

A New Perspective of Narrative Studies: A Review of *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction*¹

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Abstract This article is an introduction to the thematic monograph *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction* by Professor Fang Ying. This monograph begins with a brief overview of “the spatial turn” and recent studies on the spatial narrative in the West and in the East, and then the bulk of the monograph devotes to explicating the major contents of the spatial narrative theory, namely: spaces in the literary narrative, the “spatialization” of fictional narrative, the time-space relationship in the spatial narrative, and the implication expression of the model of spatial narrative in fiction. This article deems that Fang’s new monograph plays a vital role in the perfection of narrative studies and the academic exchange between Western and Chinese literary studies, for it offers a new and amazing perspective of narrative study. Therefore, Professor Fang’s monograph is an essential read for those scholars who have interest in the narrative theory in general and in the theory of the spatial narrative in particular.

Key words Fang Ying; *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction*; spatial narrative; new perspective

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In the “Introduction” of *Teaching Narrative Theory* (2010), David Herman, Brian McHale and James Phelan point out that “the last two decades have seen a burst

1 This is part of the research outcome of the projects “The Class Design and Textbook Compiling under the Post-classical Context” (2015186) funded by Hubei Provincial Department of Education and “The Cultivating Mode of Foreign Literature Attainment in A&F Universities” (2013B029) funded by the 12th Five-Year Plan of Education and Science Plan of Hubei Province.

of renewed interest in narrative theory across many academic disciplines”¹ (David Herman, Brian McHale and James Phelan 1), undoubtedly, today’s narrative theory has already penetrated into almost every field we can recognize, and equally noteworthy, it has fledged into the combination with other fields or disciplines, in other words, narrative theory has developed into the plural “narratologies” not merely the singular “narratology”² (Ansgar Nünning 249-256). Just as we notice that the cognitive narratology, feminist narratology, rhetoric narratology, and unnatural narratology and other branches of narrative theories have sprung out in recent decades. In addition, narrative theory pays more attention to its internal parameters, such as narrator, character, progress, plot, time, setting, space and the like, and there are many monographs aiming at these facets. Though many theorists touch on the spatial issues in their research, however, almost no one devotes attentively to the spatial narrative studies, in particular, to a monograph involving merely with fiction. Scholar Fang Ying’ new monograph *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction* (2017) is nothing short of a typical case in point concerning the “spatial agents” in fiction.

For the most part, this monograph circles around such four aspects as “space in the literary narrative”, “narrative spatiality”, “relationships of chronotope in the spatial narrative”, and “meanings of the spatial narrative”, systematically elucidates the “spatial theories” in fiction. Beyond all doubts, Professor Fang’s new monograph expands and deepens the contemporary narrative theory to a large extent and offers a great perspective or a luminous narrative mode for the studies of literature, especially, for the theoretical fictional research and textual criticism.

This article attempts to help introduce the main contents of the monograph, to illustrate the core concepts and feasibility of this theoretical construction, and to interpret its values and influences on narrative theories or narrative criticism and literary studies.

Introduction to *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction*

On Spatial Narrative in Fiction was published in 2017, and the whole monograph consists of four chapters with the exordium and epilogue. In the exordium, Professor Fang shrewdly seizes the integral “spatial turn” in the flourishing narratology and even the whole fields of philosophy and social sciences (42) and further introduces

1 David Herman, Brian McHale and James Phelan et al. *Teaching Narrative Theory*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010.

2 Ansgar Nünning, “Narratology or Narratologies? Taking Stock of Recent Developments, Critique and Modest Proposals for Future Usages of the Term,” *What is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*. Eds. Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH Co., 2003): 239-275.

its rise, development, achievement and problems of the research on “spatial narrative”. Grounded on *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005)¹ by David Herman, Fang emphatically illustrates the thought-provoking contributions of those influential theorists on the spatial narrative, such as Henry James, Joseph Frank, M. Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, Fredric James, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Edward Sojia, Seymour Chatman and Gabriel Zoran, etc.. Fang firmly deems that the mainstream research on the literary spatiality in the west includes such branches as “literary cartography”, “literary geography” and “Geocriticism”, and so on (7). What’s more, it is worth noting that Professor Fang also comparatively spares no effort to explore the status quo of research on the spatial narrative in China. She, for example, refers to Shen Dan, Cheng Xiling, Hu Yamin, Cheng Pingyuan, Long Diyong, Pu Andi, and Lu Yang etc., just name a few.

