Ethics between the Lines: Narratology and Literary Non-Fiction

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Abstract:
Towards A Critical Ethical Narratology is a post-structuralist and interdisciplinary work which makes use of advances in narratology and other areas of literary theory whilst observing the turn towards ethical criticism in literature. This approach is applied to the developing genre of literary non-fiction and the ethics implicit in narrating real-life events in recent memory as literature.

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Nora Berning's book Towards a Critical Ethical Narratology is an insightful and rigorously researched examination of the ways in which narratological and technical structures influence, interact with, and communicate the ethical content of works of literary non-fiction. This developing, hybrid genre is particularly laden with ethical significance: whilst Berning contends that all story-telling can be used in value construction and is therefore inherently ethical, literary non-fiction represents a particularly amplified usage of the ethical dimension of story-telling. The relationships between works of literary non-fiction and actualities outside the text (such as people and places) become the ethical driving force as the book continues in establishing why literary non-fiction is particularly conducive to ethical messaging as well as why writers in the medium need to be wary of their own ethics in constructing such texts.

The first of the primary texts discussed by Berning is Alexandra Fuller's novel Scribbling the Cat (2004). This work is written in first person, and Fuller describes it as "a true story" while at the same time insisting "It is not supposed to be a historic document of fact" (63). Berning argues here that Fuller's objective is to "break the complicit silence [of the greater proportion of African war veterans]" (63). By writing of Rhodesia's War of Independence, Fuller is able to provoke the ethical considerations of her readers, as Berning writes: "The narrative situation is an ethical category, for it may stir compassion among readers, [and] encourage readers to press for social change and civic transformation" (64). Fuller's uses of intertextual referentiality and the refusal to provide a "complete" ending to the novel (and the journey it narrates) are complementary in the greater strategy of "breaking the silence". When Fuller includes excerpts of United Nations documentation and of the works of writers Alexander Kanengoni (1999) and Blaine Harden (1991), the suggestion is made that truth in literary non-fiction should not be conceived of as binary. Instead, the multiplicity of voices and stories opens up a unique set of paths into the past and the experiences of others which history and journalism could not provide. Similarly, the refusal to neatly and finally end the novel has an ethical charge: it suggests that perhaps the readers ought to consider what they are to do or think subsequently, and thereby the "journey" of the ethical consideration of others via the text continues.

The following chapter, on the 2011 World Press photo narratives of Ed Ou (Escape from Somalia), Darcy Padilla (The Julie Project) and Sarah Elliot (Poor Choices), develops this concept of collaborative ethical consideration and value construction by looking at the problems posed and opportunities given by the 'visual grammar' of the photographic medium. Berning specifies that "photo narratives are best conceived of as human relationship and connectivity" (83), a connection which "constitutes an invisible armature of intersubjective relations" (84). The proximity of the photographer to the subject is ethically significant, as are the uses of filmic techniques such as the breaking of the Fourth Wall (86, Fig.9), mise en abyme, and the narrator/photographer's decisions to include or remove certain elements from the frame. Ed Ou's photographs utilize this ethical dimension particularly well; by blurring the image or crowding it with a mass of figures, none of whom is depicted in personal entirety, the photographs gesture towards the broader realities they depict and beckon the viewer's consideration of the realities outside the frame as well as within it (see 97, Fig.12).

The third chapter deals with Joe Sacco's graphic novel Safe Area Goražde (2000) and analyses this hybrid medium's suitability for conveying problematic temporalities and potential for questioning political situations (103-105). As in Fuller's novel, Sacco is both the author and a character in this work. As a result, the way in which audiences view the content through the lens of the narrator-author is offset to a degree by the voices given to others (such as Edin, Sacco's guide and friend in the graphic novel). This chapter is particularly interesting in the way it adapts the principles used in the literary and journalistic analyses of the previous chapters to the quickly developing medium of the graphic novel – still a critically under-appreciated medium.

The final chapter of textual analysis is devoted to Mark Bowden's hypertext Blackhawk Down (1997). This medium takes the strategy of audience involvement in the ethical process a step further. The hypertext has the audience decide the order in which elements of the narrative are opened and read (or watched). Thus, "Bowden's narrative paradigmatically reflects the shift away from old center-margin structures towards episodic plotlines" (120). This develops the concept established in the previous chapters of "multi-perspectival account[s]" (113) of the historical as a more ethical alternative to simply narrating it unilaterally and in a single sequence.

The key strengths of Berning's work are its breadth of research and the adaptability of the central arguments to the developing and multifaceted genre of literary non-fiction. Berning's synthesis of disparate texts and media, as well as her gesture towards the questions which will be asked in the future as work on 'new' media such as graphic novels and photo narratives continues, is indicative of the world-making potential of the genre and its criticism: as she demonstrates, it is in the textual communication and further questioning that literary non-fiction and its criticism furthers ethical reflection and establishes positive ethical communication with audiences.