

The Shape of Things to Come

An Interview with Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen

DIEGESIS: How would you define narrative research?

Zetterberg-Nielsen: First of all thanks so much for inviting me to this interview. It is an honor to follow in the footsteps of Maria Mäkelä, who I believe was the first to be interviewed in this new format. In earlier formats, I have greatly enjoyed reading James Phelan, Brian McHale and other brilliant researchers responding on their view on narratology and narrative studies. *DIEGESIS* is such an important outlet for narrative research thanks to the work of Roy Sommer and his fellow editors.

That said, I will somewhat unkindly begin, like Melville's Bartleby, to respond to the request to define narrative research by saying, "I would prefer not to." I do promise, though, unlike Bartleby, to not pursue this line of response throughout. The reasons, I am not as inclined to go ahead defining, delimiting, dichotomizing, making-up-six-box-scheme-atizing, neologizing, subdividing, ostracizing, and alianizing, as narratologists, myself included, usually are, is firstly that I believe it is not for me to exclude specific areas of research from the realm of narrative research, and secondly that Maria already did a great job in the last issue of outlining various implications and connotations of the term.

As a brief addendum, though, I can add that my younger self was rather inspired, at a point, by Giorgio Agamben's interpretation, in *Potentialities* (1999), of Bartleby's repeated phrase, which Agamben takes to contain an experience of potentiality:

The experiment that Melville entrusts to Bartleby is of this kind. If what is at issue in a scientific experiment can be defined by the question "Under what conditions can something occur or not occur, be true or be false?" what is at issue in Melville's story can instead be formulated in a question of the following form: "Under what conditions can something occur *and* (that is, at the same time) not occur, be true *no more than not be true*?" Only inside an experience that has thus retreated from all relation to truth, to the subsistence or nonsubsistence of things, does Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" acquire its full sense [...] (Agamben 1999, 260–261)

This, in turn, could be interpreted as a narrative about what the study of narrative is about. Is it scientific, and if so in what sense? Is it about representations of entities and actions that are true or false? Entities that exist or not? Or potentially speaking, about events and characters that occur and do not; exist and do not. These questions seem to me to reach across fiction and non-fiction; referential and non-referential narrative as Dorrit Cohn would put it, and across mimetic and non-mimetic approaches to said narratives. Narrative studies as a whole seems to me to usefully do the same thing.

DIEGESIS: How would you describe your research project to a wider audience?

Zetterberg-Nielsen: Thanks for asking. I suppose you can say that I am engaged in two very different yet overlapping projects.

The first, and more consolidated project is on fictionality. In the wake of Richard Walsh's *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007) I have contributed to developing an approach to fictionality, which disconnects fictionality as a communicational and rhetorical resource from a one-to-one relationship with generic fiction.

Generic fiction, I understand as genres that have emerged (and sometimes again vanished) as genres about which the gradually conventionalized expectation has become that receivers will meet in these genres imagined stories often about non-actual states of affairs. Simona Zetterberg-Nielsen has demonstrated that the novel was the first genre of fiction in this specific sense. Readers slowly came to accept during the 18th century that texts labelled "novels" contained stories that were not lies even as they often described characters and events, which never existed. Novel readers gradually learned to expect to meet invented stories of imagination. Later the same holds true for audiences engaging with genres like the short story, the Hollywood movie, the computer game and so forth.

Fictionality, on the other hand, I conceive of as a rhetorical strategy also prevalent outside of generic fiction. This is clearly implied by Walsh but not really pursued very much here. At Aarhus University, I have founded the Centre for Fictionality Studies based on the very idea that fictionality is pervasive also outside fiction, and can be usefully examined in commercials, campaigns, political rhetoric, every day speech etc. Excellent researchers like Stefan Iversen, Louise Brix Jacobsen, Rikke Andersen Kraglund, Samuli Björninen, Maria Mäkelä, James Phelan, Simona Zetterberg-Nielsen and Richard Walsh himself have all made important contributions to understand fictionality in this capacity in its relation to humanitarian campaigns, hoaxes, intertextuality, factuality, consciousness, narrative medicine and literary non-fiction, literary history, meta-fiction and metalepsis.

I have also been fortunate enough to work with almost all these researchers on aspects of developing theories about fictionality. With Simona, I have suggested a delimitation and definition of fictionality as intentionally signaled invention in communication ("Distinguishing Fictionality") and with Jim and Richard, I published "Ten Theses about Fictionality" in 2015, outlining some of the major moves and shared ideas about the concept. With Stefan, I have done work on fictionality (as opposed to deception or plain subjectivity) in political documentaries.

