The Shape of Things to Come

An Interview with Lars Bernaerts

DIEGESIS: How would you define narrative research?

Bernaerts: Narrative research is preoccupied with the form, functioning, and circulation of narrative. It is concerned with form in relation to content, in the sense that narrative strategies (such as internal focalization, closure, or scene shifts) shape the theme of a narrative. A nineteenth-century heterodiegetic narrator may convey a belief in the transparency of reality by seamlessly shifting from scene to scene and from one character to another. An anti-narrative montage of fragmented real-life conversations, political speeches, and news headings in a postwar experimental novel suggests a completely different view of life and art. As does your grandmother casting herself in a heroic role when she tells you how she became an important influencer on social media.

It is the task of narrative research to illuminate this link between form and content, to reflect upon the ideas and values conveyed by procedures that may seem formal. In order to achieve this goal, the form has to be considered in its functioning, to the extent that meaning is use. Narrative elements produce meaning in relation to each other as well as to the context. If a comic uses gray colors for flashbacks, for example, their meaning becomes clear in contrast to the colorful scenes. Or consider a radio play staging a character with a low and breathy voice so as to characterize it as powerful and intimidating while letting that character achieve absolutely nothing. From our present point of view the so-called highly reliable nineteenth-century narrator I was hinting at may seem very *un*reliable because of our scepsis toward transparency and realism and because of our familiarity with narrative unreliability. Meaning depends on the context, including the cognitive response of the reader.

Finally, narrative research takes the broader context into account. The circulation of narratives is short for the embedding of narratives in historical and societal contexts, including the way they circulate cultural materials (as defined by Stephen Greenblatt [1995]). In other words, narratives are situated in contexts and discourses that surround them and that flow through them like water through a coffee filter, leaving behind their residue the same as, vice versa, narratives leave their own traces in the contexts of circulation. In twenty-first-century fiction, narratives circulate ideas about intersectionality and empathy, for example, or about the postdigital condition.

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

Bernaerts: I am currently looking into the narratological implications of the "cycle." Cycles are circular patterns of recurrence ("cyclicity") as well as a type of macrotext containing several narratives revolving around the same character, theme, and/or plot, as in a short story cycle, a poetry cycle, or a cycle of novels. Think of the epic cycle of Homeric narratives, medieval cycles of mystery plays, or the *India Cycle* (1964–1976) by the French novelist and filmmaker Marguerite Duras. The two meanings of the cycle (cyclicity and macrotext) come together in narrative forms such as the novelistic cycle.

It is striking how often we resort to cyclicity as a tool for thinking (to borrow David Herman's phrase about stories). In disciplines such as psychology, biology or, say, business communication, cycles are a remarkably omnipresent model of presentation: 'the arousal cycle of anger,' 'the cycle of violence,' 'the communication cycle,' 'the life cycle of a plant,' . . . We can go on and on. Interestingly, these concepts are almost always used to describe a temporal sequence of events with a distinct narrative arc. In a cycle of anger, there is a clear succession of built-up tension and a release of that tension. However, since it is a cycle, it can or will continue the same succession. In such instances, there is an intriguing integration of linear development and cyclical return.

Stories are usually associated with linear development: they have beginnings, middles, and endings. In the history of storytelling, however, this type of narrativity has always been entwined with cyclicity. From archetypical recurrences in the cosmos and in nature described by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) to narrative circularity in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), cycles have always been around, sometimes challenging and sometimes reinforcing the course of the narrative that is presumed to be linear.

The monumental narrative form of the novelistic cycle, on which my research centers, often foregrounds cyclicity and combines it with a macrotextual dynamics. In a macrotext, the parts interact with each other on multiple levels: characters introduced in one novel come back in another, the narrated time develops across volumes, closure is distributed over the parts of the cycle. These relations between its parts are what constitute the cycle as a cycle. Read in relation to the other novels of *Children of Violence* (1952–1969), for example, Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City* (1969) gains depth and meaning. The twelve volumes of Anthony Powell's cycle *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951–1975) together create the image of generation, they sketch an entire social history through the life of the first-person narrator Nicholas Jenkins. The cyclicity of *A Dance* is already apparent in its structure of four trilogies presented as the four seasons.

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

Bernaerts: What I find fascinating is that the study of the cycle connects nature and culture, literature and other disciplines, genres and media. Another potential

of this research is its transgeneric potential. I consider it a testcase for a transgeneric narratology.

Together with Janine Hauthal I am exploring the cycle as a narrative form across genres. We know cycles from several literary genres and artistic media, such as poetry, drama, short stories, cinema, and painting. Hauthal and I examine the narrative aspects of the cycle that are genre-specific and those that transcend genres. Cycles, for example, always entail part-to-part relations that, in turn, involve patterns of recurrence: the return of a character or set of characters, the re-introduction of the same narrative situation, the reiteration of a certain theme or setting. Still, this continuity works differently in different genres. We aim to study how the cycle (as a macrotext) and cyclicity (as a conceptual feature) function in and across these different genres as well as how they are wielded as a thematic tool, for example to evoke the human desire to capture time or the fragmentation of contemporary life.

