My Narratology

An Interview with Ansgar Nünning

DIEGESIS: What is your all-time favourite narratological study?

Nünning: First of all, I should like to thank the editors for inviting me to this interview and to answer the five questions that distinguished colleagues like Marie-Laure Ryan and Wolf Schmid answered before. The trouble with the first two questions, however, at least from my point of view, is that they encourage you to adopt the kind of ranking-top-five-list-winner-takes-all-perspective that seems to have become the dominant way of worldmaking in today's media, to the detriment of all those who don't happen to be in the limelight or at the top of those lists. Moreover, I don't really have an all-time favourite narratological study. What I do have, is great admiration for many colleagues' work in the field. If I were pressed to come up with a top-five or rather top-ten list of narratological studies, it would include (in alphabetical order) some of the well-known monographs by Monika Fludernik, David Herman, Susan Lanser, Brian McHale, Jim Phelan and Marie-Laure Ryan. Let me add that I am not at all sure whether I would have developed such a strong interest in narratives and narrative theory if I had not been lucky enough as a completely uninitiated undergraduate to come across and eagerly read Wayne C. Booth's seminal, and eminently stimulating, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), which, of course, predates the birth of narratology proper but which I still consider to be one of the all-time favourite studies on narratives.

DIEGESIS: Which narrative would you like to take with you on a lonely island?

Nünning: Like Marie-Laure Ryan (see *DIEGESIS* 3.2) and, I guess, many other colleagues and friends, I would be hard put to make up my mind. Among the obvious top candidates from the long list of my all-time favourite novels would be George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (indeed "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people", as Virginia Woolf aptly observed), James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Gabriel García Marquez's *Cien años de soledad*, Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Virginia Woolf's novels (yes, all of them, although they are anything but one narrative). But rather than re-read a novel that I greatly enjoyed on previous occasions, I would probably end up with a pile of narratives that I have wanted to read for a long time, but have not yet got round to. Therefore let's play academic humiliation and publicly admit that I have not yet read

Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Mark Twain's *Autobiography*, to name just a few of the many narratives that I would be seriously tempted to take to a lonely desert island.

DIEGESIS: Why narratology?

Nünning: There are any number of reasons why the study of narrative is arguably very important. In addition to the answers given by Marie-Laure Ryan and Wolf Schmid, to whose views I fully subscribe, I would like to add that narratives are not just ubiquitous in today's media-saturated society, but they are also among the most important ways of self-, sense- and indeed world-making, as Jerome Bruner, Paul John Eakin, David Herman and others have shown. As my wife and I have argued in a co-edited volume on *Cultural Ways of Worldmaking* (2010), there are various domains and functions of narrative worldmaking, including e.g. self-making, sense-making and community-making. Though most people would probably agree that narratives are of fundamental importance for the ways in which we make sense of our experiences and of our lives at large, the worldmaking capacity of stories and storytelling has not received the degree of attention that it arguably deserves. The same holds true for the performative power of narratives to create or make not only worlds, but also communities, nations, and selves, as well as conflicts, enemies, and wars. Moreover, narratives can also be abused as ideological and propagandistic devices, as means of fostering collective delusions, and as 'weapons of mass destruction'. Narratology is thus not just indispensable for literary and cultural studies. On the contrary, anyone interested in what has been, and is, going on in the realms of finance, law and politics just cannot afford to ignore the study and theory of factual and fictional narratives.

DIEGESIS: Which recent narratological trends are of particular interest to you?

Nünning: Like many other colleagues working in the increasingly broader field(s) of the study of narratives, I am especially interested in the approaches and trends that have been dubbed 'cognitive narratology', 'contextual narratology' and 'cultural and historical narratology'.

