

Transborderality, Transmediality, Transdisciplinarity — An Interview with John Pier: Retrospectives and Prospects for Western Narratology

John Pier Cao Danhong

Abstract: Shortly after the celebration of twenty years of the narratology seminar at the CRAL (CNRS/EHESS) in Paris, Cao Danhong, professor of French language and literature at Nanjing University in China, conducted an interview with John Pier, one of the organizers of the seminar at the CRAL and also one of the most active researchers in narratology. Based on the evolution of the Seminar's work over the past twenty years, John Pier briefly reviewed the achievements of Western narratology since its foundation, suggested reexamining its evolution by dividing it into three "generations", and reaffirmed its fundamental characteristics such as transborderality, transmediality, and transdisciplinarity. Also discussed were paths for the future development of narratology with an emphasis on comparative research, diachronic research, and historiography.

Keywords: narratology seminar; "generations"; comparative narratology; diachronic narratology; historiography of narratology

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标 题: 跨国界、跨媒介、跨学科——与约翰·皮埃尔教授谈西方叙事学回顾与展望

摘 要: 在法国艺术与语言研究中心(隶属法国国家科研中心/社会科学高等研究院)庆祝“叙事学研讨课”设立 20 周年之际,南京大学法语系曹丹红对约翰·皮埃尔进行了访谈。皮埃尔是该研讨课组织者之一,也是当今国际叙事学界最活跃的学者之一。皮埃尔基于研讨课 20 年的发展历程,简要回顾了西方叙事学自诞生之日起所取得的成果,建议将这段历史切分为三个“世代”来重审其演变过程,并再次肯定跨国界、跨媒介、跨学科等特征为西方叙事学的基本特征。访谈者还提到了叙事学的未来发展,尤其强调了比较研究、历时研究与历史书写的重要性。

关键词: 叙事学研讨课; “世代”; 比较叙事学; 历时叙事学; 叙事学历史书写

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To mark the twentieth anniversary of the CRAL narratology seminar, CAO Danhong, professor of French language and literature at Nanjing University in China, interviewed John Pier, one of the organizers of the CRAL narratology seminar at the CNRS and EHESS.

1. Cao Danhong (hereinafter referred to as Cao): Dear Mr. John Pier, thank you very much for accepting this interview. We know that on February 6, 2024, you and Philippe Roussin organized a workshop entitled “Twenty Years of Narratology at the CRAL: Retrospectives and Prospects”. First of all, I’d like to congratulate you on hosting such a stimulating and timely event. You began the narratology seminar with Francis Berthelot. What prompted you to set up a seminar of this kind? In the twenty years of its existence, there have been many activities in and around the seminar, but it wasn’t until the 2007/2008 academic year that the seminar began to choose a theme for each year. Over the past fifteen years, these themes have covered many aspects of the vast field of narratology. What determines the choice of theme for each year? Is there an underlying logic that connects the different themes?

John Pier (hereinafter referred to as Pier): Following the international colloquium “La métalepse, aujourd’hui”, held in October 2002 and co-organized by the Centre de recherches sur les arts et le langage (CRAL) with the collaboration of the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology at the University of Hamburg, Jean-Marie Schaeffer, director of the CRAL at the time, suggested that Francis Berthelot and I set up a series of conferences entitled “La narratologie aujourd’hui”. The narratology seminar directed by Claude Bremond at the EHESS had ceased to exist some ten years earlier, and in France this type of narrative analysis, still associated with the structuralism of the sixties and seventies, had somewhat fallen out of favor. So, twice a month, we convened a group of around twenty people — students at the EHESS and other universities in the Paris region, but also faculty members from various institutions — to listen to and discuss papers on a wide array of topics such as thematic narratology and structural narratology, intertextual narratology, narratology and music, narratology (in the singular) versus narratologies (in the plural), enunciative narratology, *mise en abyme*, the social use of narratives, etc. Exploratory during its early years, the seminar did not propose a specific annual theme or topic: the aim was to make students and faculty members aware of the different currents of research in narratology at a time when both the “classical” (or structural) and “postclassical” variants (terms coined by David Herman in 1997) were still developing.

From 2007/2008 academic year onward, we adopted annual themes such as: “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative” (the same year we organized an international colloquium entitled “Écritures de l’histoire, écritures de la fiction”, a selection of papers from which has been published on the seminar website), “Fiction and Cognition” (2008/2009), “Narrativity” (2013/2014), “Narrativity and Intermediality” (2014/2015), “Narratives Challenged by Chance” (2019/2020), “Storytelling and Narratology” (2020/2021), “Narrative Performativity” (2021/2022), “Narrating/Building Worlds” (2022/2023), “Acceptability of Narratives” (2023 – 2024), and for the present academic year, “Heroes/Heroines: Power(s) to Art”. At the end of each academic year, topics for the following year are discussed by the seminar co-directors. There is no multi-year program: new topics grow out of the previous year’s debates, colleagues’ ongoing research projects and current issues in narratological research.

