How Paradigm Shifts and our Taste for Immersive Stories Have Transformed our Understanding of Plots and Characters

Raphaël BARONI

From a Small Camp of Foldable Tents into a Vast Metropolis

In narrative theory, looking at the changing relationship between characters and plots is a good way to account for the evolution of the discipline over the years. While debates concerning other issues – like narrativity, implied author, optional narrator, or focalization –at times appear to have frozen in some kind of Cold War – with front lines that have moved very little over the years – the way we look at the interconnection between fictional entities and the unfolding of plot has changed quite dramatically over the last few decades. This evolution is obvious if we examine a recent discussion between Thomas Pavel and Françoise Lavocat. Asked why she chose to write a book on possible world theory and the difference between fact and fiction[1], Françoise Lavocat recalls how she discovered, in the mid 1990s, the famous essay by Thomas Pavel, *Univers de la fiction*:

> One evening that I remember very well, in February 1996, I began to read *Univers de la fiction*, which an analytical philosopher had advised me. I read from the very first page – which evokes Mr Pickwick – that we have the right to love characters. With this authorization, ten years of structuralism collapsed all of a sudden. In preparatory school, I had learned that characters were made of paper and that it would be very naive to picture them in another way. I read in Thomas Pavel's book that we have the right to be naive.[2] (Lavocat & Pavel 2016: n.p.)

Thomas Pavel replies by saying that, when he began working on possible world theory, in the seventies, he felt quite alone:

> You remind me of the 1970s when the few people who had begun to think about these questions felt a little like three or four friends on an excursion into the Rocky Mountains, spending nights in easily foldable tents. Forty years later, studies on fiction seem to have reached the size of a vast metropolis, with its enormous skyscrapers. The landscape has changed a lot! At the time, we were told that what counted in *Madame Bovary* was the use of free indirect speech. It was certainly not false. Now, I read *Madame Bovary* to follow the life of the characters, to learn, for example, what will become of this unwise woman, who, among other things, buys dresses too costly for her budget. We were told that it was stupid to read novels simply to understand the plot.[3] (Lavocat & Pavel 2016: n.p.)

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[1] See Lavocat (2016).

[2] « Un soir dont je m'en souviens très bien, en février 1996, je me suis mise à lire Univers de la fiction, qu'un philosophe analytique m'avait conseillé. Je lis, dès la première page – qui évoque Mr Pickwick – qu'on a le droit d'aimer les personnages. Avec cette autorisation, dix ans de structuralisme s'effondrent tout d'un coup. En khâgne, j'avais appris que les personnages étaient de papier et qu'il était vraiment naïf de les envisager d'une autre façon. Je lis dans le livre de Thomas Pavel qu'on a le droit d'être naïf. »

[3] « Vous me rappelez les années 1970, lorsque les quelques personnes qui avaient commencé à réfléchir à ces questions se sentaient un peu comme trois ou quatre amis en excursion dans les Montagnes Rocheuses et qui passent les nuits dans des tentes facilement pliables. Quarante ans plus tard, les études sur la fiction semblent avoir atteint la dimension d'une vaste métropole avec ses énormes gratte-ciels. Le paysage a beaucoup changé ! À l'époque, on nous apprenait que ce qui comptait dans *Madame Bovary*, c'était l'emploi du discours indirect libre. Ce n'était certes pas faux. Or moi je lisais *Madame Bovary* pour suivre la vie les

The evolution of narrative theory has transformed a small camp of foldable tents into a vast metropolis, and on this account, narratology may almost appear like a cumulative science. But we know that human sciences possess the virtue of forcing us to reconsider our deep motivations when we change our interpretive frameworks. Besides, as expressed by Thomas Pavel and Françoise Lavocat, this evolution is also a form of regression, or more exactly, it is a way of reevaluating narrative experiences that were once discarded because they were considered as "naive", "stupid", or "regressive". The history of narrative theory is not linear nor teleological, instead it consists of curves and dead-ends.

