My Narratology

An Interview with Mieke Bal

DIEGESIS: What is your all-time favourite narratological study?

Bal: In 1974 a French friend gave me Gérard Genette’s *Figures III* for Christmas. I loved it. Not because I agreed with it all. In fact, as I have made clear since, I didn’t. What I loved about it was the development of theoretical ideas with and through the literature – in Genette’s case, Proust. My favourites (no singular is possible) will always be those studies that demonstrate the relevance of theory in that way.

In 1979 I attended my first important international conference on narratology, *Synopsis II*, in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. There I met all those who have remained my favourites since then, for the reason mentioned above. Jonathan Culler who, without writing exclusively on narratology, has contributed wonderful ideas that nuanced the various accounts of Free Indirect Discourse, for example, through his brilliant work on Flaubert (from 1974; still the best in the business); Brian McHale, who wrote a very useful overview of FID, and whose work on postmodernism shows the ongoing relevance of narratology; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, whose book on narratology came out more or less simultaneously with mine, and whose work on modernist literature helps us historicize narrative form; Ann Banfield, whose work I find challenging because of its rigorous linguistic logic; and last but not least, Lubomír Doležel, whose account of FID was inspirational for mine, and whose work always provides new insight into ‘other’ literary texts. They became life-long friends, and just a few weeks ago I saw most of them again in Amsterdam. So, not a single favourite, but an ‘intellectual community’ of people who, like myself, care as much for the narratives as for the concepts that help understand them better.

DIEGESIS: Which narrative would you like to take with you on a lonely island?

Bal: Can I take two? Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Both are inexhaustible. Both challenge our theories while also demonstrating how those theories help encounter their strangeness.
**DIEGESIS:** Why narratology?

**Bak:** For at least four reasons.

1) Narrative is the most widespread semiotic mode of expression, within literature and outside it;
2) It is socially useful to understand how narrative works because it is so frequently deployed for manipulation, political and otherwise;
3) Children read stories, and have clear heads; when I first began to develop narratology, I had a 10-year old as my trial student. Without needing to use jargon, I could make her understand it all. Her grades in school went straight up to heaven.
4) Analysing narratives in other media, such as film, but also painting, photography, and those now old media they keep calling ‘new’, can greatly contribute to our understanding of culture, or rather, cultures, or ‘the cultural’, as anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls it: moments of cultural tensions and conflicts, which are the moments when we become aware of ‘our’ culture. Ultimately, that is my goal. Hence my interest in ‘cultural analysis’. I have found narratology a brilliant tool for cultural analysis, helpful, also, to understand cultural differences.

**DIEGESIS:** Which recent narratological trends are of particular interest to you?

**Bak:** Can I say it? None that I know of, if you mean theoretical developments. I have been looking in other directions, mainly visual, and have tried to make visualisations of narratives. I can’t say I have seen anything particularly innovative lately. Not that I have seen everything, of course. I may be very unfair here. The so-called cognitivists produce old wine in new sacks; I have not found any of their claims different from the ones I had proposed, and they have little empirical evidence to support their claims about the truth value of their views. I do find it important to work on ‘postcolonial’ literature (scare quotes because there is so little ‘post’ about colonialism). But that is a domain of ‘application’ (scare quotes because I prefer to see it rather as an encounter), not a new theoretical development.

**DIEGESIS:** What is the future of narratology?

**Bak:** I keep hoping that more people will understand the link between storytelling and manipulation, as well as that between storytelling and psychic relief, so that they stop constructing categories and instead develop, or work with, analytical tools. This is my quarrel with narratologists. The future is in the practice: showing the brilliance of narratives and the hopelessness of the incapacitation of narrative skills, for example in traumatized people. I am not so interested in what amounts to translations of old concepts into allegedly new contexts.

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