Some of the earliest narratologists — Claude Bremond, Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov — were among the founders of the CRAL in 1983. The workshop “Twenty Years of Narratology at the CRAL” held on February 6, 2024, in tribute to these pioneers, was organized as part of the activities surrounding the CRAL’s fortieth anniversary. Inspired by these innovators, the seminar has always sought to be a forum for exchange and reflection on current developments in narrative theory.

The seminar co-directors are (in addition to myself) Olivier Caïra (Institut Universitaire de Technologie Evry and EHESS), Thomas Conrad (École Normale Supérieure, Paris), Anne Duprat (Université de Picardie Jules Verne and Institut Universitaire de France), Anaïs Goudmand (Sorbonne Université), and Philippe

Roussin (CRAL/CNRS).

The full program for the workshop, with video recordings of the presentations (in French), is available on the seminar website at:

<http://narratologie.ehess.fr/journee-detude-vingt-ans-de-narratologie-au-cral-6-fevrier-2024/>

2. Cao: Thank you for these clarifications. As Tiphaine Samoyault mentioned in her opening address, the seminar has changed names several times. Initially, it was called “Narratology Today”. From the fourth academic year (2005/2006), the seminar adopted the name “Narratologies contemporaines”, which is also the title of the volume published in 2010. Between 2009 and 2021, the seminar was named “Recherches contemporaines en narratologie”. Since the 2021/2022 academic year, you’ve reverted to the old name: “Narratologies contemporaines”. Why all these changes? Do they reflect a conceptual shift in the field of study? Furthermore, we noticed that the title of the workshop “Twenty Years of Narratology at the CRAL” uses “narratology” in the singular. It seems to me that today we’re more inclined to use the plural form. This being the case, why call the workshop “Twenty Years of Narratology”? Why return to the singular form? Moreover, you recently edited a collection entitled *Contemporary French and Francophone Narratology*, again using “Narratology” in the singular. Do you have a preference for one term over the other?

Pier: I think these changes in titles reflect less the situation at a given time than the fluidity of research in narratology and its various developments in the context of French and international research. Also to be considered is the status of narratology and its methodologies in the context of the general interdisciplinization of research, without ignoring the mutations of narrative objects themselves under the effect, in particular, of recent technological innovations. Admittedly, the seminar’s various titles recall the paradigm of “classical” versus “postclassical” narratology. Today, “narratology”, in the singular, refers to a type of narrative theory, whereas the term in the plural suggests the plurality of approaches and applications adopted by researchers, conceived and conditioned in part according to the narrative object in question, whether oral, written, visual or digital, whether literary, conversational, fictional or factual, whether dating from antiquity, the Middle Ages or modernity. Moreover, certain aspects of narratology are no longer the privileged reserve of narratologists but have become, with varying degrees of success, commonplace in other types of narrative studies, both literary and non-literary. We may well ask whether the “classical”/“postclassical” paradigm has reached the limit of its usefulness.

3. Cao: We know that you and Francis Berthelot edited the *Narratologies contemporaines* (2010), where you say in the introduction that “[t]he articles presented in this book were elaborated, at least in part, within the framework of the seminar ‘Narratologies contemporaines’ at the EHESS”, and that they “were also discussed, in most cases, in other contexts”. What happened to the other presentations? Have all the lectures given at the seminar been edited and published?

Pier: The contributions to this volume are based on the lecturers’ current research presented during the seminar conferences. Many other presentations that do not appear here have published elsewhere. While the number of publications directly stemming from the seminar is relatively small, this is far from being the case for articles, books and symposia related to our work, which would be impossible to identify or document without extensive investigation. Several titles are nonetheless noteworthy:

– *Métalepses. Entorses au pacte de la représentation*. John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (eds.). Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 2005 (proceedings of the international colloquium “La métalepse, aujourd’hui” held in Paris in November 2002);

– *Théorie du récit. L'apport de la recherche allemande*. John Pier (ed.). Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2007 (contributions by the Narratology Research Group of the University of Hamburg);

– *Narratologies contemporaines*. John Pier and Francis Berthelot (dir.). Paris: Éditions des Archives Contemporaines, 2010 (collection of articles from the narratology seminar);

– *Emerging Vectors of Narratology*. Per Krogh Hansen, John Pier, Philippe Roussin and Wolf Schmid (eds.). “Narratologia” vol. 57. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2017 (proceedings of the third international congress of the European Narratology Network held in Paris in March 2013);

– *Narratological Concepts across Languages and Cultures*, John Pier (ed.). Amsterdam International Electronic Journal for Cultural Narratology, 2016: <https://cf.humanities.uva.nl/narratology/index.html>;

– *Le formalisme russe cent ans après*, proceedings of a colloquium co-organized by the CRAL and EUR'ORBEM of Sorbonne Université in 2015, edited by Catherine Depretto, John Pier and Philippe Roussin in *Communications*, n°103, 2018;

– *Narratological Transfer. French Narratology in Russia/Russian Narratology in France*. Larissa Muravieva and John Pier (eds.), 2019. Proceedings (in English, French and Russian) of the workshop held in Moscow on July 12, 2017, organized under the auspices of the Moscow Center for Franco-Russian Studies. Available online at: <http://narratologie.ehess.fr/textes-et-contributions/>;

– *Contemporary French and Francophone Narratology*. John Pier (ed.). Contributions by members of the Seminar. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020;

– *Genette*, Special issue of *Nouvelle revue d'esthétique* 2021/2 (no. 26), edited by Marc Cerisuelo (proceedings of the colloquium “Poétique, esthétique, écriture: autour de l'oeuvre de Gérard Genette”, CRAL colloquium, October 2019).

