What Is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?: A Response to Monika Fludernik

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What Is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology? A Response to Monika Fludernik

In the following response to Monika Fludernik’s “How Natural Is ’Unnatural Narratology’” we will identify Fludernik’s main observations concerning our joint article from 2010 and respond to them individually. Her perspicacious account brings to the fore several important issues; some point toward fruitful unexplored territory, while others address ongoing discussions in our essay “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” and in more recent articles by unnatural narratologists. In her essay, Fludernik discusses some core ideas of unnatural narrative theory, demonstrating in the process the proximity of several of our major ideas to those presented in her own work from 1996, 2001, 2003, and 2010. Unnatural narrative theory is partially inspired by and indebted to Fludernik’s approach and we agree with her statement that “Alber et al. are conducting research much in the spirit of Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology” (358). Fludernik’s response confirms once more that unnatural narrative theory is a “timely and significant” (364) approach in the current narratological

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Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Terminology and Dichotomies

Fludernik defines the term “unnatural narrative” as denoting “the fabulous, the magical, and the supernatural besides the logically or cognitively impossible” (362). Furthermore, from her perspective, unnatural narratology combines two different discourses: “the discourse of fable, romance, before-the-novel narrative; and the discourse of postmodernist anti-illusionism, transgression and metafiction” (363). We have different responses to this statement and need to provide some additional clarification.

Brian Richardson, for example, defines the term “unnatural narrative” as “one that conspicuously violates conventions of standard narrative forms, in particular the conventions of nonfictional narratives, oral or written, and fictional modes like realism that model themselves on nonfictional narratives. Unnatural narratives furthermore follow fluid, changing conventions and create new narratological patterns in each work. In a phrase, unnatural narratives produce a defamiliarization of the basic elements of narrative” (“What Is” 34). Furthermore, Richardson differentiates between what he calls nonmimetic or nonrealistic poetics that govern traditional nonrealistic works such as fairy tales, ghost stories, etc., and the antimimetic work of an author like Beckett that defies the principles of realism. He limits the unnatural to anti-mimetic and defamiliarizing scenes, entities, and events such as impossible

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spaces, reversed causal progressions, and acts of narration that defy the parameters of natural conversational narratives. Richardson's idea of the unnatural is thus more limited than that articulated by Fludernik.

Jan Alber, on the other hand, defines the term “unnatural” as denoting physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios or events (Alber, “Impossible Storyworlds” 80) and discriminates between the unnatural in postmodernism, which still strikes us as disorienting or defamiliarizing, and conventionalized instances of the unnatural in other genres, which have become important features of certain generic conventions (see Alber, “The Diachronic”). What Fludernik calls “the fabulous, the magical, the fantastic, and the supernatural” (363) are examples of what he classifies as the conventionalized unnatural, and there are numerous further instances. Among other things, Alber is interested in the history of the unnatural and tries to demonstrate that the conventionalization of the unnatural is a hitherto neglected driving force behind the creation of new generic configurations and thus the development of literary history (see Alber, “Unnatural”).

Stefan Iversen ties the notion of the “unnatural” to narratives that present the reader with clashes between the rules governing a storyworld and scenarios or events producing or taking place inside this storyworld, clashes that defy easy explanations. While many of these phenomena (such as the ones mentioned by Fludernik) become conventionalized over time, some remain resistant to familiarization. The transformation in Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” (1915) is such an example because it presents the reader with an unresolvable combination of a bug and a human mind, which is situated in an otherwise conventionally realist storyworld. Iversen is also interested in the ways in which narratives change status along the natural/unnatural axis over time as new methods of conventionalization are developed and become widespread, and he also deals with unnatural elements in non-fictional genres (see Iversen, “Broken or Unnatural?” and Iversen, “In Flaming Flames”).

