My Narratology

An Interview with John Pier

DIEGESIS: Why narratology?

Pier: First, I wish to thank the editors of *DIEGESIS* for offering me the opportunity to take part in the rich discussion that has developed in this column through the participation of so many outstanding scholars of narrative.

To answer the question "Why narratology?" it is helpful to bear in mind how narratology has evolved. The early narratologists (to simplify things) sought to identify the properties that bind all narratives together and thus to establish a narrative *langue*, or even a universal "narrative grammar." However, the focus remained primarily on text at the expense of context. The "classical" phase of narratology was thus succeeded by a "postclassical" phase, more attentive to contextual considerations and to narrative *parole*. In addition, under the influence of the "narrative turn" and other factors, the corpus was expanded beyond the literary canon to embrace non-literary and non-verbal forms of narration. It is in the wake of these developments that we have seen a growth in the number of so-called hyphenated narratologies, some favouring the analysis of literary narratives, and others the cinema, comics, computer games, AI storytelling, etc. At the same time, the scope of inquiry broadened to incorporate a panoply of transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to the analysis of narrative, drawing on the cognitive sciences, the computer sciences, modal logic, sociolinguistics, and so on.

It would be possible to trace these evolutions as extending from *les frontières du récit*, identified in 1969 by Gérard Genette, through what I described some twenty years ago as the "parameters" of narrative on to "the emerging vectors of narratology" (topic of the ENN3 conference held in Paris in 2013) and to the "limits of narrative" (topic of the ENN8 conference held in Wuppertal last autumn). The fact that narratology has become influential in the study of a range of phenomena broader than the objects of its original purview bears witness to the fruitfulness of six decades of narratological research. This can be seen for example in the response to "instrumental narratives" that have developed in the social media, a form of "commodified storytelling propagated by an entire industry of storytelling consultants and coaches" (Mäkelä 2021, 93), but it also includes corporate storytelling, the storytelling economy, etc. In contrast to literary narratives that seek to portray an imaginary world, instrumental storytelling, through the use of algorithms, for instance, can predict or even manipulate behaviour. In this connection, a research program at the University of Tartu,

"Dangers of Narrative," has explored the downside of emotionally engaging Facebook and Twitter narratives and their social impact (see Maria Mäkelä's interview in *DIEGESIS* 10 No. 1, 2021). These and other forms of instrumental narratives represent an important transdisciplinary extension of narratological research.

The question "Why narratology?" cannot be addressed without inquiring into the shifting parameters of narrative.

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

Pier: Time is not immobile, and I would be hard put to label any of the narratological studies I am familiar with as an all-time favourite. It is more a question of how my views have developed over several decades of narrative study. My first contact with narratology came shortly after the appearance of Gérard Genette's *Figures III* in 1972. Enrolled in a seminar taught by Genette, I spoke with him about his book, an exchange that culminated in writing my dissertation under his direction: "L'instance narrative du récit à la première personne" (a title that avoided the term "homodiégétique," regarded at the time with suspicion). Curiously, neither in the original of Genette's book nor in the English translation, *Narrative Discourse* (1980), does the word "narratology" appear. Nor, unfortunately, were four articles in the French edition included in the English edition: "Critique et poétique," "Poétique et histoire," "La rhétorique restreinte," "Métonymie chez Proust."

The revelation that he was a "classical" narratologist given to rigid taxonomies and arcane terminology was a source of bemusement for Genette. His interest was in narrative poetics (not a grammar or a model of narrative!), and in particular he focused on narrative as *discourse*. His aim was not to take stock of narrative in its ubiquity, but to map it out in its specificity, not to incorporate narratology into transdisciplinary research, but to position narrative within an *open poetics*. This is a point often overlooked by Genette's admirers and detractors alike (for further discussion on these questions and Genette's aesthetics, see Pier 2010).

Other scholars and currents of research that have influenced my thinking about narrative are the following: Umberto Eco on abductive reasoning; Meir Sternberg's work on narrativity; Jan Mukařovský on Czech structuralism, semiotics, and aesthetics; complexity theory and narrative; Yuri Lotman on semiosphere, cultural semiotics, and narrative.

DIEGESIS: How would you describe your current research project to a wider audience?

Pier: It would be difficult to speak about my "current" work without reference to my early exposure to Genette's open poetics of narrative discourse. What I have done since then builds partly on this backdrop and can be described as a trajectory unfolding in five intersecting phases (not to mention a few false starts).

Not all of these phases bear on narratology *per se*, but, taken together, they seek to situate narrative study within a semiotic framework.