Less directly related to the seminar are the *Handbook of Narratology* whose second, revised and expanded edition, published in 2014, is available online; and the *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology*, published in 2023. Both works published in the “Narratologia” series by de Gruyter.

Finally, we are currently working on a collection of articles based on the papers presented at the seminar in 2022/2023 — “Raconter/construire des mondes” — to be published in the journal *Communications* (Paris).

4. Cao: As you indicated earlier, over the past twenty years, narratology has significantly mutated or “diversified”, to use Claude Calame’s term. The aim of this workshop was to take stock of these developments and to outline possible paths of research for the future. As an organizer and participant in the seminar for twenty years — “present from beginning to end without interruption”, as Tiphaine Samoyault pointed out — have you noticed progress, if any, within the seminar? What do you think are the reasons for this progress? I followed the workshop online, and while listening to the speakers, I noticed that, as you yourself mentioned in the last email you sent me, “a certain number of points of convergence emerged”. Among these points, I’d say the refusal to mechanically divide narratology into “classical” and “postclassical” periods (you said earlier: “We may well ask whether the ‘classical’ / ‘postclassical’ paradigm has reached the limit of its usefulness”), a relative rapprochement of narratology with narrative analysis and narrative theory generally, and an interest of

reassessing the legacy of structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s in its relations with the structuralism of the Prague School or with the Russian formalists. Are there any other significant points of convergence?

Pier: Certainly, we can speak of the “diversification” of research in narratology under the influence, from the 1970s onward, of various “turns” (linguistic, pragmatic, narrative, cognitive, ethical . . .) and, for over a quarter of a century, of the proliferation of narratologies (contextualist, feminist, postcolonial, cultural, rhetorical, diachronic . . .) mapped out by Ansgar Nünning. Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, for their part, identified two phases in the evolution of postclassical narratology in 2010: 1) multiplicities, interdisciplinarity, transmedialities; 2) consolidation and continued diversification.

For my part, rather than “progress” in theoretical reflection on narrative, I would speak of its “mutations” and the widening of the “frontiers of narrative”, to use Gérard Genette’s words. The seminar’s twentieth anniversary provides a miniature, and very brief, picture of these developments that I will try to summarize in a few lines.

It seems to me that, in the French and Francophone context, it is appropriate to distinguish three “generations” of research in narratology, less polemical than the division into “classical” and “postclassical”.

While the first, “structuralist” generation focused on literary narrative to identify the textual categories and analytical procedures known to all (Genette’s, to put it briefly), it was not entirely disconnected from subsequent developments. To give just one example, Raphaël Baroni, who has been working for over fifteen years on the problem of narrative tension, has rehabilitated a phenomenon within narrative that had been marginalized, but not entirely eliminated, by structural analysis: plot. It turns out, according to Baroni, that plot had remained lurking within narrative structure, only to emerge in Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* in 1970.

Other features — discursive, enunciative, rhetorical, pragmatic, cognitive, transmedial . . . — present in narrative but unequally exploited by structural analysis, were already hinting at the second generation of narratology, more oriented toward the question of narrativity. Rather than the intrinsic properties of narrative or the question “What is a narrative?”, the focus is on the conditions that enable us to apprehend an object as narrative, its narrativity. These conditions are conceived in different ways and according to various criteria that I won’t attempt to enumerate here.

In connection with the principle of narrative tension theorized by Baroni, mention should be made of the functionalist (not structuralist) conception of narrativity defended by Meir Sternberg. For him, narrativity is “the interplay between temporalities [which] generates the three universal narrative effects/interests/dynamics of prospection, retrospection, and recognition — suspense, curiosity, and surprise, for short” (Sternberg 117). We begin, not with a definition of narrative, but with the dynamic forces of narrativity: suspense/curiosity/surprise. First narrativity, then narrative! Conceived in this way, the role of the narrator in narrative needs to be rethought (who “narrates” the film, the painting, the video game?), as does the status of the event (what “happens” in the still image, in program music, in interactive narrative?). Freed from linguistic support, or more precisely conditioned by the possibilities and constraints of different media (“medium affordances”), the study of narrative opens up to transmedialization, i. e. the possibilities of narrative passing between several media, or even their convergence. (Goudmand & Baroni) The second generation of narratology also saw the emergence of the “narrative turn”, the presence of narrative beyond the literary text in fields as diverse as jurisprudence, journalism, psychotherapy, the visual arts and much more.

