

Book Review

Richard Walsh
THE RHETORIC OF FICTIONALITY
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Richard Walsh, currently a Professor at the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York, is the author of numerous interdisciplinary studies exploring the nature of connection of the embodied sense-making and cultural manifestations of the cognitive capacity. His 2007 study, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, addresses Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), and offers a unique contemporary perspective on the scope of discourse and literary analysis moving away from structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to literary analysis and criticism in general. Although in accord with Booth and his view of the contact between the author and reader as the core of the communicative situation in fiction (1961: 403), Walsh reviews and broadens the theoretical scope of formalism and post-structuralism and emphasizes the relevance of pragmatic theory in narrative meaning making. Integrating Relevance Theory as the framework for understanding the communicative situation of narrative – storytelling across media, Walsh redefines the conceptual and terminological bases of narrative theory, from the viewpoint of contemporary rhetoric, but with insight offered by the interdisciplinary field of cognitive sciences. The rhetorical concept of fictionality is introduced with the aim of producing an inclusive and applicable approach that finds its center at the pragmatics of the discursive process (Walsh 2007: 3). In contrast to the formalist and post-structuralist approaches focused on the descriptive output of the analysis, Walsh elaborates on the rhetorical principles in the domain of speech-act theory and explores storyworld theory, the narratological concepts pertaining to the narrator, implied author and reader, narrative structure and reception, as well as the emotive dimensions of the text. Coextensive with the seminal studies in the field of literary theory, *Rhetoric of Fictionality*, offers a broadened understanding of immersion in terms of its analogous relation to the referential reality. The major contribution to the body of contemporary theoretical literature that observes the reading experience from the point of view of cognitive sciences – the focus on how the human cognitive capacity is employed in the pseudo-communicative situation of literature, is the applicable pragmatic-rhetorical instrument. The 194-page study includes an *Introduction* and *Conclusion*, and eight chapters.

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In the *Introduction*, Walsh's critique and revision of post-structuralist narrative theory serves as the groundworks for redefinitions of a number of narratological concepts. Fictionality is elaborately defined as the main feature of narratives, problematizing the relationship between storytelling and mimesis. Moreover, context is presented as crucial for narrative production and interpretation – theoretical and critical, which is supported by the elaboration of the reformulated Gricean communication model in speech act theory. The relevance principle as established in the *Introduction* figures as the key to the understanding of the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction (fiction and fact), but also the rhetorical strategies in context. Fictionality is not merely an ontological quality, but a rhetorical one (7).

In Chapter One, *The Pragmatics of Narrative Fictionality*, Walsh provides a definition of narrative – fictional and factual with no difference, as a construct whose “meaning is localized within the narrative system” (14). The definition clearly assumes the difference between fiction and fictionality – the former as a category or genre, and the latter as a communicative strategy. This definition is in the function of further explication of intertextuality, and most notably, the classification of narratives according to the referential foundations in the real world. Walsh explores the very criteria of veracity (15) and its artificial nature. The author draws on the exploration of narratologists and their models of storyworlds, such as Mary-Laure Ryan, as well as relevant pragmatic and rhetoric theories pertaining to the minimal requirements for the understanding of the communicative situation. The review of literature offers arguments for the relevance principle in terms of the building of storyworlds and understanding of context. Walsh here observes the communication act in literature in the same manner as that occurring in real-life, so the Gricean model of “conversational implicatures” as incorporated in the coded communication model and Relevance Theory by Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson form the basis of his model. The truth-criterion is significant only when it involves some sort of cognitive processes that affect judgment or inference, but otherwise, relevance is dictated by the context, and the power of narrative depends on the ability to establish a sense for the relevant (31) in its progression. In Chapter Two, *Fictionality and Mimesis*, fictionality is further defined as a rhetorical device – not a generic category, but also a feature outlining all narratives, irrespective of their criteria for objectivity, truth or factuality, or their genre. This chapter thoroughly examines the problematics of the fictional and factual, specifically in storyworld theory – both from the point of view of rhetoric and pragmatics, the common narratological frameworks, and the concept of mimesis. Chapter Three, *Fabula and Fictionality in Narrative Theory*, revises some of the most contentious narratological terminology, including Gerard Genette's view on story and discourse. The theoretical review turns a critical eye to the formalist tradition and more closely defines *fabula* and *sujet* with the view that the sequence of events does not define the narrative, and therefore *fabula* cannot be the source of *sujet* – the discourse is. Chapter Four, *The Narrator and the Frame of Fiction*, revises Gerard Genette's work in terms of the narrating instance and addresses the inadequacies of the structuralist model. Chapter Five, *The Rhetoric of Representation and Narrative Voice*, deals with the rhetoric of representation and draws on the previous chapter in terms of the specifics of the narrating voice. In this study, storytelling is observed as bearing the function of narrative transmission, but also the function of rhetorical representation (88). Representation, Walsh notices, strives to tell the story, although it is hierarchically not as important as the rhetorical strategy. This introduces the review of literature and discussion on the narrative voice, which again supports the premise that the voice marks the rhetorical device. In representation, the voice is a rhetorical effect. The matter of narrative representation via different mediums of

transmission is tackled in Chapter Six, *The Narrative Imagination across Media*. Articulation of events, independent of the medium of transmission, based on our inherent cognitive capacities, is explicated on the examples of comic books. Storytelling is explained as articulation of information in narrative form, which is coded and decoded in the process of communication, with the potential to produce meaning. This meaning, Walsh suggests, is “part of discursive economy” (111), contained within a single mind or shared by groups. Chapter Seven, *Narrative Creativity: The Novelist as Medium* addresses the problematics of the rhetorical imperative of subjectivity and narrative logic. Discursive authority (144) models the referential framework the reader’s understanding depends on, and implies authorial responsibility in terms of the conventional expectations. “Representational precision” (146) and congruence with existing narratives outweighs the simplistic dichotomy between fact and fiction. Ultimately, the communicative act of fiction is not the transmission of a specific kind of knowledge. Fiction, rather, is a narrative method of understanding and learning that goes from the general to the specific. Narrative reception is explored in Chapter Eight, *Reader Involvement: Why We Wept for Little Nell*. Walsh observes reading and the critical practice as contrasting processes characterized by the dichotomy between “immersion and critical distance” and “literal meaning and different strategies of figurative and symptomatic understanding of the text” (148). Although fictionality is a matter of conventional understanding, it does not hinder the text’s rhetorical ability to elicit an emotional reaction (158). In line with the interdisciplinary field of cognitive approaches to narratives, Walsh’s position takes into account the significance of the historical and cultural moment, as well as the sensitivity of the reader to the rhetorical strategy involved.

In the *Conclusion*, Walsh elaborates on the necessity to explore fiction in its frequent everyday manifestations, and not as an “ideal object” (171), even though the study itself offers a great level of abstraction. The view of fictionality, as the major contribution of this study to literary Theory, offers a different lens for the observation of fiction in general, but more importantly the non-fiction genre and its context in terms of the nature of connection with referential reality and the process of storytelling. Walsh’s self-reflexivity is extended to other concepts revised in the study in terms of the scope of their applicability across different mediums of narrative transmission. The author emphasizes the significance of the intuitive approach to the problematics of fiction and fictionality as a rhetorical strategy – one that should not exclude laypeople from the critical discourse, but rather sensitize the wide readership to the nature of knowledge contained in fiction within its artistic frame. In itself, this is both an act of modest understating the applicability of the *fictionality*-tool for the study of the rhetorical and pragmatic dimensions of narrative, and a necessary emphasis on the fact that wide applicability of this approach requires extensive interdisciplinary competences.

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