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# Narratology Version []]: A Review of Zhao Yiheng's A General Narratology

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In Zhao Yiheng's recent book A General Narratology, he makes it clear at the outset that his book is intended as a "semiotic study of narratives in a general sense, that is, a study of the universal rules of all narrative genres". (Zhao 2013: 3) A general narratology is thus a semio-narratology that examines all forms of narrative-based semiotic texts. This is a task that has never been attempted before. The academic study of narratives has long revolved around the novel, and, therefore, the theoretical model is largely set up by the narratology of fiction. With Zhao's definition of narrative as "an event involving human character(s) being organised into a text", the "past by default" tense of the fictional narrative is challenged and expanded to include other time dimensions such as the performative, the mental and the conative narratives. (Zhao 2013: 8)

Zhao formulates his theory around four major concerns. Starting from a classification of narratives by the principle of textual intentionality, the first

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part offers a categorical analysis of different genres in terms of the time dimension, medium and framing. The second part discusses three crucial factors involved in the construction of narratives: the narrator, the secondary narrativisation and the "fabula-syuzhet" relations. The third part explores the time and plot that lead to a philosophical contemplation of the ontological qualities and accessibility of the three worlds, namely, the possible world, the impossible world and the actual world. Finally, the tensions between the narrative subjectivities are dealt with to illuminate the tangling conceptions of the implied author, personalisation of frames and stratification.

Compared with Zhao's When the Teller is Told about published sixteen years ago, A General Narratology shares with it a critical scope and methodology based on a comparative poetics that incorporates discussions of both Western and Eastern (mostly Chinese) narrative texts, while further extending the cross-national perspective to a cross-media concern. However, the breakthrough is prominent as A General Narratology adopts a semiotic approach with aims to offer a more ubiquitous theoretical paradigm and moves beyond the narratology of the novel by taking into account a wide range of narrative genres across media, including genres neglected by traditional or post-traditional narratology, such as news, advertisements, computer games, sports, laws and so on. The classical theorisation of the narrator, the implied author, narratorial unreliability and issues of time and plot has been revisited and revised to accommodate narrative texts of alternative media. Throughout the book, Zhao introduces notions such as textual intentionality as the criteria for genre categorisation, double segregations that differentiate fictional and factual narratives, frame-person duality of the narrator, cross-world accessibility that seeks to explain differences in textual styles, the omni-text and the general implied author as the reservoir of the textual meanings and values. In order to catch a glimpse of semio-narratology in the book, I would like to go over some of the key concepts.

Zhao first discusses the concept of "textual intentionality" as the starting point for establishing a classification of narrative genres. Textual intentionality is defined as the relationship between the narrator and the narratee, in which the text assumes "interior intentions of meaning and

(Zhao 2013: 23) Based on one of three moods, Zhao proposes to classify narrative genres into the three modes of intentions (declarative, interrogative, imperative), which, according to Emile Benveniste, correspond with three times (past, present, future), and various media (man-made media, ready-made media, etc). Thereupon, all narrative genres break into three groups: the recorded, the performative, and the conative. Furthermore, both the recorded and performative categories can be divided and fictionalnarratives, while the conative (e. advertisements, promises and prophecies) intending to exert influences on the addressee, must be factual. Zhao has noted that the conative narrative as an important category has not been investigated by narratological scholars so far. (Zhao 2013: 57)

When dealing with the distinctions between factual and fictional narratives, Zhao brings in the notion of "frame-segregation" as a feasible foundation for differentiating the two groups. The primary framing is a process of mediation that segregates the represented world from the actual world. The factual narrative marked by the primary framing is therefore referring to the actual world, and would sometimes be mistaken for the facts due to the illusion created by the transparency of the frame. Photography or images, for example, might be seen as reality itself rather than its reflection. (Zhao 2013: 75) The fictional narrative is segregated by a secondary framing on top of the primary one, and what is within the secondary frame does not refer to exterior reality but constitutes a narrated world claiming "horizontal authenticity". (Zhao 2013: 71) The fictional narrative is opaque to the actual world. This factual/fictional dichotomy induces an interesting contrast between lies and fiction: the fictional narratives unfolding within the secondary frame cannot be taken as a lie, while a lie can be regarded as a lie because it is factual, that is, concerning with facts. The double segregation in effect determines how a narrative text should be read "culturally" by the community.

The theory of frame-segregation is closely related to the idea of "frameperson" duality of the narrator which presents itself either as aperson or a narrative frame. The narrator takes the form of a human story-teller when

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personalised, otherwise a frame of cues is set for constructing the narrative. The two narratorial phases coexist in any narrative text, though the dominant phase determines the particular narrative genre and style. Zhao examines forms of the narrator in various genres. In factual narratives the narrator is identifiable with the author, and is, therefore, highly personalised. In fictional recorded narratives both phases of the narrator appear. In performative narratives the narrator appears as a set of cues. In interactive narratives such as in computer games, and in dream narratives, the narrative frame is manifest only to the narratee.