The third generation of research in narratology aims to identify and locate not only the parameters but also the limits of narrative. In her contribution during the workshop, Liesbeth Korthals Altes warned against the perils of “pan-narrativity”: the uncontrolled inflation of narrative that obscures the boundaries, formal or

otherwise, between narrative and non-narrative. Not every form of human expression can be classified as narrative. But it is also true that some of its manifestations lie on the margins of narrative, remote from the characteristic features of narrative, without however being definitively excluded from a certain diffuse narrative potential.

Basically, it is less a question of exporting so-called classical or postclassical narratological models and theories to other fields than it is of identifying the possibilities of narrative, possibilities that may lie at a certain remove from narrative properly speaking.

Why talk about “generations” in narratology? As in real life, we are all daughters and sons of someone and potential mothers and fathers of future generations. Biologically and culturally, the dividing lines between generations cannot be neatly and clearly demarcated, as we often see something of the father, the aunt or the grandmother in the baby’s eyes. So it is with the evolution of narratological research.

5. Cao: The idea of “generations” in narratological research is indeed thought-provoking! It seems that we are currently in the third generation. As you mentioned, this generation “aims to identify and locate not only the parameters but also the limits of narrative”. This means, if I’ve understood correctly, that after a period of expansion and diversification, the phenomenon “narrative” needs to be re-examined. This reminds me of Françoise Lavocat’s major work, *Fait et fiction. Pour une frontière*. Similar to the study of the phenomenon of fiction, the frontier is an essential marker for narratological studies, for as you say, “not everything is narrative”. Faced with the phenomenon of “pan-narrativity”, how can we define the boundaries and criteria necessary for the study of narratology while at the same time adapting them to the mutations of its objects and methodologies?

Pier: I’d like to thank you, first of all, for drawing attention to Françoise Lavocat’s important book, as it is among the studies that confirm the place, within the third generation, of the questions surrounding fiction, questions largely overlooked by the first generation and dealt with sporadically by the second.

We have approached the problem of the limits of narrative in various ways. Examining the theme of “Narrating/Building Worlds”, for example, members of the seminar have pointed out that diegetic encyclopedias (genealogies, bestiaries . . .) build worlds without relying on narrative, but also that long narratives (TV series, etc.), even if they represent a worldbuilding process, do not necessarily depend on a plot. On the other hand, franchises like *Matrix* or *Star Wars* demonstrate the convergence of several media. This raises questions about the collaborative nature of the “author” of the story (who, ultimately, is narrating?), the multiplicity of stories generated during the worldbuilding process, and the participatory culture engendered by the interaction of producers and consumers of media franchises. (Jenkins)

Another challenge to narrativity can be found in storytelling, a discursive practice emerging from fields such as marketing, management, journalism and politics. Contrary to the literary tradition, storytelling does not seek to create an imaginary world or to convey lived experience, but, according to Christian Salmon, instrumentalizes narrative by tracing out the conduct to be followed and directing the flow of emotions in a protocol-like manner, implementing a rhetoric of persuasion. Such is the case, for instance, of the “storytelling company”, where the interactions of stakeholders (employees, customers, suppliers, etc.) are “narrated” in real time according to standard scenarios, but without the intervention of an author or narrator and without plot, peripeteia or denouement; the aim of storytelling is to cultivate shared beliefs that identify individuals as members of a group. (Salmon)

The performative nature of storytelling brings narrative closer to conversational narration. The analysis of

this discursive form, practiced by sociolinguists independently of narratology since the 1970s, has been the focus of small stories research for the last fifteen years. These are highly contextualized, rather than textualized, stories that are co-constructed by multiple interlocutors in real time at the expense of a single narrator or the representation of a centralizing event. Non-prototypical (and thus antithetical to any notion of “narrative grammar”), small stories represent snippets of narrative, often hypothetical, allusive or future-oriented, unfolding without a clearly identifiable beginning, middle or end. As they do not meet any definition of narrative, small stories can be described as emergent. (Georgakopoulou; Patron)

6. Cao: It seems, then, that the CRAL narratology seminar, if we also take into account the seminar directed earlier by Claude Bremond, has accompanied all three generations of narratologists and today undoubtedly constitutes an important international platform for academic exchange in this field. According to your presentation, over the past twenty years, some 250 researchers have been invited to present their work at the seminar. What percentage of these speakers are foreigners — by which I mean non-French? In your opinion, is there a radical difference between narratology carried out in the French or Francophone field and that in other countries? Have exchanges between foreign and French researchers had any impact on the development of narratology?

