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Shaul R. Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, New York: Routledge, 2015; xiv + 104 pp., US\$32.95 (pbk).

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While the study of narratives is increasing and embracing more forms of storytelling in diverse social sciences, researchers make use of theoretical and analytical methods imported in uneven and fragmented ways from the context of literary analysis. As a result, many students of social sciences are left with the difficult task of trying to make sense of the assortment of approaches, while lacking rudimentary knowledge of narratology. In this book, Shaul R. Shenhav proposes an introduction to principles of “classical narratology” and to adapt its basic elements to better serve students and research scholars with diverse backgrounds and interests who wish to apply narrative approaches in their study of the social domain. Though the important contribution of anthropology to this pluralist field has been overlooked, an extensive list of sources from an array of diverse contributing disciplines allows the author to make qualified statements on the state of the art for further reading and for engaging students with diverse backgrounds in an interdisciplinary project with growing horizons.

“Classical narratology”, closely linked to the traditions of Russian Formalism, Czech and French Structuralism, developed what some describe as a toolkit for the analysis of stories, stressing the idea of narrative as an object. Several of the technical terms and concepts expressed by narratologists, such as Gérard Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in that period (1970-80s), are the starting point of Shenhav’s treatment of narrative. This book clearly assumes that the analysis of social narratives should be built on the aspects of classical narratology, while the range of the phenomena that need to be investigated is more expansive. The author starts, therefore, by suggesting a minimalist definition of *narrative* as ‘the narration of a succession of events’ (p.17) in order to keep it open to the wide range of non-canonical materials that are of interest to social narratives researchers.

After an introduction that includes a number of suggestions for using the book, Chapter 1 focuses on the discussion of the differences between the terms, often used interchangeably, *story* and *narrative*, and of related narratological concepts. Drawing from Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction* (by now probably one of the most popular of all introductions to narratology) and her definition of the three key elements to treat

fiction narratives: *story* (what is being told), *text* (the mode of the communication and representation of the story) and *narration* (the act or process), the author adds a fourth element, *multiplicity*, in his words, ‘to capture qualities specific to social narratives’ (p.6). Each of the four designated key components of social narratives (or layers of analysis) is then sequentially addressed from Chapter 2 to Chapter 5, using empirical examples, mainly from the Western political sphere (the area of Shenhav’s research interests), to demonstrate analytical possibilities to their study in each respective chapter.

It starts with the chapter on the story component covering issues from the role of shared stories, the text-story relationship to the role of characters in social stories. Chapter 3 explores the changing nature of text and its various versions in the context of social narratives (visual gestures, dance, silent movies, etc.), even considering the possibility of free-text narratives. It has not been demonstrated, however, the adaptability of this theoretical framework to this kind of narrative forms. The author ends up arguing that to the extent that stories are social they must have, at some point, been transmitted through some oral or written form (p.39). On the process of communicating the story (the narration), the discussion is focused on the ‘who’ (narrators) and ‘how’ (the process) that are part of the text (textual narration) and the social context of the narrative for its production and telling (extra-textual). Chapter 5 explores the last component multiplicity, “the process of repetition and variation through which narratives are reproduced at the societal level’ (p.66). Social narratives are shared, told and retold in different ways and forms and through diverse media. Adding the study of this dimension is indeed crucial to capture the distinctiveness (of the mechanism of dispersion) of social narratives. To study this component, the author suggests a structural approach in order to trace core elements across the multiple versions of a social narrative.

Other well-known previous introductions to narratology, some of them acknowledged by Shenhav in this book, already include visual documents and non-canonical narratives. This introduction does not include any non-verbal example in order to illustrate the study of the four components in those widespread social narrative forms. Moreover, analyzing social narratives in today’s world often means that the researcher has to be prepared to deal with multimodal analysis. Social narratives are likely to be dispersed in the social arena in multiple forms and through different media simultaneously. This book does not provide any ground for those facing this kind of methodological dilemmas.

In Chapter 6, 'Normative Perspectives in the Study of Social Narratives', the author, finally, examines some of the growing literature on the theoretical and ideological perspectives that connect the study of social narratives to a variety of normative approaches. This discussion is essential for the analysis of social narratives as a different conception of narrative and of its relationship with lived reality or lived experience has an impact on the criteria used to assess the data and the conclusions of the study. In fact, as the author points out, the question of the position a researcher has chosen to adopt in relation to the subject, participants, context, and process of research will, therefore, define the specificities of the methodological approach and which of the narrative elements would be heuristically advantageous to emphasize in a particular study. It will also determine, I would add, the pertinence of the story-text-narration-multiplicity methodological device to framework the narrative object.

In the concluding chapter, the book proposes what is described as some guidelines for the application of narrative analysis in the social sciences. Shenhav reinforces the usefulness of orienting the study within the framework of the elements discussed while applying thin and thick levels of analysis (derived from the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz on thin and thick descriptions to interpret culture). The chapter rounds out the book and suggests some strategies to confine or otherwise expand the investigation in different ways while focusing on one or more narrative elements and incorporating the study of multiple narratives.

As a researcher already engaged in social narratives analysis dealing with multiple narrative forms, I would say, in conclusion, that the current pluralism of narratological scholarship opens a space for a plurality of introductions. Though I did not find it particularly helpful to deal with non-textual materials and multimodal analysis, this slim volume is presented in a comprehensive and succinct way, accomplishing its purpose for those who may be looking for an introduction to the field. In line with the trend in the production of introductions to narratology, the author also provides some tables and diagrams throughout the book that are meant to underscore the argument and help the student to understand it.

Reference

Rimmon-Kenan S (2002 [1983]) *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.