Furthermore, I am personally particularly engaged in extending the aims and scope of narrative theory to include all the instances of narrative worldmaking, which is not a strategic move but an acknowledgement of the fact that narrative worldmaking plays such a crucial role in many domains over and beyond literature, film and the arts in general. Since studying narrative worldmaking, however, is a genuinely inter- or transdisciplinary project, literary narrative theory should foster a more sustained dialogue with narrative research in other disciplines, both in the humanities and the social sciences. The credit for redirecting narrative theory to the issues of worldmaking probably goes to David Herman and his pioneering work on the topic. If we want to get to grips with

the forms, modes and media involved in narrative worldmaking, we should follow in the footsteps of those colleagues who have not just advocated the interdisciplinary expansion of narrative studies, but also successfully engaged in collaborative ventures with the kind of narrative research done in the social sciences.

In addition, I have become very much interested in three different areas that cannot yet be called 'trends', but which I am convinced hold great potential for narrative theory and to which narratology has yet to turn its attention: First, the interdisciplinary field that is generally called 'narrative medicine', in particular the study of 'broken narratives'; secondly, the blind spots and limitations of both classical and so-called post-classical narratology, both of which are largely ahistorical and anything but sensitive to cultural differences; thirdly, the obvious differences that can be observed between narratives from different cultures and historical periods.

Although the format of an interview is definitely not the right place to try to outline new research perspectives, at least by way of example, I should like to mention the proliferation of crisis narratives, broken narratives, and new kinds of fictional storytelling like "fragmented novels" (cf. Goia 2013). For worse rather than for better, we seem to live in an age in which disrupted lives (cf. Becker 1997) and broken narratives have become the rule rather than the exception. I would even go so far as to venture the hypothesis that the plethora of broken narratives across a broad range of domains, genres, and text-types may suggest that in a digitally enhanced and fragmented age like ours there may be a change of dominant between the hitherto prevailing form of the linear novel and new kinds of broken narratives, fragmented novels and other fragmentary as well as often multimodal hybrids that combine heterogeneous genres and text-types. These kinds of narratives and many other recent trends arguably deserve more attention than they have hitherto been given by narratology.

Being as much shaped by contemporary culture and altered ways of living as shaping them in turn, this rise of new kinds of narratives in 21st-century storytelling presents a challenge to classical narratology, questioning as it does some of narratology's most cherished premises and concepts, including the very notion that there is such a thing as narrative logic. The phenomenon (or phenomena?) that has (or have) been subsumed under the umbrella terms of 'broken narratives' and 'fragmented novels' challenges and even undermines some of the central assumptions, objectives and cherished concepts of narratology, especially the key concept of the event. More specifically, it calls into question three of the key assumptions and goals of classical narratology, i.e. that there is such a thing as a logic of narrative, that stories are endowed with orderly narrative structures, coherence and causality, and that it is possible to generate a science of narrative modelled on structuralist linguistics which would provide a systematic inventory of the elements, forms and structures of narrative. Thus it is arguably no coincidence that broken narratives have hardly come onto the radar of classical narratology and postclassical narratologies in that they chal-

lenge, defy and transgress some of the core presuppositions on which narratology is built.

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narratology?

Nünning: Since I am an academic and not a prophet, I would be loath to make any sweeping predictions about the future of a field that has been, and is, undergoing quite rapid changes. What I am much more interested in than premature forecasts about the future of narratology, which also very much depends on such prosaic factors as funding, are open questions: how can narratology contribute to greater dialogue across the disciplines? Can its conceptual apparatus serve as the foundation of a language of communication that can illuminate the workings of narrative in different disciplinary areas of inquiry? Some of the concepts developed in narratology can arguably indeed perform this task, but as soon as we cross cultural or disciplinary boundaries we should also be or become aware of the blind spots and limitations of the toolkit of narratological concepts. Moreover, several notable exceptions (cf. e.g. Salmon 2007; Klein / Martínez 2009; Bietz 2012) notwithstanding, narrative theory has yet to fully come to terms with such influential and ubiquitous narrative ways of worldmaking as "The News" (see de Botton 2014), the so-called 'social' networking services like Facebook, and the forms and functions of storytelling in organizations, politics, law, economics and many other fields.

