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Narratology, In and Out of Order

Raphaël Baroni and Françoise Revaz Present Essays on Narrative Sequence

Raphaël Baroni / Françoise Revaz (Eds.): *Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press 2016. (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series). 226 pp. USD 85.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1296-7

Overview

It is not controversial to say that narrative makes much of sequence. Insofar as narratives generally unfold over time, and mark some distinction between before and after, now and then, or past, present, and future, sequence would appear to be a central, and perhaps necessary, feature. But what, if anything, makes a sequence *specifically* narrative? Is there something that distinguishes the sort of sequencing we find in narrative from other types of ordering, patterning, or grouping? Is it that narrative sequences involve anthropomorphic characters? Or that, as Roland Barthes famously argued, they conflate chronological and causal relations? That they are organized into well-formed wholes with beginnings, middles, and ends, or that they immerse us in storyworlds in ways that other types of sequence do not?

As Gerald Prince writes in his contribution to *Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology*, determining what is unique about narrative sequence “constitutes one of the primary and necessary tasks of narrative theory” (p. 11). The contributors to this volume meet Prince’s injunction less in the spirit of a problem that must be solved, than as an opportunity to meditate on the surprising variety of ways narratives incorporate, instrumentalize, or imply sequence. The result is a lively volume, featuring some of the most prominent figures in narrative theory investigating diverse narrative objects, from biblical texts to comic strips, orchestral music to video games. It certainly achieves its aim of offering insight into current developments in narratology, though it is clearly aimed at a reader already broadly familiar with at least some of these developments, not to mention narratology’s history. None of the essays could be described as introductory. For the student or critic of narrative theory, however, the volume offers a compelling capsule of the state of the field.

The Different Guises of Narrative Sequence

The volume is organized into four sections, on “Theorizing Sequence”, “Rhetorical Perspectives on Narrative Progression”, “Sequences in Nonliterary Narratives”, and “Unnatural and Nonlinear Sequences”, and one of the book’s charms is the way these sections progress. Questions posed early on are taken up and reformulated in succeeding chapters, and because each section has a unique structuring principle, the reader is invited to track various concepts as they travel over the course of the volume.

The opening section lays the groundwork, with Gerald Prince offering a helpful overview of classical vs. postclassical conceptions of sequence, and John Pier offering a configurational take, more aligned with the work of Paul Ricœur, that narrative sequence is not “given”, but generated by the “gaps opened up between the actional and the communicative” levels of narrative (p. 34). Peter Hühn’s contribution is the highlight here. A wonderful account of “the eventfulness of non-events”, Hühn’s argument is that theorists have generally taken for granted the “manifest” nature of story events – their positive presence in either story or discourse (p. 39). Without wholly rejecting this framework, Hühn insightfully draws attention to narratives that employ the “nonoccurrence of an event” (or “non-event”) as a kind of event (p. 47). When an expected event fails to occur, or an event occurs but fails to produce a particular change, we witness a non-event. But these non-events may function as narrative events when they make a point, in the Labovian (1971) sense, by staving off the audience’s disappointed “so what?” Pointing to examples from Samuel Beckett and Henry James (among others), Hühn vividly demonstrates how the reader’s expectations concerning eventfulness determines what constitutes an event, and by an extension, the components of a narrative sequence.

Hühn’s emphasis on readerly anticipation serves as a helpful segue into the volume’s second section, on “Rhetorical Perspectives on Narrative Progression”, featuring contributions from James Phelan, Eyal Segal, and Raphaël Baroni. Here priority is given to the function of sequence in what Phelan dubs “narrative progression”: the gradual unfolding of the story alongside the development of the teller-audience relationship. As Phelan writes, this approach stresses the relation between someone who tells a story (author or implied author), and someone who listens (actual audience). By way of typically sensitive readings of Tobias Wolff’s “Bullet in the Brain” and John O’Hara’s “Appearances”, Phelan makes the case that many of the features we generally associate with stories (characters, events, temporality), “though crucial to a narrative’s progression and effects, are themselves ultimately subordinated to the implied author’s relationship with the audience” (p. 53). Working in a similar vein, Segal and Baroni take up other aspects of the text-audience relationship. Baroni’s discussion of the paradox of suspense is particularly interesting. The paradox asks how it is possible for rereaders to feel suspense when they already know how a

story will end. Baroni's solution is elegant: he claims that "value-laden virtualities" – unfulfilled promises, impossible hopes, etc. – represent alternative paths that, if realized, would lead the story to very different places (p. 92). When we reread, these virtualities remain operative. Baroni's object here is to account for a narrative's capacity to retain some kind of force upon rereading, while staying within the rhetorical narratological paradigm. Because this paradigm stresses the dynamics of a reader progressing through an *unknown* text, it would seem to imply that readers cannot fully experience the dynamics of narrative upon rereading. The persistence of "virtualities" allows Baroni to claim that a narrative's aesthetic, emotional, and ethical values are not solely determined by what *actually* happens, but "depend more directly on the many other ways that story could or should have unfolded" (p. 101).

