

Handbook of Narratology

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During the last ten years or so, narratology as "the study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation"<sup>[1]</sup> undeniably regained some of its popularity it had lost when structuralism fell out of grace in literary studies (in the 70's and 80's). Moreover, a description such as "narrative representation" indicates that narratological study has fled partly its traditional field of research, literature, to invade film studies, media studies, performance studies, sociology, etc. The present *Handbook of Narratology* inscribes itself in this 'narratological turn' and tries to map "an overview of recent and older research, taking into account different disciplinarity and national traditions in narrative study" (from the preface). The present publication originated in the work of the very active Narratology Research Group at Hamburg University (2001-2007) and its successor, the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology (ICN, founded in 2007). It is the nineteenth publication in the series "Narratologia. Contributions to Narrative Theory", published by Walter de Gruyter.

The systematic approach of the editors is reflected in the use of an old but at the same time still popular principle to organise their *Handbook*: the encyclopedia. Instead of a linear 'narrative' the reader gets an alphabetically ordered number of articles. This approach implies the absence of a hierarchy in the thirty-two entries. Each contribution treats a concept, key term or category of narratology. The articles are cross-referenced in a well thought manner so the interested reader can move freely through the texts, depending on what he or she is looking for. When you are reading the entry on "Focalization", you can redirect to the related "Perspective/Point of View". However, no cross-reference points to the entry "Narrator" when the reader encounters the word 'narrator', probably because the reference seems irrelevant in the context of this entry. It avoids at least a profusion of pointers.

Each article is structured according to the same pattern: a short concise definition followed by a longer differentiated description which treats the concept's historical evolution and its study. A critical discussion of approaches, positions and controversies forms the main body of each article concluding in a paragraph on "topics of further investigation" and an extensive bibliography comprising cited works and suggestions for further reading. The authors of the articles are leading specialists in contemporary narratology which should vouch for the quality of the contributions.

The main question is: can it live up to the expectations it creates when presented as a 'handbook'? Not really, if a handbook is supposed to supply a set of 'how to' instructions. This 'handbook' simply does not. If the reader is looking for ways to apply theoretical insights, a book as *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck (2005) would be a better choice.<sup>[2]</sup> After all, if this *Handbook of Narratology* is supposed to be used as a guidebook one would expect the very first lemma to be 'Narratology'. It appears now on page 329 as chapter twenty-four (of thirty-two articles). The present publication presents itself more as a reference work for the interested student of narratology, and rather than being a complete encyclopedia, it is a compendium of 'capita selecta' that seeks to draw a state-of-the-art of narratological research.

What is most peculiar about this book is that the editors never justify their fragmentary approach of the field. Nor do they clarify why and on what criteria topics were selected. This raises questions. For instance, why have a lemma on "Cognitive narratology" and not on "Contextualist narratology" or "Transgeneric narratology"? These two latter variants are mentioned alongside cognitive narratology as being "the dominant methodological paradigms of contemporary narratology" in the article on "Narratology" (p. 340). Only the first one gets a separate entry however. The fashionable transgeneric approach is indirectly present in multiple entries discussing narratology and different media such as 'Mediacy and Narrative Mediation', 'Narration in Poetry and Drama', 'Narration in Various Disciplines' or 'Narration in Various Media'. Why these different lemmas on closely related subjects? (The same question is true for topics such as "point of view" and "focalization"). Another intriguing question: Why thirty-two articles in the first place, and not

thirty-one or thirty-three? The Wikipedia learns me that thirty-two has a lot of meanings, but none really linked with narratology.<sup>[3]</sup> There might be good reasons to construct the book in the way the editors did, but why not explicate them? Also, it would be useful, even in these times of Google and Wikipedia, to provide students and other neophytes with some information on the contributors.

What do we learn then from this *Handbook of Narratology*? That the field of narratology is rapidly developing. Scholars are trying to keep up with the so-called 'narrative turn': the growing awareness of the omnipresence of narrative in almost any art form and in our everyday reality. It is only recently that traditional narratology has become aware of Erving Goffman's analysis (1959!) that we act - and interact - according to 'scripts' or Hayden White's and Paul Ricoeur's notions of the *mise en intrigue* of (historical) reality. The fact that narratological thinking is ready to include non-verbal narratives means that quite some pedestals of authorities are being nibbled at. Aristotle, Plato, even Gérard Genette are being questioned, especially on fundamental but intermediality-unfriendly concepts as 'mimesis' and 'diegesis'. We also learn that other pedestals are being erected. For instance for Mikael Bakhtin, whose concepts of 'dialogism' and 'heteroglossia' are considered by the editors as worthy of their own entry, besides the many bibliographical references. A plinth is also being built for Seymour Chatman. Indeed, he might be less visible, but he certainly has become one of the most cited 'early' (1974) theorists studying narrative in an inter- and transmedial context. This *Handbook of Narratology* assumes its object from a current state of affairs with an eye for historical perspective. That is its strength: it questions and reassesses concepts that today sound all too familiar. At the same time it means its weakness: the editors (literally) pass over without comment that actual positions are being taken, not only by the respective authors of the articles, but also through the selection of subjects.

If I were to suggest 'topics for further investigation' it would be on concepts as 'discourse' and 'performance'. Are these terms actually becoming synonyms? And – in the same train of thought - wouldn't it be a good idea if different disciplines as narratology and performance studies learn from each other, now that literature, drama, theatre and film have become merely story's vehicles and can no longer be considered as main generic distinctive features of a type of narrative? Or we might even take it a step further and begin to create a definition of narratology that is not based on and in literature, as Rick Altman recently has tried?<sup>[4]</sup> Incidentally Altman's endeavour is not mentioned in the *Handbook of Narratology*. This might be because it was published too late (2008) to be referenced in the *Handbook*. It is however also possible that Altman, a film studies scholar, passed under the radar of literary oriented narratology.

And now for the best part: It is actually possible to express comments and suggestions because the *Handbook of Narratology* also exists as a website: the [Living Handbook of Narratology](#) (*LHN*). Each of the thirty-two articles of the print version is available on the open access website, with the advantages of electronic publishing: easy searchability and cross-referencing. One click takes you from one reference to the other. The most important feature however, will be the ever expanding content of the *LHN*: adopting the Wiki-system allows narratologists to comment on existing entries, to submit new articles or to make corrections and additions. The original editors of the *Handbook* will function as a supervision board, with Jan Christoph Meister as executive editor. For the time being not much new content has been added because procedures are still being worked out. The editors also promise that "the content of the *LHN* will be archived in the form of an updated print edition of the *Handbook of Narratology*", which is an interesting idea: comparing editions will reveal developments in the field of narratology. Indeed, it is not unthinkable that certain topics, views and approaches will disappear or will undergo considerable changes. In the end a more or less complete dictionary (a better term than handbook) will come into being.

And of course, in case the *Big One* hits the internet and all the ephemeral information will be lost, paper will safeguard history and function as an archive. A reassuring thought, for sure.

[1] I quote the definition as given in the *Handbook of Narratology*, p. 329.

[2] In their *Handbook* Herman and Vervaeck provide analyses of two short stories, which illustrate the different theoretical approaches. Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.

[3] [32 \(number\)](#) (last visited 05/29/2010).

[4] Altman correctly states that definitions of narrative tend to be based on a restricted and small corpus (the novel). Rick Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 10.