Most recently, I have contributed to examining the consequences of a rhetorical approach to fictionality *in* fiction and in literary theory, which – as logical as it may sound – is something it has taken me some ten years to begin to wrap my head around. In *Fictionality and Literature – Core Concepts Revisited* forthcoming at Ohio State University Press this summer, a broad range of contributors each examine a concept (such as "author," "narrator," "ethics," "novel," "metaphor")

to ask how fictionality theory effects the understanding and use of the concepts. Next, we work on a follow-up publication with the working title “Analyzing Fictionality,” which moves to examine how interpretations – rather than conceptual frameworks per se – change when full attention is given to the fictionality of fiction from this new rhetorical perspective.

The second project is still in a much earlier stage. So much so that I am still shy and anxious to even present it. I will try to outline a few things about it next, though.

In a sense it applies fictionality to human sexuality in the same way one can examine it in, say, documentaries and commercials – and in a sense it is much broader than that. The contention of the project is that imagination and fictionality serve indispensable roles in what makes human sexuality human. Fictionality is often put in the service of producing desired physical effects or working for the sole benefit of autonomous psychological pleasures. Reversely and equally fundamental, the project claims that sexuality has played a huge role in the development of the human capacity to process narratives, including invented fictional narratives. Thus, I contend that invented, imagined stories not only *tell us* something important about sexuality but *constitute and form* a central, under-investigated part of sexuality itself. By and large fiction theory and fictionality theory has not been interested in sexuality at all. This despite the fact that sexuality is the subject of an absolutely overwhelming amount of tales and fictions and fantasies. This applies to porn, daydreams, sexual fantasies, role-playing games, and everyday imagination. When we use fictionality and narrative, we are very often concerned with sexuality. Having paid little or no interest to porn, sexual fantasies etc., narrative theory has blocked a very high percentage of all narratives in general from view. Conversely, research on sexuality has largely ignored issues of fiction and fictionality. The exception being research on sexual fantasies, and this research remains detached from other research on narrative and fictionality. The role that invented imaginary stories play for human sexuality remains unexamined. This is despite the fact that the use of the imaginary is one of the most defining features of human sexuality and a large factor in creating a successful sex life for many people; and despite the fact that we largely learn about gender and sexual norms, roles, expectations, etc. from fictions whether in the form of novels, porn, or TikTok.

In the project, I try to work out the relationships between the sexuality of homo sapiens having moved much further away from the purely physical and reproductive than all other species combined on the one hand, and the role of the imaginary in the form of fantasies and fictionality for human sexuality on the other hand. This turns out to provide for new perspectives of issues such as dominance, fetishism, mating strategies, non-reproductive sexual practices, preferences and more. It is a pleasure to work with excellent colleagues and researchers with expertise complementary to mine in this field such as Yonina Hoffman, Signe Ulbjerg Mortensen, Ditlev Tamm, and Camilla Paldam.

DIEGESIS: What are the most innovative aspects of your current project?

Zetterberg-Nielsen: Supposing there are any 😊, which is really not for me to judge. Yet, I can mention a couple of aspects that seem to be at least unusual about the most recent project. Hence, they are probably either innovative or stupid. First, the project considers mating systems across species and the likely human development from harems to monogamy as social norm and detachment from heat on the one hand to the role of imagined narratives in everyday (sex)-life on the other. Second, it makes claims about well-known biological concepts such as mate-guarding, sperm competition, dominance, and hierarchical disparities from a new perspective factoring in the importance for human beings of imagination and fictionality. Third, it assumes that fictionality is didactical to some degree, not least with respect to sexuality. I will follow up on this aspect in the next question. Thus, potentially, the project can contribute to make us look differently at the importance of fictionality for sexuality and the importance of sexuality for fictionality by bringing together scientific areas, which are rarely in dialogue.

DIEGESIS: In an ideal world, what could your project hope to achieve?

Zetterberg-Nielsen: This is a question we should always ask ourselves on a regular basis, isn't it? Thank you for offering me the opportunity to do so.

Beyond an abstract but very powerful desire to understand as many aspects of human sexuality as possible, I have the hope that the project can contribute to two complementary goals: depathologization and education.

I aim to demonstrate how the distinction between consensual and non-consensual, and between the overtly invented and imagined on the one hand, and the real and actualized on the other hand, allows us to de-pathologize many non-normative but widespread sexual fantasies, preferences, and practices. This, in turn, allows us to understand their roles in human sexuality, and to understand how it is possible that what would be disastrous in reality can be advantageous and pleasurable as fantasy. It is quintessential to strike a balance between vehemently countering all aspects of abuse and any kind of rape myth acceptance, misogyny and sexism, and at the same time avoiding to pathologize or claim as rare or non-existing what are actually very usual fantasies or consensual practices. The project suggests that one contribution to achieve both a de-pathologization of the harmless and common and a steely resistance to any form of malignant beliefs can be provided by the establishment of clear boundaries between communicating about invented fantasies and real actions; between fantasy and wish fulfillment, and between consensual practices and non-consensual crimes.