From Nonliterary to Unnatural Narratives

Alain Boillat and Françoise Revaz also take up the question of suspense and repetition in the third section, on sequence in nonliterary narrative. Their choice of text raises some different questions about narrative's relation to readerly knowledge, as they focus on an early twentieth-century comic (*Little Sammy Sneeze*) that not only announces its end in its title, but ends the same way in each strip. Boillat and Revaz conclude that here narrative sequence functions as a means of maintaining readerly interest in *how* a known outcome will be achieved, but though their reading is astute, the larger claim it is meant to illustrate – that nonliterary texts represent a challenge for narrative theories based on classic literary works – largely goes unprosecuted. This is true of the other essays on nonliterary narrative as well. Michael Toolan, in a reflection on the possible narrativity of orchestral music, takes a catholic approach to what constitutes narrative sequence, welcoming any definition that would allow listeners to describe their musical experiences in narrative terms. Though personally convinced by the rhetorical paradigm articulated by Baroni (and Meir Sternberg), he nonetheless admits that he would "rather engage with those who argue that a sonata cannot be a narrative because it has no characters or events by reflecting upon the ways in which listeners to a sonata report the presence of characters and the occurrence of events than abandon the criteria of eventhood and characterhood altogether" (p. 146). Emma Kafalenos's account of how different communities "narrativize the matrix" likewise applies "equally to narratives we read (or hear or view) and to the narratives of events from the matrix that we tell ourselves" (p. 159). By "matrix" Kafalenos is actually referring to contemporary global life, with its complex interconnectedness. Kafalenos is interested in how and why people see narrative sequences so differently, depending on what they already know, or what place they occupy in the matrix. For example, she notes how many Americans viewed the events of September 11, 2001 as a kind of "beginning" to a series of events that culminated in the death of Osama bin Laden, whereas many

others saw 9/11 not as a beginning, but an event somewhere in the middle of a *fabula* that includes decades of U.S. support for corrupt governments in Africa and the Middle East, presence in Kuwait, support for Israel, etc. But again, this is not so much a challenge to narratological methods premised on classic literary texts than an application of those methods to different objects. Kafalenos draws in particular on Lubomir Doležel's notion of "functional polyvalence", derived from the formalism of Vladimir Propp, which states that an event is subject to interpretations that shift "according to the context of other events in relation to which it is perceived" (p. 153).

The relation between narrative object and narrative theory stands out more prominently in the final exchange on unnatural narrative between Brian Richardson and Marie-Laure Ryan. As one of the most active figures in work on unnatural narrative, Richardson has long exhorted narratologists to rethink basic concepts (like sequence and plot) to better account for nonmimetic and experimental literary texts. In his contribution to this volume he surveys a range of experimental texts that fall into three "subcategories" that he proposes narratologists consider at greater length: texts with 1) variable 2) multiple or 3) negated *sjuzhets*. His descriptions of these different types of narrative are convincing enough to warrant consideration. Some of the examples also resonate with ideas put forth earlier in the volume, as when Richardson notes the "unactualized possible sequences of events" (p. 174) in Malcolm Bradbury's story "Composition" – an example of a variable *sjuzhet* text – recalling Baroni's remarks on narrative "virtualities" in his essay on suspense. But the resonance begs the question – how sharp is the divide between Baroni's example (a "natural" narrative) and Richardson's? Does the existing narratological toolkit need to be expanded to account for the texts Richardson is most interested in, when the same concepts also seem to inform our experiences of more conventional texts? Or perhaps it's the case that *all* narratives are a bit more "unnatural" than we generally assume? Marie-Laure Ryan's essay, though not a direct response to Richardson, functions as a kind of counterpoint along these lines, with its prodding subtitle, "Why Be Afraid of Fixed Narrative Order?" Taking Barthes's *scriptible* or "writerly" value as her point of departure, Ryan insists on conceiving of narrative organization more narrowly as temporal and causal connection, but argues that the relatively logical lines of plot produced by such connections are in fact the precondition for the kind of play that Barthes (and Richardson) value – "digressions, descriptions, imagery, opinions, and evaluations that expand the text's patterns of signification" (p. 192). Taken together, Richardson's and Ryan's contributions offer a balanced exchange to round out the body of the collection.

The volume concludes with an essay by Franco Passalacqua and Federico Piazola. Returning to the broader theorizing spirit of the opening section, Passalacqua and Piazola invite us to consider the perspectives featured here not as representatives of classical or postclassical schools, but rather as examples of either "objectivist" or "constructivist" paradigms. In doing so, they ask us to distinguish theories based on their ontological presuppositions about narrative – on the one hand, those that define narrativity as "a property immanent to the

object” (objectivist) (p. 205), and on the other, those that regard it as “the outcome of the audience-discourse relationship” (p. 208). For the most part, the contributors to this volume fall into the latter category, endorsing Sternberg’s notion that narrativity is not a property of certain discourse-types – so much intrinsically material – but rather that it arises from the play between “represented and communicative time” (p. 529). Passalacqua and Pianzola make a good case for rejecting the more dominant classical vs. postclassical dichotomy, but in the process they somewhat ironically de-emphasize sequence itself, cautioning us to stop telling a story about narrative theory in which a postclassical school develops out of its classical predecessor. It would seem that sequence thus encounters its limit as an analytical instrument, here.

Conclusion

The “constructivist” slant of many of these essays is indeed representative of a wide swath of contemporary narrative theory, and in this respect the volume offers a useful snapshot of the state of the field. That said, even if narrative theorists today no longer seem interested in elaborating Vladimir Propp’s functional taxonomies or adding to Gérard Genette’s precise categorization of temporal anachronies, still, the underlying drive of these classical (or objectivist) narratological projects strikes me as alive and well, here. Like their predecessors, the critics at work in this volume are striving to broaden our gaze, to account for a wider variety of texts that we treat as narratives in one form or another. And insofar as this wider focus helps us to defamiliarize aspects of even the most straightforward narrative progressions – the enduring interest of a comic strip that ends the same way each time, or the ability of a narrative we have heard a hundred times to hold us in suspense – the underlying goals of classical narratology will continue to have a place in future developments, constructivist or otherwise.

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