

Defining transmedia narrative: problems and questions. Dialogue with Mary-Laure Ryan¹

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Abstract

In this interview Mary-Laure Ryan faces some problems that arise from her definition of «transmedia narrative». Can every semiotic system tell stories? How can we elaborate a definition of «narrative» which accounts both for cognitive and semantic aspects? How can we dispense with the syntactic level if we need a definition of «narrativity» that suits every semiotic system? Answering these questions, Ryan deals with other proposals developed around the same theoretical problems, and points out a thought-provoking argument against Meir Sternberg's functionalist definition of narrative.

Keywords

Narratology, Mary-Laure Ryan, transmedia narrative, narrativity, cognitive science

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1. The mimetic and anti-mimetic paradigms²

[F.P.] The first RRN conference was very illuminating in many ways; in our opinion one of the most thought-provoking aspects was the emergence of two main paradigms in considering narrative: representational and anti-representational, or mimetic and anti-mimetic. This two different positions are almost never undertaken in full in narrative studies: among those present at the conference, it is not possible to claim whether anyone is completely mimetic or anti-mimetic, apart from Meir Sternberg and Eyal Segal, who clearly promote a functionalist and anti-mimetic definition of narrative (there are no immanent elements that can distinguish narrative from other discursive genres, so the same text could be a description or a narrative, depending on the reader-text relation). We regard this opposition as a very important theoretical issue that can hardly be ignored. Do you agree with our considerations? In your opinion, how do these two paradigms influence narrative studies?

[M.R.] I would not say that I promote an anti-mimetic view of narrative. I regard as mimetic any use of language or image that suggests concrete objects, whether it is a unicorn

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or a horse. In other words, I associate mimeticism with representation and I do not limit representation to objects that exist in the real world. Narrative, when it is fictional, mimics an imaginary world. And my definition is not particularly functionalist—I believe that narrative can be used to fulfill many different functions: illustration of abstract ideas, persuasion, information and entertainment. It is Rudrum who has a functionalist conception.³

As for my relation to Sternberg's definition: I think that the definition I present in *Avatars of Story* and in the *Cambridge companion* is much more content-oriented (=mimetic?) than Sternberg's.⁴ Yet I hold his definition an excellent characterization of the nature of *good* storytelling, and this is why I invoke it in my critique of hypertext.

2. Theoretical questions about transmedial narratology

[F.P.] A huge part of your contribution to narrative theory is focused on the study of the theoretical conditions of narrative transmediality: since it aims both at overtaking narrative studies based only on language-type approach and at providing a common ground for narrative studies, your definitional proposal seems to enable an actual advancement from some controversial issues. Both in *On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology* and *Toward a Definition of Narrative*, you define narrative as a set of cognitive operations in order to provide a medium-free approach based on semantic and cognitive conditions:

Rather than regarding narrativity as a strictly binary feature, that is, as a property that a given text either has or doesn't have, the definition proposed below presents narrative texts as a fuzzy set allowing variable degrees of membership, but centered on prototypical cases that everybody recognizes as stories. In a scalar conception of narrative, definition becomes an open series of concentric circles which spell increasingly narrow conditions and which 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 dimension.

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 non-habitual 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.

³ David Rudrum, *From narrative representation to narrative use: towards the limits of definition*, «Narrative», n. 13:2, pp. 195-204; *Idem*, *On the Very Idea of a Definition of Narrative: A Reply to Marie-Laure Ryan*, «Narrative», n. 14:2 (2006), pp. 197-204.

⁴ Cfr. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Toward a Definition of Narrative*, in *The Cambridge companion to narrative*, David Herman (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 22-35; *Idem*, *Avatar of Stories*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006.

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 audience.

Each of these conditions prevents a certain type of representation from forming the focus of interest, or macro-structure, of a story. 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 recipes, as well as texts entirely made of advice, hypotheses, counterfactuals, and instructions.
- (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.⁵

[F.P.] According to you, narrativity is perceived not as an «intrinsic property of the text, but rather as a fuzzy series of concentric conditions» that ensures a scalar conception of narrative, inasmuch it is linked to a dimension concerning the context and the interests of the participants and not the linguistic features of the text. In particular, in order to grant an intermedial theoretical ground, you claim that among the three dimensions which constitute the semiotic structure of narrative, «the most promising avenue for a definition» is the semantic one (of course regarded not as a «fixed relation between so-called 'narrative signs' and their meanings, but as a description of a certain type of cognitive construct») since the syntactical and pragmatic dimensions cannot be considered useful, because of the impossibility to find out fixed narrative units and «the fact that narrative itself can be put to many different uses».

