

Contemporary sequential narratology with focus on reading dynamics

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Abstract

Review of Baroni, Raphaël and Françoise Revaz, eds. *Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2016.

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Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology, a new volume of essays from the Ohio State University Press should pique the interest of the narratological audience. This is in no small part thanks to its publisher's profile as one of the main outlets of narratological studies, nor can one fail to notice the impressive cast of contributors. Yet calling the collection *timely* is not necessarily the first thing in anybody's mind. The book comes out, after all, at a time during which Narrative Studies has sought to move beyond defining narrative or narrativity through formulations about how events (one or several) relate (to preceding and following circumstances or to each other) within a sequence. Instead we have seen the preference shift towards experientially based definitions of narrativity (Fludernik; Herman, *Basic Elements*). One of the reasons for this movement can be found in the so-called Narrative Turn. It was inevitable that a question should arise whether the event-based definitions with their history in literary poetics were adequate or appropriate for dealing with scenarios arising in practices and disciplines as dissimilar as those currently inhabiting the field of interdisciplinary narrative studies (cf. Hyvärinen, Hatavara and Hydén).

The crucial hint is, to be fair, in the name of the book: contemporary narratology. While not everyone would agree that the discipline once named narratology should now be seen merely as a subset of Narrative Studies, the volume is quite frank in its orientation towards issues commonly associated with the bygone – some would say golden – era of narratological studies: events, plots, endings, sequence. The book, however, makes its intentions clear from the start. In the introduction, Raphaël Baroni, one of the co-editors of the volume (with Françoise Revaz), presents a citation from Hilary Dannenberg. Dannenberg argues for the continuing allure of sequence, and states that “the repeated attempts to redefine the parameters of plot reflect both the centrality and the complexity of the temporal dimension of narrative” (1). Baroni, on the other hand, is himself cited in the concluding essay by Federico Piazola and Franco Passalacqua, in which he emphasizes “the importance of giving a new dynamism to the narrative sequence with an approach that stresses the cognitive abilities of the interpreters and the interpretive performances that actualize the narratives” (199). Through the centrality of such statements the volume emphasizes that its contribution is, in the main, to narratology, classical and postclassical.

Once this preliminary disposition is accepted, the aim of the volume becomes clearer. The main virtue of the book might indeed be its subtle knack for linking the question of sequence, in itself about as classical as narratology gets, to a number of rather fundamental issues arising in the current climes of Narrative Theory. While the volume directs its formidable expertise from early on to rather heavy-duty narratological questions, little by little its scope broadens and the argument for the centrality of the concept of “sequentiality” becomes more and more persuasive. Therefore, the title “sequence in contemporary narratology” is apt in many ways, and its deceptive simplicity can only be deemed appropriate.

Very much the same can be said about the general outline of the book. The book is structurally well-planned, and the conventionality of its organization contributes to its general user-friendliness. The first part, “Theorizing Sequence,” doubles as a historical survey of approaches to sequence in literary poetics or narratology, while also introducing the contemporary angle specific to the volume. The contributions from Gerald Prince, John Pier, and Peter Hühn situate the volume in a particular sector of the broad narratological field.

On a glance, it seems evident that the first essay, “On Narrative Sequence, Classical and Postclassical” by Gerald Prince, is placed up front because it should clarify an important key issue. Prince’s contribution mostly stops short of placing the question of sequence in contexts of postclassical narratology, yet it certainly strengthens the impression that the volume has its distinctive agenda. Much of the earlier narratological theory takes the Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* as the bedrock of theorizing sequence, and complements it with Genette’s work on anachrony as the system of logico-temporal relations between the two (in Genette, *Narrative Discourse* and *Narrative Discourse Revisited*). This is true of even relatively recent treatments.¹ Prince’s essay, however, concerns itself more with Aristotle than the Russian formalists, more with Todorov than Genette, and more with *events* than *plot* in the sense that was widely discussed in the post-Genettian narratology (e.g., Brooks). These inclinations are fully deliberate and inform the book as a whole.

Prince’s traditional view casts sequence primarily as a “sequence of events.” The subsequent essays by Pier and Hühn take “sequence” and “event” as their respective starting points and each present a substantial critique of one of the concepts. While both authors have discussed their respective topics extensively on prior occasions, placing these essays back-to-back in the first part exemplifies the desire of the volume to challenge some of the foundational notions of narratology (cf. Pier; Hühn).

