

## Federico Piazola – Narrative and Complexity: an Interdisciplinary Dialogue

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### State of the art.

Narrative is a fundamental mode of human cognition (Bruner 1990; Varela et al. 2011), it is at the core of our experience and understanding of temporal processes (Ricoeur 1984-1988) and it is crucial for our moral identity (MacIntyre 1981). It is ubiquitous as a communicative, social, and cultural phenomenon—even more so after the so-called ‘narrative turn’—and narrative competence is often considered as an important part of our evolutionary legacy (Boyd 2010; Gottschall 2013).

Due to its importance for our life, **narrative is studied by many sciences and disciplines**: literary theory, history, political science, anthropology, legal studies, marketing, the cognitive sciences, and more. Each of these sciences and disciplines uses its own scientific paradigm or paradigms and focuses on different aspects of narrative. As a consequence, one of the main concerns of recent narrative theory is to find a way to work toward a consolidation of the broader domain of narrative studies, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of field specific research. This is evident in the topics addressed by recent international conferences—e.g. “Emerging Vectors of Narratology: Toward Consolidation or Diversification?” (ENN 2013) and “Modelling Narrative across Borders” (ENN 2015)—as well as by edited volumes like *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative* (Hatavara, Hydén and Hyvärinen 2013) and *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research* (Heinen and Sommer 2009). Narrative studies nowadays are transmedial and multidisciplinary, but so far the cross-fertilization between humanities, social sciences and cognitive sciences has been marginal or non-regardful of disciplinary idiosyncrasies (Sternberg 2003). This state of things is unsatisfactory: the multiplication of researches is a welcome fact, but **narrative studies cannot remain a fragmented territory with little or random theoretical exchanges among its regions**. The importance of narrative strongly argues for a better integration of different researches and disciplines.

This situation is positive because of its richness, but its theoretical heterogeneity prevents or hinders interdisciplinary work and the exploitation in one field of the knowledge produced in another. Different disciplines are forfeiting the ability to compare narrative systems and, as a result, global narrative features of profound implication for narrative theory are kept either hidden or barred from scrutiny. Great analytical work is continuously done but the **little awareness of the epistemological and ontological entailments of our analytical tools** and models is seriously hindering the consolidation of this field of studies. Furthermore, with the rise of new grand-scale approaches into the humanities (e.g., corpus-oriented semantic analysis), narrative theory will have to come to terms with large-scale digitally obtained data (Bod 2013), which call for flexible resources in order to be interpreted and systematized. If we want to grant cooperation and coherence to narrative studies, and if we want scholars working with different disciplinary paradigms to be able to compare and benefit from insights coming from different sources, **the theories that we use need to be commensurable**. That is, we need a common ‘unit of measurement’: e.g. epistemology, theoretical assumptions, methods of inquiry, meaning of concepts, or scope of the investigated domain (Feyerabend 1975; Lakatos 1977): a common theoretical core around which different disciplines can develop ‘regional’ narrative theories that fit different kinds of narrative and those disciplines’ main concerns. A striking example of the consequences to which this lack of commensurability can lead is the incomprehension between classical scholars about the self-consciousness of the ancient

Greeks: failing to recognize that some interpretations were based on ~~Cartesian (Snell 1960)~~ rather than ~~post-Kantian~~ post-Cartesian and post-Kantian assumptions about the mind (Snell 1960), younger scholars (Gaskin 1990; Williams 1993) had a hard time to interpret past criticism properly and this has hindered for many decades the deepening of the knowledge of European cultural roots (Russo 2012).

Two important attempts have been made to gather the knowledge produced around narratives into a 'general' theory but both achieved their target only partially. The first one is Albrecht Koschorke's *Wahrheit und Erfindung. Grundzüge einer Allgemeinen Erzähltheorie* (2012), which provides precious coordinates for the study of narrative as a universal cultural device but – resting with the claim that narrative is “ontologically indifferent” to the reality/fiction distinction – it eventually fails to set an epistemological ground for narrative theory. The second attempt can be found in Bruce Clarke's *Posthuman Metamorphosis. Narrative and Systems* (2008), in which the author sketches a narrative theory based on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. Clarke does a very important work setting the ground to link narrative to other fundamental concepts such as *society, media, communication, mind* and *body*, but he only analyses narratives related to the specific topic of metamorphosis. So far, **a concrete proposal for a transdisciplinary narrative theory is still missing.**