As you «organize the conditions of narrativity into three semantic and one formal and pragmatic dimension», hence without providing any reference to a common transmedial ground, don't you think that there could be a contradiction for your transmedial purpose? In other words, it seems that in order to ensure a theoretical ground to narrative

⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, *On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology*, in *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism. Mediality, Disciplinarity*, Jan Christoph Meister, Tom Kindt, Wilhelm Schernus (eds.), Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 2005, pp. 6-9; *Idem, Toward a Definition of Narrative*, cit., pp. 28-30.

transmediality that could overcome some of the hurdles of language-type approaches, you claim that «the definition remains unspecific as to what type of signifier is used to encode this meaning», and that common features of different media (regarded, if you want, also in a weak form, just as a series of overlapping similarities or as family resemblance features) are absolutely not relevant to the definition of an object that, by nature, is necessarily conveyed by a medium.

[M.R.] I do not see where there is a contradiction between my definition and the idea that narrative can be represented in various media. If a medium has the power to represent the three kinds of conditions, it can tell stories. I believe however that only language has the power to articulate all three types, so in a sense yes, narrativity depends to a great extent on language. Most of the phenomena we call media involve however a language channel (think of film, TV, computer games). Narrativity is extremely problematic in pure pictures and in music. It all depends of course on what one calls medium: a technological, a cultural, or a semiotic phenomenon? I think that the multiple ways in which ‘medium’ is used by theorists creates lots of difficulties, especially with the idea that narrative is a phenomenon that transcends media.

[F.P.] You define the semiotic structure of narrative through three components, «discourse», «story» and «use» — that «correspond, roughly, to the three components of semiotic theory» — without proving the irrelevancy of the syntactic level. Do you think that your two-level-based definition (cognitive-pragmatic and semantic) could present some problems of coherence to your proposal?

Syntax is the most problematic area for a definition of narrative, because the concept applies only to semiotic systems with clearly definable units that combine into larger linear sequences according to precise rules. But there is no such thing as clearly definable ‘narrative units’ comparable to the words or phonemes of language. [...] In narrative matters, there is no equivalent to Chomsky’s syntactically grammatical but semantically deficient sentence “colorless green ideas sleep furiously.” Eliminating syntax from the definition of narrative means that narrative discourse cannot be described as a specific configuration of purely formal elements.⁶

What are the theoretical arguments that can support your definition?⁷

[M.R.] In my article in the *Cambridge Companion* I observe that the description of narrative can include pragmatics, semantics and syntax, but I am not saying that these components are definitional. I think that narrative can only be defined on the semantic level. Pragmatics is variable, since we can use a message with the semantic properties of narrative to various purposes, and so is syntax, since we can tell the same story in various ways. Not being definitional of course does not mean that syntax and pragmatics are irrelevant to narrative theory.

⁶ *Idem*, *Toward a Definition of Narrative*, cit., p. 24.

⁷ *Idem*, *On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology*, cit., p. 6.

3. Narrative and cognitive conditions

[F.P.] You point out that «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», and that 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». How is it possible to define narrative as a set of properties (individuated existents, significant transformations, non-habitual physical events, mental life, state of the world, intelligent agents, causal chain, meaningful story) that could be found in any semiotic system?⁸

[M.R.] As my answer to question one suggests, I am not claiming that every semiotic system can tell stories, at least not in a literal, definite way, and therefore I do not believe that a definition should consist of elements that can be handled by *any* semiotic system. Moreover, if there is to be a definition, it can only be formulated in language, since only language can express explicitly notions like causality. I can't imagine a visual or musical definition of narrative, nor of anything else! Does this contradict my view that narrativity is a mental representation that transcends individual semiotic systems? I don't think so. First, «transcending individual systems» is not the same thing as «being able to be expressed through any kind of signs». Sign systems have more or less developed narrative abilities. I think that next to language moving images have the greatest narrative expressivity. Second, narrativity can be suggested rather than explicitly represented by a semiotic object. For instance, film—and life—do not *tell* stories, they enact them (cfr. the distinction telling vs. showing), and it is left to the interpreter to imagine the story.

[F.P.] How can we exactly consider, in narrative terms, cognitive processes (acting on the basis of inferred causal relations, focusing on certain items selected from the wide range of available products, temporal ordering) that are into play in a large amount of mental activities? With respect to our cognitive processes, what is the specificity of narrative?

[M.R.] Through speculation, I guess. Magnetic Resonance Imaging have not taken us that far.⁹

[F.P.] You claimed that this huge set of conditions can be defined as narrative only when they come together and form a reasonably stable mental image provided by «the convergence of many different mental processes that operate both within and outside stories».¹⁰ To us, this seems a too general requisite for a definitional purpose. Placing the focus of narrativity in a cognitive dimension, does it mean that narrative studies should be centered on the study of mental processes even if with important restrictions? («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»)¹¹

⁸ Ivi, p. 8.

⁹ Cfr. *Idem*, *Narratology and Cognitive Science: A Problematic Relation*, «Style», n. 44:4 (2010), pp. 469-495.

