

The Shape of Things to Come

An Interview with Monika Fludernik

DIEGESIS: You have recently been awarded the Wayne C. Booth Lifetime Achievement Award by the International Society for the Study of Narrative – congratulations! Looking back on your career, how would you describe the role of narrative, and narrative theory, for your research, and how would you describe your understanding of narrative research?

Fludernik: Narrative has always had a very special role in my career. When I started to study at the University of Graz, Austria, I was a student of Franz Karl Stanzel, and he was at that period revising his *Die typischen Erzählsituationen im Roman. Dargestellt an Tom Jones, Moby-Dick, The Ambassadors, Ulysses u.a.* (1955), introducing newer linguistic and structuralist methodology and remodelling his typological circle to have three axes based on dichotomies (identity and non-identity of the realms of existence between narrator and character; external/internal perspective; teller vs. reflector mode narrative). In this way I came to participate in his ongoing work in progress and saw him explain new insights in his lecture courses. When I had completed my PhD thesis, I worked as a research assistant for him and was involved in the English translation of his by then published revised model in *Theorie des Erzählens* (English: *A Theory of Narrative* [1986]), responsible for the index. So I had hands-on experience of narratology throughout my years as a student in Graz. And Professor Stanzel even suggested my thesis topic, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the analyses of dialogue and narrative in that work.

I then found a post in Vienna, in the American literature section of the English Department (there was no available job in Graz) and had to reorient my research to American literature. In order to do so, it proved useful to focus on postmodernist narratives (for instance, I wrote an essay on *Gravity's Rainbow*) and to stay with narratological issues. And then I ended up doing my habilitation on free indirect discourse and other forms of speech and thought representation in the history of English narrative (published as *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction*). This was a strategic choice since I wanted to return to English (or British) Studies rather than stay with American studies; not because I did not like American literature – in fact, I profited immensely both from reading postmodernist and also older American fiction and even more from becoming immersed in literary theory (as yet little appreciated in the UK and in British studies in Europe). My main reason for returning to British literature was the fact that in Germany and Austria most English departments only have *one* professor of American literature, and so this person is obliged to teach nothing but American

literature; whereas I wanted to be able to do a broad spectrum of texts from medieval to contemporary anglophone literature.

When I moved to Freiburg in 1994, I needed to catch up on much reading of texts from all periods of English literature, and this again was easiest to do for fiction since I was already familiar with many novels from John Lyly's *Euphues* and Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* all the way to Alasdair Gray or Salman Rushdie. However, I did broaden out to familiarize myself with drama and poetry as well, and in my teaching have consistently offered courses on early modern and eighteenth-century as well as twentieth-century drama, on Elizabethan and metaphysical poetry, and on neoclassical and twentieth-century poetry. This has resulted in much thinking about the narrativity of drama and resulted in essays on that issue. Another new orientation in Freiburg was postcolonial studies. Since I was part of a research project on identities and alterities, I ended up doing a cooperative project with my colleague, Professor Paul Goetsch: he did South African fiction and I did South Asian fiction. So my research on postcolonial theory and South Asian literature has had an almost exclusive emphasis on narrative throughout, both in my early work on suttee and hybridity and in my later work on leisure and otium in South Asian literature.

What I wanted to underline is that my research has throughout had a strong narratological emphasis. As for my understanding of what narrative research consists in, I have of course primarily been inspired by my teacher, Franz Karl Stanzel. It his own focus on discourse narratology that I have followed. Throughout my work, the words on the page have been the key to my concept of narrative research and my understanding of what is narratology. Of course I have learned tremendously from those scholars focusing on plot, but my own special approach is geared towards the linguistic analysis of what happens on the level of the sentences in the text. I am therefore not into media but only into words on the page, even for drama, although I do of course take account of performance when I write about drama. Since I also studied linguistics (both as part of Indo-European philology, one of my subjects at university, and as part of my courses in the English department), I was inspired by the 'new' linguistics of Noam Chomsky and later by discourse analysis and pragmatics to utilize these insights in my work on narrative. My current work is very linguistic indeed and also diachronic, combining historical pragmatics and a historical analysis of narrative form.

DIEGESIS: Which narrative scholars and/or which theories and approaches have been most influential for your own work and thinking? Do you have any all-time favorites?