In any case, we may ask ourselves: Why have things changed so much? Why did we feel impelled to engage ourselves in new directions? Françoise Lavocat argues that the ephemeral success of structuralism partly explains this lack of interest in the character's mimetic depth and in the study of the emotional commitment to their destiny. So, one might conclude that the problem was essentially epistemological. And of course, it is quite easy to show how new paradigms, like reception theory, possible world theory, or cognitivism, have considerably enriched our understanding of the relation between plot and characters, passing from a "desiccated" description (to use the words of Wayne C. Booth) to a more vivid and "embodied" conceptualization (to use a very popular expression in contemporary cognitivism). Nevertheless, beyond the constant need for novelty in academic institutions, this does not fully explain why so many scholars have decided to change their perspective.

As we know, the negation of referential readings and the discarding of plot dynamics were also ideologically motivated. Paradoxically, many narratologists during the sixties and the seventies were not really fond of fictions. Or, more exactly, prototypical narratives were viewed with political suspicion. Immersive narratives, those involving convincing characters, suspenseful situations, or intriguing mysteries, were seen as belonging to popular culture, and they were denounced as political and/or commercial levers, aimed at alienating the readers. Accordingly, Emma Bovary was not considered as a character that the reader should identify with, but as an example of what a reader should try to avoid to become. Thus, many narratologists endorsed the mission to educate these "dominated readers"[4], to teach them to despise some very basic aesthetic experiences usually associated with prototypical fictions, and to develop a taste for experimental literary works and for other formal, or intertextual, aspects of narratives.

Eventually, the bigger contrast between a structuralist like Roland Barthes, and scholars like Françoise Lavocat and Thomas Pavel, can be found in their opposed interests for fictional characters and for thrilling stories. They thus belong to a growing number of narratologists who have adapted their taste when compared with the historical founders of our discipline. As pro-narrativists, they believe that immersion, identification, empathy, curiosity, suspense, or other similar issues, are not necessarily dangerous, but can be enjoyable aesthetic experiences, and these could even be cognitively or ethically beneficial experiences. Many believe now that these phenomena could even constitute one of the deepest anthropological functions of mimetic arts in general.

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personnages, pour apprendre, par exemple, ce que deviendra cette femme imprudente qui, entre autres, achète des robes trop coûteuses pour son budget. On nous expliquait qu'il était bête de lire des romans simplement pour comprendre l'intrigue. »

[4] On this concept, see Lafarge (1983).

This does not mean, however, that we do not take the dangers of malicious uses of fictitious or factual mimetic narratives seriously. Recent history has taught us much about what happens when heroic characters, with their fascinating life stories, are in fact ambitious politicians or leaders of greedy global companies. But even if a malicious agent can use the power of narration to manipulate crowds, I think it best not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. [5] In summary, one could say that over time, the narratological doxa has moved from a platonic to a more aristotelian perspective: many narrative theorists believe that their duty is no longer to warn the audience against the dangers of mimicry but to recognize the virtues of the cathartic phenomena associated with fiction. Thus, philosophical or cognitive theories highlighting the ethical [6] and/or adaptive [7] values of fiction have played a major role in this transformation, along with the exhaustion of modernism and the crisis of literary studies.

Under the pressure of postmodernism, not only have the experimental literary works that dismantle plot structures or expose the artificial nature of characters lost their central position in the avant-garde, but also many scholars confronted with the desertion of students from their Departments now feel impelled to justify the value of literary fiction, as opposed to other kinds of discourse, such as argumentation or scientific explanation. And to do so, it is probably best to avoid frontally criticizing immersive and thrilling novels, not only because they belong to the territory that needs to be defended[8], but also because they are probably those that have motivated some of their remaining students to attend literary classes.

Yet, I do not claim that every narratologist has now completely lost his/her taste for experimental literary works. Firstly, I can easily understand the motivations of those who continue to reject a pro-narrativist ideology for political or ethical reasons. Secondly, academic scholars (as well as some students) are naturally interested in challenging objects. The existence of a very vivid branch of contemporary narratology focusing on "unnatural narratives" illustrates this remaining interest in representations that "violate mimetic conventions and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres" (Richardson 2015: 3). Nevertheless, I do not think that we find in this present-day interest in experimental or "unnatural" narratives the same anti-mimetic ideology that motivated many structuralists some fifty years ago. In the terms of Pierre Bourdieu, even if the *orientation* seems similar, the *posture* has changed, because the *field* has been reconfigured completely.

