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The Merger of Classical and Postclassical Narratologies and the Consolidated Future of Narrative Theory¹

The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen an unprecedented growth of interest in narrative and storytelling. While classical narratology was mostly regarded as the domain of a small group of structuralist scholars dedicated to narrativity, who sought to identify and classify universal structures and patterns shared by all verbal narratives, the various new or postclassical approaches to narratology have also been interested in non-verbal and non-fictional storytelling, audio-visual media, and the cultural and historical contexts of narratives. Given this expansion in aims and objectives, it is hardly surprising that surveying narrative studies in general, and so-called contextual narratologies in particular, has become increasingly difficult. This article shows that there is considerable variation between existing attempts at mapping the field, and offers a new integrative model that is designed to clarify the relationship both between structuralist and postclassical narratologies, and between corpus-based and process-oriented contextual approaches. The systematic survey of current approaches is intended as a contribution to the ongoing consolidation of postclassical narratology. Ultimately, it might also facilitate communication between narratological approaches in literary and media studies on the one hand, and narrative research in other disciplines on the other.

1. GUF'ON, GUF'TOL, GUNTOC... Visions and missions of narratology

In his preface to the fortieth anniversary edition of *The Nature of Narrative*, James Phelan (2006, xiv) reflects on the formidable task of adding a chapter on recent developments in narratology to the classic by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg: “Contemporary narrative theory is too diverse for ‘a section on developments in the field’ since 1966 to become the presentation of a GUF'ON.” Such a GUF'ON, or Grand Unified Field Theory of Narrative, was the visionary mission – or, echoing Phelan’s irony, missionary vision – that helped to secure the field’s theoretical and methodological unity in its classical phase. The search for a universal grammar of narrative was founded on the belief in precise terminology, rigorous theorizing, and well-defined methodological standards. Tzvetan Todorov outlined this mission in a few programmatic statements on the structural analysis of literature that have lost little of their initial appeal: “The nature of structural analysis will be essentially theoretical and non-descriptive; 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 will be the real goal of structural analysis” (1969, 2099).

However, while the structuralist approach to literary narrative outlined by Todorov is still valid in principle, he could not possibly have anticipated the diversification of narrative theory in its postclassical phase. Using a linguistic analogy, Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, 354) points out that a fully-fledged theory of narrative, like a complete grammar of language, cannot be reduced to syntax and semantics – i.e. the study of discourse and plot or story – but also requires pragmatics, in the form of “the study of the uses of storytelling and of the mode of participation of human agents in the narrative performance”. Understanding the *nature* of narrative in Scholes and Kellogg’s broad sense, then, entails more than defining narrativity. Feminist and queer, postcolonial and ethnic, rhetorical and cognitive, transgeneric and intermedial, cultural and historical narratologies have indeed added many new items to the narratological agenda that now includes the analysis of non-literary and non-verbal narratives, and questions the structuralist exclusion of context. If narrative is really a way of world-making and sense-making, if storytelling really is a universal feature of human communication, if the mind really is accessible through its stories, if narratives really allow us to come to terms with trauma, to memorize things, to develop coherent images of ourselves, to demonize others, to justify injustice or to win elections, narratologists should be out there, not merely analyzing narrative forms, but also investigating the manifold uses of narrative in the real world.

These new prospects explain why narratology, deeply unfashionable at the beginning of this century (cf. Fludernik 2000, 83), has survived the near-death experience of a predominantly poststructuralist fin-de-siècle and is now fully *en vogue*. While the search for universally applicable definitions of narrative and narrativity or structuralist analyses of narrative mediation concentrated on ‘what’ questions and ‘how’ questions, postclassical narratologies appear to be increasingly interested in the ‘why’ questions that situate narratives in their pragmatic contexts (cf. Kreiswirth 1995, 63). Such research requires trans-disciplinary collaboration. Narratologies, cultural theories and cognitive studies are currently developing a productive critical paradigm that has attracted a whole new generation of scholars, some of whom were not even born when Todorov coined the term *narratologie* (narratology) in 1969.² The price for this expansion of narratology’s domain is the diminishing coherence of the field, once a major strength of structuralist narratology. Such unity can now no longer be taken for granted, but has to be renegotiated from scratch, and much narratological work in the first decade of the new century has consciously or unconsciously prepared the ground for what Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (2010b) have aptly called the consolidation of postclassical narratology.