For Henrik Skov Nielsen, finally, the expression “unnatural narrative” first and foremost takes on meaning in relation to what it is not: a natural narrative in the sense of the term discussed by Monika Fludernik (Towards). Nielsen defines unnatural narratives as a subset of fictional narratives that—unlike many realist and mimetic narratives—cue the reader to employ interpretational strategies that are different from those she employs in non-fictionalized, conversational storytelling situations. More specifically, such narratives may have temporalities, storyworlds, mind representations, or acts of narration that would have to be construed as physically, logically, mnemonically, or psychologically impossible or highly implausible in real-world storytelling situations, but that allow the reader to interpret them as reliable, possible, and/or authoritative by cuing her to change her interpretational strategies. Only some fictional narratives are unnatural and cue the reader to interpret differently than real-life storytelling situations do, whereas countless realistic and conventional fictional narratives do not do that. In addition to the genres and narrative types mentioned by Fludernik, Nielsen also stresses the unnaturalness of other conventional forms, such as the use of zero focalization in traditional works of realism.

Fludernik critiques the notion of an “unnatural narratology” as follows. First, she observes that the very notion of the “unnatural” is conceived in relation to its oppo-
site, to the natural, and thus seems to introduce too sharp a dichotomy to capture the connections and the divergences of the two phenomena. Furthermore, she feels that unnatural narratology “falls into the trap” (365) of being dependent upon the very notion it set out to circumvent (namely, the notion of the natural). In a nutshell, for her, unnatural narratology “ends up reinforcing the mimetic rather than escaping from its clutches” (366). Second, she also notes that this dichotomy potentially involves problems that relate to “moralistic, phallogocentric, heterosexual and generally conservative” (357) ideologies.

To begin with, since “the very concept of transgression presupposes an acknowledgement of boundaries or limits” (Cohen 16), it goes without saying that the unnatural can only be recognized and felt in relation to the natural. However, as far as the workings of concrete narratives are concerned, we would all like to eschew dichotomous positions in favor of a more dialectical view: most narratives can adequately be described in terms of the permanent interaction between the natural on the one hand and the unnatural on the other. Furthermore, each of us believes in a gradual spectrum of narrative possibilities rather than a system of binary oppositions as the structuralists offered in the sixties. As Richardson argues elsewhere, “we will be most effective as narrative theorists if we reject models that, based on models derived from linguistics or natural narrative, insist on firm distinctions, binary oppositions, fixed hierarchies, or impermeable categories” (Unnatural Voices 139).

Second, as Fludernik herself notes, we have taken some care to explain why we do not at all use the concept of the unnatural as an ideological tool (“the term itself . . . has no . . . loaded meanings” [362]). Nevertheless, other critics of unnatural narratology have repeatedly accused us of stigmatizing and denouncing narratives by referring to them as being unnatural. Therefore, we would like to underline Fludernik’s point about the ideologically neutral use of the term. Unfortunately, the term “unnatural” carries a large amount of cultural baggage which has nothing to do with our narratological investigations. Unnatural narratology has no position on the nature/culture debate and does not designate any social practices or behavior as natural or unnatural. The provocative term “unnatural,” which has a decidedly positive connotation in our analyses, will inevitably cause a certain amount of confusion among the uninformed, but since the name is now fairly well established, we are prepared to live with its natural (and unnatural) consequences.

Even though the development of unnatural narratology is indebted to the work of Fludernik, our project differs substantially from Fludernik’s. In her own words, she wanted to “find a model able to deal with a maximum number of narrative texts” (358). One of the main disagreements between unnatural narratology and Fludernik’s approach is exactly this inclusivity: for Henrik Skov Nielsen and Stefan Iversen, unnatural narratology does not necessarily aim at developing a comprehensive model so much as to stress differences between different types of narrative texts, and we all argue that most existing narrative theories offer a false totality thatneglects and excludes an entire literature because it cannot be contained within the parameters of a mimetic framework. In our view, Fludernik’s drive toward comprehensiveness inevitably results in an inadequate treatment of some distinctive kinds of narratives, especially the unnatural.
When Fludernik asks whether there exists “an anti-mimetic (dare I call it ‘unnatural’?) reductionism as well as a ‘mimetic reductionism’” (358) our answer would be a clear no. We all look at the various ways in which some narratives deviate from real-world frames, and we then try to interpret these deviations. However, we do not mean to replace existing unified theories so much as to supplement them as we rescue the types of narratives that are left out by the dominant theories. Unnatural narratology is a theory of unnatural narratives, and as such has no immediate quarrel with “natural” and other narratologies (except to the extent that such theories perhaps claim a greater comprehensiveness than they actually achieve). At the same time, however, our efforts to account for unnatural narratives do lead us to propose revisions to basic concepts of narrative theory such as story (fabula), time, space, character, narrator, and narration, and these revisions inevitably challenge some tenets of other theories. But we stop short of delineating how other theories should respond to these challenges.