This being said, I will give now a quick overview of some the most important transformations that we have witnessed over the past decades concerning the status of characters and their relation to plot. Then, I will focus on an attribute of a famous contemporary character, in order to highlight some principles governing the interrelation between characters' features and their function in plot dynamics.

From Structure to Mimetic Functions and Plot Dynamics

Both characters and plot are interrelated notions that have evolved considerably, but while the object designated by the former is quite obvious, the referent of the latter

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[5] See Citton (2010) ; Baroni (2017).
[6] See Laugier (2006) ; Laugier and Ginsburg (2012).
[7] See for example Kukkonen (2014 : 737) ; Herman (2009 : 20-21) ; Baroni (2009 : 45-94 ; 2017 : 52-62).
[8] See Merlin-Kajman (2016).

remains subject to a somewhat discouraging polysemy[9]. I will not attempt to argue here that it would be better to adopt what James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz (2012: 57) have called a "maximalist" definition of plot, or to explain why *progression* – a notion introduced by Phelan (1989) – is useless as long as we do not confuse plot with the internal logic of the *fabula*. My point here will be to highlight the mutability of a concept that has been defined alternatively: 1) as a static image of the story (or fabula); 2) as the reconfiguration of the story by narrative discourse (or syuzhet); 3) as a strategic combination of this double sequence aimed at arousing narrative tension[10] (the three main narrative interests being suspense, curiosity, or surprise)[11]; 4) or, last but not least, as an evolving storyworld, a mental experience relying on the progression of the reader.[12]

I leave aside the definition of plot as an equivalent of *syuzhet*, which results from an unfortunate translation of Tomashevky's seminal essay, since this is a terminology that most narratologists have now ceased to use. I will rather focus on the opposition between plot as an equivalent of *fabula* and plot as a rhetorical device aimed at creating and resolving tensions in the reading experience because these opposed definitions provide a good image of how narrative theory has evolved over the past fifty years. While the description of the internal logic of the *fabula* was the main concern of structuralists and formalists, readerly dynamics has become the new focus of most postclassical narratologists, some insisting more on its rhetorical dimension, others on the cognitive process aroused by the narrative. Of course, this evolution had a direct impact on the way we talk about characters, since it is practically impossible to think of plot without thinking of characters, and vice versa.

In the first phase, one of the most influential models was the morphology of Russian folktales by Vladimir Propp (1968), soon followed by the logic of actions by Claude Bremond (1973), and the structural semiotics by Julien Algirdas Greimas[13] (1987). In these conceptions, plot was referred to as a fixed structure of the fabula. It could be exhumed in any narrative, like a skeleton hidden behind the materiality of the discourse, and also behind the accidental nature of the events told. Using the same methodology, every character was supposed to embody an abstract identity determined by his or her role in the plot. In this extremely disincarnated conception, the potential roles were very limited: Propp counted only seven spheres of actions in Russian fairy tales, while Greimas reduced these functions to six actantial structures, supposedly valid for all narratives: Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent.

Of course, none of these narrative theorists ever pretended that characters were no more than actants or roles. For instance, Philippe Hamon mentions the existence of many other semantic axes differentiating a character from others. But, as he explains, there is a hierarchy between different axes, and in this hierarchy, the role played by the character in the plot seemed to be more important than any other attributes:

> A recurrence is not necessarily confused with narrative functionality, with importance. First, because an axis like the color of the hair is common to all characters in a novel, and secondly because it is probably not such axes that organize the main narrative transformations of novels. Such axes are therefore probably

[9] I discuss this polysemy in Baroni (2017 : 25-36).
[10] See Baroni (2007; 2009; 2017), Phelan (1989), Brooks (1983).
[11] See Sternberg (2001).
[12] See Dannenberg (2008), Kukkonen (2014).
[13] For a presentation of this model in English, see Hébert (2006).

noted and summoned by the text, either to bring about a simple "reality effect", or to highlight, accompany, underline, or indicate, a particular relationship situated at another level, or on a more "fundamental" axis.[14] (Hamon 1998: 185)

One might believe that Hamon is most llikely right when he states that the actantial role of the character is more fundamental than hair color. But fundamental for whom? And in what respect? Is hair color so trivial for the audience and for plot dynamics? Rhetorical or cognitivist perspectives helped us to reevaluate what used to be considered as trivial and to give a more dynamic account of the fundamental structures outlined by the structuralists.

