AVATARS OF STORY

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
3 9345 01645003 7

MARIE-LAURE RYAN

languages cannot convey the same semantic values under the doctrine of linguistic relativism, two different media cannot convey similar meanings or use similar devices under the doctrine of medial relativism. This view comes in a strong and a weak form. In the strong form, the signified cannot be separated from the signifier. Since a transmedial concept of narrative presupposes a distinction between narrative meaning and the signs that encode it, the strong interpretation kills in the egg the project of transmedial narratology. In its weaker form, medial relativism accepts common meanings but insists on the uniqueness of the expressive resources of each medium, thereby forcing the theorist to rebuild the analytical toolbox of narratology from scratch for every new medium. This position ignores the productivity of transmedial borrowings in narratology: for instance, theme comes from music, perspective from painting, and camera-eye narration from the cinema. In some cases borrowing seems inevitable: for instance when a medium tries to imitate the effects of another medium, or when two media share a common channel. The alternative to medial relativism is to recognize that theoretical concepts can be either medium-specific or applicable to several media. Examples of narratological concepts that apply across media are the distinction story / discourse, as well as the notions of character, event, and fictional world. On the other hand, montage is a technical concept native to film; but literary critics have borrowed it when language-based narrative began to imitate some of the techniques of the cinema.

Defining Narrative

In the past ten years or so, the term "narrative" has enjoyed a popularity that has seriously diluted its meaning. Jerome Bruner speaks of narratives of identity, Jean-François Lyotard of the "Grand Narratives" of a capitalized History, Abbe Don of the narratives of interface in computer software, and everybody speaks of cultural narratives, meaning by this not a heritage of traditional stories but the collective values that define a culture, such as belief in free speech in Western societies, or latent stereotypes and prejudices, such as narratives of race, class, and gender. The dissolution of "narrative" into "belief," "value," "experience," "interpretation," or simply "content" can only be prevented by a definition that stresses precise semantic features, such as action, temporality, causality, and world-construction. A transmedial definition of narrative requires a

broadening of the concept beyond the verbal, but this broadening should be compensated by a semantic narrowing down, otherwise all texts of all media will end up as narratives.[2]

As I have already mentioned, the main problem facing the transmedial study of narrative is to find an alternative to the language-based definitions that are common fare in classical narratology. As a point of departure (to be modified later) I will use a definition proposed by H. Porter Abbott. Representing a common view among narratologists, Abbott reserves the term "narrative" for the combination of story and discourse and defines its two components as follows: "story is an event or sequence of events (the *action*), and narrative discourse is those events as represented" (2002, 16). Narrative, in this view, is the textual actualization of story, while story is narrative in a virtual form. If we conceive representation as medium-free, this definition does not limit narrativity to verbal texts nor to narratorial speech acts. But the two components of narrative play asymmetrical roles, since discourse is defined in terms of its ability to represent that which constitutes story. This means that only story can be defined in autonomous terms. As we have seen, Abbott regards stories as sequences of events, but this characterization cursorily equates stories with events, when events are in fact the raw material out of which stories are made. So what is story if it is not a type of thing found in the world,[3] as existents and events are, nor a textual representation of this type of thing (as discourse is)?

Story, like narrative discourse, is a representation, but unlike discourse it is not a representation encoded in material signs. Story is a mental image, a cognitive construct that concerns certain types of entities and relations between these entities. Narrative may be a combination of story and discourse, but it is its ability to evoke stories to the mind that distinguishes narrative discourse from other text types.

Following a proposal by Fotis Jannidis, I suggest regarding the set of all narratives as fuzzy, and narrativity (or "storiness") as a scalar property rather than as a rigidly binary feature that divides mental representations into stories and nonstories. In a scalar conception of narrativity, definition becomes an open series of concentric circles that spell increasingly narrow conditions and that presuppose previously stated items, as we move from the outer to the inner circles, and from the marginal cases to the prototypes. The proposal below

organizes the conditions of narrativity into three semantic and one formal and pragmatic dimensions.

Spatial dimension

1. Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.

Temporal dimension

2. This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.
3. The transformations must be caused by nonhabitual physical events.

Mental dimension

4. Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.
5. Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans.

Formal and pragmatic dimension

6. The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.
7. The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the story world.
8. The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient.

Each of these conditions prevents a certain type of representation from forming the focus of interest, or macrostructure of a story (see list below). This does not mean that these representations cannot appear in a narrative text, but rather that they cannot, all by themselves, support its narrativity.