On Making Sense: Methodology and Interpretation

Fludernik also discusses two of our readings in the article that differ from one another with regard to the question of how to approach and/or make sense out of the unnatural. With regard to Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart,” we have argued that the discourse of the narrator is taken over by the beating heart, and Fludernik finds this argument the most persuasive one in the essay. As Fludernik notes, this fundamental unnaturalness “becomes backgrounded” or even “buried” in “familiar readings of the tale,” through “the identification of the narrator as a murderous lunatic whose narration is simply biased” (364). On the other hand, she considers our reading of Coover’s “The Babysitter” to be “more problematic” because “a mimetic focus creeps in by the backdoor” (364, 365). First of all, we would like to note that we consider the co-existence of logically incompatible event sequences to be as unnatural as the heart’s actions in Poe’s short story: in the case of “The Babysitter,” the story involves logical impossibilities (because it—actually and objectively—consists of a web of mutually exclusive event sequences), while the situation in Poe involves a physical impossibility (because in the real world, hearts do not have an agency that will enable them to narrate). What we do in the case of “The Babysitter” is to explore the potential “implications” (Gibson 259) of the unnatural, i.e., the question of what its logically impossible story says about us and our being in the world. And in this sense, “a mimetic focus” does indeed “creep [. . . ] in by the backdoor.” Fludernik also complains that our reading of “The Babysitter” is not all that different from postmodernist readings. The test of our reading is not that it is wholly original (i.e., one that another approach would not generate) but whether it is appropriately responsive to the unnatural features of the narrative. Thus, our reading of Coover does converge with postmodernist readings but it takes a different route—working up from the unnatural rather than down from a view of what postmodernism is and does.

These two readings are symptomatic of one of the important points of disagreement within the field, namely the question of whether the unnatural is ultimately a
function of our bodily existence in the world (Alber's position) or whether the unnatural lies beyond the scope of our embodiment (the position of Iversen and Nielsen); Richardson for his part believes that physical embodiment is a relevant rather than a defining feature of the unnatural. In this context, it is perhaps worth noting that none of us thinks of interpretation as something to be "resist[ed]" (361), as Fludernik puts it. It is not quite true that we are more interested in highlighting the unnatural for its own sake than for including it in as comprehensive an interpretation as possible.

In many cases, interpretation will focus on and highlight the transgressing of real-world boundaries, whereas in other cases, it will additionally involve what Stein Haugom Olsen calls the "human interest' question" (67), i.e., the argument that fiction focuses on "mortal life: how to understand it and how to live it" (Nagel ix). Take character-narration, for instance: if we believe that a fictional character-narrator is limited by the same constraints as real-world narrators, we will have to assume that a character telling what he could not know has to be unreliable (like people in the actual world). If we believe instead that a first-person narrative may be completely authoritative even when the perspective of the character-narrator is transgressed in a striking manner—whether we refer to that phenomenon as disclosure functions (Phelan, Living 14 and "Implausibilities") or impersonal voices (Nielsen, "Impersonal")—we make a different choice that changes our interpretation (from distrust to trust in the content). In making this equally legitimate choice, we would also be following the first strand of unnatural narratology mentioned above (because we would make an interpretational choice that is unnaturalizing in the sense that it is not limiting the narrative possibilities to what is mnemonically possible or plausible in cases of real-world narration).

