Narrative, Fiction, Theory
Autumn Term
Richard Walsh

Narrative theory has always been preoccupied with literary fiction, yet has also asserted the much broader significance of narrative. How well has the example of literary fiction served as a theoretical paradigm for narrative in general? And conversely, how well has the general concept of narrative served the specific features of fictionality? This module adopts a broadly historical perspective upon the development of narrative theory, taking seminal theoretical works for its primary texts. The readings below are either available in the university library’s e-journal collection, or they are provided on the “module materials” page of the VLE site. A useful introductory text on narrative theory is Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

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1. Precursors

2. Russian Formalists

3. Structuralist Narratology

4. Discourse Theorists

5. The Limits of Structuralism
This week, the extract from Barthes’s tour de force analysis of Balzac’s “Sarrasine” marks an important post-structuralist conceptual transition from structure to structuration, while Culler synthesizes structuralist thinking on the cusp of post-structuralism. The exchange between Chatman and Herrnstein Smith enacts a nice set piece confrontation between a structuralism and a certain kind of post-structuralist pragmatism over the story-discourse distinction. See what you think.


6. Narrative Semantics
This week’s texts focus upon linguistic and philosophical attempts to grapple with the reference of fictions and so with formalizations of the idea of a fictional world. How far should we take this concept? What about our understanding of fiction does it really explain? Ryan’s “principle of minimal departure” has been particularly influential, but can it really function in the way and to the ends she claims?


7. The Narratological Diaspora
This week’s readings are an eclectic set meant to convey the multiplicity of post-classical approaches to narrative. White applies a narratological perspective to historiography, shedding useful reflected light on fiction; Brooks draws on psychoanalysis to articulate the logic of narrative desire; and Branigan, a film theorist
here offering a (problematic) analysis of a comic strip, stands for the increasing sense of narrative as a transmedia mode of discourse. We also return to Bakhtin, alongside Lanser, for an important turn towards contextualist narratology and the ideological nature of narrative voice in particular.


8. Cognitive Narratology
Cognitive narratology, in various senses, has become very prominent over the last fifteen years or so. In part it is a recognition of the fundamental role of narrative sense-making in how our minds work, beyond the limits of texts, fictional or otherwise; in part it is also a return of the old desire for a pilot science, a claim to a kind of theoretical and methodological authority that humanities scholars often envy – or at least a veneer of such authority. Ryan’s sceptical overview helps to evaluate the possibilities.