1. Eliminates representations of abstract entities and entire classes of concrete objects, scenarios involving "the human race," "reason," "the State," "atoms," "the brain," etc.
2. Eliminates static descriptions.
3. Eliminates enumerations of repetitive events and changes caused by natural evolution (such as aging).
4. Eliminates one of a kind scenarios involving only natural forces and nonintelligent participants (weather reports, accounts of cosmic events).

5. (together with 3) Eliminates representations consisting exclusively of mental events (interior monologue fiction).
6. Eliminates lists of causally unconnected events, such as chronicles and diaries, as well as reports of problem-solving actions that stop before an outcome is reached.
7. Eliminates instructions, advice, hypotheses, and counterfactual statements.
8. Eliminates bad stories. This is the most controversial condition in the list, because it straddles the borderline between definition and poetics, and because it needs to be complemented by a full theory of the different ways in which narrative can achieve significance. If we accept 8 as part of the definition, then narrativity is not an intrinsic property of the text, but rather a dimension relative to the context and to the interests of the participants. A sequence of events like "Mary was poor, then Mary won the lottery, then Mary was rich" would not make the grade as the content of fictional story, but it becomes very tellable if it is presented as true fact and concerns an acquaintance of the listener.

The eight conditions listed above offer a toolkit for do-it-yourself definitions. When they are put to the question "Is this text a narrative?" some people will be satisfied with conditions 1 through 3 and will classify a text about evolution or the Big Bang as a story, while others will insist that narrative must be about human experience and will consider (4) and (5) obligatory. Some people will regard a chronicle listing a series of independent events with the same participant as a narrative while others will insist on (6). Those who accept recipes as narratives consider (3) and (7) optional; and there are scholars who draw the line below (8) (for instance, Bruner 1991, who claims that a story must have a point), while others may think that a pointless utterance or a boring account of events can still display a narrative structure (this is my own inclination: I regard the "Mary" story quoted above as narrative regardless of context). But if people differ in opinion as to where to draw the line, they basically agree about what requirements are relevant to narrativity and about their importance relative to each other. If we ask "Is *Finnegans Wake* more narrative than *Little Red Riding Hood*?" we will get much broader agreement than if we ask (mindless of the incompatibility of a yes-no question with a fuzzy set) "Is *Finnegans Wake* a narrative?"

Through its multiple conditions organized into distinct areas,

the above definition not only provides criteria for determining a text's degree of narrativity,[4] it also suggests a basis for a semantic typology of narrative texts. While degree of narrativity depends on how many of the conditions are fulfilled, typology depends on the relative prominence of the four dimensions. The Grand Narratives of Lyotard breach the top condition, because they do not concern individuals and do not create a concrete world, while postmodern novels are often low in narrativity because they do not allow readers to reconstruct the network of mental representations that motivates the actions of characters and binds the events into an intelligible and determinate sequence. Through a structure that I call "proliferating narrativity" (Ryan 1992, 373–74), contemporary fiction (especially magical realism and postcolonial novels) may also shift condition (6) from the macro to the micro level, becoming a collection of little stories loosely connected through common participants.

Among narratives that fully satisfy all the conditions, some emphasize the spatial dimension, others the temporal, and still others the mental. With their detailed construction of an imaginary world, science fiction and fantasy locate interest in the spatial dimension, and these genres often treat the plot as a mere discovery path across the fictional world.[5] The demand for action and changes of state that make up the temporal dimension is the dominant feature of thrillers and adventure stories, while the mental dimension, by insisting on the motivations and emotions of characters, rules over tragedy, sentimental romances, detective stories, comedies of errors, and, in the nonfictional domain, narratives of personal experience. In contrast to modernist novels that represent the mind for its own sake, these narrative genres evoke mental processes as a way to explain the behavior of characters.

The definition proposed above presents narrative as a type of text able to evoke a certain type of image in the mind of a cognizing subject. But it does not take a text to inspire the construction of such an image: we may construe stories as a response to life itself, and keep them in memory until we get an opportunity to tell them to an audience. According to cognitive scientists (for instance, Schank and Abelson), most if not all memories are indeed stored in the form of stories. I am not saying that life "is" a narrative, but it can in certain circumstances suggest a quality that we may call "narrativity." The property of "being a narrative" can be predicated of any semiotic object produced with the intent to evoke a story to the mind of the audience. To be more precise, it is the receiver's recognition of this intent that leads to the judgment: this text is a narrative, though we can never be sure that sender and receiver have the same story in mind. "Having narrativity," on the other hand, means being able to evoke such a script, whether or not there is a text, and if there is one, whether or not the author intended to convey a specific story. The concept of "having narrativity," as opposed to "being a narrative," offers a fitting description of the particular narrative quality of music, which remains a theoretical enigma to many scholars (see Nattiez 1990).

