

Narrative Contestations

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Review Essay:

Michael Bamberg & Molly Andrews (Eds.) (2004). Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 380 pages, ISBN 90-272-2644 X (Eur), 1-58811 542-9 (US) USD 126

Key words:
narrative analysis,
narrative theory,
counter-narratives,
big and small
narratives,
methodology

Abstract: The study of counter-narratives is a promising, yet largely neglected approach to narrative studies. This review draws on the idea that counter-narrativity might theoretically and methodologically connect the cultural, political and personal contents of narratives with the forms of narration in new ways. The anthology is discussed from the perspective of how each article contributes to identifying and theorizing both master and counter-narratives. At the same time, the book is introduced as an interesting forum for many current debates in qualitative research. The ongoing debate between contributors and discussants displays alternative strategies in reading narrative materials.

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1. General Introduction

The topic of counter-narratives is both significant and thorny. The whole ethics of the narrative turn in social sciences has often been grounded on the vision of providing public and scholarly discussions with new stories, voices and perspectives. The themes of silenced, forgotten or marginalized narratives thus re-emerge constantly. The same turn to narrative in the humanities, (having taken place two decades earlier), however, was more interested in the *conventionality* of narratives (following the model of PROPPian fairy tales; PROPP, 1968) and scholars often wanted to see stories from the perspective of grammars and structures. Following this lead, scholars sometimes wanted to show how people are always telling the same story, with only slight variation. The "narrativist" historian Hayden WHITE (1987) understood historical narrative as being imposed

on the factual plurality of events and, therefore, equaled the need to narrativize and to moralize. There is no shortage of literature proffering narrative a straightforward ideological and/or political role—be it benign or detrimental. The vocabulary of counter-narratives, vis-à-vis master, dominant or hegemonic narratives and cultural scripts, works in a different way and aptly foregrounds the *variety* of narratives and resists any narrative essentialism. There are, therefore, many good reasons to welcome the anthology *Considering counter-narratives* by Michael BAMBERG and Molly ANDREWS. [1]

The volume consists of six empirical articles, each discussed by several more or less critical commentators, an introduction by Molly ANDREWS and concluding remarks by Michael BAMBERG. As for characterizing counter-narratives, the editors leave the reader in a state of suspense. As ANDREWS formulates it in the introduction, the editors wanted to leave definitions open to see how different authors would react to the theme. Thus the picture of counter-narratives emerges in pieces, through competing and complementary perspectives, by way of proposals and counter-arguments, before BAMBERG gathers the discussion in his essay at the end of the volume. [2]

Rather than delving into the contents of the six empirical studies as such, I choose to foreground a few key layers of the book. On my reading, there is an ongoing debate concerning what is meant by narrative to begin with. This is continued by diverse views on how to do narrative analysis properly. Finally, these issues indicate different strategies of finding and theorizing counter-narratives. With its 27 contributors (!) and six separate debates and numerous argumentative cultures, the volume offers a rare opportunity to engage with a fair portion of the prevailing tensions and controversies within the field. [3]

2. Discipline as a Master Narrative?

Molly ANDREWS writes on counter-narratives "of early maternal influence" by re-reading her earlier interviews of four elderly socialist activists. Their stories are contrasted with the dominant "story of mothering" (p.8) or developmental psychology as one "grand narrative" of modernity. Feminist research and the reading of the four interviews are interpreted in terms of criticism of the "mother-blaming characteristic of much developmental work" (p.9). Disciplines may thus be generating master narratives, while the "relationship between the academic literature and commonsense notions of it is a symbiotic one" (p.10). [4]

ANDREWS' interviewees tell about beatings, poverty, death and depression, but in such a manner that they never accuse their mothers. Instead of blaming, historical understanding of their mothers was the characteristic attitude. The stories that align themselves on the side of feminist research and against the dominant heritage of developmental psychology are thus interpreted as counter-narratives. I find ANDREWS' analysis of the counter-narration convincing enough, yet the "master narrative" might have profited from further exploring it as *a narrative*. Is it principally a narrative—and not a discourse, cultural script or an ideological thesis. [5]