The postclassical excitement caused by the prospect of explaining the world through its narratives may appear naïve in the eyes of structuralist veterans who have been chasing monsters for too long. But Todorov’s original proposals were no less visionary when he imagined the future of narratology: “It is

easily seen that such a conception of literary analysis owes much to the modern notion of science. It can be said that structural analysis of literature is a kind of propaedeutic for a future science of literature” (Todorov 1969, 2100). Todorov was not far off the mark when he envisaged that in the long run narratology could be turned from a science of narrative into an even more ambitious science of literature, from a GUFTON, as it were, to a GUFOL. But postclassical narratologists did not stop there, boldly venturing beyond literature toward an interdisciplinary GUNTOC, a Grand Unified Narrative Theory of Culture.³

No wonder, then, that narratology “has developed into a flourishing discipline and has managed to keep almost as many professors busy as James Joyce” (Nünning 2000, 347). Well-respected structuralist values and virtues, such as sound methodology, well-defined terminology and rigorous theorizing are, however, difficult to maintain in the face of continued diversification. While postclassical narratologies have excelled at creating visions and formulating mission statements, they have thus far been less successful in developing strategies to reconcile conflicting views, integrate competing approaches and agree on interpretive rules, objectives and long-term goals or, in business terminology, standardization and quality management.

2. A new agenda: the consolidation of postclassical narratology

The inevitable consequence of the cross-disciplinary interest in stories and storytelling in the first decade of the twenty-first century has been a “Babelization” (Heinen / Sommer 2009b, 2) of narrative studies that has posed a serious threat to the critical lingua franca established by the structuralist science of narrative. More and more scholars in historiography, economics, anthropology and psychology are discussing narrative, but are they really talking about the same things when they use terms such as ‘narrator’ and ‘story’? Can narratorial unreliability in fiction really be compared to inaccurate witness reports in courtrooms? Cross-disciplinary borrowing encourages metaphorical usage of terminology, with the result that even formerly well-defined terms are now in need of redefinition or explication. Add to this the proliferation of new ‘narratologies’ – including solitary studies seeking to establish a new school, or work merely using the increasingly fashionable label to give ‘narratological’ weight to undertheorized readings – and it is easy to see why it has become increasingly difficult to survey the state of the art, let alone to establish a shared understanding of key terms and concepts.

Narratologists responded to this challenge by taking stock. In retrospect, the past decade appears to have been a period not only of proliferation and diversification, but also of classification and codification. This is reflected in the rise of genres such as introductions and handbooks, the growing interest in the national traditions and transnational histories of narratology, and the in-

creasing number of systematic surveys and overviews. One particularly effective impulse for mapping the field came from David Herman (1999), whose distinction between two stages in the development of narratology, the structuralist and the postclassical⁴, provided a productive blueprint for a “reconfiguration of the narratological landscape” (8).

Telling the story of the rise and fall, the crisis and renaissance of narratology has been a collective effort to which, apart from Herman (1999, 2005) himself, Ansgar Nünning (2000, 2003, 2009), Monika Fludernik (2000, 2005), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (2002, 134ff.), Anja Cornils and Wilhelm Schernus (2003), Wolf Schmid (2005), James Phelan (2006) and, more recently, Jan Christoph Meister (2011) and John Pier (2011) have made important contributions. Their various accounts have not only established a consensus with respect to the roots and genealogy of narratological discourse but have also acknowledged the respective merits and interdependencies of European and North American takes on narrative and narrative theory. They also, incidentally, proved that narratologists know a fair bit about narrative world-making and the implications of closure – against all odds, these histories unanimously opted for open endings in their determination to give narratology a new lease of life.

