

Narrative Constitution

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1 Definition

In general terms, the term “narrative constitution” refers to the composition of narratives. In a narrower sense, it involves structural models with two or more tiers that, following the tradition of formalism and structuralism, divide the narrative work into various levels and treat it as the product of a series of transformations (understood in a more or less formal sense) of a set of happenings. In a wider sense, though, the concept touches on the basic questions attached to the construction of narratological models in any form. It concerns, in fact, the theoretical modeling—which can differ widely depending on the methodological approach taken—of both the relationship between happenings and narrative and the relationship between literary and non-literary narration.

2 Explication

Building on corresponding formulations associated with Russian formalism, Schmid introduced the expression “narrative constitution” into narratological discussion and has retained the term in a prominent piece of recent work (1982, 1984, 2005: 223–72). Schmid uses narrative constitution to refer to the structural models of narrative that have emerged in the tradition of formalism and structuralism and been developed with reference to works of literary, i.e. fictional narrative. The work is understood here as an object *sui generis* and divided into individual levels (understood as tiers of its constitution); in the process, certain narrative operations are paired with the transformations that lead from the natural order of the narrated happenings (the *ordo naturalis* of rhetoric) to the artificial arrangement of the narrative (the *ordo artificialis*). Various binary oppositions have been put forward, such as *fabula/sujet* (e.g. Tomaševskij [1925] 1965), *histoire/discours* (e.g. Todorov [1966] 1980; story/discourse), and story/plot (e.g. Forster [1927] 1972), as have multileveled models such as *Geschehen/Geschichte/Text der Geschichte* (Stierle 1971; happenings/story/text of the story), *histoire/récit/narration* (Genette [1972] 1980, [1983] 1988; story/narrative/narrating), and *Geschehen/Geschichte/Erzählung/Präsentation der Erzählung* (Schmid 1982;

happenings/story/narration/presentation of the narration). These distinctions provide a framework in which the approaches involved attempt to grasp the construction of narrative works in a theoretical manner and represent it as the transformation of a set of happenings in a generative manner in the sense of an abstract model of production. Where the modeling of the relationship between happenings and narrative is concerned, these approaches can be said to make the happenings logically antecedent to the narrative itself. In the sense of the distinction between the “two principles of narrative” elucidated by Culler, in other words, they assume a theoretical “priority of events” posited in the case of fictional narrative (1981: esp. 179, 186–87). Even if we subscribe to the theoretical premises of approaches with a text-internal or formalist orientation, the practicality of such models is affected not least by the fact that their authors, though sharing the idea that narrative works can be decomposed into levels or components, often have very different starting points and sometimes even associate significantly different meanings and concepts with a particular term (Martínez & Scheffel [1999] 2007: 26, for a comparative table of the basic terms used by nineteen theorists from Propp to Schmid).

In actual fact, the study of narrative composition should be confined neither to a text-internal perspective nor to works of literary narrative. Thus, against the background of a newly developed interest in narration as one of the fundamental forms of human cultural activity, more recent narratological approaches have adopted a broader understanding of the concept of narrative constitution, in the context of which they take into consideration the problem of the relationship between narrative and reality in general (Schaeffer → Fictional vs. Factual Narration [1]). The historiographical theorist White took a crucial step in this direction when, in the 1970s, he developed several theses regarding the fiction of the factual. These theses have been taken up repeatedly in the context of post-structuralism. They are based on a multileveled, originally abstract model of production in the tradition of formalism and structuralism, and transfer this model of the narrative constitution of fictional narratives to the at first sight non-fictional narratives of historiography and their relationship to historical reality (Meuter → Narration in Various Disciplines [2]). On this basis, White set out a theory of “emplotment”: this theory takes the form of a typology of how meaning is generated through narrative and treats the transformation of happenings into stories as, at base, a process that gives rise to literature (in this case, the set of happenings presents itself as a product of the narrative, creating an unbridgeable gap between historical reality and all narratives of any kind). White’s concept of emplotment has been cited many times in the context of the narrative turn in cultural studies. Ricœur takes an analogous approach when he writes about how a reality that is in and of itself contingent is subjected to a fundamental reshaping by a process of *mise en intrigue* (rendered as

“emplotment” by his translators) that is bound up with narrative. In his far more complex concept of a narrative hermeneutics, however, Ricoeur—unlike White—takes as his starting point the idea that there is a mutual relationship between narrative and human activity, and that the concept of narrative constitution applies to essential parts of the reality of human life in general.