Shlomith RIMMON-KENAN (2006, p.12) asks poignantly in a similar case: "Who, for example, *narrates* the ideological construct in question? The hegemony, some would say, but the hegemony only narrates in a metaphoric and necessarily implicit way (otherwise it would not be an effective disguise)." Of course, as Michael BAMBERG (2005, p.287) notes, "in late-modern and post-modern social and literary analyses the term 'master narrative' has been extended to all sorts of legitimisation strategies for the preservation of status quo with regard to power relations and difference in general." Hilde LINDEMANN NELSON (2001, p.158) says it even more clearly: "(I)n many instances [master narrative] doesn't designate any single narrative with a specific plot and a fixed cast of characters [...] But most master narratives aren't so much stories than as ensembles of repeated themes that take on a life of their own." Many narratologists typically have difficulties in accepting or understanding this very broad usage of (master) narrative (TAMMI, 2006; RYAN, 2005). My worry is empirical, because at least LINDEMANN NELSON's version gives the critical scholar fairly free hands to attach damaging features to these "master narratives," precisely because one cannot locate and characterize them except theoretically. [6]

3. Institutional Master Narratives

Jaber F. GUBRIUM and James A. HOLSTEIN (forthcoming) have acknowledged the relevance of institutional, narrative environments. This is an important step away from the structuralist tendency to study narratives only as individual and separate texts, and towards the study of narrative practices. Institutional master narratives could now be read as instances of such "narrative control" as GUBRIUM and HOLSTEIN theorize and, the other way round, institutional settings can be seen as key locations of master narratives. [7]

Karen THORSBY's case, negotiating "normalcy" when *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) fails, sets the counter-narratives into that of a clear institutional setting. Now the dominant stories seem much easier to outline: there are "the happy and the hopeless" versions (p.62). Women who had difficulties in conceiving can find proper help and healthy babies by entering the IVF process, or they are "infertile." Yet 80 percent of the treatment cycles fail, leaving the women without a sound storyline. THORSBY discovers that many of her interviewees' "claim to explicitly maternal feminine attributes," in accounting for their situation and choices, is a strategy of conformity to resist the normative standards (p.79). The idea of resistance mobilizing elements of conformity is well known from the history of political thought and here it seems to resist the idea of pure polarity between master and counter-narratives. [8]

Photographs might have a far more central role in the study of alternative and counter-narratives of life, argues Barbara HARRISON. It is possible, for example, to see families as particular narrative environments with privileged genres, characters and story-lines—and photographs respectively as sites and sources of counter-narration. Alexander PODDIKOV suggests the prominence of family conflicts over old photographs and all the practices of erasing unsuitable persons from pictures and albums. There is no need to go to the extremities of the Stalin

era to find such family erasures. Paul AUSTER (1982) relates in his *The Invention of Solitude* about finding an unaccounted for erasure in his father's photo album, which finally leads to the acknowledgment of a silenced murder story in his family. What AUSTER generates in the process is a genuine counter-narrative. But as HARRISON retorts to PODDIKOV, counter-narratives need not be negative as such. For example, AUSTER's story resulted in a deeper understanding of his father's mysteries. [9]

4. The Invited Master Narrative

The matrix of narratives and counter-narratives receives further elaboration in Rebecca L. JONES' article on older women talking about sex. JONES rejects both the overly broad definitions of narrative (like Richard CHALFEN, saying in the volume that "we established 'narrative' to mean any or all kinds of verbal utterance that occur from when photographs are first taken out for viewing to the time they are put away," pp.147-148) as well as the LABOVian (LABOV & WALETSKY, 1997), structurally oriented and narrow approach, preferring what she calls the "discursive approach to narrative" (p.171). However, these individual narratives ("produced by speakers in order to do particular rhetorical work within interaction," p.171) are not the exclusive narratives in her model. She recommends the concept of "storyline," to refer to "a family of related plots which carry with them recognizable characters, expected situations and anticipated outcomes" (p.172). Is this a more modest, limited, and empirical version of post-structuralist "master narrative"? [10]