### **Objectives of the research.**

The project is focused on setting the **guidelines for a pluralism in narrative studies, based on a systems theory approach.** The aim is to propose a framework that can be shared among various disciplines and it will be achieved focusing on the condition of possibility of the narrative experience, not just describing the 'structure' of narrative artifacts. I do not aim at a universal narrative theory, rather I want to propose **a model of the enabling conditions of narrative**, be they semantic, cognitive, social, aesthetic, etc. To this end, the project adopts systems theory to describe the affordances and limits of narrative theory and analysis, and how a systemic framework can be used to **confront different kinds of narrative and integrate the research models used to study them.**

The theoretical references used are new to the field of narrative studies: apart from the mentioned work by Koschorke and Clarke, the applicability of systems theory for the study of narrative has never been explored in depth. Systems theory can offer useful instruments to account for the connections within this multiplicity, and the project will focus on the **development of ready-to-use tools of research implementation and assessment** that do not impose top-down restrictions upon disciplinary paradigms and other stakeholders<sup>1</sup>. However, the aim of the project is not to develop a complete model or to advance universal solutions to problematic issues in narrative studies, but rather to suggest how to approach them within a **framework of complexity** and benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration. As a member of the “Narrative and Complex Systems” group at the University of York, I am contributing to a seminal research program interested in systems theory but which has not yet a fully developed agenda. The step forward of my research project is to test systems theory on a specific basic concept, **narrative engagement**, and on a limited but heterogeneous set of narratives, trying to answer two circumscribed questions:

**– What is peculiar to narrative engagement? What characterizes it as such, compared to other kinds of experience? On what grounds—semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, emotional, etc.—can it be described?**

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, 'research tools' are, for instance, the Lachmann method in philology (Timpanaro 2005), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework for Human Development in the social sciences (Bronfenbrenner 1979), Chomsky's tree diagram in linguistics (Chomsky 1965).

– How is narrative engagement affected by fundamental variables such as fictionality (fictional or non-fictional), art (artistic or non-artistic), medium (verbal, visual, digital, etc.), and context (educational, recreational, journalistic, etc.)?

These are questions that must be answered if we are to understand narrative engagement and, in fact, many attempts have been done to deal with them, but never in a transdisciplinary fashion. The benefit of a systemic framework is that it can easily **show connections between aspects of narrative having different scope—ranging from linguistic analysis to the social uses of narrative**—while considering the interdependence between discursive properties and context. For instance, the concept of ‘identity’ is employed in various narrative theories but its meaning can greatly vary from the study of characters in literary fiction to the construction of social identity in everyday conversation (Bamberg 2010). Therefore, it would be a hazard to assume that the same linguistic properties intervene in the formation of identity in the same way in both cases, because the aesthetic function of a literary text imposes some constraints on discourse organization that ordinary contexts do not require. Nonetheless, it could be helpful to use insight from sociolinguistic analysis of narrative (Labov and Waletzky 1967; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2011) in order to understand how dialogues between literary characters reflect the interaction within actual social groups, or even the dynamics of power of contemporary society. And vice versa, can children’s engagement with characters of digital games affect their social interactions, emotional intelligence and learning ability? (Aarsand and Aronsson 2009).

To achieve the goal of having a framework that can be shared among narrative studies is not an easy job, but the gain will be certainly high: the possibility to ground the dialogue between different areas—from literature and media studies, to cognitive sciences, social sciences and ICT—on the same foundations will impact narrative studies in two ways: **consolidating the field**, making the efforts toward the same object of study converge; and **opening up new horizons for the cooperation between different theories, methodologies and disciplines**.

To sum up, the objectives of the project are: to suggest a framework for the consolidation of the domain on narrative studies; and to establish long-term theoretically and methodologically compatible research collaborations. The overall objectives translate into the following concrete secondary objectives: suggestions about how to **integrate discursive and contextual elements in a systemic way**; and a **model describing the elements necessary to establish an experience characterized by narrative engagement**. These tools can potentially be used: (i) by researchers interested in collecting narrative data, (ii) as a tool for narrative analysis, and (iii) to deploy narrative strategies in the services offered (in the development of user interfaces for digital interaction, in education and social care, in psychology).