In chapter one, based on the introduction to both “spatial turn” and “spatial narrative” in the academia home and abroad, Fang mainly tries to define, investigate and distinguish between “literary space” and “narrative space”. After drawing the developmental contour of the “spatial concept” in the west from the ancient Greek period to the 20th century, Professor Fang emphatically explores the “literary space”, in particular, the space in the narrative fiction. The author insists that the literary space is a construction of relations, a space in the world of literary works, constructed with language as the media, through the interaction between the author, the text and the reader. It is the assemblage of the relations of time, position, hierarchy, power, value, etc., and the result of the language construction, mental construction and cultural construction.. Additionally, the space in the narrative fiction is the subspace of the literary space, which consists of three groups of concepts: 1) in terms of content, primarily the physical, mental and social spaces; 2) the spatial complementation, intersection and bordering, which are important spatial states and often point to the thematic meaning of literary works; 3) the different levels and sections of space, the division of which is not only possible, but also necessary for the studies on spatial narrative.

In chapter two, Professor Fang devotes with all her heart to explore the laws and characteristics of the spatial narrative. In the beginning, she draws a very concise definition that “the spatial narrative” is “a certain type of narrative mode”, which in essence is the “spatialization of narrative” (75). Then, Fang illustrates this from the following two aspects, namely, the expression level and the content

1 David Herman, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

level. Specifically, the expression level means that the fiction fulfills its narrative nonlinear development through the three-dimensional characteristic of “lump narrative”, which embodies three aspects: 1) juxtaposition of narrative elements; 2) fragmentation of plots; 3) the “labyrinthization” of the lines of narrative (80-88). On the other hand, the content level means that the fiction centers the content of space, and the fiction focuses primarily on the contents of spatial description, spatial construction, spatial relation and spatial meanings, which embodies another three aspects: 1) space as the narrative foreground; 2) space as the organizer of narratives; 3) space as the major source of meanings (93-109).

In chapter three, Professor Fang tries to elucidate the relationships between time and space in the mode of the spatial narrative. Based on the universality of the relationship between time and space, that is, space must be in a certain time and alters as the time flows, and meanwhile time and space are also defined as “chronotope” by M. M. Bakhtin (qtd. in Fang, 119) and cannot be spilt, Fang creatively puts forward that space is in the time and contains the time as well. To be specific, time as the narrative background, temporal stagnation, and temporal segmentation are the typical characteristics of the spatial narrative. In a word, the spatialization of time is to manifest the time through space, and spatial logic, spatial order and spatial element are the leading centers in the spatial narrative.

In chapter four, Professor Fang explores the latent meanings of the spatial narrative. As the global market and relevant techniques develop, a sort of phenomenon of “global time” and “simultaneity” springs out, which fundamentally leads to the mankind’s feelings of chronotope. The feeling of chronotope has a profound influence on the literary creation, and one of the influences is that “the narrative mode of classical fictions or the verses of traditional poetry all are to blame” (qtd. Holga Nowotny in *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction*, 147), which means they should be replaced by various revolutionary and innovative forms. As Professor Fang puts, “to a large extent, the mode of spatial narrative accords with the characteristics and people’s feelings on its chronotope in the 20th century, we can conclude that the spatial narrative has a certain metaphorical association with the times and humans’ living conditions”....In the 20th century, “modernity could be the core and pointcut to analyze and probe the spatial narrative” (147-148). Since the spatial narrative is about today’s people and their living conditions, to be specific, Fang believes that the spatial narrative contains the following three aspects: 1) occasionality of life; 2) momentariness of reality; 3) spatiality of existence (149). All of above is to discover unprecedentedly close and complicated relationship between today’s people and space, responding to the fragmentation of modern

society and the anxiety of today's people. On the whole, the three aspects above are the core problems of today's people and the core contents of the spatial narrative mode.

In sum, the spatial narrative is one of the common narrative modes in the 20th century, which is closely related to the philosophy, literary trends, and the real modern life and interacts with each other as well. Through this narrative mode, as Professor Fang mentions in her monograph, the fiction writers “don't focus their attentions on characters, the growth history of a certain character or the representation of outside world, but focus on the construction of space” (198), from which the fiction reveals the complicated relations between humans and space and the real status quo of the existence of today's people as well. The spatial narrative, however, is not perfect and flawless, and it has its own weaknesses and problems as Fang puts in the book. “First of all, the spatial narrative very often contains blurred plots, chaotic narration, reversed time-order and unintelligible content. Second, the spatial narrative may be somewhat unreadable because it puts more emphasis on the spatial construction than the plots and stories. What's more, the spatial narrative is a highly challenging read, which is, therefore, more popular with scholars than ordinary readers” (199).

