

Jan Alber and Peter Wenzel (eds.)

## Introduction to Cognitive Narratology

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Herausgegeben von  
Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning

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# **Introduction to Cognitive Narratology**

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# I. WHAT IS COGNITIVE NARRATOLOGY?

JAN ALBER

## 1. Introduction

The chapters in this handbook seek to introduce beginners and students to the field of cognitive narratology. In this chapter, I will clarify what exactly a cognitive (or mind-related) perspective on narratives entails, and why the focus on the nexus of narrative and mind is an important approach among many others. I will begin by defining cognitive narratology as a specific branch within postclassical narratology, and then move on to an elucidation of the most important concepts that cognitive narratologists typically use in their analyses. More specifically, I will zoom in on experientiality; the creation of mental models like storyworlds (including top-down and bottom-up processes); knowledge structures (such as frames and scripts); mechanisms of perception (figure vs. ground; primacy and recency effects); processing mechanisms (such as the principle of minimal departure, naturalisation and blending); the worlds of text-world theory; character models; theory of mind (including the continuing-consciousness frame, the internal and the external perspective on the mind and social minds); hypothetical intentionalism; storyworld possible selves; as well as important differences between first- and second-generation approaches within cognitive narratology. Generally speaking, representatives of the second generation seek to transcend the first-generation idea that narrative understanding mainly involves mental representations. Instead, they zoom in on the bodily dimensions of the reception process by foregrounding notions such as enactivism, the embodied mind and experiential backgrounds: for them, experientiality is not primarily a textual feature but rather located in the reader. Finally, I will outline the recent fusions of cognitive narratology and cultural studies by highlighting the central significance of cultural models. In the conclusion, I will argue that in the future, the project of cognitive narratology will presumably be most effective if it is combined with empirical investigations.

## 2. Definitions

When Tzvetan Todorov coined the French term “narratologie”, he used the word in analogy to disciplines such as biology and sociology to convey the idea of a

science of narrative (“la science du récit” [1969, 10]). Todorov wanted to use Saussurean linguistics as a pilot science for the study of cultural phenomena of all sorts. Just as Ferdinand de Saussure privileged *langue*, i.e. the underlying system of abstract rules, over *parole*, i.e. concrete utterances by individual speakers, structuralist narratologists privileged narrative in general over individual manifestations.

Classical narratologists wanted to develop what one might call a universal grammar of narrative. They were interested in what all narratives have in common. While some associated plot, i.e. the logical and causal connecting of events or event sequences (Todorov 2001 [1969]), with the universal structure of narrative, others argued that narratives are always mediated by a narrator (Stanzel 1984 [1979], 4; Genette 1988 [1983], 16-17). Todorov outlined this research program as follows:

The nature of structural analysis will be essentially theoretical [...]; in other words, the aim of such a study will never be the description of a concrete work. The work will be considered as the manifestation of an abstract structure, merely one of its possible realizations; an understanding of that structure [the *langue* of narrative, J.A.] will be the real goal of structural analysis. (2001 [1969], 2099)

In its structuralist phase, narratology was hardly ever concerned with the business of interpreting narratives. The aims of classical narratology were, rather, fundamentally taxonomic and classificatory.

While classical narratologists sought to identify and classify structures shared by all narratives (although they actually focused on printed prose narratives), the new postclassical approaches address the narrativity of various different media or genres. In addition, they look at the cultural and historical contexts of narratives, and they want to put the narratological toolbox to interpretive use (see Herman 1999; A. Nünning 2003; Alber and Fludernik 2010). As Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck put it, the differences between the classical structuralist paradigm and the new postclassical research program can be characterised as follows:

Whereas structuralism was intent on coming up with a general theory of narrative, postclassical narratology prefers to consider the circumstances that make every act of reading different. [...] From cognition to ethics to ideology: all aspects related to reading assume pride of place in the research on narrative. (2005, 450)

Cognitive narratology is a specific field within postclassical narratology that zooms in on the interaction between narratives and the readers’ mental processes in concrete contexts. The term was first used by Manfred Jahn (1997) and denotes a branch of narratology that concentrates on the reception (rather than the