Fludernik: The first and primary place goes to Franz Karl Stanzel, who was a fantastic teacher and an excellent scholar of narrative. Besides him, Dorrit Cohn's work has been extremely important to me, but also Gérard Genette's and Susan Lanser's, and Seymour Chatman's. Chomsky was a huge eye-opener to me while I was a student, and then there was cognitive studies: especially

George Lakoff's and Mark Turner's work have had a crucial impact on my thinking and were the inspiration for my adventures into cognitive narratology. Also, the study of conversational narratives was significant; it initially inspired me to look at narrative structure from a Labovian perspective, and later led me to include many insights from Deborah Tannen's work and that of other discourse and conversation analysts.

DIEGESIS: Your life's work is not complete yet, you are still very active in the field. What is your current research project?

Fludernik: My current research project is the study of diachronic narratology, particularly the sketching of how narrative structure developed in the late Middle English/early modern period. This is a project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), which is currently being completed. My team of researchers and myself are studying episodic structure and how it gets modified and eventually disintegrates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This project is really a continuation of two chapters in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, but tries to put the rather speculative theses developed in that book on a sounder basis. The two volumes of the project, which are going to be published by Routledge, are analyzing selected genres in a 400-year period and map out key continuities and discontinuities as well as refunctionalizations in the form-function relationship. Thus, there are chapters in the book on the medieval verse romance, the prose romance and the early modern romance; on verse and prose hagiography; on the fabliau; on historiographical texts; on epic poetry; on letters and diaries; and on early modern low-style narratives.

DIEGESIS: Your work bridges the gap between linguistics and literary studies, historical and systematic approaches, text and cognition, as well as politics and form. Can you explain why cross-disciplinary perspectives matter?

Fludernik: If narratology had kept to the novel as its primary playing ground, none of the important developments in narrative theory and narrative studies that have emerged in the past thirty years would have materialized. One could explain this perhaps in analogy with Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolution. It is the marginal areas that open one's eyes to new explanations, which then result in new theoretical models. For instance, the acknowledgement that there are so many second-person narratives and we-narratives has led to extremely insightful new models trying to explain and map out these forms. In my own work, this has resulted in the proposal of revising homo-/heterodiegesis into homo-/heterocommunicative narratives. At the same time, linguistics in a variety of forms has had a key influence on narratological research. This has happened with the impact of cognitive studies on narratology in the work of Manfred Jahn and David Herman; in the inclusion of conversational storytelling into the horizon of (literary) narrative study; and of course in the integration of narratives in several media into originally classic (verbal) narratology. For me interdisciplinarity has been a must but also quite natural; I did not need to go

out of my way to become interdisciplinary since I have always had wide-ranging interests.

DIEGESIS: What is your vision of the future of narrative research?

Fludernik: I think in terms of the internet and social media, there is now a very wide range of narratives that cry out to be studied. Methodologically, too, database related types of research are certain to come to the front. What I would like to see, however, is also at last more narratological work for languages and cultures that have not yet been studied from a narratological perspective, or (when there has been some work for these languages) the results have not been duly acknowledged by the narrative community. As Susan Lanser so pointedly showed in her essay in my *Festschrift* (Alber et al. 2018), even today the overwhelming bulk of narratological work concentrates on the novel and studies texts from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (though film must be a close second). This means that medieval, early modern and ancient narratives are still underresearched even today. (This situation is improving thanks to some scholars working on classical texts from a narratological perspective like Irene de Jong and Jonas Grethlein; there is also historical narratology as engaged in by many scholars in German medieval studies and by Eva von Contzen for English.) But the lacuna is even greater, in fact a fissure or chasm, when it comes to narratives in Suaheli, Igbo, Hausa, Zulu or in Kannada, Tamil, Chinese or Navajo. There is a stark lack of communication between scholars conversant in these (and many other) languages and the community of narratologists (mostly writing and researching in English and some other European languages). It would be wonderful to find out whether narratives in non-European cultures ‘work’ differently and, if so, how.

DIEGESIS: What advice would you give to the next generation of aspiring narrative scholars?

Fludernik: I think my advice would be to study the classics of narratology and to read widely narratives from different periods, cultures and backgrounds. Knowing several languages and having a strong background in linguistics would also be helpful. And, today, a much better grasp of digital culture than I have (as a dinosaur who still typed her PhD thesis on a mechanical typewriter with five carbon copies). Much really fascinating narratological work is being done by Maria Mäkelä, Elena Semino, Dorothee Birke and others in the field of social media narratives, and this may become a flourishing area of research for the next decade or more.

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