My endorsement of a cognitively rather than verbally based definition of narrative should not be taken as an unconditional adherence to a position that has recently taken cognitive science, the social sciences, and the humanities by storm. This position proclaims the fundamentally narrative nature of thought, knowledge and memory, and it equates our never-ending efforts to make sense of the world and of our lives with a process of "emplotting" or "storying."[6] Without denying that storytelling (to oneself or to others) is an efficient way to make life and the world more intelligible, and that the formation of narrative scripts plays an important role in mental life, I believe that there are sense-making operations that do not take narrative form: capturing the laws of physics through an equation such as $E = MC^2$ fails, for instance, the top conditions of my definition, since it produces a timeless law rather than a historical scenario involving particular individuals and one-of-a-kind transformations. Sense making can also result from the drawing of analogies and contrasts between phenomena, rather than from the chronological and causal ordering of individual events.[7] The mental construct that I regard as constitutive of narrative admittedly puts into play cognitive processes that we also use in everyday life, such as focusing thought on certain objects cut out from the flux of perception, a process that also enables us to distinguish discrete states and events; inferring causal relations between these states and events; thinking of events as situated in time; and reconstructing the content of other peoples' minds as an explanation of their behavior. We resort to these mental operations when we drive a nail with a hammer (acting on the basis of inferred causal relations), when we plan our schedules (temporal ordering), when we make grocery lists (focusing on certain items selected from the

wide range of available products), and when we participate in social interaction, especially conversation (reading other people's minds). The activation of one or the other of these cognitive processes is not sufficient to produce narratives, because they can operate independently of each other, as my examples suggest. It is only when they all come together and form a reasonably stable mental image that they generate representations that fulfill all the conditions of my definition. Narratives are more than temporary drafts in the theater of the mind, more than transitory firings of neurons in the brain along individual pathways; they are solidified, conscious representations produced by the convergence of many different mental processes that operate both within and outside stories.

Narrative Modes

If narratology is to expand into a medium-free theory, the first step to be taken is to recognize other narrative modes than the standard way of evoking narrative scripts: telling somebody else that something happened. I do not take this term of mode in the traditional narratological sense defined by Genette (1972) (who uses it as a rather vague umbrella term for concepts such as frequency, direct and indirect discourse, perspective, and focalization), but in a personal sense, to mean a distinct way to bring to mind the cognitive construct that defines narrativity. The best way to explain this concept of modality is through a list of concrete examples. This list, which I regard as open-ended, is organized for convenience's sake into ten binary pairs and one triple. In each group the left-hand term can be regarded as the unmarked case, because the texts that present this feature will be much more widely accepted as narrative than the texts that implement the right-hand category. The conjunction of all the left-side categories yields the prototypical narrative situation, while the actualization of one (or more) of the right-hand categories leads to marginal forms. If the set of all narratives were the bird family, the left-hand elements would correspond to robins and nightingales, its most exemplary members, and the right-hand terms to penguins, kiwis, and ostriches.[8] The terms of the oppositions described below are not freely combinable and I do not claim that my "system" can generate $2^{10}*3$ types of narrative. Some modes presuppose or exclude others, and the list could be organized differently.

External/Internal. In the external mode, narrative meaning is

encoded in material signs; it is textualized. In the internal mode, it does not involve a textualization: we can tell ourselves stories in the privacy of our minds (see Jahn 2003).

Fictional/Nonfictional. Of all the pairs of modes listed here, this is the most widely recognized and the most extensively theorized, but also the hardest to define. I will not discuss it here, since it forms the subject matter of chapter 2. I do not personally regard fiction as a more prototypical form of narrative than nonfiction, but some scholars do (Wolf, Fludernik, Jannidis), presumably because of the greater variety of its discourse. Moreover, as we will see in chapter 2, some scholars deny the possibility of a nonfictional form of narration.