The study of the cycle also complements the study of serial narration, and that of other macrotextual forms such as the album or the anthology. In many ways, cycles are similar to series, which have been studied intensively in seriality studies in recent years. But the cycle is also different in that it is a more closed system and turns up in particular genres such as fantasy and science fiction. The novelistic cycle in particular is a form of experimentation with the genre of the novel. It is a logical extension of the novel's tendency towards expansion. The study of the novelistic cycle might reveal how this narrative form inherits a certain claim of totality that is historically tied to the epic.

DIEGESIS: In an ideal world, what could your project hope to achieve?

Bernaerts: This is a tricky question: in an ideal world certain mysteries would still remain unsolved, because unanswered questions are what drives scholarship. That being said, the main unattainable goals would be to reach an understanding of (1) the literary tradition of cycles of novels, the narrative constants and variations in novelistic cycles, and (2) the interplay between cyclicity and narrativity in narrative.

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narrative research?

Bernaerts: Judging by the diversity of publications and conference papers in narrative studies, its future is certainly bright. I believe an interesting way of looking forward is to look back – or even: to look back at what was considered as the future of narrative research in the past. What can we learn from narratological science fiction? What has become of these visions of the future in the past? Twenty years ago Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning edited a collection entitled *Neue Ansätze in der Erzähltheorie* (*New Approaches in Narrative Research* [2002a]). Both "neue" (i.e. new) and "Ansätze" (i.e. approaches) presuppose that the directions presented in the volume – at that point commonly called "postclassical" (Nünning / Nünning 2002b) – carry promises for the future.

Indeed, narratologies such as feminist narratology, postcolonial narratology, the narrative theory of possible worlds, and cognitive narratology, continued to flourish in the years that followed. Cultural narratology also received several impetuses in recent years (see Herman / Vervaeck 2017). Yet, other 'new approaches' did not survive as distinct branches: one could argue that 'pragmatic narratology' is continued under the umbrella of rhetorical narratology, but how about postmodern narratology, speech-act narratology, or marxist narratology? Comparing the two editions of Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (2019 [2005]) one can notice a similar tendency of proliferation and fade-out. Similarly, in their introduction to *Postclassical Narratology. Approaches and Analyses* (2010) Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik suggested that narratology was on a path of "consolidation and continued diversification." So, the future of the past that is the present produces an image of a wide array of narratologies, some of which are consolidated and institutionalized.

What strikes me as a particularly valuable perspective for the future of narrative research in that respect is the exploitation of the plurality of narratologies to tackle specific narrative problems. The narrative phenomena and narrative problems we encounter benefit from a multiperspectival approach which combines the relevant ideas and concepts from various narratologies. In the study of narrative unreliability or fictional minds, we can see how this works. In separate studies, unreliability has been theorized from a cognitive, rhetorical, unnatural, and transmedial perspective. Why not combine these approaches in a single study or case study to reach a more thorough and differentiated understanding? It would be like the superhero movie in which the superpowers of several heroes are combined to face a threat to the world.

The condition and added benefit would be that the differences between approaches would not be ironed out but rather foregrounded and discussed, as in *Narrative Theory. Core Concepts and Critical Debates* by David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, and Robyn Warhol. A whole range of topics could result from such an integrated approach: nonhuman narration, slow narrative, closure, lyricality in narrative, or the interplay between cyclicity and narrativity. In experimental fiction such as *Finnegans Wake*, for example, cyclicity can be considered in the framework of unnatural narratology as staging impossible beginnings and endings (the novel's beginning is the ending and vice versa), but this insight can be usefully complemented with a cognitive approach able to describe and analyze the readerly effects of the novel's strangeness. A diachronic narratology helps to put the narrative procedures into a historical perspective.

In that way, we acknowledge that narrative is always cognitive, rhetorical, situated and perhaps even 'eco,' unnatural and transmedial. It is not always preferable or desirable to isolate one of these dimensions. In the future, we can do more to train students in several narratologies rather than compartmentalizing these approaches. I'd suggest we develop this into a method for students and scholars to use when dealing with narratological issues.

The previous considerations concern the internal future of narratology as a discipline, but there is also an external future. Narratologies can and will help to

study, even solve societal problems and global challenges, such as climate change and human rights. This is clear from the current research in narrative studies and this involvement will become even stronger in the next few years. This also means that narrative theory will continue to branch out across disciplines.

DIEGESIS: Imagine the perfect Tweet someone would post about your project.

Bernaerts: A recent project develops a narrative theory of cycles and cyclicity across genres. Here's my critical response: [hyperlink].

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How to cite this article:
Bernaerts, Lars: "The Shape of Things to Come. An Interview with Lars Bernaerts." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 11.2 (2022). 102–107.
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20221213-093708-7
URL: https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/453/626