If historicizing narratology was the first step toward a reunification of old and new approaches, divided by a “shift from text-centered or formal models to models that are jointly formal and functional” (Herman 1999, 8), it almost coincided with an equally important second step, the classification of alternative, co-existing, complementary or competing narratologies. A preliminary “Bibliography of Recent Works on Narrative”, compiled by Fludernik and Richardson (2000), intimated what a Herculean task this would be. Nünning (2000, 2003) proposed a comprehensive survey of narratologies. No fewer than eight rather heterogeneous categories – contextual, thematic and ideological approaches; transgeneric and transmedial applications and elaborations of narratology; pragmatic and rhetorical kinds of narratology; cognitive and reception-theory-oriented kinds of (‘meta’-)narratology; postmodern and poststructuralist deconstructions of (classical) narratology; linguistic approaches / contributions to narratology; philosophical narrative theories; other interdisciplinary narrative theories – are required to distinguish, albeit provisionally, over forty different approaches to narrative. Despite some inevitable inconsistencies (after all, it attempted to plot the move from classical to post-classical narratology at a time when the transition was still in full swing), Nünning’s survey – along with several other overviews to be discussed in the following section – provides a valuable reference for current attempts at reconfiguring narratology. With the benefit of hindsight, a more coherent picture is slowly beginning to emerge.

A third measure taken to prevent post-millennium narratologists from speaking in a Babelonian variety of mutually incomprehensible tongues was terminological and conceptual codification. In the heyday of structuralism, Gerald Prince (1987) had provided a first, eminently useful dictionary that helped to shape the metalanguage created, developed and used by narratolo-

gists to speak about narrative and narratology. New terms were added to the vocabulary, and existing neologisms were redefined in the second, revised edition – published in 2003 – to keep track of new developments. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005), edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, goes a step further. Designed as a universal reference tool, it “cuts across disciplinary specializations to provide information about the core concepts, categories, distinctions, and technical nomenclatures that have grown up around the study of narrative in all of its guises” (ibid., x). While an encyclopedia has the authority to select and define core concepts, it lacks the flexibility of digital media to react quickly to new requirements, such as the addition of new terms or the possibility of debate. This gap has meanwhile been filled by the online edition of *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2009), edited by Peter Hühn and others.

Of course, much of what has been said about historicizing, classifying and codifying narratology in the face of ongoing Babelization implies both a shared conviction that narratology *should* be unified, and a conscious effort to secure such unity. It is difficult to say in hindsight whether such an effort was, in fact, forthcoming. Now that postclassical narratology has reached the second stage in its ‘adolescence’ (cf. Alber / Fludernik 2010b), some things, however, are undisputed. No one diagnoses narratology as suffering from a potentially fatal disease or even a temporary depression. Despite increasing pressure on the humanities, narrative and narrative theories are still going strong. The time has indeed come for a move – however cautious and preliminary – toward consolidation (see Alber / Fludernik 2010b). The histories, surveys and dictionaries of the past decade have prepared the ground for a realignment of old and new narratologies. Consolidation goes a step further, seeking unity in diversity: Which classical and postclassical approaches are going to form the core of narrative studies in years to come?

