

Dissertation Abstract:
**The Narrativity of Secrets and Narrative Plots in John le Carré's
Spy Fiction (by Elena Jenssen)**

Spy and detective novels are highly self-referential in that they tell stories about individual figures, social and/ or international institutions producing, interpreting and telling stories to gain authority over individual life stories or political history. While the main stream novel has long begun to doubt narrative's capacity to clarify and control reality these genres generally assert the power of narrative and thus of the novel in shaping knowledge about the world, veiling the narrative constructedness of their world. Not radically breaking with the tradition of realistic narrative, detective and spy fiction nevertheless show a particular analytic sensibility for crises that challenge and question narrativity. The novels' self constitution within this tension of self-challenge and self-affirmation is based on **secrecy**. This dissertation is concerned with the ambivalent capacity of secrets to undermine and enable narrative discourse. It combines Gérard Genette's *structuralist narratology* with the sociological communication model of Niklas Luhmann's *systems' theory* in defining secrecy as resistance to narrativity. Secrecy **reacts** to pressure that the desire to illuminate reality in terms of stories exerts on the world. It is thus not non-communication but itself an **unruly narrative** implying a narrative plot.

The surfacing of a secret within the fictional world thus suggests and calls for action that can be described as metaphorically representing the *writing, narrating* and *reading* of stories motivated by a particular desire for power over communication. Metaphorically speaking the characters act as "autors", "narrators" and "readers". Their **plotting** tells a story about the power, the violence, and the limitations of narrative discourse. This is one but often not the only level of literary self-awareness of novels. Applied to the novels of le Carré this approach shows that the more world espionage institutions force into their story projects the more secrets remain untold, because the extra-diegetic narrators (the narrators of the novel) can not "read" them.

In addition secrets surface that are produced by the narrators' interpreting of the story. These unruly aspects of the narrative discourse undermine its reference to the fictional world hinting at motives underlying the **telling** of the story instead. To specify the effect of such **secrets of narrative discourse** on the overall meaning of fiction, I suggest a recursive re-application of Genettes terms *narrative* and *story* to the narrative itself. Unreliable elements of a narrative can thus be described as narrative traces of the **story of narration**, meaning the story of how and why a particular aspect of the fictional world is chosen and told. In the novel *The Russia House* inconclusive aspects of the narrative show, that the extradiegetic narrator occasionally loses his rational grip on the espionage case. They tell a story about the narrator's desire for a life outside the espionage world, that he tries to gratify vicariously by projecting it onto others. Metaphorically

speaking the narrator can be described as the “autor“ of the *story of narration*. While narrative secrets undermine the reliability of the story he tells, they ascertain the reality of a latent **narrative plot**.

Within the espionage context of deceptive framing the *story of narration* in *The Russia House* appears as credible **information** (Luhmann) because the narrator tells it inadvertently. Within the overall project of a novel, however, such a story of a narrator's unreliability forms part of a strategic **communication** (Luhmann) carefully plotted by the actual autor of a novel. To better define the narrative function of this difference between *information* and self-interested *communication* Luhmann's terms can again be expressed in Genette's dual terminology. A novel not only refers to an artificial world and the telling of this world, it also refers to its own textuality and can thus be seen as textual outcome of the *story of its production*. The **narrative** of this *story* is overtly or covertly ingrained in the literary text in tell-tale traces such as the naming of characters, the division of power, the relation between beginning and end and the conception of the extradiegetic narrator. This distinction between the **story of a novel's production** and the way it is told or hidden allows us to draw conclusions as to the overall **plot of a novel**, meaning its underlying narrative project. By framing his narrator and thus betraying the literary creation vicariously used for the role of the autor of a narrative, the actual autor of a novel can gain credibility for the literary reality he created.

These modifications in narratological terminology allow a more specific analyses of textual tensions, that nevertheless remains a narrative construction determined and somewhat blinded by its own analytic plot. The constellations of secrecy and narration le Carré uses to create various metaphors of narrative show three main tendencies: **(1)** Individual secrets and manifestations of the untellable - like the uncanniness of collective repression (*A Small Town in Germany*; *The Looking Glass War*) or the reality of dying (e.g. *The Honourable Schoolboy*) - increasingly criticise and undermine the way in which espionage plots reduce individual and social reality to a mere source of information on the political opponent. **(2)** From *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* onward resistance to espionage grows until the secret plot of an individual “autor“ finally wins over the espionage institutions in *The Russia House*. In this novel the conflict between individuality and spying also surfaces in the *story of narration*. First masked by narrative projection in *The Russia House*, it figures as narrative plot of self- delusion in *The Secret Pilgrim* until the narrator of *Our Game* finally discloses his private attempt at coming to terms with secrecy ingrained into his personality by his training as intelligence officer as the driving force of his narrative. **(3)** In the last instance the critical reflection of the narrative tension of secrecy and disclosure in the plotting **within** the fictional world as well as the narrative plot always serves as a cover for the *story of the novel's production* that is based on the same narrative principle.