The other side of this, which leads me back to the didactic potential of fictionality is that I hope that working towards de-pathologization of consensual and healthy, yet possible non-reproductive and non-normative preferences can be accompanied by an even stronger resistance to psychopathical and pathological belief systems and practices. An average night out in the city for a young woman, still includes far more than one physical or mental assault. Inspired partly by the Everyday Sexism Project, my project contends that novels, TV-

series and mass-cultural products teach (especially young) people about sexual norms, expectations and actions in ways that influence their self-understanding and sexual becoming – much more so than institutional sex education.

When blockbuster series such as *Game of Thrones* and *365 Days* depict "heroines" destined to fall in love with their abductor and rapist, they contribute to shaping belief systems in viewers. We mirror ourselves in fictionality, and it is easy for a young person to think: 'Maybe I should just act like a strong man who takes what he wants, and then it will probably end well.' If the project could contribute to strengthening resistance to sexist myths and uninvited advances partly by means of an understanding of the importance and didactics of fictionality – and at the same time counter religious and conservative attempts to enforce heteronormative 'values' and condemn and castigate non-reproductive, non-normative and queer consensual practices – then that would make me proud.

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narrative research?

Zetterberg-Nielsen: Needless to say, there are several. Unless war, hunger, collapse of ecological systems and climate change make the planet uninhabitable shortly, so that, instead, there is none.

I see many important developments and contributions in narrative research over the next years – and then there are all the ones to which I am currently blind. In my own close vicinity, I see the importance as still growing of the ways in which James Phelan has moved our understanding of narratives towards an interest in their purposes, effects and rhetoric and towards seeing them as actions. Similarly, I believe that what Richard Walsh forcefully started in 2007 (and some previous articles) has given rise to many very worthwhile projects, and that maybe, we are, in a sense, in the very beginning of our trying to understand why and how we use fictional stories as a species. I see an interest in Simona and her groups in using fictionality theory to provide completely new horizons for genre understanding and in an exchange with other forms of knowledge and ideas of enlightenment, which I conceive of as innovative. In a similar context, I see one future of narrative studies in helping create precise, powerful stances on and resistance to post-enlightenment-tendencies and misinformation. In Tampere, there are several projects sustaining possible futures, and the story-critical approaches developed there are certainly important. On the fringes, maybe, of narrative research, Tobias Skiveren has recently brought fictionality and questions of interpretation to new and unexpected areas in highly rewarding ways in articles in *New Literary History* and *Theory, Culture & Society* (see Skiveren 2022 a, b). There is highly important work on narrative and politics and ideology going on in several places, notably the Horizon 2020 project "Crises as OPPORTUNITIES: Towards a Level Telling Field on Migration and a New Narrative of Successful Integration," whose scientific coordinator is Roy Sommer (see also Gebauer and Sommer 2021). Divya Dwivedi, similarly, is making several important contributions on the relations between narrative, politics and

religion. I hope and think that narrative studies will considerably impact and improve our understanding of our place in and interaction with the world and each other in ways that continue to bridge and explore gaps between form(alism) and (political/ideological/cultural) matter.

DIEGESIS: Imagine the perfect Tweet someone would post about your project.

Zetterberg-Nielsen: That is a perfect invitation to engage in fictionality, thanks! Here's what I imagine:

"Thanks, Henrik, for our collaboration. I feel we mutually brought much to each other and that the article benefited from an integration of our insights and perspectives.

PS: Henrik; you know how awkward I feel using Twitter, and how difficult it is for me to stay below the ridiculous 280 word limit. I am not even sure, this kind of message is a good fit with the medium or that it will stick to your Twitter-wall (is that even a thing?). If it does, I'd also just like to add:

Elon Musk, if you are listening in on your recent (perhaps/perhaps-not-because-you-fault-Twitter-for-not-doing-your-own-due-diligence) purchase: You are a presumptuous, post-factual, stock-market-manipulating, tax-evading MF who could have done very well but didn't.

Oh, and Henrik: Let's discuss more joint projects next month at the conference one night."

Henrik is a professor at Aarhus University and was a visiting professor at Tampere University (2014–2018). He is head of the research group [Narrative Research Lab](#) as well as the [Centre for Fictionality Studies](#) at Aarhus University. His research has attempted to contribute to conversations about mainly three areas of narrative theory: first-person narration; unnatural narratology; and fictionality. His current project is on human sexuality and the roles of imagination and fictionality in human sexual practices and preferences. Sample publications in English include "The Impersonal Voice in First-Person Narrative Fiction" (*Narrative* [May 2004]), *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, co-edited with Jan Alber and Brian Richardson (Ohio State University Press, 2013), "Ten Theses about Fictionality," co-written with James Phelan and Richard Walsh (*Narrative* [January 2015]), and *Narratology and Ideology*, co-edited with Divya Dwivedi and Richard Walsh (Ohio State University Press, 2018); *Fictionality and Literature*, co-edited with James Phelan et al., is forthcoming at the Ohio State University Press. His Danish publication *Fiktionalitet* (2013) won the prize as Danish text book of the year across disciplines awarded by Samfundslitteratur.

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