JONES is exceptionally helpful in outlining the way the cultural scripts or master narratives "exist," and how they are empirically drawn into actual conversations. Instead of a binary setting, with brave individuals against hegemonic plots, she outlines a triangle with (at least) two cultural story-lines: the *dominant* line, expecting old people's diminishing interest in sex, and the *liberal* line, postulating sexually active old people, and the *individual* storylines reflecting both of the cultural alternatives. This triangle creates new space between master and hegemonic narratives, and gives additional nuances to the analysis. The setting resembles the more general situation of narrative contestation, which is typical for law courts and many other conflictive situations (e.g., ABBOTT, 2002, pp.138-155). One more admirable feature in JONES' article was the interest in the ways the speakers themselves announce when they are resisting, that is, offering a counter-narrative, albeit her sociolinguistic commentators were keen on requiring a far more detailed reading of the interaction. [11]

5. Cultural Studies Meet Sociolinguistics?

The debates between broader, cultural studies orientation, and the stricter, sociolinguistic readings and definition of narrative continue in an interesting way with Corinne SQUIRE's article on daytime television talk shows. Even though "race," gender and class need not be openly addressed in the talk shows, the settings of the shows bring them back in a number of ways, argues SQUIRE. Black hosts and audiences function in the role of model citizens, while "the story

of a shade of white, which we could call white trash or trailer park white, has become the story of social pathology on these shows" (p.227). [12]

SQUIRE foregrounds interestingly the larger, cultural move towards personal story-telling and the huge success of this genre in media since the 1960s. In other words, the article portrays a social process which is, in a way, parallel to the popularity of methods and perspectives of the study itself. There are two levels of narration going on, and apparently causing problems for the analysis and the discussants: narratives *in* television and *tele-visual* narratives. As a result, the researcher both tells and tells apart the narratives, which always causes difficulties for more empirical orientations. In the best spirit of cultural studies SQUIRE resists a clean divide between master and counter-narratives:

"A universalizing narrative about parenting here becomes a counter-narrative, a kind of alternative theory [...] Dominant narratives are always less stable and unified than they appear, more susceptible to fracture and subversion, and it is on these fault lines that such stories of citizenship work" (p.235). [13]

Most of SQUIRE's commentators demanded more detailed analysis of the discussions' transcripts, a wish SQUIRE could not grant because of copyright reasons. Most interestingly, the discussion laid out a remarkable polarity in terms of defining narrative, either strictly as "verbal activities with more or less well-defined" structures or as "a genre" or a "way of constructing the social world" (p.279). SQUIRE's criticism of the narrow, LABOVian model of socio-linguistic narrative is well-grounded. She partly resorts to a rhetorical version of narrative, recognizing and emphasizing the relevance of receiver and situation as parts of the narrative context. However, I am not sure what it means to call narrative "a social genre." Quite obviously there can be many kinds of social genres, both narrative and non-narrative. [14]

Monika FLUDERNIK (2000), a linguistically oriented literary narratologist, expresses an often shared understanding by calling narrative a "macro-genre," making a distinction with other discursive genres (e.g. instruction). A way between the too narrow and too all-encompassing definitions might be found in the way narratologists have recently discussed the "bare minimum" criteria on narrative (ABBOTT, 2002; RIMMON-KENAN, 2006). [15]

6. Countering the Narrative of the Self

Mark FREEMAN adds one more angle to counter-narratives. He recounts a story about his first journey to Berlin, his sudden and unforeseen emotional turmoil; a full exposure to Jewish history and the consequent atrocities. To interpret this confusing experience, he introduces the concept of "narrative unconsciousness." Instead of something "dynamically suppressed" in a Freudian sense, his reference of unconsciousness is cultural, storied (and possibly forgotten) inheritance and its emergence relevant in experiences of epiphany. FREEMAN's point is to argue that we are more than just individual consciousnesses. A similar

point, from the perspective of cognitive narratology, has recently been made by Alan PALMER (2004). [16]

