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»Contextualism« Revisited

Among the numerous »new« narratologies proposed in recent years contextual approaches have enjoyed particular popularity. Feminist narratology, the earliest and so far most established strand of contextual narratology, has been joined by Marxist, postcolonial, intercultural and queer narratologies, to name but a few.

Today, a growing number of narratologists are exploring the colonial and post-colonial contexts as well as the intercultural functions of narratives, the semantics of literary forms or correlations between ideology and narrative structure. From their very beginnings, however, contextual narratologies have been criticised by proponents of classical, structuralist narratology who insist on the predominantly theoretical nature of narratological research and exclude what they regard as mere applications of narratological concepts in literary interpretation from narratology proper.

This essay argues against such strict distinctions between foundational narratological research exclusively concerned with theoretical modelling on the one hand, and narratologies studying the cultural embedding of narrative in specific historical contexts and constellations on the other. Its aims are to evaluate the pros and cons of context-oriented narratology, to discuss recent proposals for a postcolonial narratology as examples of the contextual approach in postclassical narratology, and to make the case for an intercultural narratology.

Section two revisits the model of the relationship between narratology and a theory of interpretation proposed by Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller. Their model illustrates the epistemological and methodological differences between the traditional, »autonomist« conception of narratology which regards narratology as an alternative to interpretation, and post-classical schools in narratology which emphasize the historical and cultural embedding of narrative structures and question strict distinctions between narratology and interpretation. Whereas the model offers a helpful comparative survey of recent methodological debates in narrative studies, its treatment of contextualist, foundationalist and heuristic positions is criticised for its tendency to emphasize categorical differences between closely related approaches. Equally problematic is the claim that contextual approaches to narrative fail to make significant contributions to narrative theory. Feminist critics have revised narratological concepts of voice and initiated a debate on the gender of narrative instances. The essay argues that the more recent postcolonial and intercultural narratologies have similar theoretical potential. It has to be admitted, though, that the reservations against contextual narratology held by more restrictive narratologists are not completely unfounded, as the narratological debate has reached a stage where programmatic proposals are only rarely complemented by in-depth studies.

Section three leaves the broader theoretical framework of the relationship between narratology and interpretation and turns to three essays by Monika Fludernik, Marion Gymnich and Gerald Prince, which illustrate the current scope of narratological responses to postcolonialism, ranging from a call for terminological precision in textual analysis to a search for new input into narratological systematics. Fludernik and Gymnich are mainly interested in bridging the gap between narrative theory and postcolonial literary studies by making use of narratology's heuristic potential for a better understanding of how ethnicity or

postcoloniality is evoked in narrative fiction. Prince's essay follows a different trajectory. Its aim is a systematic contribution to narrative theory rather than a better understanding of postcolonial or intercultural fiction by way of an analysis of specific qualities, recurrent features and dominant narrative techniques.

Section four sums up the essay's main argument in favour of contextual narratologies in general and intercultural narratology in particular. It is shown how literary strategies employed in multicultural narratives can be linked with traditional narratological concerns such as plot structures, the representation of time and space, perspective structures, irony or narrative unreliability. It will also be argued that the cross-cultural translatability and wide appeal of culture-specific aspects in cosmopolitan novels is partly due to the ways in which they address multiple audiences. Methodologically, narratological approaches to intercultural fiction can draw on existing studies of the semantics of literary forms as well as on cognitive concepts such as reader constructions, implicit personality theories or contextual anchoring.

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