

Book Review

John Pier, (ed.), *Contemporary French and Francophone Narratology*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2020.

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Contemporary French and Francophone Narratology (Ohio State University, 2020) offers a refreshing synthesis of French-language scholarship in the field of narratology. Even though few scholars would call themselves narratologists in France (there is no such thing as a ‘school’ of French narratology *per se*), the ten chapters that compose John Pier’s edited book evince that research in narratology is vibrant in the French-speaking countries. Perhaps because of the lasting influence of ‘classical’ narratology that was text-driven, postclassical narratology has not fully taken root in France the way it has elsewhere. This does not mean that French narratology has remained impervious to new developments in the field. It has accommodated them but without totally or radically severing links with its origins.

More than that, several chapters highlight that the tight distinction between the classical and postclassical periods needs to be seen with a fresh eye. In Chapter 1 for instance, Raphaël Baroni demonstrates that the functionalist conception of narrative – as opposed to the structuralist and formalist approach that characterises the ‘classical’ period – was in fact latent in the French tradition. He shows that Steinberg’s interest in suspense and curiosity (1978) that comes to epitomise the switch from a focus on the *form* of a text to the way it is (cognitively and emotionally) *processed* in the reader’s mind was already budding in Barthes’s or Todorov’s writings. Baroni states that French narratology has never been captive to its formalist approach but ventures an hypothesis as to why these functionalist concepts have been marginalised in the French tradition. For him, the reasons are less epistemological than aesthetic and ideological: at that time there was a reluctance – and to a certain extent there still is – to address topics like plot, suspense or tellability because they smacked too much of popular art and commercial success. The only art that was truly worthy of serious intellectuals’ attention belonged to ‘the potentially unreadable or unsellable but definitely left-leaning avant-garde’ (23).

Likewise, in chapter 7, Denis Bertrand tries to understand why the notion of ‘narrativity’ that was once at the heart of Greimassian semiotics and the principle of ‘immanence’ (whereby structures are cut off from context) have fallen into disfavour and lost their operative conceptual force. He hypothesises that this regrettable loss might lie in a certain ‘radicalization’ of the principle (139). Taking Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* as case study, Bertrand shows how the two concepts of narrativity and immanence can be connected anew through Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘regimes of immanence’.

If postclassical narratology – marked by a wider variety of narrative objects and a more interdisciplinary orientation set in motion by the ‘narrative turn’ – is definitely more ‘context-oriented’, what has escaped the attention of many narratology theorists is that in France one discipline opted for a context-oriented approach well before the rise of postclassical narratology. This discipline that has had a strong influence on francophone narrative theory is (French)

Discourse Analysis. John Pier forcefully emphasises in Chapter 6 that by privileging ‘text’ and ‘discourse’ over the story/discourse pair favoured by narratologists, discourse analysis has been able to study discourse in all its ‘fluctuating’ varieties, situating narratives as one form among the discourses that ‘permeate all domains of social life and cultural and disciplinary pursuits’ (132). He shows *inter alia* the relevance of Maingueneau’s notion of ‘scene of enunciation’ that cuts across both the linguist’s ‘situation of enunciation’ and the sociologist’s ‘situation of communication’, the theatrical touch (though the image of the scene) highlighting how enunciation is staged and played rather than merely enunciated and communicated.

The figure that has remained central in both classical and postclassical narratology is that of ‘the narrator’. In this book, the narrator retains its essential place but is also looked at anew. First, in Chapter 2, Sylvie Patron offers a fine-grained defence speech of the ‘optional-narrator theory’, exposing the ontological and epistemological weaknesses of the pan-narrator theories (that propound the existence of a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives). She also ferrets out some errors and approximations in some texts that point to the birth of the ‘narrator’ notion, deploring the lack of what she calls ‘the historical argument’ in second-generation optional-narrator theory. She convincingly advocates the pursuit of a rigorous historical and meta-historical approach to theoretical concepts in narratology.

Second, Pier’s edited book presents narrators who extend their authority beyond authorised limits or others, on the contrary, who see their authority undermined. In Chapter 3 for instance, Richard Saint-Gelais concentrates on the ‘undecided zone’ between the inside and outside of a text. This blurry line separates the narrator from the extrafictional agents that the author, the publisher or the graphic artist embody, perceived as they are by many readers as belonging to the ‘paratext’. Rather than dealing with authorial intrusions, Saint-Gelais is looking the other way round at cases where “the narrative is ‘spilling over to’ the paratext” (56). Notably he investigates cases where narrators are not only taking the role of writers in the diegesis but also pretend to be the authors of the very books the flesh and blood readers are holding in their hands. He construes this telescoping of two worlds where narrators seem to take control as the textual equivalent of the ‘Möbius strip’ (61). Benoît Hennaut in Chapter 4 focuses on postdramatic productions where narrative discourse can be seen as inscribed within the performance – he follows, in this, performance studies – which renders the need for a narrator as a disembodied super-agent null and void. The authority of the postdramatic narrators he introduces is undermined: their weaknesses become apparent in their failure at organising the performance. They are sometimes violently punished for it through metaleptic cursing. The self-cancellation of the role is nowhere more visible than in the narrator’s introductory remarks in Lauwers’s *Images of Affection* (2002) for example: ‘I am a bullshitter, a liar. Which is unfortunate for you because you need me to make sense of this thing... I’m sad, I’m tired and I’m ugly. Look at my face’ (87).

