

Metanarration and Metafiction

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1 Definition

Metanarration and metafiction are umbrella terms designating self-reflexive utterances, i.e. comments referring to the discourse rather than to the story. Although they are related and often used interchangeably, the terms should be distinguished: metanarration refers to the narrator's reflections on the act or process of narration; metafiction concerns comments on the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative. Thus, whereas metafictionality designates the quality of disclosing the fictionality of a narrative, metanarration captures those forms of self-reflexive narration in which aspects of narration are addressed in the narratorial discourse, i.e. narrative utterances about narrative rather than fiction about fiction.

2 Explication

The terms "metanarration" and "metafiction" are both based on the model of metalanguage, which designates a (system of) language positioned on a level above the ordinary use of words for referential purpose (Fludernik 2003: 15).

Metanarration and metafiction therefore have one point in common, namely their self-reflexive or self-referential character. However, these two types of narrative self-reflexivity differ greatly, and this difference has tended to be ignored in most existing typologies. Therefore, the widely-used umbrella term metafiction not only needs to be elaborated, but a clear distinction also has to be made between metanarration and other forms of self-reflexive narration.

Metafiction describes the capacity of fiction to reflect on its own status as fiction and thus refers to all self-reflexive utterances which thematize the fictionality (in the sense of imaginary reference and/or constructedness) of narrative. Metafiction is, literally, fiction about fiction, i.e. fiction that includes within itself reflections on its own fictional identity (Hutcheon 1980). Thus, the term is a hypernym denoting all sorts of self-reflective utterances and elements of a fictional narrative that do not

treat their referent as apparent reality but instead induce readers to reflect on the textuality and fictionality of narrative in terms of its artifactuality (Wolf 1993: 224). To characterize different forms of metafiction, Wolf introduces a distinction between fictio- and fictum-metafiction (cf. *ibid.*: 247f.): Fictum-metafiction relates to a text's potential truth status, that is, the feasibility of determining its truth. In contradistinction, fictio-metafiction refers to a text's constructedness as well as the conditions of production and reception that contribute to the characterization of texts as fiction. Hence, fictio-metafiction refers to elements of construction that do not directly concern the feasibility of determining the truth status of the text. According to Wolf, the term metafiction can thus be defined as a form of discourse that draws the recipient's attention to the fictionality and artifactuality of the narrative.

Proposing an alternative categorization of self-reflexive utterances, Nünning (2004) introduces a distinction between metafiction and metanarration. Metanarrative comments are concerned with the act and/or process of narration, and not with its fictional nature. In contrast to metafiction, which can only appear in the context of fiction, types of metanarration can also be found in many non-fictional narrative genres and media. Metanarrative passages need not destroy aesthetic illusion (Wolf → Illusion (Aesthetic) [1]), but may also contribute to substantiating the illusion of authenticity that a narrative seeks to create. It is precisely the concept of narratorial illusionism, suggesting the presence of a speaker or narrator, that illustrates that metanarrative expressions can serve to create a different type of illusion by accentuating the act of narration, thus triggering a different strategy of naturalization, viz. what Fludernik (1996: 341) has called the "frame of storytelling."

As a distinct form of narratorial utterance, metanarration displays a variety of textual functions (Prince [1987] 2003: 51). In contrast to Genette's ([1972] 1980: 261–62) suggestion, it cannot be restricted to the narrator's "directing functions," i.e. to references thematizing the "internal organization" of the text. Rather, all comments which address aspects of narration in a self-reflexive manner as well as the narrator's references (Margolin → Narrator [2]) to his or her communication with the narratee on the discourse level can be subsumed under the term "metanarration." Although such comments are detached from the narrated world, they do not possess a high degree of generality because they refer to one specific object: the act of narrating. Since such self-reflexive comments can be defined according to their reference to the act of narration, they make the reader (Prince → Reader [3]) realize that what s/he is dealing with is a narrative. Fludernik (1996: 278) describes the accumulation of metanarrative expressions as "a deliberate meta-narrative celebration of the act of narration."

History of the Concept and its Study

Research in the field of metafiction has been cultivated over decades and goes back well before 1970, when the term was first introduced in essays by Scholes (1970) and Gass (1970). Analyzing Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*, Šklovskij ([1921] 1965), for instance, addresses the concept as a "device of laying bare the device," namely as a device through which the storytelling itself is made part of the story told. Scholes (1970) coined the term "metafiction" to designate fiction that incorporates various perspectives of criticism into the fictional process, thereby emphasizing structural, formal, or philosophical problems. Since then, metafiction has become a major topic in narratological research, replacing the hitherto established and more narrowly defined terms "self-conscious narration" (Booth 1952) and "irony of fictionality." In fact, metafiction has met with considerable academic interest both as a historical element of (narrative) fiction and as a hallmark of postmodernism, and book-length studies (Hutcheon 1980; Waugh 1984) have been devoted to it. The conceptualization of forms and functions of metafiction evolved from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, precisely when scholars were attempting to define postmodernism as an epoch and ethos (O'Donnell 2005).