The second part, “Rhetorical Perspectives on Narrative Progression,” builds on the theoretical leanings of the first. Importantly, the essays here put the theory into use and demonstrate how narrative sequence may be approached in analysis. The essays in this section are by James Phelan, Eyal Segal, and Baroni, and they align with the essays of the first part in how each of them somewhat plays down the absolute centrality of the *fabula-syuzhet* distinction and shows how focus on dynamics of reading (in Segal and Baroni) or

¹ E. g. Ireland; Richardson, *Narrative Dynamics* and “Some Antinomies of Narrative Temporality;” Shen “Defense and Challenge” and “What do Temporal Antinomies Do.” The influential debate among the previous generation of narratologists took place as part of the reception of Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse*. This discussion provides a backdrop for later discussions, and many of the key contributions are collected in W. J. T. Mitchell’s *On Narrative* (especially contributions of Herrnstein Smith and Chatman; see also Chatman, *Story and Discourse* and “Reply to Barbara Herrnstein Smith;” Culler; Sternberg, *Expositional Modes*).

“progression” (in Phelan) not only cuts across the division but also requires thinking beyond the basic duopoly.

The third part titled “Sequences in Nonliterary Narratives” takes up the challenge of transmedial applicability of theories of sequentiality, and each of the contributions asks how the questions of sequentiality have to be reframed once they are taken out of their native context – that of verbal narrative media.² Alain Boillat and Françoise Revaz discuss comic strips, Michael Toolan queries whether theories of narrativity can be reconciled to the fact that many experience musical compositions as narrative. Emma Kafalenos’s essay theorizes our ability to form causal chains out of the everyday “matrix” of events. In the fourth part, titled “Unnatural and Nonlinear Sequences,” the contributions by Brian Richardson and Marie-Laure Ryan pose further metatheoretical challenges in a way which links these essays to the earlier work of each of the two prolific scholars: Richardson’s on “unnatural” narrative, and Ryan’s on transmedial and media-conscious narratology.

To clarify the holistic contribution that the book makes to the field of contemporary narrative theory, two ideas emerging from the book as a whole should be looked into more closely. One is the concept of “intersequentiality,” which is taken up in John Pier’s essay, and derives from Meir Sternberg’s work (see Sternberg, “Universals of Narrative” 612). The other is the notion of “paradigm shift,” the idea which partly provides the volume its very rationale. The thought of narratology going through a paradigm shift has been bandied around for some time now – yet there is no simple answer to the inevitable questions concerning the particulars of the shift: exactly where was narratology when the shift occurred, and where is it now?

Intersequentiality: Narrativity between Events and Presentation

John Pier starts off the second essay of the volume by stating that sequence can be seen as “prototypical” on one hand, and “intersequential” on the other. The latter concept, as mentioned above, derives from Sternberg’s work, and it proves vital in showing how the notion of sequence is going to be relevant in the context of contemporary narratology. The sequential dynamic particular to narrativity is found in the interaction of two sequences, one of action and one of presentation. While this dual sequentiality is related to the *fabula/syuzhet* -distinction, the action/presentation variant emphasizes that the sequences are grounded in the real world: both action represented narratively, and reading in which narrativity is actualized, are sequential by nature (cf. Sternberg, “Narrativity”).

The adoption of this notion of sequence has certain consequences. On one hand it entails renewed focus on action or events, concepts which many essays in the book argue we should not take for granted – none more persuasively than Hühn’s “Eventfulness of Non-Events.” On the other hand, it gives the volume as a whole a strong focus on sequentiality and temporality of *reading* (as well as some other modes of reception). The theory of reading tying most of the contributions together, is, again, Sternberg’s. The influential Tel Aviv scholar and erstwhile editor-in-chief of *Poetics Today* is clearly the most referenced scholar of the volume.³

² The question of transmedial applicability of concepts and theory is often considered one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary narratology (Alber and Fludernik; Ryan, *Narrative across Media*; Ryan and Thon).

³ Of all essays in the book, only Hühn’s and Richardson’s do not make use of Sternberg’s ideas. According to Passalacqua and Pianzola, however, Hühn’s idea of eventfulness can be reconciled with intersequential dynamics (202).

