

How I Became a Cognitive Narratologist: Fludernik's Towards a 'Natural' Narratology

written by Eva von Contzen | 1. October 2022

Reading Monika Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* meant an epiphany in my thinking about narrative texts. My first encounter with narrative theory had been in school - in my final year, I was taught German literature by a very enthusiastic teacher who introduced us to Gérard Genette's terms (e.g. 'focalization') and Franz Stanzel's typological circle. During my B.A. studies, Genette and Stanzel remained important; in fact, they were the only narrative theorists mentioned in the introductory classes to literary studies. Yet I was hooked: how fascinating it was to research the manifold ways in which narrative texts exert their influence; to think about character construction, narrative voices, the narrator as a concept, and the various kinds of perspectives! These questions became all the more urgent (and problematic) when I discovered medieval literature and fell in love with it. As much as I enjoyed toying with the structuralist approaches to narrative, I became increasingly frustrated with their lack of historical depth. It was all too clear that many of their (often implicit) assumptions about how narrative texts worked failed to take into account premodern narrative contexts - contexts in which even something as basic as the concept of the narrator may be difficult to maintain.

I don't remember exactly how and when I stumbled across Fludernik's work, but I remember that I found the title off-putting at first - what is a 'natural' narratology, and why should it be relevant to me? Also, the book itself, at least the copy I got (it was published by Routledge, which is known for its monochrome, no-nonsense bindings) was not exactly a feast for the eyes with its simple greyish cover. My naïve B.A. student self quickly discovered that one should not judge a book by its cover. Fludernik's study was eye-opening for me, not least because it was the first time that I encountered post-classical narratology. I was astonished by how confidently and carefully she developed her own theoretical approach; I was intrigued by her use of cognitive theories and the combination of linguistic, cognitive, and literary theories; and I was

delighted to read her analyses of English medieval and early modern narratives, which she sets in relation to later developments in narrative forms and functions.

A brief recapitulation of her approach: in contrast to structuralist narratology, Fludernik takes human everyday experiences and features of oral story-telling as the basis for her analysis. She argues that the spoken and the written mode of narrative are based on the same underlying premises. Through processes of narrativization, experiences are turned into stories. Narrative is regarded as the result of a dynamic process, which requires a human agent responsible for the telling of any narrative. A second important concept is narrativity: it refers to the cognitive strategies through which human beings are able to follow and understand a story, to distinguish between narrative and non-narrative texts, and also to create stories themselves. Fludernik's model consists of four levels of cognitive parameters, which hinge on the idea of experientiality. Experientiality is defined as the "quasi-mimetic invocation of 'real-life experience'" (1996: 12). Level I of her model comprises all pre-textual real-life experience of understanding and reacting to events. Level II introduces four viewpoints that describe the various aspects of narrative mediation. These are: TELLING (the real-world 'script'), VIEWING (the real-world schema of perception), EXPERIENCING (the access to one's own experience that can be turned into narratives), and ACTING (the frames readers use in the process of narrativisation, i.e. the dynamics initiated by the reading experience). Level III comprises the patterns of storytelling in terms of cognitive frames, such as different genres or the contexts of a performance. On level IV, finally, there is the complex process of narrativisation, i.e. the "all-embracing dynamic process engendered by the reading experience" (45). Based on this framework, Fludernik then traces the diachronic development of narrative forms. She highlights the episode as a crucial marker of change in the history of narrative forms, arguing for the relevance of the episode in earlier, oral-aural contexts vs. the subsequent replacement of episodic structure in favour of other structural arrangements of the plot.

For me, Fludernik's approach was liberating: I began to think anew about the forms and functions of medieval narrative from a cognitive narratological angle, which then provided the basis for my thesis, which focused on a Scottish collection of medieval saints' legends. I met Monika Fludernik for the first time

shortly before I submitted my thesis, approaching her to ask if she wanted to be my second reader. I was nervous to write to her and terrified when she agreed to be my reader - what if I had grossly misunderstood her approach? It turned out I hadn't; and little did I know that historical narratology, inspired by cognitive theory, would become one of my main research foci in the coming years! As a medievalist, I have always been more interested in historical narratology, which has a stronger synchronic thrust, while Fludernik's perspective is firmly diachronic in that she focuses more on the development of narrative forms and functions. I have had the immense pleasure of working with Monika Fludernik for a couple of years now, and her generosity and open-mindedness when it comes to developing narrative theory further has always struck me. And of course I still have the copy of *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* I bought as a student many years ago - an inconspicuous reminder of how a text can change one's way of thinking.