

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 Doležal, 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?

Bal: 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?

Bal: 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?

Bal: 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.

DIEGESIS: What other question would you like to answer?

Bal: What are your primary current interests?

My current enduring interest is in *cultural analysis*, as an interdisciplinary but more analytical alternative to the cultural studies perspective and the traditional and less-traditional corpuses of the cultural disciplines. I have developed some of this in my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. With a few colleagues, I founded ASCA – the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis – to spread this trend, and this has been quite successful (see <http://asca.uva.nl/about-asca/mission/mission.html>).

In my own work I am interested in developing the connections between theory and practice in more depth and breadth. I do that in, for example, film-making, but also in curating. In my current curatorial project, I posit, or stage, two ‘focalisers’, Emma (B, from *Bovary*) and Edvard (from Munch), who point out what is problematic about the visions of life and relationships they have believed in. See <http://www.miekebal.org/research/curating/emma-and-edvard/> for more on this project, which allows me to integrate the three domains within which I work (with narratology): analysing, making and curating.

Analysing remains the best way to understand cultural production intimately. It is an enduring method that enables closeness to those others that are texts (including images). I enjoy the learning of new insights from cultural texts.

Making a narrative is a good method for understanding important but complex and subtle cultural issues. I have found this extremely useful in my attempt to understand the legacy of Descartes better, beyond the facile dismissal it is fashionably subjected to. The need to forge a story about him for my film *Reasonable Doubt* (2016) has revealed to me how the 17th century philosopher ‘invented’ – or perhaps more modestly, created the possibility for – a post-Freudian form of psychoanalysis.

Curating requires such close analysis, but it then also enables and demands the presentation of those insights for a larger audience. The curated exhibition constitutes a narrative of its own, creating an experience that is narrative.

Mieke Bal was professor of Theory of Literature at the University of Amsterdam and Academy Professor of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Currently, she works as an independent scholar, filmmaker, video artist and curator. Recent topics of her practice as cultural analyst include intercultural encounters, migration, sincerity, and feminism. Her classical monographs on narratology are, among others, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto 1985), *Femmes imaginaries: L’Ancien Testament au risque d’une narratologie critique* (Paris 1986), *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto 2002), and *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago, IL 2006). Her latest publications include *In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani’s Shadow Plays* (Ostfildern 2016), *Tiempos trastornados: análisis, historias y políticas de la mirada* (Trans. Remedios Perni Llorente, Madrid 2016), and *Lexikon der Kulturanalyse* (Trans. Brita Pohl, Vienna 2016).

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How to cite this article:

Bal, Mieke: "My Narratology. An Interview with Mieke Bal". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 5.2 (2016). 101-104.

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20161122-085113-8](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20161122-085113-8)

URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/241/333>



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