In Sternberg's theory, the question of sequence is intertwined with the fundamental issue of narrativity, and the resulting view of narrativity is intersequential. The three basic forms of narrative interest producing narrativity – curiosity, suspense, and surprise – are by definition effects of the interaction of the two sequences of action and presentation. (Sternberg, "Universals of Narrative"). While most of the essays adopt this view rather than challenge it, some of them also seek its potential blind spots. Both Baroni's and Boillat and Revaz's essays raise the question of how we may experience suspense even if we know the outcome of the events presented. Baroni analyzes the *Gospel According to Mark*, which like most Biblical texts can surely only ever be reread, and with zero uncertainty about either the events or the ending. Boillat and Revaz, on the other hand, look into the dynamics of suspense in a Winsor McKay comic strip *Little Sammy Sneeze*, the episodes of which almost invariably consist of six panels, with the action culminating in a cataclysmic sneeze by the titular character. Both cases are shrewdly selected, as one of the obvious challenges to the model operating on the ternary operations of curiosity-suspense-surprise is posed by dynamics of rereading. While this issue has been addressed before (e.g., Perry), the analyses here are satisfyingly discerning and also able to present novel theoretical insights.

On the whole, the concept of intersequentiality is decisive to the argument of the volume and greatly informs many of the analyses presented in individual essays, including Baroni's, Segal's, Boillat and Revaz's. It is also revisited in the concluding contribution by Passalacqua and Pianzola.

Paradigm Shifts Reconsidered

Another topic that should be of great interest across the field of narrative studies manifests itself through the many-faced notion of "paradigm shift." Charting the possible shifts of the field has constituted a significant sub-branch of narrative theory at least since the turn of the Millennium. If one were to pinpoint the first major harbinger of the emergence of this brand of inquiry, it would be the David Herman edited *Narratologies* from 1999, a volume which not only defined but also exemplified the dual drives of what came to be called postclassical narratology, singular or plural. Postclassical narratologies were to "not just expose the limits but also exploits the possibilities of the older, structuralist models." Perhaps inevitably, and surely incorrectly, this has often been read as an invitation to see the "new narratologies" as either continuing the work of classical narratologies or departing from it in more or less certain terms. No simplification could describe the actual situation less accurately.

Within a few years, Herman's volume was followed by several similarly conceived books made in different narratological contexts. Hamburg's Narratology Research Group conducted its own survey (Kindt & Müller), while also Herman's *Narrative Theory and Cognitive Science* and Ryan's *Narrative across Media* took up the question of paradigms. The past discussions have been synthesized by, for instance, Alber and Fludernik. It is debatable, however, whether attempting such synthesis is advisable, or even possible at this juncture. Indeed, others have preferred to embrace the internal discordance and take that in itself as a starting point for description of the current field of study of narrative. A good example of this approach can be found on the pages of this journal. In the aftermath of the ENN 2013 conference, a number of short responses were published, which presented a wide range of answers to the question of whether the field of narratology is in the process of consolidation or of diversification (*Enthymema* 9, 2013).

However, Baroni and Revaz's volume chooses to take on the challenge of synthesizing the current pluriverse. The concluding essay by Franco Passalacqua and Federico Piazola points out that the distinction between classical and postclassical is unraveling at both ends (196–98). The essay puts forth a new distinction that promises to run deeper: it proposes that if we distinguish between objectivist and constructivist paradigms in narratology our distinction will then operate on the level of epistemological presuppositions underlying current narrative theories. To the authors of the concluding essay the significant precursor in this line of thought is, once more, Meir Sternberg, who argued in his 2010 essay that the field of narrative theory can be seen in the light of two rival paradigms: objectivist and functionalist. Although this idea has precedents in various narratological debates, making the question of paradigms primarily a question of epistemology may prove a fruitful opening for further discussions.⁴ This reconceptualization of the paradigm shift may also constitute the main argument that the book as a whole presents for its contemporary relevance to the broader audience on the field of narrative studies. It is what makes this collection, after all, a timely one. Although this move is made at the price of the focus on sequence dispersing on the final pages of the book, the concluding discussion manages to show that the problems concerning the field as a whole can be addressed through questioning concepts often misleadingly seen as somewhat old-fashioned, such as events, action, and sequence.

The final essay, therefore, may somewhat exceed the scope of what the volume sets out to do. Whether it convinces readers to reconsider the paradigm shifts within narratology remains to be seen. Thanks to the marquee publisher and the highly estimable cast of writers, the challenge is very unlikely to go unnoticed.

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⁴ Herrnstein Smith; Chatman, "Reply to Barbara Herrnstein Smith;" Rudrum, "From Narrative Representation to Narrative Use" and "On the Very Idea of a Definition of Narrative;" Ryan, "Semantics, Pragmatics, and Narrativity."

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