The Critical and Practical Significance of *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction*

With resourceful research documentation, insightful analysis and strong practicality, Professor Fang's monograph plays a vital role in the perfection of narrative studies or narrative criticism and in the academic exchange between Western and Chinese literary studies as well.

To begin with, just as Brian Richardson repeatedly declares, his monograph *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (2015) “is not to deny, overthrow or replace existing mimetic narratology but to add, extend or expand the current theories, and ultimately to construct a poetics of unnatural narrative or of the other literary ‘Great Tradition’”¹ (Li Minrui 694). Generally speaking, Professor Fang's monograph is also to add, extend or expand the current narrative theories and to urge the contemporary theories to be more thorough, encompassing, and comprehensive in scope. Fang puts in the book that “the spatial narrative as a narrative mode is an attempt of the Russian formalism and a defiance or resistance to the stereotype and convention as well” (197). In other words, the spatial narrative

1 Li Minrui, “Constructing a Poetics of the Other Literary ‘Great Tradition’: A Review of *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Poetics*,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 4 (2016): 689-695.

theory triggers readers to transfer their attentions from plots, characters, linear time and cause and effect of the story, etc. to the spatial agents of the fiction and meanings of the spatial narrative. Therefore, the spatial theory to a great extent expands and enriches the current postclassical narratology and offers an exciting perspective for the narrative scholars and a very valid critical tool for the literary lovers.

Moreover, Professor Fang's monograph creatively constructs a poetics of the spatial narrative. Specifically speaking, Fang focuses on the literary space, in particular, on the spatial agents in the fiction. She believes that the literary space is mainly about the relations and constructionism, the spatial narrative usually is involved with the spatiality in the expression level and in the content level, and the relationships of chronotope in the spatial narrative, etc.. In addition, just as Professor Shang Biwu's academic viewpoint of "narrative means, ethical ends"¹ (Shang Biwu 11), Professor Fang points out in the book that the spatial narrative has its own meanings or ethical enlightenments too. That is to say, Fang in her monograph puts forward a set of complete, scientific, rational, and convictive spatial narrative theory, which in a nutshell is simply a poetics of the spatial narrative and adds a new layer to the spectrum of narrative studies.

Furthermore, if we read prudently the monograph from head to foot we can surprisedly discover that Professor Fang offers us a great number of literature reviews from the selected fictions to the influential theories, from those overseas writers and critics to the domestic novelists and commenters. As a young scholar or a lover of literature, beyond all doubts, this monograph is "a fantastic reference book and is of much help for both Chinese contemporary narratology and literature, theoretically and practically"² (Zheng Hongxia 353).

Last but not least, Professor Fang shows an amazing talent at the understanding and analysis of the spatial narrative. She demonstrates her gifts not merely with her thought-provoking ideas about the spatial narrative but also with her unique expression pattern through beautiful and spiritual poems. At the very beginning of each chapter, Professor Fang offers readers a poem, which expresses her personal analysis of a certain issue and demonstrates her exquisite and unique understanding of it. Of course, sometimes those poems reflect her puzzlements and sudden enlightenments as well.

Admittedly, *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction* is not perfect or flawless as

1 Shang Biwu, "From 'Two Turns' to 'Two Criticisms': On the Rise, Development and Cross Vision of Narratology and Ethical Literary Criticism," *The Academic Forum* 2 (2017): 7-12.

2 Zheng Hongxia, "From 'Spatial Turn' to 'Spatial Narrative': A Review of *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction*," *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 2 (2018): 347-353.

Professor Fang mentions in the monograph. Compared to its rigorous logic and structure, rich examples of the spatial narrative, and refined diction and lines, a few minor problems are that “the spatial concept itself should have been deeply explored, the spatial functions need to be expanded, and some textual examples are repeatedly used” (qtd. Hu Yamin “Prologue” in *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction*, 4). In addition, some spatial narratives such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *Red Sorghum Family* (1985) and *L’amant* (1984) are “not boring but so highly readable and full of narrative spatiality” (199), which also should have been explored in depth.

From what has been discussed hereby, it is absolutely certain that Professor Fang has produced an insightful and suggestive monograph that invites future probes into the spatial narratives in fiction. The monograph by all means anticipates a better future of the contemporary narrative criticism and a new wave of scholarly exchange between China and the west in literary studies. In light of all these above, Professor Fang’s new monograph *On Spatial Narrative in Fiction* is an essential read for those scholars who have interest in the narrative theory in general and in the theory of the spatial narrative in particular.

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