3. Postclassical approaches: Four models⁵

In an early overview of new developments in narrative theory, Fludernik (2000, 87) distinguishes four new schools of narratology that she calls possible worlds theory, “thematic” narratology, linguistic and applied narratology, and post-structuralist narratology (figure 1). She further differentiates between three “major orientations” (ibid.) in work belonging to thematic narratology: feminist narratology, queer narratology, and ethnic narratology – i.e. works “discussing race in the framework of narrative theory” (ibid., 88). This last category includes narratological theorizations within postcolonial studies. Fludernik (rightly) anticipated that much more work would be done in this field (cf. ibid., 88),⁶ although we are still waiting for fully-fledged ethnic and postcolonial narratologies. Nünning’s more comprehensive survey, first published in 2000 and revised and expanded in 2003, similarly subsumed feminist, queer, ethnic

and postcolonial narratologies under the broader spectrum of “contextualist, thematic, and ideological approaches”; possible worlds theory, however, was classified as one of several “philosophical narratologies”.⁷

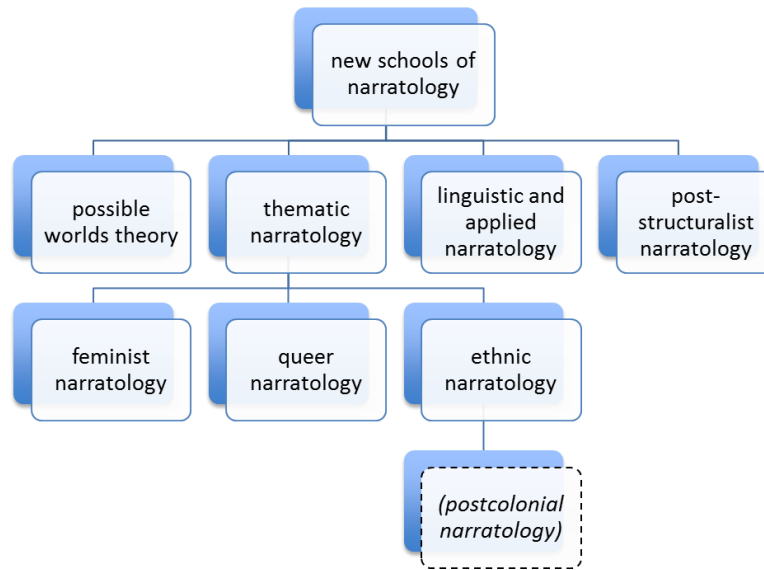


Fig. 1. *New schools of narratology* (cf. Fludernik 2000, 87ff.)

In a more recent overview of postclassical narratology, Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (2010b) revisit and regroup Herman’s (1999) – and Fludernik’s own – models. They distinguish four “types of interaction” (ibid., 3) between the classical paradigm and its postclassical successor. “Revisions” of structuralist narratology focus on “blind spots, gaps, or indeterminacies within the standard paradigm”, while “*methodological* extensions” of the classical paradigm “absorb theoretical and/or methodological insights and import them, producing, for instance, narratological speech act theory”. The third, “*thematic*” group contains “feminist, queer, ethnic or minority-related, and postcolonial approaches to narrative”. The remaining approaches are described as “contextual”: “Contextual versions of postclassical narratology [...] extend narratological analysis to literature outside the novel. Narratology now includes a consideration of various media (films, cartoons, etc.), the performative arts as well as non-literary narratives” (ibid.).