Let's take for instance the blond hair of Iseult or, even better, of Daenerys Targaryen. Daenerys was first presented as an object of desire for several characters, and quite likely for many in the television viewing audience, as well. Indeed, in her first scene she is shown naked in her bath and preparing for an arranged wedding, which is supposed to restore her brother's chances of becoming the king of the Seven Kingdoms. In this respect, the blondness of her hair is far from being innocent: we can associate this symbol to a *topos* found in many Western narratives, which, of course, resounds with the intertextual echo of Iseult. Accordingly, it is hard to ignore that the blondness may indicate Daenerys' purity, as she is still a virgin when the narrative begins, but it can be also a means to enhance her erotic value, and therefore, it refers to her narrative function as an Object of desire.

Yet, this character evolved tremendously after the death of her husband and her brother, while the entire TV show has adopted a progressively more feminist tone, as many commentators have noticed. Daenerys was reborn in the fire of her husband's cremation and she became the Mother of the Dragons, the Queen of the South, and one of the few ambitious characters of Westeros to have a true (though fragile) sense of morality. She has clearly transitioned from the position of a passive Object to the role of an active Subject, yet without losing any of her erotic attractiveness. In this new context, her blondness has acquired many additional symbolic functions: it can be associated with Fire as opposed to Ice, Life of a passionate human being as opposed to the Death meted out by the White Walkers.

But this does not exhaust any of her potential functions, since the epic narrative is based on the intertwined destiny of several heroes, making us wonder who represents the real core of the fabula, if there is such a thing. If we take the point of view of another potential hero, Jon Snow for instance, we may wonder if she should be considered as a potential Opponent, a Helper, or an Object again? Of course, it is extremely complicated, because it all hinges on the phase of the story we are considering. When I began writing this essay, in late July 2017, the long-awaited meeting between Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen had not yet occurred. In-between, new revelations concerning Jon Snow's true identity have made him both a potential rival and a possible relative. At this stage of the plot unfolding, it was impossible to know whether those two emerging central characters

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[14] « Une récurrence ne se confond pas obligatoirement avec une fonctionnalité narrative, avec une importance. D'abord parce qu'un axe comme la couleur des cheveux est commun à tous les personnages d'un roman, ensuite parce que ce ne sont sans doute pas de tels axes qui organisent les principales transformations narratives des romans. De tels axes sont donc, probablement, notés et convoqués par le texte, soit pour provoquer un simple « effet de réel », soit pour mettre en relief, accompagner, souligner, ou indiquer, telle ou telle relation située à un autre niveau, ou sur un axe plus "fondamental". »

would become allies or foes, enemies, friends, or lovers. And this indeterminacy is of course essential for arousing narrative tension in the middle of the seventh season.

What if Jon Snow's long and magnificent black hair helped him to become the powerful Daenerys' Object of desire, as much for her as he is for an increasing number of spectators? Then, would not their union become a way to reconcile the South and the North, the Summer and the Winter, the Fire and the Ice, and the erotic power of the Female and Male? If we are concerned with how narrative tension functions, rather than with narrative structures, then we ought to deal with unresolved stories because their working power is more obvious. We see that, even when considered in a structuralist perspective, characters' attributes are an unstable matrix of virtualities evolving throughout the progression of the narrative. To use the words of Jonathan Culler "characters are not heroes, villains, or helpers; they are simply subjects of a group of predicates which the reader adds up as he goes along" (Culler 1975: 235). Undeniably, there is an addition of complexity when the narrative is not seized as a whole, but considered in its evolution. As such, the fixed functions delineated by Propp and Greimas can hardly be attributed to characters without ambiguities. As Eco explains:

> We know [...] that a text has or should have a specific actantial structure, but we could hardly say at which phase of the cooperation the Model Reader is invited to identify it.[15] (Eco 1985: 229)