Let us briefly elaborate on the differences concerning the methodologies and interpretive tools that we use. Jan Alber, for one, argues that "ideas from cognitive narratology help illuminate the considerable, sometimes unsettling interpretive difficulties posed by unnatural elements" and advocates using "the cognitive-narratological work to clarify how some literary texts not only rely on but aggressively challenge the mind's fundamental sense-making capabilities" ("Impossible" 80). Alber believes that since we are bound by our cognitive architecture, the unnatural can only be approached by using frames and scripts. In a first step, he demonstrates how the unnatural urges us to create new cognitive parameters that transcend our real-world knowledge (such as the tree narrator, the speaking corpse, the reversed causality, or the shape-shifting room) and, in a second step, he addresses the question of what these impossible blends say about us and our being in the world. More specifically, Alber proposes the following reading strategies or navigational tools, which are designed to help readers explain the unnatural (see also Alber, "Unnatural Spaces"):

1. **Blending/frame enrichment**: these processes play a role in all cases in which we try to make sense of the unnatural; the physically, logically, or humanly impossible urges us to create new frames (or impossible blends) by recombining, extending, or otherwise altering pre-existing cognitive parameters.

2. Readers may account for impossible scenarios or events by identifying them as belonging to particular literary genres and generic conventions.5
We can explain some impossibilities by attributing them to the interiority of the narrator or one of the characters; in this case, the unnatural is naturalized insofar as it turns out to be something entirely natural (namely somebody’s hallucination).

Unnatural scenarios or events may not be mimetically motivated occurrences but exemplifications of particular themes that the narrative addresses.

Readers may also see unnatural elements as representing abstract ideas in allegories that say something about the human condition or the world in general.

Narratives may use impossible scenarios or events to mock certain states of affairs. The most important feature of satire is critique through exaggeration, and the grotesque images of humiliation or ridicule may occasionally merge with the unnatural.

Sometimes we can make sense of impossibilities by assuming that they are part of a transcendental realm such as heaven, purgatory, or hell.

"Do it yourself": Marie-Laure Ryan has shown that we can explain the logically incompatible storylines of some narratives by assuming that “the contradictory passages in the text are offered to the readers as material for creating their own stories” (671). In such cases, the text serves as a construction kit or collage that invites free play with its elements.

"The Zen way reading," finally, presupposes an attentive and stoic reader who repudiates the above mentioned explanations, and simultaneously accepts both the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, worry, and panic that they might evoke in her or him.

By contrast, what one might call unnaturalizing readings leave open the possibility that unnatural narratives contain or produce effects and emotions that are not easily (if at all) explainable or resolvable with reference to everyday phenomena or the rules of the presented storyworld.

Stefan Iversen and Brian Richardson, for instance, agree with H. Porter Abbott, who—when discussing what he calls ‘unreadable minds’—claims that they “work best when we allow ourselves to rest in that peculiar combination of anxiety and wonder that is aroused when an unreadable mind is accepted as unreadable. In this regard, my stance is at odds with efforts to make sense of the unreadable, as, for example, Jan Alber’s effort” (Abbott 448). Indeed, Brian Richardson seeks to “respect the polysemy of literary creations, and a crucial aspect of this polysemy can be the unnatural construction of recalcitrant texts.” From his perspective, “we need to recognize the anti-mimetic as such, and resist impulses to deny its protean essence and unexpected effects” (“What Is” 33).

Henrik Skov Nielsen argues that when readers face unnatural narratives, they have two options: they can either try to naturalize or they can apply what he calls “unnaturalizing reading strategies.” Un-naturalizing reading strategies, for him, resist the application of real-world limitations to all narratives and refrain from limiting interpretations to what is possible in literal communicative acts and representational models. Accordingly, for Nielsen, unnatural narratology investigates the interpretational
consequences of the employment of unnatural techniques, scenarios, and strategies insofar as they are different from the interpretation of natural narratives. For example, he argues that readers will be led astray if they judge first-person narration as being unreliable only on the basis that information is revealed that the protagonist could not realistically possess. Likewise, he argues, if we begin to seek in second-person narratives for a narrative situation that would allow a speaker to address a "you" that seems completely unaffected by and even ignorant of the uttered words, we will miss the point of most literary second-person narratives that explore the possibility of designating while not addressing a specific person through the "you"—a possibility that is different from oral, natural storytelling situations in which the "you" simply refers to the audience being addressed (or is used in the sense of "one").