Representational/Simulative. This distinction is based on the idea that a given process may be actualized in many different ways, or that a given action may have many different consequences depending on the global state of the world. A representation is an image of one of these possibilities, while a simulation is a productive engine that generates many different courses of events through a combination of fixed and variable parameters. A narrative mode specific to digital media, simulation is found in story-generating programs and in computer games. (Simulation will be further discussed in chapter 8.)[9]

Diegetic/Mimetic. An expansion of the representational category of the preceding pair, this distinction goes back to Plato. A diegetic narration is the verbal storytelling act of a narrator. As the definition indicates, diegetic narration presupposes language, either oral or written; it is therefore the mode typical of the novel and of oral storytelling. A mimetic narration is an act of showing, a visual or acoustic display. In forming a narrative interpretation the recipient works under the guidance of an authorial consciousness, but there is no narratorial figure. Mimetic narration is exemplified by all the dramatic arts: movies, theater, dance, and the opera. But each of these two modes can intrude into a narration dominated by the other. The dialogues of a novel are islands of mimetic narration, since in direct quote the voice of the narrator disappears behind the voice of the characters; and conversely, the phenomenon of voiced-over narration in cinema reintroduces a diegetic element in a basically mimetic medium.

Autotelic/Utilitarian. In the autotelic mode, the story is displayed for its own sake; in the utilitarian mode, it is subordinated

to another goal, such as making a point in a speech or sermon, explaining a situation through an example, or motivating people to adopt certain behaviors.

Autonomous/Illustrative. In the autonomous mode, the text transmits a story that is new to the receiver; this means that the logical armature of the story must be retrievable from the text. In the illustrative mode, the text retells and completes a story, relying on the receiver's previous knowledge of the plot. The illustrative mode is typical of pictorial narratives, for instance, medieval paintings of biblical scenes. Halfway between these two poles are texts that offer a new, significantly altered version of a familiar plot, such as a modern retelling of a classical myth.

Scripted/Emergent. In the scripted mode story and discourse are entirely determined by a permanently inscribed text. Examples include both print narratives and dramatic performance relying on memorized text. In the emergent mode, discourse, and at least some aspects of story, are created live through improvisation by the narrator (oral storytelling), by the actors (commedia dell'arte), by the recipient (see participatory), or through computer programming (see simulation).

Receptive/Participatory. In the receptive mode the recipient plays no active role in the events presented by the narrative nor in their presentation: she merely receives the account of a narrative action, imagining herself as an external witness. In the participatory mode (a subcategory of emergent), the performance of the recipient actualizes the narrative and completes it on the level of either discourse or story. In discourse-level participation (hypertext fiction), the recipient-participant determines the order of presentation of the text, while in story-level participation (pencil and paper role-playing games *[Dungeons and Dragons]*, interactive drama, and computer games) she impersonates an active character who influences the evolution of the storyworld.

Determinate/Indeterminate. As the image of a world that undergoes metamorphoses, a story traces an arc, or a trajectory, that traverses many points in time. In the determinate mode the text specifies a sufficient number of points on the narrative arc to project a reasonably definite script. In the indeterminate mode, only one or two points are specified, and it is up to the interpreter to imagine one (or more) of the virtual curves that traverse these coordinates. The indeterminate mode is typical of narrative paintings that tell

original stories through the representation of what Lessing calls a pregnant moment. The pregnant moment opens a small temporal window that lets the spectator imagine what immediately preceded and what will immediately follow the represented scene. But a full-blown story normally covers an extended stretch of time, and every spectator will probably imagine the remote past and the remote future in a different way.

Retrospective/Simultaneous/Prospective. In the retrospective mode, narrative recounts past events; in the simultaneous mode (TV and radio commentaries of live broadcasts), it recounts events almost as they happen; in the prospective (prophecies and political speeches), it focuses on future events. Setting events in what is from our historical point of view the future does not necessarily result in a prospective narrative: science fiction stories are usually told in the retrospective mode.

Literal/Metaphorical. What constitutes a literal or metaphorical narration depends on the particular definition given to narrative. While literal narration fully satisfies the definition, the metaphorical brand uses only some of its features. The degree of metaphoricity of a narrative thus depends on how many features are retained, and on how important they are to the definition. The great advantage of recognizing a metaphorical mode is that it enables narratology to acknowledge many of the contemporary extensions of the term "narrative" without sacrificing the precision of its core definition.