Additionally, the new perspectives offered by reception theories, and by rhetorical and cognitive narratology, invite us to broaden our investigation beyond a "group of predicates" (to quote Culler), even if those predicates are described in their evolution. Along the psychoanalytical vein advanced by Michel Picard (1986), Vincent Jouve (1992: 110) insists in particular on the reader's affective and erotic investment, thus going far beyond the intellectual understanding of the narrative function played by a character. In this new stance, we must reevaluate the importance of these elements that serve to create what Jouve describes as an "illusion of person (object of sympathy or antipathy of the reader)" and "a phantasmatic alibi (support of unconscious investments)" (Jouve 1992: 111, m.t.).[16] James Phelan follows the same line when he proposes adding to the synthetic components of characters – namely those aspects reflecting their artificial nature – a study of their mimetic dimension:

> When the structuralist remains suspicious of the emotional involvement that comes from viewing the character as a possible person, the mimetic analyst regards that involvement as crucial to the effect of the work. In short, where the structuralist seeks an objective view of the text, one which foregrounds the text as construct, the mimetic analyst takes a rhetorical view, one which foregrounds the text as communication between author and reader. (Phelan 1989: 8)

Now, if we return to the previous examples, we see that this new approach allows us to stress the importance of Daenerys Targaryen's blondness or Jon Snow's voluptuous black hair in a completely new way. They are crucial aspects of the plot, not only because they

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[15] « Nous savons, du moins quand la reconstruction critique est effectuée, qu'un texte a ou devrait avoir telle structure actancielle, mais nous pourrions difficilement dire à quelle phase de la coopération le Lecteur Modèle est invité à l'identifier. »

[16] « Le personnage sera ainsi à étudier comme élément du sens (fonction narrative et indice herméneutique), illusion de personne (objet de la sympathie ou de l'antipathie du lecteur) et alibi fantasmatique (support d'investissements inconscients). »

reveal the synthetic or thematic[17] functions of these characters, but also because they deepen their attractiveness and their mimetic consistency, and therefore, they reinforce their potential for arousing suspense. As Marie-Laure Ryan explains, the emotions aroused by believable and attractive characters is not only a way to intensify immersion, but also a way to make us forget the artificial, and more or less predictable, nature of the plot: she argues that "emotional immersion" makes situations present in the mind; therefore, "it does not matter whether the envisioned state of affairs is true or false, and its development known or unknown, because simulation makes it temporarily true and present, and from the point of view of the present, the future has not happened" (Ryan 2001: 156).

When the characters are defined according to their role in modulating the narrative tension – which can be considered as the dynamic aspect of plot[18] –, three main functional axes can be identified[19]. Each of these axes can encompass a virtually infinite set of attributes, ranging from their actantial roles to the color of their hair, or any tiny detail that may have the power to reinforce the character's power to increase the tension of the story until reaching its virtual resolution. It is crucial to insist on the fact that, in this set of attributes, what is missing, or what may change over time, is actually as important as what is being specified.

1. **Puzzling attributes**: if characters are meant to arouse curiosity, it is necessary to keep some of their characteristics hidden. For example, a hidden agenda or an undisclosed intention, as well as an unclear role in the actantial structure, all these missing attributes can be used to puzzle the audience. In *Game of Thrones*, Petyr Baelish, aka Little Finger, is an ambiguous character whose actions and loyalty remain unpredictable. In contrast, Tyrion Lannister's loyalty, after several spectacular twists, has become more and more predictable over time, but in the last episode of the sixth season, while he seems to surrender to Daenerys' enemies – the latter appearing to be in a desperate situation – we understand retrospectively that he has set a trap for them. Here, the hidden plan was aimed at arousing curiosity and surprise.

2. **Mimetic attributes**: if characters are meant to arouse suspense, the audience must care for the fate of at least some of them, and to do so, these focal characters must have some attributes that help us to view them as *possible persons*. This "reality effect" is usually achieved through a form of over-determination. Over-determination is meant to describe qualities going beyond the definition of the role that characters play in the story, or what Barthes used to call "insignificant notations" (1968: 231). In an abstract game, we can feel suspense because we care for the players, or simply because we wonder how their next move may solve a complex problem. But in a narrative fiction, we are less concerned by those who move the pieces, but by the pieces themselves. If the authors decide to sacrifice a Queen, we must care for her in order to be moved by this event, because the only way for authors to lose the game, is to have the audience stop being concerned by

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[17] Phelan defines the "thematic dimension" of a character as attributes "viewed as vehicles to express ideas or as representative of a larger class than the individual character" (1989: 12). In this case, this dimension corresponds to the reading when Daenerys is considered an incarnation of Fire as opposed to Ice, or Life as opposed to death. As Phelan explains "just as the full mimetic function is often not revealed in the initial stages of a narrative, so too may the thematic functions emerge more gradually" (1989: 12-12).

