicated by the following illustrations' (1981: 121). Chatman provides reproductions of fourteen single frames from various sections of the film.

It will be recalled that Metz equated the cinematic image (captured in a single frame) with a sentence. His syntagmatic analysis of a film's image track is thus more or less equivalent to a sentence-by-sentence analysis of a narrative text. Chatman's approach to a comparison of the Maupassant story and the Renoir film is along these same lines. This is apparent in his comments on the third paragraph of the story: 'The first narrative unit, "Mademoiselle Dufour was trying to swing herself" and so on, refers to an event. The second, "She was a pretty girl of about eighteen", seems on the face of it a straightforward description...' (1981: 127). Chatman goes on to discuss, in effect, how problematic it is to translate the description into a cinematic 'sentence'. The reader can conjure up an image that

corresponds to his notion of prettiness, but the filmmaker has to select a particular face, which not everyone will regard as pretty.

Implicit in both Chatman's approach and Metz's is the assumption that a simple one-to-one relation exists between units on the image track or sentences of the text, on the one hand, and narrative units (taken in the usual sense of units of the underlying narrative structure) on the other. However, if any solid fact has emerged from countless analyses of narratives, it is that the relation between units of the textual surface and units of the plot structure is very indirect. A verbal narrative is not just a sequence of sentences; a narrative film is not just a sequence of images (or shots).

Much more work is being done in the area of semiotics and narrative film. See, for example, Galan 1983, for a discussion of Prague School contributions; Lotman 1976, for a contemporary Soviet view; and Ropars-Wuilleumier 1977, for a brief annotated bibliography of work up to the mid-1970s.

Painting and Narrativity

Finally, let us take a look at another major area of nonverbal narrative research: painting. The conjunction of the notion of narrative with painting is by no means just a recent phenomenon. Unabridged dictionaries list as one sense of *narrative* 'the representation in painting of an event or story'. It is interesting to note in this connection the etymology of the word *story* in the sense of a horizontal division of a building. It derives from Latin *historia*, history, story, via the pictures adorning the windows of medieval buildings.

There is a long tradition of asserting a parallel between poetry and painting.⁴ The Greek poet Simonides asserted that painting is mute poetry, and poetry a speaking picture—a dictum popularized by Plutarch. Also influential was Horace's phrase *ut pictura poesis* (a poem is like a picture). What painting and poetry share is the principle of imitation, and the proper subject of imitation was taken to be heroic human nature. The models for historical, or narrative, painting were to be found in the literary classics. One example is Poussin's Biblical painting *The Fall of Manna in the Desert*, with a famous critique by Charles Le Brun, director of the French Royal Academy. Le Brun demonstrated that the painting's graphic depiction of the action conformed to Aristotle's criteria for a well-made plot. (In this particular painting there are three different groups of people: in the

lower left, those who suffer from hunger; in the lower right, those who discover the manna; and in the upper center, the leaders who give thanks to God.)

A strong argument against seeing poetry and the graphic arts as parallel was made in 1776 by Lessing in his *Laocoon* (one recommended translation is Lessing 1969). Lessing argued that poetry and painting make use of different means and signs: the former employs articulate sounds in time; the latter, figures and colors in space. For a recent discussion of Lessing, see Mitchell 1986 (chapter 4).

In many respects, what we are seeing now is a resurgence of the view that there are close parallels between painting (and the other arts) and verbal narrative. One relatively recent expression of such a view is Goodman 1981 (101), where the author says of Bruegel's *The Conversion of Saint Paul* that 'it tells a story and tells it so compellingly that we tend to forget that nothing in the picture literally moves....' Goodman's paper includes a reproduction of this painting. I personally would be hard pressed to paraphrase the 'story' this painting tells—especially without drawing upon the title.

A different perspective is offered by Varga (1988), who also provides a good overview of the topic of painting and narrative. Varga begins by noting that he will not compare the verbal and visual rendering of a tale; e.g., a saint's life as told in the *Golden Legend* as compared to that life represented in stained glass windows. Rather, he will explore whether verbal narratological methods can be transferred to the visual field (cf. my earlier notion of 'weak narrativity').

Varga focuses on fixed images, excluding the cinema. A fixed image is said to have a narrative character only if it implies the presence of living beings engaged in an action. This excludes landscapes (no living beings) and portraits (only one living being). However, Varga raises the question of whether this really suffices to constitute a narrative. His answer is that a teleological framework is necessary: a beginning (with a problem) and an end (where the problem is overcome).

It is clear that a painting can represent an action. The central problem of visual narratology, however, is whether a story can be told only by this means. Varga concludes that 'It is not by chance that L'Abbé Du Bos tells painters to choose well known subjects, that is, those in the Bible and in mythology: the image is not a second way of telling the tale, but only a way of *evoking* it' (1988: 204).

This, of course, is not the final word on a complex topic (though I find myself sympathetic with much that Varga says). For one, the fixed image is not limited to painting. There is also the area of narrative photography. Weber (1985: 16), in a recent introduction to this area, notes that

no reliable, agreed-upon definition of narrative exists. The tendency has been to consider any work containing 'story' or an ordered sequence of events narrative, but this loose definition fails to distinguish adequately between a depersonalized, supposedly objective, photojournalistic description of 'what happened' and an act of narration which seeks a persuasive or eloquent recounting of an event... Narrative presumes the narrator's involvement and vested interest in the story told; it presumes a non-objective point of view.

In discussing the work of seven different photographers, Weber notes that the written word plays a role in six of these, thus signalling 'the overdue demise of the notion that photography is a satisfactory "universal language"' (1985: 17).

Hopefully the current interest in 'visual narrative' will eventually resolve the issue of whether narrativity is intrinsically a nonverbal or preverbal notion.

Notes

1. Actually, the term *narrative* has historically not been all that prominent in literary criticism (see Hendricks 1990 for a brief discussion). Its prominence is a recent phenomenon. As we will see, some scholars differentiate *story* from *narrative*.
2. I have not yet seen this translation. Incidentally, Greimas in some respects may be said to turn his back on narrative analysis in this work, insofar as he regards the story as a prose poem.
3. Jakobson was the originator (or at least a strong proponent) of the notion of 'literariness', and it would be profitable to compare that notion with narrativity.
4. The following historical remarks are derived from Wimsatt and Brooks 1957 (263ff.).

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