The first attempt to propose a comprehensive theory of metafiction was made by Hutcheon (1980). She understands metafictional narratives as "narcissistic" because they are fundamentally self-referring and auto-representational (1980: x). By mirroring their own process of fictional construction, metafictional texts, such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, draw the reader's attention to the storytelling process and undermine the realism of the narrative. Metafictional strategies therefore often produce a hermeneutic paradox: readers are forced to acknowledge the fictional status of the narrative, while at the same time they become co-creators of its meanings. Hutcheon's most crucial distinction is that between overt and covert forms of metafiction. While overtly metafictional texts disclose their self-awareness in "explicit thematizations [...] of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the texts themselves," covert forms "internalize" this process: They are "self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious" (1980: 7). Similarly, Waugh (1984: 14) defines metafiction as fiction which "self-consciously reflects upon its own structure as language," thereby ostentatiously parading the conventions and language of the realistic novel. Although Hutcheon's and Waugh's approaches have contributed to a better understanding of metafiction, they are problematic because they reduce its effects to anti-illusionism.

A different approach is put forward by Wolf (1993, [1998] 2004) who focuses, firstly, on the formal variety of metafiction. To capture the different forms of metafiction

and their potential effects, Wolf (1993: 220–65) develops a typology based on three dimensions: the form of mediation, the contextual relation, and the contents value. The first dimension refers to the level of narration on which the speaker engaged in metafictional reflections can be situated. Metafictional comments can be explicitly uttered by a character of the narrated world or by the narrator when reflecting on the fictional nature of the text (mode of telling). Alternatively, they can be conveyed implicitly through formal means, e.g. through contradictory and highly implausible elements which disrupt the mimetic illusion (mode of showing). According to the second criterion, contextual relation, various forms of metafiction can be distinguished depending on whether they appear in a central or marginal position and how deeply they are entangled with the narrated story. Using Wolf's third criterion, contents value, one can differentiate between various forms of metafiction depending on whether metafiction refers to the "fictio or the fictum status" of a passage, whether it contains comments on the entire text or only on parts of it, and whether the commentary refers to the text itself, to literature in general, or to another text.

While metafiction has often been perceived as a primary quality of postmodern literature, Wolf ([1998] 2004) stresses that (Western) narrative fiction has contained metafictional elements ever since its beginnings (cf. also Alter 1975 and Hutcheon 1980). From Homer to Salman Rushdie, from *Don Quixote* and *Jacques le fataliste* to *The Remains of the Day*, narratives have bared the conventions of storytelling and highlighted their constructed nature. However, its frequency and function vary depending on genres and epochs. The functions of metafiction range from undermining aesthetic illusion to poetological self-reflection, commenting on aesthetic procedures, the celebration of the act of narrating, and playful exploration of the possibilities and limits of fiction.

Wolf's detailed typology has also provided a sound basis for the analysis of metafiction in various other genres such as poetry, drama and music. In recent contributions, Wolf (2009) seeks to increase the transmedial applicability of metafiction by reconceptualizing it in a first step as a non media-specific concept, namely as "metareference." According to Wolf (2009: 31), metareference can be defined as "a special, transmedial form of [...] self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a 'metalevel', within an artefact or performance". Metareference thus denotes a signifying practice that generates self-referential meaning and actualizes a secondary cognitive frame in the recipient, thus eliciting a "meta-awareness" (ibid.: 31). On the basis of this media-unspecific definition, one can examine individual media with respect to their specific metareferential capacities (cf. Wolf 2009, ed. 2011). Hence, the category metareference supplies a "heuristically motivated

umbrella term for all meta-phenomena occurring in the arts and media” (Wolf 2009: 12).

In contrast to metafiction, the terms “metanarration” or “metanarrative comment” have not become common categories of narratology, although they have been used in some narratological studies (e.g. Genette [1972] 1980; Hamon 1977; Prince 1982; Scheffel 1997; Cutter 1998). There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, the term metafiction is so widely used in English for all sorts of anti-illusionistic techniques that forms of metanarration are generally subsumed under this umbrella. Secondly, in the few contributions in which the term metanarrative is used at all, it is commonly perceived as an English equivalent of *grand récit* (in Lyotard’s sense) and thus as synonymous with “master narrative” (e.g. Hutcheon [1989] 1996: 262). Due to the equation of metanarration with metafiction, narratological research has largely focused on metafictional forms of narrative self-reflexivity, giving little attention to such metanarrative phenomena as digressions and other self-reflexive narratorial interventions. The exception to the rule is Prince (1982: 115–28). A number of recent articles have redressed the balance, putting the subject of metanarrative on the map of narratological research (Nünning 2004; Fludernik 2003; Weidle 2009). They have provided a descriptive analysis of different types of metanarration as well as a survey of its changing functions in English novels from the 17th century to the present.