Pier: It's an interesting connection you make between the three “generations” of narratology and the evolution of narratology at the CRAL, but I think it requires some clarification. The CRAL was founded in 1983 as a tribute to Roland Barthes at a time when first-generation narratology was already losing ground in France. The legacy of this structural narratology has remained in the CRAL's DNA, if only through the pioneering work of its founders. However, Barthes had long since distanced himself from structural analysis, emphasizing the plurality of the text at the expense of its unifying totality: “for the plural text, there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic” (*S/Z* 6). It is as though the second generation, an unacknowledged or disavowed child in which French researchers took little interest, remained hidden within the first generation, only to emerge later. As for the third generation, which explores the contours of narrative in transmedia and transdisciplinary contexts while diversifying the objects taken into consideration, it is heir to the previous generations. Our seminar operates essentially in the wake of the last two generations, but we must bear in mind that any attempt to date or periodize the three generations is provisional and subject to reappraisal in light of new developments. Indeed, first-generation narratology has lost nothing of its relevance and vitality today. I am thinking in particular of Gerald Prince who, since the 1980s, has been scrutinizing changes in the “frontiers of narrative” and those of narratology, describing himself, not as a “classical” narratologist but as a “relatively restrictive” — and, I would add, well-informed-narratologist. Attentive to the *differentia specifica* of narrative, Prince reminds us that “all is not narrative and [that] all representation is not necessarily narrative” (Prince 6).

Since its inception, the seminar has met nearly 250 times and has welcomed around 150 lecturers. A number of researchers, including the five persons who direct the seminar, have intervened regularly. We have had over thirty speakers from non-French-speaking countries in addition to some ten people of foreign origin who have been working in France for many years.

As for how narratological research is conducted in different linguistic and cultural areas, this is a subject that goes beyond the scope of a mere interview.

Nevertheless, it can be said that, in both its origins and its *modus operandi*, narratology is a field of research that crosses national boundaries. The rise of an international “mainstream” narratology, conducted

largely in English, has the merit of facilitating exchanges between researchers from around the world and of opening up horizons that, in a strictly national context, would in many cases remain unknown. On the negative side, of course, mainstream research risks imposing a certain uniformity on the issues debated by overlooking the specificities of one research tradition or another, neglecting, for example, the importance among certain French-speaking narratologists of enunciative linguistics, largely unknown among Anglo-Saxon narrative theorists. Similarly, the notion of reliable/unreliable author, present mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries, is marginal in Francophone research. There are many discrepancies of this kind between various research traditions.

This situation suggests the need for a comparative narratology, a branch of research that remains underdeveloped today. For further reading, I refer readers to the RéNaF (Réseau des Narratologues Francophones) glossary under the heading “Géographie culturelle des théories du récit”, which contains, among others, an entry devoted to narratology in China by Liya Wang: <https://wp.unil.ch/narratologie/glossaire/>. Also to be mentioned in this regard is Huaiyu Luo’s article in *Emerging Vectors of Narratology*.

Also to be consulted are the collections *Narratological Concepts across Languages and Cultures* and *Narratological Transfer*, both of which are available online in open access (see references above).

7. Cao: Let’s return now to the question of postclassical narratology, if you like. It seems to me that you’re not as categorical about this label as some of the other participants in the workshop. We read in the introduction to *Narratologies contemporaines*, which includes articles mainly by French and Francophone authors, that this book “is situated in the wake of postclassical narratology”. Shortly afterwards, you published an article entitled, not without irony, “Is There a French Postclassical Narratology?” This reminds me of Stanley Fish’s article “Is There a Text in this Class?” In this article you explain why the distinction between classical and postclassical narratology is not widespread among French and Francophone researchers. My question, then, is: how do you see postclassical narratology and the distinction between these two narratologies?

Pier: I’ve just answered this question in part. It’s true that the book in question “is situated in the wake of postclassical narratology”, but it doesn’t follow closely in the footsteps of this development. While the arguments developed in the articles (in this book) are for the most part far removed from the concerns of the early narratologists, it would nevertheless be difficult to place them within the typology of thematic and interpretative theories (feminist, postcolonial, ethical, rhetorical, etc.) identified by Nünning. On the other hand, some contributions focus on the linguistic issues of narrative enunciation, narrative cognition or narrativity in music. The article you refer to (written in 2009–2010 and published in 2011) represents a more in-depth reflection on the question at the time: in the French-speaking world then, research did not reflect the plurality of approaches found in postclassical narratology but did address certain issues raised by the renewal of research through discourse analysis, for example, without placing itself under the sign of narratology. (Pier, “Is There”) Hence the answer to the question posed by the title, not without irony, as you say, or without ambiguity is both “no” and “yes”. Later, I pursued my reflections on narrative theory and discourse analysis, emphasizing the priority of discourse over structure and the role of enunciation and discourse genres in the constitution of narrative. (Pier, “Discourse”) Although the emphasis in these articles is on discourse analysis, it is true, as Raphaël Baroni points out in an important overview, that this approach is only one among several in Francophone research since the advent of the narrative turn and transmedial analysis. (“L’empire”)

I conclude my remarks on postclassical narratology in the French-speaking world by pointing to a

collection of articles edited by Sylvie Patron entitled *Introduction à la narratologie postclassique. Les nouvelles directions de la recherche sur le récit* (2018).