In addition, I should like to add and repeat some of the ideas that I delineated in a volume entitled *Narrative Theories and Poetics: 5 Questions* (2012), in which thirty-three scholars working in the field of narrative studies answered somewhat similar questions: What I consider to be particularly vital – pointing to another open problem in narratology itself – is the question of moving towards a genuinely cultural and historical narratology, i.e. a self-reflexive narratology that not only looks at the cultural variability and historical development of narrative forms and genres, but also considers the historicity, and cultural specificities, of its own approaches, concepts and methods. Narratology in its classical form often aimed at a universalist science, while cultural studies have emphasised diversity and cultural and historical specificity. What seems crucial here, as in so much academic research, is intellectual reflexivity and adaptability: it is arguably possible, productive and illuminating to develop narratological concepts that have wide applicability (not least as a means of finding parallels and correspondences across cultures and historical periods), but it is necessary to maintain a reflexive consciousness of the conditions and pre-conditions that shape our modes of understanding and our cultures of research. This is, indeed, one of the fundamental insights that is gained through constructivist approaches to narratives (and metaphors) as 'ways of worldmaking' (Nelson Goodman). I am firmly convinced that change and progress, and indeed the future of narratology, depend on interdisciplinary and international dialogue and exchange, and sustained engagement across disciplines and cultures of research.

DIEGESIS: What other question would you like to answer?

Nünning: A question that I am greatly interested in, but unfortunately cannot answer, is how can and do narratives, and the study of narratives, contribute to mental and physical health, viz. to what the medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky called 'salutogenesis'?

Bibliography

Becker, Gaylene (1997): *Disrupted Lives. How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*. Berkeley et al.

Bietz, Christoph (2013): *Die Geschichten der Nachrichten. Eine narratologische Analyse telemedialer Wirklichkeitskonstruktion*. (= Handbücher und Studien zur Medienkulturwissenschaft 8). Trier.

De Botton, Alain (2014): *The News: A Reader's Manual*. London.

Gioia, Ted (2013): *The Rise of the Fragmented Novel*. Retrieved from http://fractiousfiction.com/rise_of_the_fragmented_novel (10.03.2014).

Klein, Christian / Martínez, Matías (2009) (Eds.): *Wirklichkeitserzählungen. Felder, Formen und Funktionen nicht-literarischen Erzählens*. Stuttgart.

Salmon, Christian (2007): *Storytelling. La machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*. Paris.

Ansgar Nünning is professor of English and American Literature and Cultural Studies at Justus-Liebig-University in Giessen and the founding and managing director of the "International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture" (GCSC), funded by the Excellence Initiative and inaugurated in 2006. He has published widely on English and American literature, cultures of memory, narratology, and literary and cultural theory, including 15 monographs and more than 200 scholarly articles in refereed journals and collections of essays. His narratological publications include *Cultural Ways of Worldmaking: Media and Narratives*, (ed. with Vera Nünning and Birgit Neumann. Berlin / New York 2010), *An Introduction to the Study of Narrative Fiction* (with Birgit Neumann, Stuttgart 2008), *Erzähltextanalyse und Gender Studies* (co-edited with Vera Nünning, Stuttgart 2004), two volumes on new approaches in postclassical narratology, including transgeneric, intermedial and interdisciplinary narrative theory (co-edited with Vera Nünning, Trier 2002), two collections of articles on unreliable narration and multiperspectival narration (Trier 1998, 2000), as well as numerous articles on narratological approaches and concepts, e.g. unreliable narration, the implied author, multiperspectivity, description, and meta-narration, and an issue on "Recent Trends in Narratology" of the peer-reviewed journal *GRM: Germanisch-Romanische-Monatsschrift* (2013).

Prof. Dr. Ansgar Nünning
Justus-Liebig Universität Giessen
Department of English and American Literature and Culture
Otto-Behaghel-Straße 10 B
35394 Gießen
E-mail: Ansgar.Nuenning@anglistik.uni-giessen.de
URL: http://www.uni-giessen.de/cms/faculties/f05/engl/lit/staff/profs/ansgar_nuenning

Sie können den Text in folgender Weise zitieren / How to cite this article:
Nünning, Ansgar: "My Narratology: An Interview with Ansgar Nünning". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung / Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 4.1 (2015). 104-109.
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20150520-121640-7
URL: https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/192/261