3 History of the Concept and its Study

3.1 Russian Formalism and the Opposition between *Fabula* and *Sujet*

The beginning of systematic interest in the composition of narrative works belongs to a time when the attention of literary scholars came to be directed toward the question of literariness and with it the problem of the characteristic form of literature. Against this historical background in the first quarter of the 20th century, one model emerged that was to have a greater influence than any other on subsequent literary research. This model was developed in the context of Russian formalism. The model, which has two tiers, is based on the opposition generally described using the terms *fabula* and *sujet*. Where details are concerned, though, Ėjxenbaum, Šklovskij, Tomaševskij, Tynjanov, Vygotskij, and other theorists proceed from markedly different starting points, using the corresponding terms with different, sometimes even opposing meanings in each case (for detailed reconstructions, see e.g. Volek 1977; García Landa 1998: 32–48; Schmid 2005: 224–36).

From a historical perspective, the use of the terms *fabula* and *sujet* in the manner of a binary opposition can be seen to begin with Šklovskij. The *locus classicus* for their definition is to be found in an essay in which, at the end of a detailed consideration of the idiosyncratic narrative form of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Šklovskij points out the chronological differences between chains of events in “actual life” and in art. In this context, he stresses that the “aesthetic laws” of artistic narrative can be grasped only if we distinguish between *sujet* and *fabula*. In the process, Šklovskij explains that the *fabula* should be understood as the “material for *sujet* formation” and the *sujet* as the material of the *fabula* in artistic form ([1925] 1991: 170; Schmid 2009). It is clear here and in other contexts that Šklovskij, like most other Russian formalists after him, does not associate the *fabula* with a neutral, given phenomenon. Instead, in contrast to the *sujet*, which is understood as bearing the literariness of the narrative work, he sees the *fabula* as something subordinate that is overcome, so to speak, in the work of art (in the same historical context, the opposite is the case in the work of Propp [1928] 1968 which, with its model of actants and functions, was concerned solely with the plot structure

of narrative works, and more precisely with the rules governing constitution of the *fabula*).

Numerous Russian formalists took up the pair of terms during the 1920s and put what were at times very different slants on it. Tomaševskij used and popularized the *fabula/sujet* distinction in a way that retained at least something of Šklovskij's understanding of it. In the first edition of his textbook-like *Teorija literatury* ([1925] 1965, revised 1928), which found a relatively wide readership in Western European literary studies, a footnote deleted from later editions contains the concise, much-quoted formulation that “in short, the *fabula* is that ‘which really was,’ the *sujet* that ‘how the reader has learnt about it’” ([1925] 1991: 137). In the main text of the work, on the other hand, Tomaševskij provides a more nuanced definition of the *fabula* as “the totality of motifs in their logical causal-temporal chain” and the *sujet* as “the totality of the same motifs in that sequence and connectivity in which they are presented in the work” (Černov 1977: 40). Thus, here and in other passages of his *Teorija literatury*, Tomaševskij—in contrast to Šklovskij—associates the *fabula* with the property of causally connected motifs (in the sense of events). To this extent, it contains more than the aesthetically indifferent, preliterate happenings, and is, even if Tomaševskij himself does not say so directly, already part of the artistic fashioning of the work.