8. Cao: During the roundtable discussion on the future of narratologies, a number of proposals were put forward that touched on the objects of study (different types of narrative devices, various media and their interaction), the approaches currently practiced (cognitive narratology, genetic narratology, pragmatic narratology) and the very nature of narratology (the need to redefine its status and clarify its relationship to other disciplines and practices such as semantics, sociology, the theory of fiction, the teaching of narratology and even the hard sciences, as well as the interest in a meta-cognition and the historiography of narratology). These are all paths to be explored in the future. However, I did notice some concerns among participants about the future of narratology: the “toolbox” approach might weaken its disciplinary status while the massive integration of theoretical positions and methodologies under the pretext that “everything is narrative” would cause it to lose its specificity and hence its effectiveness. What do you think narratology could or should do in the future to maintain a degree of autonomy while diversifying? How do you see narratology in the future?

Pier: What was said during the workshop did indeed touch on the diversity of questions targeted by narratologists, the current approaches available to researchers and the disciplinary status of narratology. Taken as a whole, the various proposals put forth paint a picture of certain recent developments, pointing to a future that is (or maybe is not) in the process of being sketched out. Due to the lack of time for in-depth debate, the picture remains blurred. Nevertheless, several conclusions can be drawn from the comments made.

The participants in the roundtable discussions unanimously agreed that not all discourse is narrative, and that “narrative imperialism” (Phelan) represents a threat to the coherence and objectives of research. What makes narratology so vital, and what has favored its evolution since its beginnings, is its transdisciplinarity, its ability to apply modes of reflection drawn from different disciplines (linguistics, semiotics, cognitive sciences, computer sciences, sociology, anthropology . . .) to the multiplicity and diversity of narrative objects. Its scientific status is therefore fluctuating and resists academic institutionalization. We might even say that narratology is characterized by its “non-disciplinarity” due to the fact, as Prince notes, that there exists no “large, synthetic and coherent narratology” (2). Baroni, on the other hand, has pointed out that narratology is caught in a difficult-to-escape vicious circle, having to cope with the incompatibility between the requirements of institutional disciplines and those of the discipline as a research field. (“L’empire” 229 – 230)

This is not to say that narratology lacks scientific rigor or specificity. What sets it apart from “turnkey” approaches to narrative is the attention to the back-and-forth between theory and analysis, between the general and the particular. Much more than a “toolbox”, narratology, as it emerged from the roundtable debates, represents a heuristic for discovering the different faces of a given narrative or a specific corpus of narratives. Every narrative discourse, whatever its medium, obeys a dynamic produced by a particular configuration of narrative, discursive and medial processes. According to this conception, analysis takes its object as its starting point: we are no longer, as Olivier Caïra pointed out, in a situation where the method is in search of an object; rather, the method is called upon to adapt to the contours of the object. By proceeding in this way, we avoid the pitfalls of boring and sterile codifications of narrative devices, and instead adopt a critical stance toward the narratological apparatus — its concepts, categories, methodologies, objectives, disciplinary links, etc. — when engaging in narrative analysis. What distinguishes narratology from other forms of narrative study, it seems to me, is precisely the fact that it cultivates a critical reflection on the interplay between general principles and discursive detail.

9. Cao: You're quite right! Indeed, it's not the "toolbox" as such but the semi-automatic and unreflective use of "tools" that has left narratology with a negative image.

Now I'd like to talk a little about you. It's quite curious: you're of American origin and have been living in France for many years, yet it's partly thanks to you that we're getting to know more about French and Francophone research in narratology. With the publication of *Contemporary French and Francophone Narratology* in The Ohio State University Press's Theory and Interpretation of Narrative series, French and Francophone narratological studies are becoming better known beyond the French-speaking world. I myself wrote an article to introduce my compatriots to the current state of French and Francophone narratological research based on your book. In fact, not only have you contributed to a better understanding of recent research in this field on an international scale, but you've also made great efforts to introduce French and English-speaking researchers to the work of the Russian formalists, the Czech structuralists and so on. Your experience reminds me of Tzvetan Todorov's book, *Devoirs et délices: Une vie de passeur*. He may have been poking fun at himself, but in my view, passeurs are an invaluable resource for cultural exchange and development. In your case, among the various roles you've taken on, there's one that I think is particularly important: that of a passeur. Through your efforts to foster dialogue between researchers from different cultures, you've made a noteworthy contribution to the development of contemporary narratology. Could you tell us about your main "cultural transfer" projects in narratology? What inspired you to act as a bridge between different cultures? Have the transitions between different languages and cultures enabled you to make discoveries that, confined to a single culture, you wouldn't have had the opportunity to make?