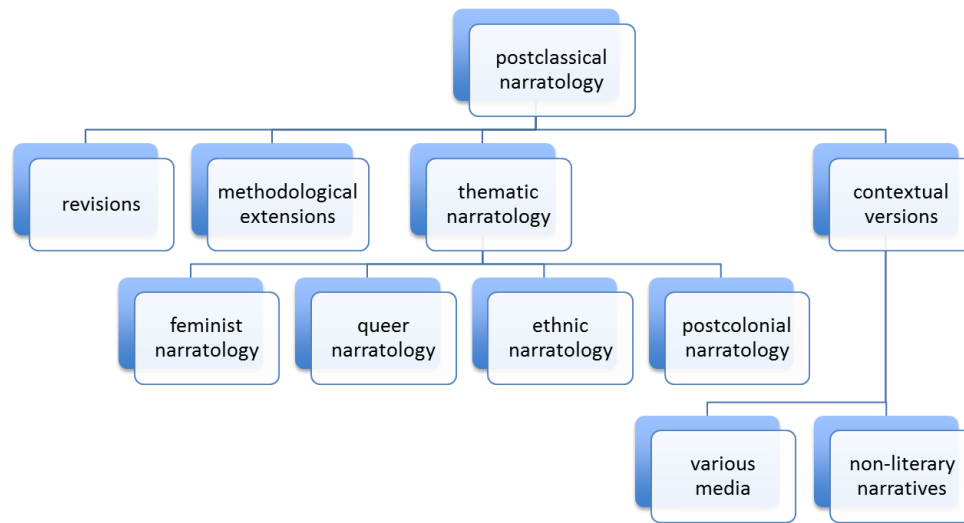


Fig. 2. *Postclassical narratology* (cf. Alber / Fludernik 2010b, 3)

Comparing this model to the one originally proposed by Fludernik (figure 1) reveals a significant difference: the older model seeks to identify the most important new schools in narratology, while the more recent one is designed to reflect – with the benefit of hindsight – on the relationship between classical and postclassical narratology as it has developed in the past decade. Thus the first and second group (revisions and methodological extensions) explicitly acknowledge narratology’s structuralist legacy, as well as the interactions of postclassical approaches with other disciplines, while the fourth group owes its existence to the ongoing expansion of the object domain (films and cartoons obviously existed in 2000, but narratology only recently developed into a truly transmedial and transgeneric theory).

At first, it may seem slightly confusing that these transgeneric and transmedial narratologies – in Nünning’s (2003) terminology – should now, along with narratological approaches to non-literary narratives, be termed “contextual”; this appears to be both unnecessary (transgeneric and transmedial seem sufficiently clear) and unhelpful, given the fact that the term “contextual” (or “contextualist”) is frequently associated with “thematic” approaches (Nünning 2000, 2003; Meister 2011), and sometimes, as in Kindt and Müller (2003b) or Shen (2005), taken to refer to all postclassical approaches in general. On reflection, however, these variations in the use of the term “contextual” point to correspondences between various postclassical narratologies that could, by distinguishing between two distinct kinds of contextual narratologies (see section 4), provide a key to a more systematic mapping of different approaches. The only part of the model that has not changed since Fludernik (2000) is that covered by the term “thematic” approaches. This may suggest the continuing

relevance of that group, if such a quality can be derived from apparent longevity. In any case, postcolonial approaches to narrative are now firmly established among the “thematic” narratologies. The term itself remains problematic, however, as it tends to reinforce the prejudice that such narratologies merely offer thematic readings and therefore cannot – or do not want to – make a systematic contribution to a general *theory* of narrative.

The focus of Shen’s (2005) article is not on classification but on the criteria postclassical or contextual narratologies (she uses these terms as synonyms) should meet: “While arguing for or agreeing with the broadening of the term ‘narratology’ to cover narratological criticism, the present study does not subscribe to the tendency to extend the term to narrative studies that engage neither in narratological theorizing nor in narratological practice” (143). For Shen, neither Sally Robinson’s *Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (1991) – a study that explicitly sets itself apart from feminist narratology – nor Mark Currie’s version of a poststructuralist narratology (Currie 1998), which marks a break with formal narrative poetics, should be regarded as narratological.

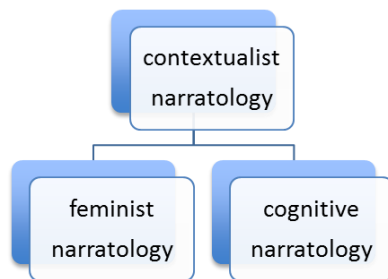


Fig. 3. *Contextualist narratology* (cf. Shen 2005, 143 ff.)