Going from Ancient Greek lyric poetry with Claude Cabane (Chapter 9) to today’s transmedial genres, notably in media sagas and to be-continued stories in comics with Françoise Revaz (Chapter 5), the book covers a wide range of interests, genres and periods. Cabane takes up the challenge of analysing Pindar’s Fourth *Pythian Ode* retelling the ‘mythical’ foundation of the Libyan city of Cyrene. He performs a combined pragmatic and semio-narrative reading as the only way to heed the specific historical context of the narrative poem that must be perceived as ‘a sung and ritual performance, reactivating the cultural memory of the city to which it is addressed’ (198). In Chapter 5, Revaz explores the rhetoric of seriality and the effects of discontinuous reading in the genre of the “suspended narrative” – a genre that she regrets has been largely overlooked and even treated with condescension. This genre that deals with the ‘sequential release’ of narratives in the form of installments poses the interesting question of when a narrative can be regarded as ‘completed’.

Giving pride of place to emergent narrative forms through the advent of new media also raises new questions that this book fully addresses, and in particular what belongs to the realm of fiction in its own right and what does not. In Chapter 8, Olivier Caïra evidences that the distinction

between fiction and nonfiction has never been more blurred than it is today. Through his sociological filter, he offers new insights into the nature of ‘fictionality’, proposing an encompassing continuum that gives visual illustration to the expanded definition of fiction we now need. This continuum extends between the two old poles that Caïra rehabilitates here, the mimetic pole (the alternative worlds constructed in mimetic fiction) and the axiomatic pole (the logical-mathematical fiction including tetris, craps, backgammon or Sudoku for instance). What is most intriguing is the middle of the continuum where fiction under the form of simulation games combines mimetic theme and axiomatic system.

What is strongly exemplified in Caïra’s chapter is that there is no such thing as a specific language of fiction that could be the measuring rod of fictionality. Caïra bases his analysis on what real people regard as a ‘a fictional experience’ – his interviewees were left 24 to 48 hours to take stock of all that, for them, comes down to ‘fiction’. This emic approach echoes Saint-Gelais’s for whom only the reader can determine where to locate the frontier between text and paratext. For him, the attribution of a certain element of the diegesis to the narrator or to the author can only be an “interpretative strategy”, convincingly arguing that “there are no textual factors that compel us to ascribe a given sentence to a narrator, an implied author, or a real author; such decisions tell more about a critic’s or a theoretician’s set of assumptions” (55). Saint-Gelais invents the concept of *parafictionalisation* to refer to these seemingly paratextual elements that in fact play a role in the diegesis. These include the use of epigraphs or titles that possibly emanate from characters for instance or typographic elements that have an actual diegetic function.

Last but not least, the book ends with a well-conducted and well-balanced analysis of the past, present and possible future of literary theory in France. Throwing an uncompromising eye on both the force and violence of “French theory” during its institutional reign that eclipsed narratology in the 70s, Françoise Lavocat (Chapter 10) expounds that the transformations of academic life in France – towards ever more evaluation and collective project research asking researchers to turn themselves into managers – may account for the decline of literary theory. To put it bluntly, “French theory” would never have seen the light of day in today’s managerial times. Yet without turning a blind eye to the detrimental effects of these developments, she offers a way to turn it to literary critics’ advantage. She sees in the blooming and inspiring new works in narratology (notably in interaction with the cognitive sciences and in the attention paid to new transmedial forms) a way to avoid the pitfall of ‘academic tribes’ in which researchers could be tempted to barricade themselves were it not for this managerial call for a more collaborative, international and interdisciplinary dialogue: ‘Literary theory, without being swallowed up by narratology, can draw inspiration from the way narratology has developed’ (212). Lavocat cites a few well-known authors like Marie-Laure Ryan that have already extended their focus on a broader variety of objects in media-conscious narratology as well Marc Marti’s and Olivier Caïra’s work on video games and interactivity.

The only element that might tone down this optimism though is that it constrains francophone narratologists to write in English. Many works by French authors working on the theory of fiction or narratology, as Baroni argues in the first chapter, like Lavocat in the final one, have remained practically invisible for English-speaking narratologists: “This ignorance reveals that if, during the 1960s and ’70s, a serious narratologist was supposed to be able to read French, today, it is quite the opposite: French narratologists are obliged to read and publish in English if they want to be heard by the international community of narrative theorists’ (24).

This is one more argument to underscore how precious and welcome this edited volume is. John Pier’s book is an invitation for English-speaking narratologists to have a look at how French narratology has developed the way it has and how it has come up with new or rehabilitated theoretical productive tools for anyone to pick up and test. Inspiration can indeed definitely work both ways.