I read FREEMAN's concept as a proposal to allow for a number of different autobiographical accounts and explanations, depending both on a concrete situation (Berlin) and the layers of cultural heritage thereby made relevant. Paul RICOEUR (2004), one of FREEMAN's key sources of inspiration, has tackled a parallel problem of writing historiography by using *changing scales* reaching from the micro-history of concrete actors and their intentions to almost immovable structural history. In this language, FREEMAN's experience might be characterized as a sudden recognition of himself from the perspective of a larger cultural scale. Yet, it might be problematic to privilege explanations based on this broader cultural heritage in contrast to explanations based on the analysis of local agents and their actions, as FREEMAN seems to do when he reads Czeslaw MILOSZ's work. On the other hand, it is not a one and unitary thing. Jens BROCKMEIER points out that cultural heritage and memory of cities are far from unitary things. His memories of *his* Berlin as a radical and culturally multiple metropolis open one of the most enjoyable dialogues in the volume. [17]

The key lesson of FREEMAN's contribution, to me, is that we may need counter-narratives and radical revision in regard to our own story, and not only with regard to master narratives of the larger culture. What if the life stories people tell in interviews tend themselves to be master narratives? [18]

7. Theorizing Master and Counter-Narratives

All the articles and comments contribute to the understanding of counter-narratives; yet very few try systematically to theorize the field of master and counter-narratives. Luckily, this is what Michael BAMBERG's concluding article endeavors to do in an elegant and original way. The author rejects the idea of narrative as a privileged genre, yet he finds its particular role in identity building, "because narratives order characters in space and time and, therefore, as a format lends itself [...] also to revealing character transformation in the unfolding sequences from past to future" (p.354). [19]

BAMBERG is admirably good at connecting key concerns of the life-as-narrative approach and sociolinguistics in his discussion. He is undoubtedly right about the risks accompanying the well-known analogy of narrative and human life and the consequent tendency to over-emphasize the reflective, confessional mode of research interviews. Few people "have" such premeditated stories on hand and have few ordinary situations where such stories are required or accepted. [20]

Still, it is an entirely different question whether narrative *reflection* itself is so thoroughly exceptional after all. People still read novels, see films and watch television narratives, in the familiar way of identifying with characters. Such reception, which is utterly difficult to address in a strictly sociolinguistic context, is indeed a very open, imaginative and reflective process. The television series

Northern Exposure used to explore and play with this on-going practice of reflection and identification rather hilariously with the help of films. [21]

Master narratives as cultural scripts, BAMBERG says, provide people with the mundane and necessary course of events, the intelligibility of everyday life. Thus "many, possibly even most, of the master narratives employed remain inaccessible to our conscious recognitions and transformation" (p.361). Instead of a binary opposition between master (read here: hegemonic) and counter-narratives, BAMBERG constructs several gradations from master to hegemonic, and tries to find a way from essential counter-narratives into what he calls the situated "doing being critical." I cannot but think: what if this thought-provoking text had been available before writing the other essays? [22]

This is a many-layered book that identifies where narrative studies currently are located and where they should be located. In its own practices of debate, the book is homage to alternative telling and, for that matter, alternative reading. The book is thus consistent with the ethics of narrative studies: there is certainly not one single truth available in its texture. In terms of the disciplinary differences, the criticism of social sciences, psychology and cultural studies typically came from the direction of socio-linguists. This reflects the obvious tension between "small" vs. "big" narratives of identity (e.g., BAMBERG vs. FREEMAN, respectively). What astonishes me is the absence of the contribution of post-classical narratology in the study of longer narratives. [23]

The book leaves a couple of open challenges. I think that cultural studies need to clarify the concept of (counter) narrative, and thus respond to the criticism coming from narratology and socio-linguistics. What could be the role of imagination, fiction and its possible worlds as regards master narratives? This question remains in the shadows together with the whole of literary narrative theory. How does the concept of "side-shadowing" (MORSON, 1994) relate to the process of narrative contestation? In thinking about the role of photographs in one's story, Freeman's narrative unconsciousness and Galen STRAWSON's (2004) recent attack against linear and teleological narrativity, I would like to suggest one more category of counter-narrative, that is, autobiographical accounts that do not fit into the first, grand and causally strong narratives of life. [24]

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Citation

Hyvärinen, Matti (2007). Narrative Contestations. Review Essay: Michael Bamberg & Molly Andrews (Eds.) (2004). Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense [24 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 8(3), Art. 34, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703346>.