

Narrative Criticism: Basic Outline

A Brief Summary of Fisher's Account

In 1984 Walter Fisher proposed a new framework for understanding human communication, specifically public moral argument.¹ This new framework he called the narrative paradigm.² Although the narrative perspective does not emerge with Fisher, he, as Foss, Foss and Trapp assert, is the person who has developed it “most fully in the speech communication field.”³ In that original essay Fisher makes reference to Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981) as the inspirational work for his idea of the narrative paradigm.⁴ Fisher especially quotes MacIntyre’s statement regarding the narrative character of man: “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.”⁵ Fisher again supports this assertion in a more recent essay entitled “Narration, Knowledge and the Possibility of Wisdom” (1995) in which he states, “The underlying premise of my argument is Alasdair MacIntyre’s observation that man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.”⁶ Before proceeding with his argument he makes two important claims that are crucial to his thesis. First, he provides a broad definition of narration: “By narration I refer to a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them.”⁷ Second, he defines “paradigm” as a “representation designed to formalize the structure of a component of experience and to direct understanding and inquiry into the nature and functions of that experience—in this instance the experience of human communication.”⁸ With the first definition Fisher broadly extends the reach of

¹Fisher, *Narration*, 1.

²Ibid., 2.

³Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*, (Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1991) 331.

⁴Fisher, *Narration*, 1.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Walter R. Fisher, “Narration, Knowledge, and The Possibility of Wisdom, *Rethinking Knowledge: Reflections Across the Disciplines* (New York: State University of NY Press, 1995) 169.

⁷Fisher, *Narration*, 2.

⁸Ibid.

what many would traditionally consider narrative to be, and with the second definition he seeks to posit narrative as a meta-paradigm under which he will subsume all other discursive forms.

Fisher describes five features of his conceptualization that will serve here to encapsulate the paradigm:

- (1) Humans are essentially storytellers;
- (2) The paradigmatic mode of human decision making and communication is “good reasons” which vary in form among communication situations, genres, and media;
- (3) The production and practice of good reasons are ruled by matters of history, biography, culture and character;
- (4) Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of narrative probability (what constitutes a coherent story) , and their constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, (whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives); and
- (5) The world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life.⁹

In proposing narrative as a meta-paradigm, and with his claim that rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings Fisher posits it against what he dubs the dominant traditional mode, the *rational world* paradigm. His argument stipulates that the rational world paradigm requires argumentative competence, knowledge of issues, modes of reasoning, etc. and as such limits participations by people, whereas narrative rationality does not make these demands and allows fuller participation because “we acquire narrativity in the natural process of socialization.”¹⁰

In 1987 Fisher proceeded to elaborate the differences between traditional rationality and narrative rationality in an article titled “Technical Logic, Rhetorical Logic and Narrative Rationality.” In that article he claimed that narrative rationality is a rhetorical logic, that is, a logic in opposition to a technical, objectivist and formal logic.¹¹ Finally, in the most recent iteration of the paradigm (1995),

⁹Fisher, *Narration*, 8.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Walter R. Fisher, “Technical Logic, Rhetorical Logic and Narrative Rationality.” *Argumentation* 1 (1987) : 3-21

not only does Fisher present his arguments against rational logic, he also contrasts the claims to knowledge of objectivist thinking (the rational paradigm) against the kind of knowledge which the narrative paradigm produces, making clear that objectivist logic although producing knowledge of *that*, and knowledge of *how* does not tell us or generate knowledge of *whether* — “whether some things are desirable to do beyond what is instrumentally feasible and profitable.”¹² Narrative finally, serves as a master metaphor, one that constitutes humans as *Homo Narrans*, and encompasses all other candidates for master metaphor.

What is the point of view of a narrative?

The point of view is the way a story is told. Does the narrator know everything? Are they omniscient? What is the perspective established by the author, speaker, or text? Perspective is important because it is through such perspectives that you as audience are presented with the rest of the elements of the story. How does the perspective help to shape, influence, or direct your attitudes, beliefs, or actions?

Some prompts for the study of narrative

1. Follow how particular narratives circulate and are disseminated among various groups.
2. Try to discover the history of particular myths, urban legends, parables, or other stories. Who tells them? From what perspective? How do the stories differ?
3. What kind of stories are given primacy, or privileged by a certain class, group, culture, profession? What kind of characters populate those stories? What actions do the characters take? What situations drive specific kinds of actions in stories?
4. How do people “live” narratives? For instance, how do students live the narrative of the “bright, engaged, and active Willamette student?” What do people here mean when they say “the Willamette Experience?”
5. Think about who is excluded from certain narratives. What kind of actions, settings, and events are not present? How are certain characters, or perspectives described or presented?
6. How have you put to use those fables, or short stories that you were told as a child?
7. Take a maxim or proverb and try to expand it into the narrative it tells.
8. Look carefully at a narrative: when does conflict emerge? What clash of values lead to the conflict? Is conflict generated by actions of humans against themselves, against nature or God, against other humans, or against culture and society?
9. How does a narrative encourage you to adopt a particular identity? That is, who does the narrative encourage you to be?
10. How does a narrative appeal to you as a member of a collective (group, mass)?
11. How does a particular narrative, or set of narratives, influence or shape your interpretation of a situation?
12. How do narratives help you to make sense of experience? Of the world?

¹²Fisher, “Narration, Knowledge,” 172.

Story, Genre, Emplotment

Most often we think of narrative as “story.” While that is not necessarily wrong, narrative does imply story, it is significantly much more than that. Narrative finds much of its force in the power of form, structure, pattern. As such, narrative should remind you of our conversation about genre. From literature class we remember that we have large categories in which we “sort” literary texts. For instance, we have poetry, essay, and story, and within each of those we have subcategories. Narration is a specific genre, one that follows a particular form to convey messages. Essential characteristics of that genre we call narrative include plot, characters, and setting. These characteristics help provide structure to narrative. That is, they “structure” the possible actions and events that take place within the narrative.

Plot itself should remind you of the process of text formation (weaving together). The process of creating a plot is called “emplotment.” Emplotment is a process by which we bring disparate elements (events, actions, characters, situations) into one coherent unity. When Fisher says with McIntyre that humans are essentially storytellers, they imply that we perform this emplotment operation on our daily lives, our experiences.