### **Methodology of the research.**

Systems theory is a worldview that shifts the emphasis of theoretical description from individual parts to the organization of parts, recognizing interactions and correlations not as static and constant but as dynamic processes (Bánáthy 1996). In this regard, **systems theory serves as a bridge for the dialogue between autonomous areas of study** (sociology, psychology, computer sciences, etc.) as well as for interdisciplinary research, as it is exemplified by complexity science, a domain in which the efforts of biologists, software engineers and physicists converge. The most important works based on systems theory are by Maturana and Varela (1980) in cognitive sciences and by Niklas Luhmann (1995) in sociology: both will be used as theoretical references. Moreover, Bruce Clarke (2008) has worked on the impact of systems theory upon narrative from a cybernetic perspective but his approach is limited to literary narratives, whereas my project will combine the theoretical reflection with **empirical data derived from the analysis**

**of different kind of narratives and of audience response (comments and sharing on the web or through social media).**

In order to maximize the feasibility of the project, the **corpus** will be limited to the domains of literature, media and communication studies, paying attention to select heterogeneous narrative forms and also considering **unconventional works—which have never been studied so far**—like micro-stories aggregated into big narratives thanks to Twitter’s hashtags, videocasts on YouTube and data visualization.

Given the variety of works under scrutiny, of course I do not aim at presenting detailed descriptions and interpretations of them, rather I will focus on their narrative organization and the engagement that it triggers.

During the process of theoretical synthesis of the results of corpus analysis it will be carefully considered that the systemic framework will also have to be applicable to research in psychology, education, ethnography, etc. Thus, **the research will not be biased by (a) aesthetic or (b) ‘naturalistic’ assumptions:** i.e., (a) literary narratives or fictional movies are not necessarily ‘privileged’ prototypical narratives, when the goal is to develop narrative theory; (b) real world ‘natural’ experience (of chronological time, space, cognitive schemata and scripts) is not necessarily the standard norm from which fictional and aesthetic elements of narrative depart.

To this end, systems theory is a very promising approach for the study of narrative engagement inasmuch as it can comprehensively **account for the relations between social, cognitive and aesthetic aspects of experience**, focusing on the body-mind interaction and how they are reciprocally constituted in relation to the environment, i.e. situated in a social space (connecting with other people), within a certain culture (or enacting a conflict of cultures), negotiating values, and being articulated through one or more media. Within a systemic approach, focusing on the engagement of the audience does not mean privileging the description of subjective cognitive and aesthetic perceptions, but **considering how the narrative experience emerges from the interaction of all the elements involved**. And “making the scientific study of interaction more explicit can offer new hypotheses about the processes sustaining a cognitive performance, and frees researchers from postulating complicated mechanisms in the individual brain that duplicate what the interactive dynamic configuration is able to bring about on its own” (Di Paolo and Thompson 2014).

There is already important scholarship on the topic of narrative engagement: in literary studies, Meir Sternberg on narrative suspense, curiosity and surprise (1992; 2003), Monika Fludernik on narrative experience (1996), and Marco Caracciolo on narrative experientiality (2014); in rhetoric and communication studies, Busselle and Bilandzic (2009); in cognitive sciences, Bruner (1990), Polkinghorne (1995) and Hutto (2009). All this works will be considered but their manifest limit is that they are mainly based on the analysis of just one kind of narrative, be it literature, recited oral speech or spontaneous conversation. On the contrary, my project will be grounded on the analysis of a heterogeneous corpus, and will take into account novel narrative forms that have not yet been studied. Another relevant piece of scholarship is transmedial narratology, which surveys narratives across different media (literature, film, videogames etc.), studying how different semiotic systems affect narratives (Ryan 2004) and in what measure narratological categories are medium-free or medium-specific (Ryan and Thon 2014). However, it does not focus much on social and cognitive aspects, whereas my project will address **the role of media with respect to the issue of narrative engagement**, thus not only describing the representational ability of media, but also considering their cognitive affordances, aesthetic effects and social functions.

The specificity of the project in addressing such issues is to use systems theory to **develop a set of practical tools (operative rules, grids and guidelines)** that can be used to avoid superficial analogies between disciplines, which “are useless in science and harmful in their practical consequences” (Bertalanffy 1968).

The project will be implemented both through theoretical reflection and collecting data from case studies, thus paying much attention to the **empirical evaluation of the framework's affordances and limits**.

The first part of the project is dedicated to review the literature and setup the systemic framework, working on its theoretical soundness and applicability; the second part is dedicated to the comparative analysis of the corpus using the systemic model, in order to test its effectiveness and its limits; the third part is dedicated to revise the systemic framework and synthesize the results into a narrative theory describing the conditions of possibility of narrative engagement.

To sum up, I will draw on systems theory and empirical testing in order to **implement a knowledge management model for narrative studies** that can realistically be shared across disciplines, i.e. a model that dismisses centralized control in favour of beneficial correlations and cooperation emerging from the distributed organisation of research.

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