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► **To cite this version:**

John Pier. Dan Shen's Rhetorical Narratology and Umberto Eco's Semiotic Theory of Interpretation. *Style*, 2021, 55 (1), pp.29-34. 10.5325/style.55.1.0028 . hal-03869274

HAL Id: hal-03869274

<https://hal.science/hal-03869274>

Submitted on 15 Jan 2023

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Style, Volume 55, Number 1, 2021, pp. 28-35 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



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Dan Shen’s Rhetorical Narratology and Umberto Eco’s Semiotic Theory of Interpretation

John Pier

UNIVERSITY OF TOURS

Every reader, listener, or viewer of stories, from the most casual to the most critically attuned, intuits that between the lines or under the surface of the narrated incidents there lies unspoken information and meanings of various kinds, scopes, pertinence, and accessibility that cannot be ignored.

“Goldilocks and the Three Bears” tells us something more than the story of a little girl who wanders into the Bear family’s house, tastes their porridge, sits in their chairs, and sleeps in their beds. And Umberto Eco once asked: “Is *Oedipus Rex* the story of detection, incest, or parricide?” (*Role* 28).

Dan Shen addresses such issues with an emphasis on “covert progression,” a narrative movement paralleling plot development that has previously been neglected. I will first discuss the characteristics of Shen’s rhetorical narratology and some of its relations with James Phelan’s narrative dynamics, structuralist poetics, and Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic investigation of plot. I will then suggest how Shen’s rhetorical narratology might be extended by drawing on Eco’s semiotic theory of interpretation.

Covert progression is an outgrowth of Phelan’s influential notion of *narrative progression*, critical to the broader principle of *narrative dynamics*:

‘narrative progression’ identifies the movement of narrative as the synthesis of two dynamic systems, one governing a narrative’s internal logic as it unfolds from beginning through middle to end [instabilities and tensions, or textual dynamics], and the other governing the developing interests and responses of the audience to that unfolding [readerly dynamics]. (“Narrative” 359)¹

As for Shen, she is concerned with a class of narratives that contain, behind overt narrative progression (with its instabilities, tensions, and trajectory of readerly responses), a parallel covert progression triggered by elements that often prove recalcitrant to the principal storyline. Key to detecting the relations between overt and covert progression is stylistic analysis in conjunction with narratological analysis (“Narratology and Stylistics”; see also Pier). Methodologically, it is an approach that not only integrates stylistic principles into the practice of rhetorical narratology but also takes into consideration certain details of sociohistorical import, for knowledge of relevant biographical or historical information may prove crucial to tracing down covert progression (*Style and Rhetoric* 16–20, “Contextual,” “Contextualized Poetics”). By expanding the rhetorical model to include attention to a parallel narrative movement, Shen seeks to achieve a comprehensive shared reading of individual works, and thus to enter more fully into the position of the authorial audience.²

The two forms of progression—overt and covert—mark a subtle but significant departure from the structuralist terms “story” and “discourse.”

Although Shen has written on story and discourse (“Defence,” “Story”), her point of reference remains Phelan’s progression with its “instabilities” among the characters (in lieu of story) and “tensions” among authors, narrators, and readers (in lieu of discourse)—features she groups together under “plot development.” The addition of covert progression results in the complication of both textual and readerly dynamics (“Dual Textual”).

One of the problems that plagued structural narratology was the question of plot, the *parent pauvre* of early work in the field. For reasons too elaborate to detail here, the very word “plot” was either left out of the story/discourse paradigm, assimilated into discourse, or likened to sequence-like structures. It was with Ricoeur’s *Temps et récit* (1983–1985) that plot was addressed directly, although this was within a hermeneutic rather than a structuralist framework. In his reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Ricoeur³ stressed the close relation between *mûthos* (“plot”), or the “structure of events” (50a5),⁴ and *mimêsis*, “an imitation not of men but of a life, an action” (50a16); this, together with the aporias of temporality and the subject of historiographic and fictional narrative, led him to render *mûthos* as *mise en intrigue* (“emplotment”).⁵ According to this conception, the internal dialectics of poetic composition consists in temporal discordance within the concordance (atemporal completeness, totality, appropriate length) of *mûthos*, the structuring of events; it is in the confrontation between *mûthos* and *mimêsis* that tension is generated. Ricoeur’s “discordant concordance” is most salient, not in “simple” (episodic) plots but in “complex” (*peplegmenos*: interwoven, intricate) plots, in which “reversal” (*metabolè*) is continuous throughout, supported by “peripety” (*peripeteia*) and/or “recognition” (*anagnôrisis*), neither of which is present in simple plots (52a12–52b13).