[18] For a definition of plot in relation with narrative tension, see Baroni (2007 : 18 ; 2017 : 31).

[19] See Baroni (2017 : 85-90).

the piece on the board. So, the piece must have more complexity than chessmen, and they must be enriched beyond its direct functional value [20]. This over-determination may include any idiosyncratic features. Of course, if the character is also attractive, his or her affective impact may be stronger. It is clearly the case with Daenerys and Jon, while others, like Tyrion, can count on their afflictions, their wounds, their humor or their tortured past in order to arouse a feeling of compassion. Besides, imperfect characters may inspire more empathy, and be even more attractive than bigger-than-life heroes, since they may appear closer to us. Therefore, Jon's uncontrolled impulsivity or Tyrion's alcoholism, may also help to increase their emotional impact.

3. **Autonomy**: even if characters become so familiar to us that we know them as friends or relatives, they must nevertheless retain a degree of unpredictability. This means that their fate must be an open one: they must show some freedom in their reactions and take surprising decisions. This is a necessity not only in order to maintain an interest for the potential developments of the plot, but also to strengthen the mimetic deepness of the storyworld. In some extreme cases, the illusion of freedom may reach the point where characters seem to acquire a type of autonomy. This is what Bakhtin (1981) called "polyphony": a character's ability to speak for him/herself, with his/her own voice, and to make his/her own decisions, instead of being a pawn on the chessboard, or a spokesman for the author. Accordingly, along with the unexpected evolution of characters, their synthetic or thematic functions, including their axiological value, may be blurred, and, as many authors acknowledge, in the process of creation, the story often drifts away from the author's original intentions.

We see now how different kinds of attributes may come into conflict when an author tries to build narrative tension: while we need to know the characters intimately in order to be moved by their fate, they must also remain partly unpredictable and mysterious in order to keep hold on their power to intrigue us. Yet, these qualities are not always incompatible. A well-known character may sometimes keep a secret, or make a surprising decision, without compromising his/her mimetic deepness and the coherence of his/her personality. Nevertheless, the most mysterious characters, like Little Finger, are usually condemned to play second-roles because they are too inscrutable to build an emotional bond with the audience, while the most unpredictable characters run the risk of becoming tricksters, a fool that refuses to play according to the rules, a pure chaos, a person without personality. Therefore, a focal hero is usually recognizable when there is a stronger investment on the mimetic axis and, even if he/she shows a relative degree of autonomy, when he/she remains more or less coherent with his/her personality.

As for the autonomy of characters, Bakhtin praises Dostoevsky's talent in crafting narratives where characters have their own voice, but production constraints can also play a significant role in increasing a series' polyphony. I just mentioned the numerous roles successively played by a character like Daenerys. I have no doubt that the saga's author had a vision of her overall evolution in mind when he first began writing the story, but along the way, he may have discovered that his creature embodied some unexpected qualities or flaws, leading her to act unpredictably. Moreover, we cannot exclude the fact that the audience's reaction to the TV series, in particular some attacks published in the

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[20] For a more detailed distinction between abstract games and narrative fictions, see Caïra (2011) and Lavocat (2016).

news media denouncing the sexism of the first seasons, may have changed the fate of the character, especially when the writers came to the point where they faced the production of the saga's final volumes. This last point will lead me to mention rapidly the specificities of serialized narratives in the context of transmedia storytelling[21], and I will finish this discussion with a reflection on the impact of media on the mimetic thickness of a character and how unnatural features may compromise this quality.