Here are some examples of what I consider metaphorical types of narrative. If we define narrative as the representation of a world populated by individuated characters, and if characters are intelligent agents, the following relaxations of the definitions should be regarded as metaphorical: scenarios about collective entities rather than individuals (for example, the "Grand Narratives" of Lyotard, as well as their heirs, the "narratives of class, gender and race" of contemporary cultural studies); narratives about entities deprived of consciousness (for example, Richard Dawkins's exposition of biology as the story of "selfish genes"), and dramatizations that attribute agency to abstract concepts (Hegel's "ruses of Reason").

If we want to stretch the metaphor to its limits, we can apply it to art forms deprived of semantic content, such as music and architecture. In the case of music, the metaphor can be invoked to analyze the structure of the work in terms of narrative effects or narrative

functions. Narrative terminology is indeed common in music theory: relations between chords are described as exposition, complication, and resolution. Given a specific exposition and complication, only certain chords will provide a satisfactory resolution. In this metaphorical interpretation, all music becomes narrative, while if we use an illustrative interpretation, narrativity is a feature that occurs in only some compositions—those that allude to a narrative through their title, such as the *Don Quixote Suite,* by Telemann, or the *Sorcerer's Apprentice,* by Paul Dukas. In the case of architecture, a metaphorical interpretation would draw an analogy between the temporality of plot and the experience of walking through a building. In a narratively conceived architecture, the visitor's discovery tour is plotted as a meaningful succession of events. This occurs in Baroque churches, where the visitor's tour is supposed to reenact the life of Christ.

Some of the modes listed above have strong affinities for certain media, while others can appear in several physical supports, but no mode is totally medium-independent. For instance, the distinction fictional-nonfictional appears in written and oral language, film, and television, but it is questionable in other media, as we will see in chapter 2. The diegetic mode presupposes language, illustrative occurs mainly in visual media, and the participatory mode is most common in digital environments, though not entirely limited to them. It is precisely this dependency of certain modes on certain media that makes the concept useful for transmedial narratology.

What Are Media?

The concept of medium is no less problematic than the concept of narrative. As Joshua Meyerowitz observes, "it is a glaring problem for media studies" that "we have no common understanding of what the subject matter of the field is" (1993, 55). This may seem a strange problem for the layman: don't we all instinctively know what media are? And yet, if we ask specialists of different disciplines to propose a list of media, we will receive a bewildering variety of answers. A sociologist or cultural critic will answer TV, radio, cinema, the Internet. An art critic may list music, painting, sculpture, literature, drama, the opera, photography, architecture. An artist's list would begin with clay, bronze, oil, watercolor, fabrics, and it may end with exotic items used in so-called mixed-media works, such as grasses, feathers, and beer can tabs. An information theorist or historian of writing will think of sound waves, papyrus scrolls, codex books, embossed surfaces (for Braille texts), and silicon chips. A philosopher of the phenomenologist school would divide media into visual, aural, verbal, and perhaps tactile, gustatory, and olfactory. In media theory, as in other fields, what constitutes an object of investigation depends on the purpose of the investigator.

These various answers reflect the ambiguity of the term. The entry for "medium" in *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed., 2003) includes, among other meanings, these two definitions: (1) a channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment; (2) material or technical means of artistic expression. Type 1 regards media as *conduits,* or methods of transmitting information; and type 2 regards them as *languages.* (I am borrowing these terms of comparison from Joshua Meyerowitz.)[10] Media of type 1 include TV, radio, the Internet, the gramophone, the telephone—all distinct types of technologies—as well as cultural channels, such as books and newspapers. Media of type 2 would be language, sound, image, or more narrowly, paper, bronze, or the human body.

In the conduit, or transmissive conception of medium represented by type 1, ready-made messages are encoded in a particular way, sent over the channel, and decoded on the other end. Before they are encoded in the mode specific to the medium in sense 1, some of these messages are realized through a medium in sense 2. A painting must be done in oil before it can be digitized and sent over the Internet. A musical composition must be performed on instruments in order to be recorded and played on a gramophone. Medium in sense 1 thus involves the translation of objects supported by media in sense 2 into a secondary code.

Some media theorists (Ong 1982, 176) have objected to the transmissive conception of medium, arguing that it reduces them to hollow pipelines, through which information passes without being affected by the shape of the pipe. It is almost an axiom of contemporary media theory that the materiality of the medium—what we may call its affordances, or possibilities—matters for the type of meanings that can be encoded. On the other hand, if we regard meaning as inextricable from its medial support, medium-free definitions of narrative become untenable and we fall back into the doctrine of radical medial relativism. This doctrine, as we have seen, makes it illegitimate to compare messages embodied in different media and to view them as manifestations of a common