3.1 Story and Plot in the Work of E. M. Forster and other English-speaking Scholars of the 1920s to the 1940s

Roughly contemporaneously with the Russian formalists, Forster ([1927] 1972) outlined a two-tiered model based on the terms “story” and “plot.” Forster sees the story as “the lowest and simplest of literary organisms,” explaining that “it is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence—dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on” ([1927] 1972: 35). As for plot, the following comment in the book was soon to become famous: “We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died,’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief,’ is a plot” (93). For Forster, then, the crucial difference between story and plot lies in the move from simple chronology to causality—in the establishment of a causal relationship between individual events. If we consider the *fabula/sujet* opposition of the formalists with this in mind, it becomes clear that Forster's model should not be understood as straightforwardly analogous to the two terms of Russian origin (Volek 1977: 147–48; Sternberg 1978: 8–14, for a detailed description of the terms and concepts involved, and Pier 2003: 77–78, for a discussion of the issue of translating Russian *fabula* and *sujet* into English). The concept of *sujet* has no direct equivalent

in Forster's work; what Forster refers to with "plot" would seem to correspond to the meaning *fabula* has for Tomaševskij; and Forster's concept of story corresponds to what the formalists either consider part of the *fabula* but do not name or, like Tomaševskij, say, distinguish from the *fabula* and call *xronika* ("chronicle"; Tomaševskij [1925] 1965: 215).

If we exclude the case of Muir, who refers to plot and story but uses the terms imprecisely and at times synonymously (e.g. [1928] 1979: 16–17), it was above all the term "plot," frequently associated with the Aristotelian concept of *muthos*, that was soon taken up by other scholars in the English-speaking countries. From the 1930s onward, they used it as a central category in work on the composition of narrative works (reconstructions of this process can be found in e.g. García Landa 1998: 48–60). Brooks & Warren provided a widely known definition: "Plot, we may say, is the structure of an action as it is presented in a piece of fiction. It is not, we shall note, the structure of an action as we happen to find it out in the world, but the structure within a story. It is, in other words, what the teller of the story has done to the action in order to present it to us" ([1943] 1959: 77).

3.2 *Histoire* and *Discours* in French Structuralism and Classical Narratology

The reception of the texts of Russian formalism in Western Europe began around the middle of the 20th century. As part of this process, French structuralism picked up the terms *fabula* and *sujet* and replaced them in the 1960s with the binary oppositions of *récit/narration* (Barthes [1966] 1977) and *histoire/discours* (Todorov [1966] 1980). The two-layered model of *histoire* and *discours* has spread far beyond the boundaries of French structuralism and stands out as highly successful from a present-day point of view. It was developed, building on Tomaševskij ([1925] 1965), by Todorov, a Bulgarian whose academic background lay in Slavonic studies in Sofia (in fact, Todorov drew the terms *histoire* and *discours* from a model developed by the linguist Benveniste, who actually uses them to mean something different, namely the contrast to be found in the tense system of French between forms of narration with and without a clearly apparent speaking entity, *discours* and *histoire* respectively; Benveniste [1959] 1971). Todorov's formulation is still potentially compatible with Tomaševskij when he writes: "At the most general level, the literary work has two aspects: it is at the same time a story [*histoire*] and a discourse [*discours*]. It is story, in the sense that it evokes a certain reality [...]. But the work is at the same time discourse [...]. At this level, it is not the events reported which count but the manner in which the narrator makes them known to us" ([1966] 1980: 5).

These same words, though, also suggest that the terms *histoire* and *discours* are not simply translations of *fabula* and *sujet*. Apart from various studies of narrative grammar by Bremond and others (see for example Bremond 1964; Greimas [1967] 1970; Todorov 1969), which stand in the tradition of Propp and concentrate entirely on the constitution of the *histoire*, the subsequent use of the terms *histoire* and *discours* in French structuralism and its successors confirms that both the extension of the two terms and the theoretical framework involved have been altered in certain ways.