Phelan’s narrative progression,⁶ by contrast, (1) equates the internal logic of narrative with *holos* (“whole”) (50b26) rather than *mûthos*, putting the accent on poetic composition unfolding from beginning through middle to end, subject to the demands of necessity (*anankè*) and probability (*bôs epi to polu*) (51a14) and (2) incorporates audience interests and responses, heir to Aristotle’s tragic pity (*pathos*) and fear (*phobos*) (53a4–6). Shen follows Phelan in investigating plot dynamics (instabilities-complications-resolution), narratorial dynamics (tensions among implied author, narrator, focalizer, authorial audience), and readers’ unfolding responses to this dynamics. In addition, she is concerned with “dual narrative dynamics” (Shen, “Covert Progression,” “Dual Textual,” and “Dual Narrative”).

In light of Aristotle's distinction between simple and complex plots, one might be tempted to argue that covert progression operates as a "reversal" of narrative progression while peripety provokes subversion and recognition generates supplementation. This is not the case, however, as Shen's analyses show. In Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby," for instance, the plot development is generally interpreted as anti-racist, but scrutiny of the covert progression reveals an undercurrent of racist attitudes (*Style and Rhetoric* 70–94), thereby setting up a process of dual narrative dynamics—not a twist in the plot. Aristotle's reversal, peripety, and recognition are properties of the plot itself.

The goal of Shen's target essay is to extend her theory from the dynamics of plot development to dual textual dynamics and the accompanying dual readerly dynamics. From this perspective, plot development and covert progression become "two parallel trajectories of signification" that may come into conflict. It is essential that these trajectories, which "contradict, condition, and complement one another," be taken into account, for if they are not, the reader will fail to gain "a fuller and more balanced picture of the thematic significance of the text" ("Joint Functioning" 126). A case in point is Ambrose Bierce's "A Horseman in the Sky," whose plot development centers on the cruelty and inhumanity of war as embodied in a Unionist soldier's killing his own father, a Confederate soldier, but whose covert progression focuses instead on the paramount importance of carrying out one's duty ("Joint Functioning"). Unlike Eco's question about whether *Oedipus Rex* is to be interpreted as a story of detection, incest, or parricide, Bierce's story develops a contrastive meaning built up out of the interaction between two parallel trajectories.

As witnessed by this and other examples, in Shen's rhetorical narratology, analysis of parallel trajectories of signification hinges largely on interpretation. This invites reflection on how her treatment of interpretation might relate to other approaches to the subject. The approach I would like to consider here is Eco's theory of interpretation. Confronting Shen and Eco on interpretation may be surprising at first sight, for Eco's writings on this topic stem from a semiotic text theory set in a conceptual and methodological framework that bears little resemblance to the concerns of rhetorical narrative theory. Yet there are a number of tentative though potentially fruitful points of comparison that deserve consideration.

Eco distinguishes *semantic* (or *semiosic*) interpretation as revealed in Linear Text Interpretation at the discursive level, born out of a first reading,

from *semiotic* (or *critical*) interpretation, the result of metalinguistic activity, a product of subsequent readings. At the same time, a dialectical link is maintained between *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris* (*Limits* 54–60). Moreover, texts are open to both semantic and semiotic interpretation: emanating from the inferential quality of the sign, texts are conjectural in nature.⁷ “The text,” writes Eco, “is nothing else but the semantic-pragmatic production of its own Model Reader” (*Role* 10). By Model Reader is understood not an “ideal” reader that real readers are summoned to emulate, but a framework for “interpretative cooperation,” that is, a “textual strategy as a system of instructions aiming (*sic*) at producing a possible reader whose profile is designed by and within a text [and that] can be extrapolated from it and described independently of and even before any empirical reading” (*Limits* 52) (cf. authorial audience). Moreover, “since the intention of the text is basically to produce a Model Reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the Model Reader consists in figuring out a Model Author that is not the empirical one and that, at (*sic*) the end, coincides with the intention of the text” (59) (cf. implied author).

The two systems, Shen’s and Eco’s, while comparable on some points, are not translatable into one another. This is due to the fact, first of all, that, at the general conceptual level, the framework of the one is the “rhetorical experience of narrative” (Phelan, *Experiencing*), augmented by dual narrative dynamics, while that of the other is the poetics of the closed versus open work (Eco, *Opera*, *Role* 47–66, 175–99, and *Limits*), a principle set within a complex semiotic theory.

The point of comparison between the two authors I wish to comment on gravitates around Shen’s dual textual dynamics. When a narrative contains a covert progression, signaling a textual undercurrent that runs parallel to and sometimes counter to plot development, two contrastive channels of authorial communication occur simultaneously with two contrastive authorial audiences (“Dual Narratives”). Although it is possible to speak of a narrative “recalcitrance” of sorts in Eco’s text semiotics, this feature is not of the same order and does not resolve itself into covert progression or dual dynamics, concepts not employed by Eco. Rather, it results in a reflexive relation between narrative and metanarrative.