While Shen’s article is without doubt an important step toward a consolidation of contemporary narrative theory, her equation of contextual with postclassical narratology, probably inspired by Nünning’s (2003) criteria for distinction between text-oriented and context-oriented or contextual(ist) approaches, seems to complicate matters unnecessarily. As Alber and Fludernik have convincingly argued, classical narratology, with revisions and extensions, remains an integral part of the postclassical paradigm. For this reason the established distinction between postclassical narratology as an umbrella term embracing all current approaches and contextual narratology in a more narrow sense still appears to be helpful. It is also fully in line with Shen’s own plea for a reconciliation of formal and contextual narratologies.

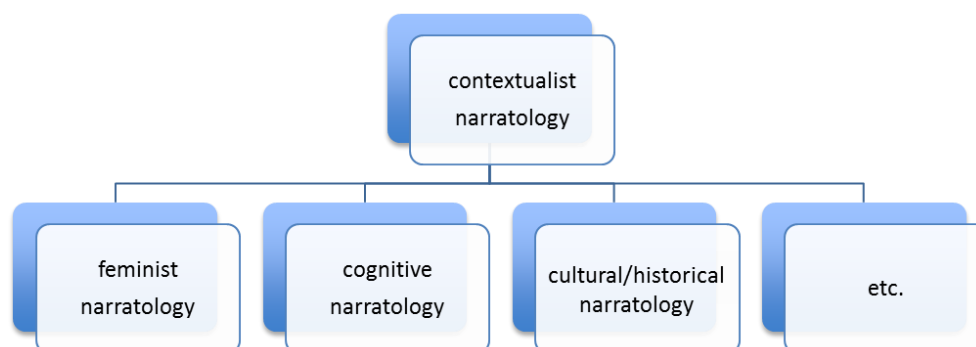


Fig.4. *Contextualist narratology* (cf. Kindt / Müller 2003b, 207)

While the three models that have been discussed so far share a conviction that context-oriented or postclassical approaches enrich narratology and should be pursued further, Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller (2003b) remain sceptical of what Kindt (2009, 36) describes as “narratological expansionism”. Their list of ‘contextualist’ approaches, including feminist narratology, cultural and historical narratology and cognitive narratology (figure 4), is not meant to provide a survey of postclassical narratology. Instead these approaches exemplify the problems incurred through contextualizing narrative, a move that – according to Kindt and Müller (2003b, 210) – conflates the boundaries between narratology, textual interpretation and literary history. Kindt (2009, 43) even goes so far as to propose (ironically?) a move “towards a classical narratology” that in effect seeks to turn back the clock: “In my view, we should leave narratology as it is” (ibid., 44).

“It”, however, means different things to different people – the heterogeneous collection of articles edited by Kindt and Müller (2003a), intriguingly titled *What Is Narratology?*, is a case in point. A return to the status quo ante is not an option, as no one can define the ante – does it mean prior to cognitive narratology? Before feminist narratology? The early 1980s? Retro is the new cool, and there is no doubt that classical narratology – or maybe one should by now say neo-classical narratology (cf. Wolf 2010) – still has its place among the various strands of 21st century narrative theory. Structural analysis is neither a (merely temporal) predecessor of, nor a theoretical alternative to postclassical narratology; it is an integral part (though no longer exclusively representative) of contemporary narrative theory.

4. Consolidated narratology: integration of formal and contextual approaches

If the compelling idea of a consolidation of narratologies is to be pursued further, a more sophisticated model is required that can accommodate all existing and possible future approaches and that allows us to discuss more explicitly the relationships and interdependencies between various schools. Bearing in mind that new branches are still emerging in postclassical narratology – most recently unnatural or non-natural narratology (Richardson 2006, Alber et al. 2012, Fludernik 2012), as well as affective narratology (Hogan 2011) – it is easy to see that such a model needs to be founded on categories that facilitate the grouping of related approaches. The established dichotomy of text or textual vs. context or contextual offers a convenient starting point. However, further criteria are needed to allow for meaningful distinctions among contextual approaches.