The Unnatural and Mimesis

In her response, Fludernik repeatedly urges us to clarify our relationship to the term "mimesis." We would therefore like to briefly relate the unnatural to the two divergent conceptions of mimesis as they were developed by Plato and Aristotle. In Book X of Plato's Republic, Socrates equates mimetic art with "the art of imitation" (Plato 431, 595A; see also 439, 600C and 443, 601B). According to Socrates, art merely reproduces empirical reality and is illusory because it does not take us to the transcendental and perfect World of Ideas. Since Socrates conceives of art as being just a misleading shadow of a shadow (namely a shadow of the empirical world which is itself nothing but a shadow of the World of Ideas), he bans art from the ideal state.

By contrast, in his Poetics, Aristotle equates mimesis with the process of representation, projection, or simulation (Aristotle 2–4, 1448a–b; see also Hamburger 11). For him, "mimesis coincides with artistic representation as such: epic poetry, drama, the art of dithyrambs, of flute and lyre, painting, choreography, and religious poetry are all mimetic" (Schaeffer and Vultur 309). According to Stephen Halliwell, Aristotle employs "mimesis or representation . . . as a supple concept of the human propensity to explore an understanding of the world—above all, of human experience itself—through fictive representation and imaginative 'enactment' of experience" (vii–viii).

From our perspective, the unnatural is clearly anti-mimetic in the sense of Plato because it does not try to imitate or reproduce the world as we know it; rather, it transcends real-world parameters. However, it is worth noting that the unnatural is quite obviously mimetic in the sense of Aristotle because it can be depicted or represented in the world of fiction. That is to say, when we speak of "anti-mimetic" or "anti-realist" components of narrative, we refer to Plato's sense of mimesis (rather than mimesis in the Aristotelian sense).

Conventionalization vs. Naturalization

Fludernik considers our "distinction between conventionalization and naturalization" to be "the most interesting point of the essay" (367) but also asks us to further clarify the difference. In the article, we draw a distinction between the process of con-
ventionalization, which denotes the converting of the unnatural “into a basic cognitive category” (Fludernik, “Natural Narratology” 256), and the process of naturalization in the interpretive sense of Jonathan Culler: Culler argues that readers attempt to recuperate inexplicable elements of a text by taking recourse to familiar interpretive patterns: “the strange, the formal, the fictional must be recuperated or naturalized, brought within our ken, if we do not want to remain gaping before monumental inscriptions” (134). 5

It is perhaps worth noting that, in Towards a “Natural” Narratology, Fludernik herself lumps these two processes together under the heading of narrativization. On the one hand, the term “narrativization” denotes “a reading strategy that naturalizes texts by recourse to narrative schemata” (Towards 34), but on the other hand, it also refers to the converting of what she calls the “non-natural” into “a basic cognitive category” (“Natural Narratology” 256). From our perspective, the conventionalized unnatural, i.e., what Brian Richardson calls the nonmimetic, comprises (but is of course not limited to) the speaking animal in beast fables, “omniscient” narration, and simultaneous narration. All of these examples involve unnatural phenomena that have been conventionalized through what Fludernik calls “increasing use,” which, according to her, tends “to soften the oddity” (367).

As far as Fludernik’s question concerning our approach to the speaking animal in beast fables is concerned, we would first of all note the fundamental unnaturalness of the speaking animal. In the words of Mark Turner, the speaking animal involves “an impossible blend,” namely an animal that is simultaneously beast and intentional agent with sophisticated mental capacities (60). If one then wanted to interpret the speaking animal and address the purpose or point of the impossible blend, one could use Alber’s reading strategy 6 and point out that the speaking animal in beast fables is typically used as a stand-in for humans to ridicule human folly.

Let’s look at a different example, namely simultaneous narration. In The Distinction of Fiction, Dorrit Cohn argues that simultaneous narration emancipates first-person narration “from the dictates of formal mimetics” (104); nevertheless, it has now been (more or less completely) conventionalized. In this case (as in all others), we are faced with the question of whether real-life parameters apply. In the actual world, you cannot experience and narrate at the same time, at least not in the way that the magistrate in J. M. Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) or the countless other simultaneous narrators of fiction do. If real-world rules apply, we would have to search for conditions that allowed for this simultaneity and would have to ask why certain first-person narrators go about acting and telling at the same time—sometimes even when their life is at risk and no one else is present, as in Bret Easton Ellis’s novel Glamorama (1998). We do not think that “the feeling of impossibility or strangeness in a non-natural constellation” (367) is always necessarily reduced as time passes. At the very least, we would all like to continue to highlight the fundamental unnaturalness of already conventionalized phenomena.