This point can be illustrated with Eco’s study of Alain Allais’s *Un drame bien parisien* (1890). Titled “*Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative Text*” (*Role* 200–266), analysis of this text highlights how the “verbal *trompe-l’oeil*” into which the first-time, naïve “one-dimensional reader”

is lured through Aristotelian pity and fear is “interpreted” by the second-time (critical) reader (*successive* readings, not simultaneous). The discursive structures of *Drame* contain two mutually irreducible *fabulae* or narrative topics, one of adultery, the other of a misunderstanding, neither of which is ultimately proved or disproved to have taken place.⁸ Led unawares down two paths for having adopted a culturally induced false hypothesis, the reader, on nearing the end of a first reading, finds himself “completely jammed. . . . Allais has led the reader to fill up the text with contradictory information, thus cooperating in setting up a story that cannot stand” (205–6). To understand the textual trap into which the reader has fallen, the Model Reader can only go back through the plot step by step, scrutinizing the states of the *fabulae* in order to observe, in the role of a “Meta” Reader, how *Drame* “reproduce[s] the process of [its] own rhetorical and logical structures” (256). It is thus that three “stories” can be traced out in Allais’s short narrative, each with its own character(s): “the story of what happens to its *dramatis personae*, the story of what happens to the naïve reader, and the story [or metanarrative] of what happens to itself as text.” Eco’s analysis of *Drame* “is nothing else but the story of the adventures of its Model Readers,” both naïve and critical, such that metanarrative clashes with narrative, reminding us that “any critical reading is at the same time the analysis of its own interpretative procedures” (205).

The two perspectives on narrative, rhetorical and semiotic, explore textual elements that cannot be adequately appreciated when adhering to the Aristotelian emphasis on plot. Shen achieves a nuanced account of textual undercurrents by expanding narrative progression to include covert progression and two parallel narrative movements. Eco, for whom the text is a set of instructions for producing its own Model Reader, takes his cue from Allais’s craftily designed story to show how two *fabulae* are pitted against one another, upending any normally constituted plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Recognizing that the naïve linear reader’s interpretative cooperation has been disabused, the Model Reader proceeds with a critical rereading; as it turns out, “both types of readers are inscribed within the textual strategy. . . . only the text itself . . . tells us which kind of reader it postulates” (*Role* 10). Ultimately a metatext,⁹ *Drame* projects versions of its Model Reader (naïve and critical) that do not correspond to the *dramatis personae* of the principle story and the acts undertaken by them, but are the subjects of a metanarrative, protagonists in the interpretation of the plot who do not operate within the plot. In this sense, metanarrative seems to point to a space, implicit in dual narrative dynamics, that calls for further investigation.

JOHN PIER is a professor emeritus of English and American literature at the University of Tours and a statutory member of the Center for Research in the Arts and Language (CNRS/EHESS, Paris), where he co-directs the seminar, “Contemporary Research in Narratology.” Among his many publications are an edited volume, *Contemporary French and Francophone Narratology* (Ohio State UP, 2020) and *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology* (edited in collaboration with Wolf Schmid and Peter Hühn, De Gruyter, 2022). (j.pier@wanadoo.fr)

NOTES

1. See also Phelan, *Living* 216, 217–18, *Experiencing*. On narrative progression, see Shang 65–72.

2. “The hypothetical, ideal audience for whom the implied author constructs the text and who understands it perfectly” (Phelan, *Living* 213). On the four types of audience in rhetorical narratology, see Shang 59–64.

3. *Temps* vol. I, esp. I, chap. 2: “La mise en intrigue.”

4. Translation Else.

5. Raphaël Baroni (“Réticences”) sees emplotment as arising out of *narrative tension* driven by curiosity and surprise. Elsewhere (“Virtualities”), he studies the transition from formal to dynamic conceptions of plot. He also argues that the “narrative interests” underlying plot, though dormant, were discreetly present in classical narratology (“Pragmatics”).

6. For example, *Experiencing* 15–22, “Narrative”; also *Living* 161, 217–18.

7. The logic of inference (“if *p*, then *q*”) is present throughout Eco’s work; see especially *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. It is possible to view Shen’s stylistic analysis in terms of the “inferential walk,” or interpretative moves elicited by discursive structures.

8. This level corresponds roughly to Shen’s plot development.

9. As distinct from covert progression: “an undercurrent paralleling the plot development, with the *same* central character(s) and the *same* events but implicitly conveying contrastive or opposite thematic significance” (Shen, “Covert Progression” 24; emphasis original). For more on this, see Shen’s rejoinder to Daniel Candel Bormann’s contribution in this issue.

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