¹⁰ *Idem*, *On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology*, cit., p. 9.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 8.

[M.R.] I am not invoking a huge set of conditions that must converge for the mental representation of a story to emerge, rather I limit them to a handful—the elements of my definition. Narratology, of course, should not limit itself to the study of the elements that define narrative. Next to the core conditions that make a mental representation the representation of a story there are lots of optional properties which are worthy of consideration. For instance, it does not enter into the definition of narrative that a narrator can be unreliable (in fact I do not personally believe that it enters into the definition of narrative that there should be a narrator), but this does not mean that the study of unreliable narration is not interesting for narratology. As for the study of cognitive operations—it is a most interesting aspect of narratology but by no means the only one, unless one thinks that studying narrative is intrinsically a cognitive project, since narratives are a manifestation of the mind.

[F.P.] Let's talk about your shifting between «narrative» and «narrativity», which for many reasons we agree with, since it allows a scalar conception of narrative that overcomes rigid classical accounts. You claim that «being a narrative can be predicated of any semiotic object produced with the intent to evoke a narrative script in the mind of the audience» and that «the property of being a narrative is much more clear-cut than the property of having narrativity, since it depends on the sender's intent». It seems that what is relevant for narrative studies are not only the audience's cognitive processes aimed at recognizing a narrative object, but rather the producer's intent of creating such a narrative mental configuration.¹² Does this statement involve a theoretical account that set the most relevant condition for being «narrative» as something to be recognized in the object, something belonging more to its semiotic structure than to general cognitive functions leading the interpreter's response? How can we provide theoretical arguments in order to avoid taking the chance of an intentional fallacy in which your theoretical account might incur?

[M.R.] Narrativity and sender's intent. I am not one of those people who believe that any appeal to intentionality is tantamount to succumbing to a fallacy. The philosophers Paul Grice and John Searle rely heavily on intentionality in their attempts to define meaning and speech acts. For instance here is Grice on meaning: «A [a sender] must intend to induce by x [an utterance] a belief in an audience, and he must also intend his utterance to be recognized so as intended».¹³ Applied to narrative this becomes: «A must intend to induce by a text x the mental representation of a story in an audience, and he must also intend his utterance to be recognized so as intended». Now how do we as audience recognize this intent? First there are the paratexts—'novel'; 'biography'; 'I'll tell you a good one'; then there are the titles (a painting titled 'The annunciation'); finally it's what the text is about. If a film shows people, and these people are actors playing roles (as the credits tell us), then it's a safe bet that the film is meant as a story.

¹² Ivi, p. 7.

¹³ Paul Grice, *Meaning*, «The Philosophical Review», n. 66: 3 (1957), p. 383.

4. On Sternberg's definition of narrative

[F.P.] Since he faced the same theoretical problems you have handled, what do you think about Meir Sternberg's narrative anti-mimetic definition?¹⁴ It seems that, as Sternberg provides a transmedial definition based on all the three semiotic dimensions of narrative, firmly opposed to a language-type account, his proposal can be considered suitable for a narrative transmedial account as well. What do you think in this regard since in RRN conference you talked about the importance of regarding narrative sequence as a linear phenomenon, agreeing with Sternberg's linear definition?

[M.R.] I don't see why Sternberg's definition should be considered *anti*-mimetic, rather it is situated above the mimetic. It does not tell us what a narrative text should be about (as I do), it only tells us what effect it should reach on the audience. There is a lot that it leaves presupposed: for instance, that these effects depend on time and on the representation of individual existents. I don't think that a philosophical text about abstract ideas can create 'suspense', 'curiosity' and 'surprise'. (Or maybe it can in a very limited way, as when a philosopher announces: I am going to show that free will exists, and then proceeds to give a series of arguments against free will: as a reader you think, "how on earth is he going to make his point despite all these arguments?") So, Sternberg's effects presuppose a certain semantic content, something which he does not mention. Also, Sternberg's definition is highly aesthetic: what about poorly told stories that do not create such effects? My definition, by contrast, is neutral with respect to the question of narrative as art. It can be satisfied by a summary that spoils any narrative effect, while Sternberg's cannot. However, within the domain of narrative as art, I think that Sternberg's definition is very much to the point.

¹⁴ «I define narrativity as the play of suspense/curiosity/surprise between represented and communicative time (in whatever combination, whatever medium, whatever manifest or latent form). Along the same functional lines, I define narrative as a discourse where such play dominates: narrativity then ascends from a possibly marginal or secondary role to the status of regulating principle, first among the priorities of telling/reading». (Meir Sternberg, *Telling in Time II: Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity*, «Poetics Today», n. 13:3 (1992), p. 529); reprinted in Italian in «Enthymema», n. 2 (2010), p. 194.