Transmediality, Mimetic Deepness and Unnatural Features

TV series, in particular the productions associated to what is now being called Quality TV, have become progressively a cultural phenomenon considered by many as a dominant form of storytelling, most likely due to their extensive temporality, combined with luxurious scriptwriting conditions. This new context of production has increased the complexity of plot developments and the deepness of characters[22]. Of course, when Georges R. R. Martin began to publish *A Song of Ice and Fire*, his saga provided us with substantial information concerning the characters. Literary discourse has a special ability for conveying an endless flow of data on the inner-world of each character, not only because of its use of natural language, which is made of the same material as our thoughts, but also because of its almost unlimited length, which allows us to delve into subtle details of each character's reactions[23].

But when we are concerned with a character's external features, or with their seductive power, no description can compete with the imagery provided by a film or a TV show. A photograph can capture an infinite array of unfiltered information on a person's appearance, but the film representation of that individual adds the tone of the voice of the actors, their own way of speaking and moving, along with the aura they have accumulated while participating with different narratives, or just because they can be seen in galleries of portraits displayed by the web. The enrichment conveyed by the television adaptation also includes costumes, settings, and many other visual effects. As Jenkins explains:

> the shifts between media mean that we have new experiences and learn new things. To translate *Harry Potter* from a book to a movie series means thinking through much more deeply what Hogwarts looks like and thus the art director/production designer has significantly expanded and extended the story in the process. (Jenkins 2011: n.p.)

Emilia Clarke as Daenerys Targaryen, Kit Harington as Jon Snow, and Peter Dinklage as Tyrion Lannister, have all transformed and expanded the original universe, adding their contribution to the story, with their own erotic potential, as well as their ability to turn fictional entities into plausible human beings. Thus, for the audience, these characters' attractiveness mimetic deepness and autonomy have been multiplied by a creative collaboration that goes beyond what a single author could have achieved. This expanded work of art includes the actors' performances, but also the creative work of a showrunner, of several scriptwriters, directors, production designers, special effect specialists, and of no less importance, the critical reception of the audience, which plays an increasingly

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[21] See Jenkins (2006), Goudmand (2013) and Baroni (2016).

[22] The interest for TV series, which is a recent phenomenon in narratology as well as in cultural studies, might be another symptom of the shift toward a pro-narrativist posture. See Baroni & Jost (2016).

[23] Yet, Jan Alber (2017) has recently claimed that film is much better suited to depicting character's interiority than is commonly assumed.

important role in the production, as affirmed by Jenkins, who sees this phenomenon as a symptom of the "convergence culture".

But transmedial extensions of a fictional world do not always lead to an enrichment, as they also comprise some meaningful alterations. In the case of Daenerys Targaryen's physical attributes, there have been interesting transformations in the shift from one media to another. In the novel, she is described as a woman whose eyes have shades of purple and hair is silver-gold or platinum white. These characteristics are described as typical of her Valyrian heritage and point toward her almost superhuman nature, which includes her invulnerability to fire and her ability to ride dragons. In contrast, in her TV incarnation, Daenerys eyes have Emilia's natural green color, while her hair color has been transformed into a more classical platinum blonde. This alteration can be partly explained by the producers' decision to avoid using contact lenses or CGI techniques as these would have compromised the actor's performance or required the use of time-consuming postproduction. Yet, there might be another explanation: in a verbal narrative, unnatural attributes, like purple eyes and white hair, can be mentioned and processed as meaningful information, but in the mental representation of the reader, they do not necessarily alter the attractiveness of the character, whose beauty remains a fundamental attribute overruling other qualities. Each reader will most likely build a subjective mental representation based on his/her own conception of what a beautiful woman looks like, and in this subjective representation, purple eyes and white hair are weird elements that could be considered as a contradiction. This incongruity can easily be reduced by simply mentally disregarding these attributes, even though they can be reactivated in some meaningful contexts. But when transferred to the screen, each time the character's face is seen, it would be hard to forget the strangeness of her eye color, and this may threaten her mimetic deepness by stressing the artificial nature of the character. In this case, I think that the mimetic function has been privileged over the symbolic function, while the contradiction did not appear as critical in the literary representation, because physical appearance was mediated by the reader's mind.