Predicated on the assumption that metanarration is a distinct form of narratorial utterance, Nünning (2004), drawing on Wolf’s (1993) distinction between various forms of metafiction, develops a typology that identifies the most important sub-categories of metanarration. The typology is based on four basic aspects, which in turn give rise to subsidiary distinctions: (a) formal; (b) structural; (c) content-related; and (d) reception-oriented types of metanarrative.

Firstly, a formal distinction can be made between diegetic, extradiegetic, and paratextual types of metanarration, depending on the level of communication at which the speaker of the metanarrative comments can be situated. Metanarrative comments typically occur on the discourse level, though intradiegetic character-narrators may also thematize narrative aspects.

Secondly, structural types of metanarration can be differentiated according to the criterion of the quantitative and qualitative relations between metanarrative expressions and other parts of a narrated text as well as the syntagmatic integration of such metanarrative passages.

Thirdly, depending on the subject area or the selection of topic, various types of metanarration can be distinguished on the basis of content. One important content-

related criterion concerns the reference point of metanarrative expressions. Metanarrative reflections can be restricted to auto-referential comments on the narrator's own act of narrating, they can thematize the narrative style of other authors and texts, or they can refer to the process of narration in general. Fludernik (2003) has coined the terms "proprio-metanarration," "allo-metanarration" and "general metanarration" in order to distinguish between these different reference points.

Fourthly, a typological differentiation arises as to the potential effects and functions of metanarration. This differentiation is based on the assumption that an accumulation of metanarrative commentaries contributes to foregrounding the narrative act and to creating the illusion of being addressed by a personalized voice or a "teller" (Fludernik 1996: 278). As in *Tristram Shandy*, the plethora of metanarrative often enhances the "mimesis of narrating" (Nünning 2001). The functions of metanarration differ according to a decreasing level of compatibility with diegetic illusion or to an increasing level of destruction of aesthetic illusion. These functions range from authenticating and empathy-inducing functions (Keen → Narrative Empathy [4]), which are fully compatible with mimetic aesthetic illusion, to parodic and anti-illusionistic types of metanarrative interventions. Of course, not only the forms but also the functions of metanarration are subject to historical variability. Whereas, for instance, in realistic 19th-century novels metanarration primarily serves to create a trust-inducing conversation between the explicit narrator and the narratee, in numerous novels from the second half of the 20th century it is functionalized in a metafictional way. In a recent article, Weidle (2009) has drawn attention to the various ethical functions, such as the promotion of empathy, that can be fulfilled by metanarration.

Drawing on Nünning's typology of metanarration, Fludernik (2003) suggests subdividing the category of metanarration into metadiscursive, metanarrational, meta-aesthetic and metacompositional elements, highlighting the extensiveness and historical variability of this narrative form. Moreover, she proposes an alternative schema which differentiates between metafiction, metanarrative and non-narrational self-reflexivity. To circumvent the potential ambiguity between metanarration and metafiction, she employs the term metanarrative exclusively with regard to self-reflexive statements referring to the discourse and its constructedness and limits the term metafiction to self-reflexive utterances about the inventedness of the story (i.e. to Wolf's explicit metafiction). By introducing the category of non-narrational self-reflexivity (i.e. Wolf's implicit metafiction), which comprises, e.g. mise-en-abyme or metaleptic plot configurations, Fludernik sets out to dissociate the mimesis of narration from a teller figure and highlights the contact zones between various self-reflexive devices across different genres and media. In a

recent contribution, Rajewsky (2009) argues that metanarration is not restricted to “narrative texts proper” (2009: 137) but can be found in a range of other media. Thus attempting to capture the transmedial scope of this specific form of metaization, she introduces the category of “form-based metareference” (ibid).

5 Topics for Further Investigation

Desiderata for narratological research still include differentiated investigations of the forms, functions, and diachronic development of metafiction and metanarration. One relatively unexplored issue is the development of metafiction and metanarration across different periods of literary history in different literary genres. In this context, Wolf’s (2011: 7) thesis of an ongoing increase in meta-elements within given works since the 1950s and “a current rage for metaization” (ibid.: 29) certainly warrants critical attention. Although recent research has examined forms of self-reference and meta-reference, respectively, in a range of genres and media, such as films, comics, music and computer games (cf. Nöth & Bishara eds. 2007; Grausam 2011; Bernhard & Wolf eds. 2010; Wolf ed. 2011), the various media-specific forms of metafiction and metanarration still await closer analysis. Moreover, there are hardly any studies concerning functions that may be fulfilled by certain forms of self-reflexive narration in different historical epochs and literary genres. Finally, it is also necessary to investigate the culture-specific forms and functions of metafiction and metanarration. In this respect, it would be interesting to provide comparisons between forms of narrative self-reflexivity or self-referentiality in Western and non-Western literature.

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