Unlike Šklovskij, say, who associates the *sujet* with the dynamic nature and special quality of a principle of literary composition, the French structuralists take *discours* to mean primarily the result, as it presents itself in the individual narrative work, of a certain way of mediating the set of happenings. Indeed, in contrast to the Russian formalists, *histoire* and *discours* are explicitly treated as having equal status: “the two aspects, the story [*histoire*] and the discourse [*discours*], are both equally literary” (Todorov [1966] 1980: 5). Neither of the two components has priority over the other, which accords well with the fact that writers such as Barthes and Genette drew up their narratological models against the background of the theory of the linguistic sign developed by Saussure. They treat the relationship between *histoire* and *discours* as analogous to the dichotomy between signifier and signified. The two terms are openly understood as having a greater extension, though. Tomaševskij’s *sujet*, for example, relates primarily to the order of events in their literary representation; yet as early as Todorov, *discours* subsumes the literary mediation of a set of happenings in its entirety (not just the sequence of events, that is to say, but also such features as perspective, style, mode, and so on). And unlike Tomaševskij’s *fabula*, which consists only of those parts of the narrated world of relevance to the plot, Todorov’s *histoire* explicitly contains not just the set of happenings itself, but also the overarching continuum of the narrated world, the continuum within which the set of happenings unfolds.

Finally, we may mention Chatman. Building on the development from Russian formalism to French structuralism just described, he has concisely described the canonical view of the two-tier model of *histoire* and *discours* in classical narratology as follows: “each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*” (1978: 19; italics in original). This form of the two-tiered model, upheld in similar fashion by Prince (1982), was adopted most recently by Martínez & Scheffel ([1999] 2007). Martínez & Scheffel distinguish

between a level of *wie*, or “how,” and a level of *was*, or “what.” The *wie*, known as the *Darstellung* (representation), has two aspects: *Erzählung* (narrative) and *Erzählen* (narration). The *was* is made up of the *Handlung* (plot) and *erzählte Welt* (narrated world). In the field of *Handlung*, Martínez & Scheffel distinguish further between *Ereignis* (event), *Geschehen* (happenings), *Geschichte* (story), and *Handlungsschema* (plot schema).

3.3 Three- and Four-Tier Models

Even in the context of French structuralism itself, extensions of or refinements to the binary opposition between *fabula/histoire* on the one hand and *sujet/discours* on the other were already being put forward. For example, Genette ([1972] 1980) outlined a three-part framework to which he returned in ([1983] 1988). On the one hand, he retains the term *histoire*, which he defines as “the signified or narrative content.” On the other side of the dichotomy, though, Genette replaces *discours*, which he criticizes for being heterogeneous, with the terms *récit* and *narration*. By *récit*, Genette means “the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself”; by *narration*, in contrast, he means “the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place” ([1972] 1980: 27). Genette’s triad of *histoire/récit/narration* reappears in the guise of different terms, but essentially unchanged with respect to content, as story/text/narration in Rimmon-Kenan ([1983] 2002; similar also is story/plot/narration in Abbott [2002] 2008). Bal (1977: 6), though, points out correctly that Genette’s concept of *narration* operates on a different logical level from that of the two other concepts: it refers to the activity of utterance, whereas *récit* and *histoire* refer to the result of this activity (from a theoretical point of view, indeed, Genette did not apply his triadic system consistently: he treats the *narration* under the heading of voice as part of the *discours*; for an alternative model that takes account of the special features of fictional narration, see Scheffel 1997: 49–54). Bal ([1985] 1997) seeks to resolve this problem by means of a tripartite division *fabula/story/text* in which text refers to the signifiers or surface structure of the story, which itself refers to the signifiers or surface structure of the *fabula*.

Adopting a similar approach to Bal and Volek, who refers in German to the triad *Fabula/Sujet/Text* (Volek 1977: 165), García Landa distinguishes between three levels of the narrative work in a monograph that has been influential in the Spanish-speaking countries. These levels, essentially of equal importance, are arranged above one another in tiers or nested within one another. They are *acción* (plot), *relato* (narrative), and *discurso narrativo* (narrative discourse). By *acción*, García Landa means the sequence of narrated events; by *relato* the presentation (*representación*

) of the narrated events (i.e. tense and mood in Genette's sense; Niederhoff → Perspective – Point of View [3]); and by *discurso* the presentation of the *relato*, the transformation of the *relato*, that is to say, into a sign system in conjunction with the act of utterance that is the *narración* ('narration'). In this latter level García Landa includes what Genette covers under voice as well as pragmatic aspects such as the communication between author and reader (García Landa 1998: esp. 20–1; Alber & Fludernik → Mediacy and Narrative Mediation [4]). Unlike Genette and Rimmon-Kenan, who take distinctions in the field of the *discours* as the basis for their tripartite models, García Landa's *relato* is situated in a borderline region between *discours* and *histoire*, and he himself treats it as a kind of intersection (a "terreno común") between *acción* and *discurso*.