We also want to point out that the process of conventionalization is not entirely detached from the process of interpretation. This is so because we tend to interpret something differently if it strikes us as odd or unfamiliar. Zero focalization in homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives respectively, is perhaps a good case in point. As Fludernik notes, the latter has been around since antiquity and, despite its fundamental
unnaturalness, no longer strikes us as defamiliarizing. We simply consider this form of narration to be authoritative, even as it remains unnatural in the sense that the narrator possesses superhuman powers denied to “normal” human beings. Homodiegetic narration with zero focalization is equally unnatural, but has not yet been conventionalized. Therefore, it is much more likely to be open to interpretational disputes—especially if the transgressions of the character perspective are relatively brief and limited. We would thus like to argue that, in this sense, there is a connection between the process of interpretation on the one hand and the process of conventionalization on the other. Or to put it differently: our interpretation of zero focalization in heterodiegetic narratives, albeit more or less automatic, is quite different from our interpretation of zero focalization in homodiegetic narratives. The former will be interpreted as authoritative, while the latter might be seen as potentially unreliable or as a mistake on the author’s part. The difference between the two interpretations hinges not on the natural/unnatural distinction since both are unnatural in the sense of being impossible in real-life scenarios. Instead, the difference between the two cases hinges on the one being conventional and automatically decodable and the other being unconventional and therefore debatable.

Conclusion

Fludernik describes the difference between her own (‘natural’ narratological) approach and unnatural narrative theory by arguing that she “tend[s] to concentrate on the overall taste, ignoring some of the ingredients,” while we seek to “savour the tinge of spice that conflicts with the overall familiar blandness of the pudding.” Indeed, we all feel that a focus on unnatural elements is particularly fascinating and can enrich the appreciation of the polysemic make-up of many types of narrative. Nevertheless, we would all like to describe the relationship between Fludernik’s “natural” narratology and our unnatural narratology in terms of complementarity. For us, the unnatural and the natural are equally important.

Common to all the approaches within unnatural narratology is (1) a fascination with highly implausible, impossible, unreal, otherworldly, outrageous, extreme, outlandish, and insistently fictional narratives and their structure; (2) the urge to interpret them by addressing the question of what they might potentially mean; and (3) an interest in examining the relationship between these specific narratives and all other narratives. We insist on the importance and extent of the unnatural in narratives from antiquity to postmodernism, and we remain convinced of the need to include attention to these narratives within narratology even if this means that we must significantly expand or reconfigure some of the basic categories of current narrative theory.

Endnotes

1. We would like to thank James Phelan for giving us the opportunity to respond to Fludernik’s article and also for his great comments on an earlier version of our response. We are of course responsible for all remaining infelicities.
2. Again, we use different definitions of the term “unnatural,” and therefore we measure it differently. While Richardson and Nielsen argue that the unnatural deviates from the conventions of traditional realism and natural (oral) narratives, Alber measures the unnatural against the foil of natural laws, logical principles, and standard limitations of knowledge. Alber argues that the unnatural is an effect caused by clashes between certain events or scenarios and the realist rules set up in a given storyworld (see Iversen “Unnatural Minds”).

3. In such cases, the unnatural has been conventionalized, i.e., turned into a basic cognitive frame.

4. Since “anything written in meaningful language has a theme” (Tomashevsky 63), this reading strategy plays a role in most (if not all) cases in which we try to come to terms with the unnatural.

5. At this point, however, we would like to refine our terminology. Initially, Alber had referred to all of his sense-making mechanisms (see above) in terms of naturalizations (see also “Impossible”). He would now like to reserve the term “naturalization” for his reading strategy 3, i.e., cases in which the seemingly unnatural gets explained as a hallucination or a daydream, while all the other navigational tools are perhaps better described as explanatory mechanisms of or ways of coming to terms with the unnatural.

Works Cited