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One of the underlying principles of this framework is the inferential nature of textual communication. Based on Peirce's syllogistic trio deduction, hypothesis, and induction, Eco developed a system of abductive reasoning wherein "overcoded abductions" (readily available inferences from general laws to particular cases), "undercoded abductions" (plausible alternatives to the foregoing), "creative abductions" (conjectures), and "meta-abductions" (testing of hypotheses against real-world knowledge) are commensurable with the processes of cultural representation (Eco, e.g., 1984, 39–43). For narratology, abductive reasoning means, for instance, that story and plot "can nearly always be translated into another semiotic system" (Eco 1994, 35).

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In the reception of some messages, be they verbal, non-verbal or some mixture thereof, the recipient may experience a sense of suspense, curiosity, and surprise. When this occurs, it is because of discrepancies between communicative time and represented time, which sets into motion a dynamics of prospection, retrospection, and recognition. Out of this interplay of forces there emerges the "regulating principle, first among the priorities of telling/reading": narrativity (Sternberg 1992, 529). Sternberg advances the idea that, in contrast to the standard theories, narrative is the product of the interplay of these competing temporalities, that narrative is defined by the dynamic forces of narrativity rather than as the realization of an abstract structure (story) in the form of a concrete manifestation (discourse).

The introduction of these principles into narratology is suggestive of Genette's (1991, 15) distinction between an *essentialist poetics* and a *conditionalist poetics*. Together, Eco's and Sternberg's proposals mark, among other things, a passage from the question "What is narrative?" to the question "When is narrative?"

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Mukařovský, the leading member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, was not a theoretician of narrative, yet two aspects of his groundbreaking research in particular are worthy of the narratologist's attention today.

First, he conceived of structuralism in terms that differ significantly from those that are associated with classical narratology. For him, structuralism is not a theory, a method or a fixed body of knowledge. Rather, it is an "epistemological stance": "Mukařovský's structuralist aesthetics must be seen as a process, a way of posing questions rather than a closed system" (Steiner 1977, x). Structure is "a set of elements, the internal equilibrium of which is constantly disturbed and restored anew and the unity of which thus appears to us as a set of dialectic contradictions" (Mukařovský 1977 [1946], 4).

Second, it was Mukařovský who laid the groundwork of aesthetics as a systematic semiotics of art, beginning with "Art as a Semiotic Fact" (1977 [1934]).

Being a sign rather than the direct interaction between the object of aesthetic experience and the experiencing subject, an artistic work is composed of a material vehicle ("work-thing"), a meaning ("aesthetic object," lodged in the collective consciousness and containing the structure proper of the work), and a relation to the thing signified (the total context of social phenomena) (85). Mukařovský's aesthetics of art is not only structural, but also functional. Among the defining functions of the work of art are the aesthetic function. This function is not restricted to art but, analogously to Jakobson's poetic function, can also be found in other, non-artistic contexts; a work of art is an artefact where the aesthetic function predominates (cf. Jakobson's dominant), a function that is open to change over time.

Closely related to this function is the aesthetic code, corresponding roughly to the tradition forming the backdrop against which a work is perceived. Moreover, it is the aesthetic code, comparable to *langue*, that makes the work of art a social fact understandable by the members of the collectivity: at the same time, it puts works of art into relation with other semiotic codes, such as those of science and religion, and thus with human culture at large.

Without a semiotic perspective, the theoretician will regard a work of art either as a purely formal construction, a direct reflection of the author's psychic dispositions or a passive commentary on an external reality. "Only the semiotic point of view," argues Mukařovský, "will permit theoreticians to recognize the autonomous existence and essential dynamism of artistic structure and to understand its development as a movement which is immanent but in constant dialectic relation to the development of the other spheres of culture" (87).

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Complexity theory, originating in the natural sciences, went on to develop in other fields such as information theory and the social sciences before drawing the attention of literary and film scholars and, more recently, of narratologists. At issue in the complexity of narratives is not how "complicated" or lengthy a narrative might be, but how "art complicates its own structure through interaction with its environment. […] what matters is density and richness of connections stemming from the interplay of predictability and indeterminacy." Complexity is thus characterized by "open-ended dynamics and resistance to closure" (Grishakova and Poulaki 2019, 2–3).

It is in this light that what I have called "narrative instabilities" can be considered. Narratives, subject at all times to nonequilibrium, unfold as an irreversible process whereby entropic forces fluctuate between greater and lesser degrees of nonequilibrium. Due to these fluctuations and to the asymmetries they provoke, causes and effects are multiple, which results in the inherent *nonlinearity* of narrative. Furthermore, due to multiple indeterminacies, for example, the open-endedness of the system will be accentuated, tending toward "the edge of chaos" where it may trigger a *bifurcation point*. When this occurs, the system itself, pushed "beyond the threshold of stability" toward a breakdown of the chain of cause and effect, will dislocate and spontaneously self-organize in ways

that cannot be determined or projected from previous states. The irreversibility of narration in time and in process drives a wedge between the parts of the narrative as well as between the narrative and its environment, interjecting *dissipative structures* into the narrative flow at random (cf. Pier 2017, esp. 551–556; 2020; Pier et al. 2025).