One way of coping with the increasing complexity of the field is to acknowledge that some approaches rely more heavily than others on specific corpora of texts or, in a wide semiotic sense, sign systems. These will include all media-specific narratologies such as film narratology, as well as narratological approaches to conventional auditive, visual or audiovisual media (such as music, painting and other art forms, film, video), and to new digital media, from video games to social networks. They will also include transgeneric takes on narrative, such as the narratology of drama and poetry, and comparative approaches (transmedial narratology). To this group of corpus-based postclassical narratologies one might also add all “thematic” narratologies, as these restrict themselves to the analysis of specific kinds of narrative, for instance women’s writing, postcolonial writing or black writing.

A second group of new narratologies is less dependent on specific media or genres but focuses on conditions and processes of narrative comprehension or naturalization or, more generally, on the interactions between narratives and recipients and the communicative purposes of storytelling. This group will include rhetorical narratology, psychological and cognitive approaches to (natural and non-natural) narrative, but could also accommodate the affective narratology recently proposed by Patrick Colm Hogan (2011). Although rather heterogeneous with respect to methodology, these approaches make assumptions about the potential effects of narrative structures, pattern or techniques and share an interest in the interplay between textual cues and contextual parameters such as the reader’s (or viewer’s) narrative competence, his or her ability to memorize textual features, the naturalization of the non-natural (Alber et al. 2012, Fludernik 2012) and processes of mind reading (see Herman 2011, Bernaerts et al. 2013).

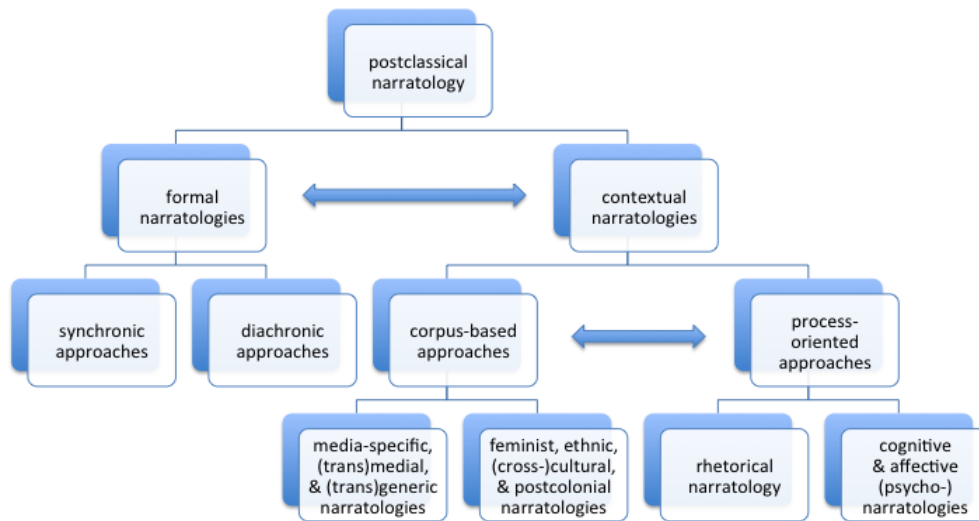


Fig. 5. *Postclassical narratology*

This model illustrates the scope of current approaches in postclassical narratology. By including formal narratology (I am adopting Shen's terminology here, as the term structuralist is commonly associated with classical narratology), it acknowledges the continued influence of narratology's structuralist heritage, with the revisions and extensions discussed by Alber and Fludernik. The arrows indicate that there is a constant exchange between formal and contextual narratologies; in practice, most narratological studies today will be combinations of two or more approaches. Thus, film narratology is corpus-based, but frequently opts for a structuralist approach. Likewise, although cognitive approaches focus on processes of meaning making, they rely on textual evidence to make assumptions about the potential effects of specific narrative techniques. Thus the attribution of unreliability is generally seen as the effect of certain features of narrative discourse but cannot be explained without reference to recipients' knowledge structures. The model is also able to visualize mutual exchange between corpus-based and process-oriented contextual narratologies; for instance, film narratology frequently draws on cognitive research, while rhetorical narratology allows us to focus on the dynamics of cross-cultural storytelling. The fact that such horizontal integration is already common practice can be interpreted as a sign of successful consolidation.