This leads to the last point: the relation between mimetic deepness and what can be described as the *unnatural attributes* of characters. It is important to clearly differentiate mimetic deepness, or "reality effect", from the conformity of the existent to the rules governing the real world. Unnatural narratology urges us to discuss the dimensions of characters that do not imitate life, or those transgressing ordinary narrative rules (Richardson 2015). Two cases must be clearly differentiated. In the first, even if non-natural in some ways, the character possesses some fundamental attributes helping us to treat her as a convincing person, and therefore, we should not necessarily consider that this fictional entity is lacking mimetic deepness. In the second case, the character may lack some of those basic features, and thus, he/she threatens the functioning of the narrative itself. The essential aspects differentiating these two cases must be found in the behavior of the fictional entities, because there is no narrative without a plot, and no plot without characters acting like real persons. All other aspects, internal or external, may be considered as merely superficial, even though they may play a secondary role in the evaluation of the mimetic deepness of the representation.

Obviously, *Game of Thrones* or *A Song of Ice and Fire* belong to the corpus of prototypical mimetic narratives, at least in the sense that characters do not lack deepness and they act like typical human agents. Of course, in this highly mimetic narrative, many elements differ from reality, but they do not alter our immersion into the narrative world, or the interest of the plot. Here again, Daenerys' eye color might be problematic in a filmic

representation, because it would contradict other important features: her attractiveness and the actress' ability to play her role naturally while hiding her eyes behind contact lenses. But she possesses many other unnatural qualities which are not problematic, like her resistance to fire and her bond with her dragons. What makes her a convincing person is more fundamental: it is the plausibility of her actions, the connection between her life-story and the building of her personality, the human-like nature of her motives, intentions, flaws or virtues.

Even a character like Leto II Atreides, in the *Dune* saga created by Frank Herbert, can be considered as mimetically convincing. The god emperor, who ruled the universe for 3500 years under the hybrid form of a human and a sandworm, is eternal and omniscient, but the novel offers us privileged access to his inner life, and thus, his story is presented as a fully understandable tragedy and a moving destiny. Therefore, the mimetic deepness of the character relies more on his plausible humanlike reactions to fictive—and sometimes completely unrealistic—circumstances, than on the nature of these circumstances or any other superficial attributes.

Instead, if characters act absurdly or incomprehensibly, if their actions seem to be pointless and unable to affect the progression of plot, if they seem completely baffling and unreachable for a classical intentional understanding, then these characters may affect more dramatically the narrativity of the representation and the functioning of plot. Vladimir and Estragon may look like banal hoboes, and by waiting for Godot in vain, they may reveal the absurdity of the human condition, but their strange reactions and the absence of narrative progression flatten the mimetic deepness of the representation. The mimetic narrative is replaced by a defamiliarization of narrative scripts, and existents appear as mere functions in a critical discourse addressed against mimetic illusion.

In a way, a character like Bugs Bunny could be considered as a person by the audience if we consider that he acts like a rational talking individual, with his phlegmatic personality and his indefectible sense of humor. But of course, in another way, he lacks some essential mimetic attributes, not because he looks like a rabbit—which is only a superficial feature—but rather because he acts like an unpredictable trickster in a highly metaleptic world, where transgressions do not simply contradict the physical laws of our own world, but satirically reflect the artificial nature of the representation. But Looney Tunes are slapstick comedies linked to early cinema; they are attractions rather than real narratives. True narratives cannot work without narrative immersion, without mimetic deepness and with at least a minimal interest in the unfolding of plot. That is why unnatural narratology deals mostly with marginal forms of narratives, and as such, it has the virtue to teach us what narrativity truly is by pointing toward what contradicts its core definition. In this case, it clearly urges us to discriminate essential from superficial features for any definition of mimetic deepness, which cannot be reduced to a mere imitation of the bare reality. Meanwhile, Daenerys' hair continues to float in that narrative world where we imagine she resides.

University of Lausanne

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Biography

Raphaël Baroni is professor of French at the University of Lausanne and the co-founder of the *Réseau romand de narratologie* (RRN) and of the *Groupe d'étude sur la bande dessinée* (GrEBD). He is the author of *La tension narrative* (Seuil, 2007), *L'œuvre du temps* (Seuil, 2009), and *Les rouages de l'intrigue* (Slatkine 2017). He has published numerous articles in journals such as *Narrative*, *Image [&] Narrative*, *Semiotica*, *Poétique*, *Littérature*, and *Questions de communication*. He is co-editor of several edited books or journal issues, among them: *Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology* (OSU Press, 2016).