Narrative instabilities, be they of greater or lesser intensity, are part and parcel of narration. For, as suggested by Mieke Bal (2019, 247), "[n]arratology is not a grid to simplify literature but a tool for making the complexity of narrative texts visible."

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The other line of research that has influenced my thinking about narrative and narratology comes from the semiotics of Yuri Lotman (see Pier forthcoming). What has drawn my attention to Lotman can be succinctly viewed through his notion of *semiosphere*. Defined as "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of language," semiosphere is imbued at all levels with a "semiotic dualism" indispensable to the "organization of a working semiotic system" (Lotman 1990, 123–124). This dualism is manifest in various forms, notably in *text*. The basic unit of Lotmanian semiotics is not the sign, but text, the simultaneous presence of at least two languages in a semiotic space, untranslatable into one another, that form the minimal condition of meaning-generation (cf. Bakhtinian dialogism). Because of its plurality, text is both *heterogeneous* and *asymmetrical*. Semiotic dualism also resides in the fact that the semiosphere possesses a *centre* and a *periphery* divided by a *boundary* that opposes 'we' and 'they,' systemic and non- or extra-systemic elements, etc. Boundary acts as a "bilingual filter" (between the familiar and the alien, for example) (Lotman 2005 [1983], 210). Finally, culture exists as an aggregate of texts while texts act as a mechanism for the realization of culture. "In a sense," it has been observed, "semiosphere can be understood as an elaboration of the notion of 'culture' to its logical limits, producing an isomorphic chain: text – culture – semiosphere" (Tamm 2019, 8).

It is within the context of the constant flux of semiotic systems that Lotman sets out a schema of considerable interest for narratology. Among the themes central to Lotmanian semiotics, also present in narrative, are interactions between systems in their *gradual development* and at *moments of explosion*. Both are characterized by *irreversibility*, and the latter by *unpredictability*. These processes – on the one hand, regular and recurrent; on the other hand, disruptive and unforeseeable – not only interact in accordance with the complex patterns discussed above, but they are present in all domains, both in nature and in culture.

These principles carry over to two primordial forms of narrative. One is cyclical and recurrent, without beginning and end, and reduces anomalies to invariant images. Law-affirming and normalizing, texts of this type form the topological world of myth. Linear or plot-texts, however, record anomalies, surprises, and "news," as in chronicles and historical texts. Significantly, from the semiotic perspective, this typological distribution is structurally analogous to the organization and functioning of the semiosphere: the mythological text tends toward

the centre, forming a structural model of the world, while the plot-text, an archive of anomalies, tends toward the periphery. Typologically and diachronically, the two intertwine in innumerable ways over long periods of time. By virtue of its integration into semiosphere, narrative is included within a general semiotics of culture.

DIEGESIS: What are the most innovative aspects of your current project?

Pier: To answer this question, I would like to point out, firstly, that narratology has passed through several phases. In 1983, Genette spoke of two narratologies, one "thematic" (analysis of the story or the narrative content), the other "formal" or "modal" (analysis of the mode of "representation" of stories). In 1999, Herman distinguished between a unified "classical" narratology and "postclassical" narratologies. And in 2010, Alber and Fludernik identified two "phases" of postclassical narratology, one emphasizing multiplicities, interdisciplinarities, and transmedialities, the other, consolidation and continued diversification. These and other evolutions, including work being carried on in narrative research, bear witness to the dynamism of narratology and to the broad range of its applicability. On the other hand, such developments have on occasion tended toward a *pan-narrativism*. This phenomenon can be described on the one hand as an over-extension of the idea of narrative, and on the other hand as a dilution of narratology resulting from the sometimes ill-considered or excessive 'export' of its concepts and principles to other fields.

The 'innovative aspects' of my work, if any, might best be described as an attempt to counter this pan-narrativism (not all forms of discourse or of reasoning are narrative) by seeking out and putting into perspective relevant and sometimes overlooked or forgotten findings of past and more recent research with a potential to contribute to an open-ended semiotic framework for narrative and narratology. This, I contend, will enable us to better identify the contours and the productivity of narratology, and will also serve as a reminder that the "science of narrative" was originally thought of as coming within "a science that studies the life of signs in social life" – semiology (Saussure (1972 [1915], 33).