In addition to such horizontal integration, the model – by including formal narratology among the postclassical approaches – also explicitly acknowledges continuity in the transition from the classical to the postclassical phase in narratology. As Werner Wolf (2010) has recently demonstrated, textual or formal narratology is itself not a monolithic affair but a dynamic theory that is still developing. Not only are new categories and concepts being continuously

added, but also a stronger emphasis is being placed on the emergence of narrative forms. While most structuralists did not explicitly integrate a diachronic perspective, text-oriented narratologists are now beginning to historicize. As Fludernik (2012, 363) points out, the exploration of new corpora of texts (pre-eighteenth-century narrative, the fantastic, the supernatural) will fuel the debate on non-natural narratives, a debate that programmatically links corpus-based and process-oriented contextual approaches with text-oriented narrative analysis. Such intensified interaction between classical and postclassical approaches is further evidence of successful consolidation, and provides a perspective for a productive dialogue between restrictive structuralist positions and postclassical views: the text-context dichotomy may finally be overcome by thinking in terms of different kinds of contexts and varying degrees of context-orientation.

5. Where do we go from here?

In the world of business, mergers and acquisitions usually go along with conceptual streamlining and redundancies. Hopefully, the only casualty of the consolidation of postclassical narratology and its merger with classical and neoclassical narratologies will be a genre that was simultaneously indicative of narratology's crisis in the 1990s and vital for its reconversion in the new millennium: extended programmatic self-reference. This comes in two guises. First, the programmatic vision that emphasizes the ubiquity of narrative and the social and cultural relevance of narratology. This has worked. Narratology is back with a vengeance. Second, structuralist orthodoxy trying to bring the postclassical camp back to the fold. This has not worked. As Shen (2005, 164) has pointed out, "there is no real ground for the antagonism between narrative poetics and contextual narratologies". Contextual and formal narratologies *still* need each other. Narratology is best regarded as a collective effort that unites theory, applications and pedagogy, and the sooner any remaining gaps between these three are closed, the better. After its fin-de-siècle crisis and post-millennium expansion, narratology is currently undergoing a phase of consolidation that may bring about unity in diversity. Whether it is headed for a GUFTON – or even a GUNTOC – remains to be seen.

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² On a side note, narratology's branching out into other fields is reflected in Todorov's own work that turned from structuralism to interpretation, and thence to broader issues of culture, ethics and history. For a brief survey of Todorov's career, see the short bibliography provided in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001) that divides his work into these three phases.

³ On the semantics of "towards" in postclassical narratology cf. Nünning (2000, 356) and Rimmon-Kenan (2002, 143ff.).

⁴ Cf. Herman (1999, 2): "[...] narratology has moved from its classical, structuralist phase – a Saussurean phase relatively isolated from energizing developments in contemporary literary and language theory – to its postclassical phase".

⁵ The following diagrams are intended to facilitate comparison of the arguments put forward in Fludernik (2000), Alber / Fludernik (2010b), Shen (2005) and Kindt / Müller (2003b).

⁶ See, for instance, Gymnich (1996), Prince (2005) and Sommer (2007).

⁷ Cf. Nünning 2000 (351ff) and 2003 (249ff). The first of eight main categories, “contextualist, thematic, and ideological approaches: Applications of Narratology in Literary Studies”, includes “contextualist narratology”, “narratology and thematics”, “comparative narratology”, “applied narratology”, “Marxist narratology”, “feminist narratology”, “lesbian and queer narratology”, “ethnic narratology”, “corporeal narratology”, “postcolonial applications of narratology”, “socio-narratology”, “new historical narratologies” and “cultural and historical narratology” (2003, 249).