Stierle, meanwhile, makes clear that his proposed triad of *Geschehen/Geschichte/Text der Geschichte* is grounded in the field of the *fabula*. Here, *Geschehen* is the aesthetically neutral narrative material implied by the *Geschichte*, which is understood as the result of artistic operations that generate meaning. *Text der Geschichte*, on the other hand, resembles the *discours* of, for example, Todorov in that it includes both the arrangement of the events as well as the *Geschichte* as manifested in a medium (Stierle [1971] 1973).

The concepts of Genette and others on the one hand and those of Stierle on the other are based on distinctions in the field of the *discours* and the *fabula*, respectively. They are developed further, or indeed in a sense synthesized, in Schmid's four-tiered model of *Geschehen/Geschichte/Erzählung/Präsentation der Erzählung*. Schmid developed his model at the beginning of the 1980s and has defended it again in the recent past (1982, 1984, 2005, 2007). According to this framework, *Geschehen* is the "implied raw material" for selections whose output constitutes the *Geschichte*, understood in the sense of Tomaševskij's *fabula* and Todorov's *histoire* (selected happenings in *ordo naturalis*). *Erzählung*, on the other hand, is "the result of the 'composition' that arranges the happenings in an *ordo artificialis*," and *Präsentation der Erzählung* means the representation of the *Geschichte* in a particular medium (the result, that is, of the *elocutio*; cf. 2005: 241–72). Schmid treats the *Präsentation der Erzählung* as a pheno-level, the only level accessible to empirical observation, whereas the three other levels are geno-levels that can be arrived at only by means of abstraction. In addition, Schmid's model assumes that the four levels can be identified from changing angles, specifically from the producer's or recipient's side of the narrative work. If we move in an upward direction, an abstract perspective on production takes shape, extending from the *Geschehen* to the *Präsentation der Erzählung*; if we move in the opposite direction, namely downward, a semiotic perspective, the beginnings of which can also be found in Bal and others, takes shape. Seen from this latter

perspective, the *Präsentation der Erzählung* is a signifier denoting the signified *Erzählung*, which itself is a signifier pointing to the *Geschichte* as a third level, and so on.

3.4 Narrative Constitution in Historiographical and Philosophical Theory

In the 1970s, White (1973) adopted the model of narrative constitution in the formalist and structuralist tradition and applied it to the description of historiographical texts. So, something originally concerned with literary texts and meant as an abstract model of production—one abstracting away from the actual process by which narratives are made—is openly applied to non-fictional narratives, their actual genesis, and their relationship to historical reality. White uses the terms “historical field,” “chronicle,” “story,” and “emplotment” to describe the genesis of a historiographical work as follows. Historians are presented with their material, the elements of the historical field, in the form of events. The first step involves arranging these events into a chronologically ordered chronicle. The second step involves transforming this chronological sequence of events into a structured unity in the guise of a story with beginning, middle, and end; in the process, individual events acquire the function of initial motifs, transitional motifs, and the like. There then remains the question of the story’s meaning. According to White, this question involves the problem of explaining the set of happenings in the sense of grasping “the structure of the *entire set of events* considered as a *completed* story” (1973: 7; italics in original). This is where emplotment comes in, a concept much quoted in the context of the narrative turn in cultural studies but used somewhat vaguely by White himself. There is a famous passage in which White defines it thus: “Providing the ‘meaning’ of a story by identifying the *kind of story* that has been told is called explanation by emplotment” (1973: 7; italics in original). For White, then, who does not make a precise theoretical distinction between the acts of production and reception, the meaning of a story takes shape as the historian shapes or discerns a plot in the story formed on the basis of the chronicle: the events arranged into a story, that is to say, are subsumed into a particular plot schema (Emmott & Alexander → Schemata [5]) (“Thus, in telling a story, the historian necessarily reveals a plot;” 1978: 52). Drawing on Frye (1957), White assumes further that there is a limited number of archetypal “modes of emplotment” (*mythoi* in the sense of Frye’s *Poetics*-based terminology) that can provide a story with meaning, irrespective of whether it is a case of literary or non-literary narration. Specifically, White believes there are four such modes of emplotment: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire.