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

Pier: Rather than a lonely island, I would head for Borges's "The Library of Babel" – not exactly a narrative, but an edifice constructed as an everlasting, ubiquitous system of hexagonal galleries where each gallery opens onto a vestibule and a spiral staircase. Four sides of each gallery are equipped with five bookshelves on which there are 32 books of 410 pages in an identical format; no two books in the entire Library can be paired together. The writing system includes 25 orthographic symbols, all of whose endlessly repeated variations are foreseen by the Library, which is total, perfect, and whole. Attempts to decrypt the books are all but in vain: even journeys in quest of the catalogue of catalogues yield meagre results. However, while the Library is unlimited, it is also *periodic*: "If an eternal traveller should journey in any direction, he would find after untold cen-

turies that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder – which, repeated, becomes order: the Order" (Borges 1998 [1944], 118).

It may be the case that, with the advent of generative AI, we are on the verge of a set of algorithms that will sort things out, relieving the weary Babelian librarians of their largely fruitless efforts and inconclusive disputes. As for myself, I am predisposed to go on puttering about in the Workshop of Transtextuality, where for some time I've had a few irons in the fire. One is the topos of the labyrinth, from ancient to modern. Another is baroque narrative in its various manifestations through the ages (not without forays into baroque music and opera). The wanderings of Ulysses in ancient Greece and in modern Dublin have a place of pride in the Workshop, as do Nabokov's "other worlds" of intricate butterfly and chessboard puzzles. I am more attracted to entering the Proustian cathedral through the mind-bending incipit "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure" than I am to being immersed in Donald Trump's viral "Jim stopped going to Paris."

It is a precarious endeavour when, engaged in a work in progress in pursuit of the Book, one encounters along the way a tortoise pitted against a hare.

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narratology?

Pier: I do not pretend to have a handle on all the ways that narratology is evolving, nor do I have a crystal ball that allows me to prophesize the future. It does seem to me, though, that a number of trends stand out which, broadly speaking, are indicative of the orientation of current research. Among them are the fact that the narrative turn continues to expand the scope of investigation; that transdisciplinarity has not ceased to spawn new paradigms and models for narratology; and that the transmedial turn continues to usher in novel forms of narrative, such as instrumental storytelling, that present the narratologist with new challenges. Developments of these kinds often call for a critical rethinking of the established narratological frames of reference. Another area of reflection is how to assess research that is in some way related to narratological principles (perhaps unintentionally so), without claiming the cloak of narratology. Moreover, innovative contributions in the philological disciplines continue to appear, one notable case being diachronic narratology. Fictionality, about which the early narratologists had little to say, has been integrated into narratological research in a number of ways (active in this area is the Société internationale de recherche sur la fiction et la fictionnalité: https://fictionstudies.org/).

Along with these and other ongoing trends, however, comes a number of challenges for which narratologists may be caught short of solutions. Among them: What implications, if any, does polyphony have for the study of AI storytelling? Which concepts and analytical tools employed for television series might be helpful for the study of the medieval epic – and vice versa? Are there any lessons to be drawn from interior monologue for the analysis of computer games? In the attempt to address questions such as these, should the resources of a plurality of narratologies be called on? Alternatively, can sticking points such

as these be resolved through the lens of narrative universals, or perhaps examined in the light of a general narrative theory or model through which, ideally, variants and deviations can be accounted for?

My own angle is to look at narrative through the lens of process. Narrative discourse, in whatever medium, unfolds irreversibly. Open-ended and unstable, it is subject at all times to extra-systemic disturbances. Internal tensions and asymmetries, varying in degree of intensity from "gradual" to "explosive," build up between the parts and the whole of any given narrative, which functions as a dynamic system that is never in a state of equilibrium. When pushed beyond the threshold of stability internally and/or externally and to the point of dissipative structure, the system self-organizes anew spontaneously and non-deterministically. These patterns, also present in other spheres of culture, are at work in a dialectic between two interdependent processes that occur in narrative discourse: cyclical, recurrent, and predictable, on the one hand, and on the other, linear, discrete, and punctuated by anomalies and irregularities.

John Pier is a retired professor of English at the University of Tours, France. An emeritus member of the Centre de recherche sur les arts et le langage at the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, he has co-directed the seminar "Recherches contemporaines en narratologie" since its founding in 2003. His research activities include transdisciplinary approaches to narrative theory with an emphasis on semiotics and complexity theory and bear on intertextuality, intermediality, and discourse analysis as well as on the various theoretical and national developments of narratology. A co-editor of the Narratologia series at De Gruyter, he also co-founded (in 2009) the European Narratology Network, of which he was the chair from 2013 to 2015. He is the author of numerous scientific articles and book chapters and has edited or co-edited more than fifteen collective works, among them *Théorie du récit. L'apport de la recherche allemande* (2007), *Jan Mukařovský. Écrits 1928–1946* (2018), *Le formalisme russe cent ans après* (2018), *Contemporary French Narratology* (2020), and *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology* (2023).

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John Pier
CRAL (CNRS/EHESS), Paris
Homepage: https://cral.ehess.fr/membres/john-pier
E-Mail: j.pier@wanadoo.fr

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