Pier: It's more than anecdotal that it was a certain Bulgarian newly settled in Paris who coined the term "narratology". To be a narratologist is to be more or less a "passeur", but not a "missionary". Although narratology was originally French, its roots, like its peregrinations, cover many cultural and linguistic areas. Its concepts and principles circulate freely across borders. Strictly speaking, there is no "French", "English" or "Chinese" narratology, just as there is no narratology restricted to the novel, legend or comic strip. Research in this field has long been internationalized, and as I explained above, while exchanges between researchers represent fruitful openings and broadenings of reflection on narrative, there is a risk of standardizing research into a homogenized "mainstream" narratology and erasing significant points of comparison and divergence between Francophone, Hispanophone and Germanophone research, to take only a few examples, which deserve greater attention.

To deal with this situation, two lines of research are available to us: historiography and diachrony.

In 1965, Todorov published his collection of translations of Russian Formalists (*Théorie de la littérature*), a seminal work (along with Vladimir Propp's *Morphologie du conte*, French translation in 1966) for French narratology, later translated into a dozen languages, including Chinese. Without going into detail here, it can be noted that over time narrative theorists have ceased to distinguish between Russian formalism and structural narratology, lumping the two together nearly without distinction. To clarify a situation that had become confusing, the CRAL organized an international colloquium in 2015 devoted to "Russian Formalism a Hundred Years On" (proceedings published in *Communications* n°103, 2018). Most contributions represent a historical and conceptual reconstruction of various aspects of formalism, reminding us that it is above all a new way of thinking about literary studies (with narrative as one object) within the context of the humanities and social sciences, far removed from the logical or scientific formalism with which it has often been misleadingly associated for decades.

In the same spirit, I organized the publication of *Jan Mukařovský: Écrits 1928 – 1946* (2018). Leader of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Mukařovský was one of the founders of structuralism. When we talk about “structuralism” today, we usually think of French structuralism, forgetting that the notion was first used in 1929 by the Czechs, who associated it less with Saussurean linguistics than with functional linguistics, already well developed in Czechoslovakia. In France, Czech functionalism is well known among linguists, but the work of CLP members in literary, aesthetic and semiotic theory remains relatively unknown, largely due to a lack of translations. Contrary to popular misconception, Czech structuralism is far from being a simple “transition” between formalism and modern structuralism. As with the work on the Russian formalists, the translations of Mukařovský’s writings aim to provide a fuller and more accurate understanding of the antecedents of French structuralism while underlining the value of a historical perspective on research that, alas, is all too often lacking today.

10. Cao: So then, historiography reveals not only the evolution of studies within the same academic tradition, but also the gap between different countries, even if they belong to the same cultural area.

Pier: Absolutely! Let’s take narratological studies in Germany and France as an example. From the historiographical angle, we can consider a collection of articles by researchers at the University of Hamburg (*Théorie du récit: L’apport de la recherche allemande*, 2007). If German researchers were slow to don the narratologist’s jacket (the German translation of Genette’s *Figures III* was published in 1994, fourteen years after the English translation), it was not because they were unfamiliar with French work, but because the theoretical issues of narrative had been debated in German-speaking countries since the late nineteenth century. (Cornils & Schemus) In particular, the Austrian Anglicist Franz K. Stanzel had already developed a triad of “narrative situations” in the 1950s, inspired in part by Goethean morphology, a model that has remained influential for decades (curiously, Stanzel’s work has never been translated into French). The integration of narratology into German research is marked, on the one hand, by the publication in 1999 of Matías Martínez and Michael Scheffel’s *Einführung in die Erzählforschung* (Introduction to Narrative Research) (currently in its 11th edition), which incorporates Genette’s main categories alongside discussions of fictionality, cognitivism, plot structure, and so on. On the other hand, starting in the early 1990s, several German-speaking researchers, particularly Anglicists, took an interest in the “renaissance” of narratological studies from across the Atlantic, contributing to the internationalization of their work. German narratologists frequently publish in English, but seldom in French; their work remains relatively unknown in France, despite the fact that certain issues are common to research in both countries. This work deserves greater recognition in French-speaking countries.

The situation in France differs from that in Germany in that, from the 1980s onward, narratology, associated with structuralism, attracted fewer and fewer followers. It was under the influence of the narrative turn in the social sciences and the growing interest in non-literary narrative corpora and non-scriptorial media that the narratological perspective began to renew itself around the turn of the century. For various reasons, some of which were explained in my 2011 article, this renewal took place according to considerations that only partially coincide with those of the classical/postclassical narratology paradigm, articulated around the text versus context dichotomy. The articles in *Contemporary French and Francophone Narratology* aim to bring to the attention of English-speaking readers the contributions whose authors, well versed in classical narratology and in recent developments in the field, emphasize both the heuristic value of narrative analysis and the need for a critical perspective on the premises and methods employed.

As can be seen from the German and French examples, the historiography of narrative theory research shows that discoveries and developments in different cultural and linguistic areas progress at different speeds and in different ways — sometimes converging, sometimes diverging.

The question of convergence and divergence in narratology depends on the context in which the research is conducted. This context is threefold, determined by the nature of the objects studied (oral, written, visual, fictional . . .), by the historical and cultural environment in which the narratives circulate, and by the theoretical and disciplinary framework adopted by the researcher.