If we recall now the origins of the two-tiered model for works of literary narrative in

Russian formalism, it becomes clear that White in his *Metahistory* employs an essentially comparable model of narrative constitution with precisely the opposite objective. Šklovskij develops the concept of a *sujet* that should be distinguished from the *fabula*, and does so in order to set a certain emphasis by treating the fact of being artificial as an essential quality of a particular form of narration, specifically literary narration (with Šklovskij seeing the function of this form of narration as being “to return sensation to our limbs” [(1925) 1991: 6]). White, on the other hand, uses the idea of emplotment, situated on a level between *fabula* and *sujet*, to show that the transformation of happenings into stories necessarily involves a process of making literature; the signs are that this process is understood as one of fictionalization (accordingly in this respect, White describes historiographical narration as “essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making operation;” 1978: 85).

Ricœur takes an analogous approach to White when, in discussing narratives, he writes about how a reality that is in and of itself contingent is subjected to a fundamental reshaping by a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” in the form of a process of *mise en intrigue* (rendered as “emplotment” by his translators). By this, Ricœur means “the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession” ([1983/85] 1984/88, vol. 1: 5); configuration here, similarly to White’s emplotment, is linked to the Aristotelian concept of *muthos*, a story, that is to say, in the sense of a whole with beginning, middle, and end. Thus, for Ricœur, too, it is a fundamental fact that narratives of every kind have the nature of creative constructions. In the context of the “narrative hermeneutics” (Meuter 1994) outlined by Ricœur, though, the relationship between happenings and narrative should be conceived of not simply in the sense of an unbridgeable gap but, in so far as the happenings are concerned with human action, in the sense of a special kind of mutual relationship. The following ideas from Ricœur’s complex theoretical approach are significant where the issue of narrative constitution is concerned. Ricœur links the principle of configuration to the Aristotelian concept of mimesis and distinguishes between three levels, which he identifies as mimesis I, mimesis II, and mimesis III. Mimesis II refers to the structure and medium of the narrative, ultimately, that is, to Todorov’s *discours* or Schmid’s *Erzählung* and *Präsentation der Erzählung*. Mimesis I and mimesis III, on the other hand, involve that on which the narrative depends and that to which it gives rise. Roughly speaking, in other words, mimesis I (prefiguration) concerns the world in which people act and the models for their actions; mimesis II (configuration) relates more or less directly to that world; and mimesis III (refiguration) concerns the recipient’s realization of the *mise en intrigue* manifested in mimesis II. The recipient here is himself influenced more or less directly in his activity (including the models that determine his image of himself and of the world in which people act) by the reception of mimesis II.

Thus, in contrast to the structural models of narrative constitution belonging to the formalist and structuralist tradition, Ricœur's idea of a narrative hermeneutics does far more than identify the formal construction of narratives. Furthermore, his perspective on the question of narrative constitution, widened as it is by the idea of interplay between experience and narrative, reveals new angles of research for a context-based narratology with an interest in the pragmatics of narrative: "For a semiotic theory, the only operative concept is that of the literary text. Hermeneutics, however, is concerned with reconstructing the entire arc of operations by which practical experience provides itself with works, authors, and readers. [...] What is at stake, therefore, is the process by which the textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work" ([1983/85] 1984/88, vol. 1: 53).

4 Topics for Further Investigation

(a) The place of voice as a text- and fiction-*internal* pragmatic dimension of the narrative in models of narrative constitution has not to date been properly described where fictional narration is concerned. (b) If we follow Ricœur in considering the problem of narrative constitution in the broader sense of a narrative hermeneutics, we are presented with a wide range of questions to be tackled both by empirical studies of the interplay between human experience and narrative and by work on its theoretical foundations.

(Translated by Alastair Matthews)

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