The problem of narrator has always been a core and yet annoying issue in traditional and post-traditional narratology. From this perspective, the narrator in the novel can be better understood. The third-person implicit narrator in fiction is virtually the frame, but at times the implicit narrator shows up as a person intruding on the narrative. In *When the Teller is Told About*, the narrator is basically treated as personalised subjectivity. Theoretically, the formulation of the frame-person narrator is a step forward as Zhao puts it, "If we are to establish a general narratology, we have to find a general narrator." (Zhao 2013: 91)

The final part of the book concerning the tension between narrative subjectivities revisits and reinvents the frustrating issues of the implied author, narratorial unreliability, narrative hierarchy, and meta-narratives. In order to deduce a general implied author, Zhao brings in a semiotic perspective and a new concept of "omni-text" consisting of the text and its indispensable co-textual elements in order to provide a grounding for textual interpretation. It is predicated upon the omni-textual integrity that constructing the general implied author as a unified quasi-subjectivity becomes possible. Zhao regards the implied author in factual narratives as identifiable with the author and narrator, pointing out that the factual narrative may be unbelievable but must be "reliable" for the three parties of the narratorial subjectivity are converged as one by its genre conventions.

In the section about narrative hierarchy, Zhao proposes new terms, such as "stratification", "trespass of stratification", and "cyclical trespass of stratification", to clarify existent terminological and conceptual confusion.

He defines "stratification" as "the higher narrative level providing the lower level with a narrator or narratorial frame". (Zhao 2013: 264) This expanded definition encompasses narrative frame— "push in" and "pop out"—that functions as the sub-narratorial frame in the performative narratives. In modern narratives of films and fiction, Zhao notes, the absence of "push in" for the subnarratorial frame is a technique frequently used in creating suspense and illusions.

Whilst stratification per se is found in all narrative genres, trespass of stratification is characteristic of, though not exclusive to, the fictional narrative. He highlights the paradoxical form of "cyclical trespass of stratification", in which the lower narrative level turns to encircle a high narrative level. Only by this cyclical structure, though inevitably causing contradictions in time and logic, can the self-referential dilemma of narration be resolved. Zhao compares these cyclical "trespasses" in the recorded and performative narrative, demonstrating the fact that the time entanglement produced in the novel is generally ignored in the performative narratives due to their stratified synchonicity.

Zhao examines meta-narrativisation as the inter-relation of narrative levels and frames that generally exist in a variety of semio-narrative texts. All meta-narratives share the quality of disturbing the frame that is supposed to segregate the narrated world from the actual one. Zhao sums up 5 types of meta-mechanism extensively adopted in contemporary culture: self-exposure of narrative construction, narrative options coexisting in a text, interactions of different narrative levels, and narrative parasitic upon pre-texts.

In his earlier work When the Teller is Told about, Zhao points out that meta-fiction is a form of "performative criticism" where narrative strategies are deliberately exposed in order to subvert the naturalisation of the represented "reality" and dissolve the embedded ideology. (Zhao 1994: 291) The meta-consciousness is in essence a critical consciousness. But in the multi-media milieu of contemporary society, meta-consciousness is more actively at work as it has to accommodate the commercialism of narratives. In A General Narratology, Zhao looks at meta-narrative features, such as how advertisements expose their making for humorous effects, how games interact

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to produce a meta-game, and how films and fiction refer to one another either for parody or for subversive recreation.

One notable phenomenon of the contemporary culture, Zhao suggests, is the ramification of one narrative text intoother media, which Zhao calls the omni-mediation of a pre-text. Prototypes of the Batman, Transformers and Superman have endlessly been reproduced and adapted into any possibly profitable medium. In this digitalised, media age, the question mark is left as to how to preserve the critical edge of meta-consciousness in face of pervasive meta-consumption and how to deploy this critical potential for a breakthrough of human knowledge.

The study of narratology has reached a critical moment after a century's development while the "narrative turn" in every discipline of the humanities has become increasingly prominent. The narratology of fiction set up by scholars like Wayne C. Booth and Gerard Genette can hardly live up to the epistemological challenges and demands of the multi-media age. Although some sporadic studies on narratives of certain media have appeared, there is want for a full-length book about what is common to all narratives. A General Narratology is such an effort that could bring the century-old discipline of narratology, after the traditional and the post-traditional stages, to its Version III.

#### **Works Cited**

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