These factors guided the work brought together in the volume *Emerging Vectors of Narratology* (2017) and in the online publication *Narratological Concepts across Languages and Cultures* (2016).^① The contributions (from more than twenty countries) are too numerous and diverse to provide an adequate overview here. For our purposes, suffice it to say that among the topics covered are the reconfiguration of narrative concepts, cinematic narrative, narrative blogs, autofiction, unreliable narration, musical narrativity, the narrative turn, ancient Greek narrative, Chinese narratology, cognitive narratology, unnatural narratology, complexity sciences and narrative, as well as the rarely addressed issue of translating narrative theory. It would be futile to attempt to derive a historiography from these works, but they do give an idea of what the comparative dimension of a historiography might one day be.

11. Cao: It seems that the historiographical perspective leads us to another aspect of research you mentioned, that of diachrony. You recently co-edited a book entitled *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology* (2023). Could you say a few words about it?

Pier: While the historiography of narratology focuses on the conceptual and epistemological development of narrative theory over time, diachrony concerns itself with the emergence and historical evolution of narrative processes and techniques within different cultures, periods and genres. Traditionally, narratology has operated synchronically, aiming to identify distinctive (and supposedly) transhistorical properties, to specify and systematize the techniques and strategies that make up narrative, as well as to develop models of analysis. Postclassical narratology, for its part, has freed itself from attempts at decontextualized formalization, but its conceptual and analytical orientations remain in many respects closely tied to modern and postmodern corpora, and more recently, to new media. With the “diachronization of narratology”, promoted by Monika Fludernik as early as 2003 and further developed in the *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology* (2023), questions are being asked about the gradual emergence of the separation of narrator from author in different national literatures, for instance, about the differences between narrative sequence in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the eighteenth century in their respective cultural contexts, or about the development of focalization from Antiquity to postmodernism.^② Historical narratology, on the other hand, practiced by historians of premodern literature, does not necessarily rely on modern concepts and categories. For the study of Greek narrative, for example, the principle of focalization does not sufficiently describe the interaction between the narrator and the character’s perspective; for medieval narrative, the notion of “level” incorporated in modern narratology’s communication models is incompatible with the fact that a character’s discourse marked as such may well turn out to be that of the author. Thus, the two narratologies, diachronic and historical, are in some respects complementary. (Contzen & Tilg)

This is what it means to be a “passeur” in narrative theory.

In a seminal essay dating back to 1966, Roland Barthes reminded us of the “universality” of narrative — “present at all times, in all places, in all societies” (“An Introduction” 237). To be a passeur in narratology

is to navigate through narratives across different languages and cultures, of course, but it also means using navigational instruments to travel further, knowing where we've come from and where we're going.

12. Cao: This is really enlightening! I look forward to consulting the *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology* . . .

But now I have a final question — a question about narratology in China. In recent years, narratological studies have developed considerably in China, often drawing on French and American research in the field. However, China has a very long tradition of theoretical studies in literature where reflection on “narrative” is not lacking. According to Chinese scholar Yang Yi (1946 – 2023), the word 叙事 (*Xushi*, both noun and verb meaning “to tell; telling of events”, most often used to translate the English words “narrating” and “narrative”) appeared very early, around the sixth century B. C. E. Confucius adopted this concept to comment on and explain rites to his disciples. In 2009, Yang Yi published a major work entitled 《中国叙事学》 (*Chinese Narratology*) in which he explores the practical and speculative Chinese tradition of storytelling, drawing on classic literary and theoretical works. His observations and conclusions are very different from those of Western narratology, whether classical or postclassical. Indeed, it is precisely Yang Yi's aim to distance himself from Western frameworks.

Let's return now to the narratology seminar at the CRAL. Reading the programs from the beginning to the present day, I noticed that no researcher has come to talk about narratological studies in China. Do you plan to collaborate with Chinese researchers in the future? I believe that a dialogue between East and West on these issues would be beneficial for research on both sides.

Pier: I don't feel well placed to talk about Chinese narratology. From what I've read, Western studies translated into Chinese began to appear in the 1980s. Alongside these works, there seems to be a growing interest in an ancient tradition of reflection on narrative in China that cannot be directly assimilated into the questions studied by Western specialists. This being the case, there appear to be two perspectives on narrative in China, one traditional, the other more or less inspired by Western narratological work. But, once again, I am unable to comment on the relationship between these perspectives.

In any case, it seems that Chinese research is currently undergoing a significant “translation” process — terminological, conceptual and cultural — between these different traditions in thinking about narrative. This points the way to the vast field of comparative narratology, a field that has yet to bear all its fruit. We can only hope that the results of this work will one day be made available to researchers working in other linguistic and cultural areas. This would be an invaluable service to the passeurs of narratology!

Paris and Nanjing, May 2024

Notes

① These publications are the proceedings of the third colloquium of the European Narratology Network held in Paris in March 2013.

② A research group at the Universities of Heidelberg and Wuppertal, financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, is currently preparing an edited volume on diachronic metalepsis.

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