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UNNATURAL NARRATIVES – UNNATURAL NARRATOLOGY

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Unnatural Narratology, Impersonal Voices, Real Authors, and Non-Communicative Narration

1. Introduction

Narrative theory may well be the greatest export success emanating from the study of literature ever. Originating in structuralism and applied in the early years mainly to literary works of art, narratological terms and insights have now spread to fields as diverse as economics, history, psychology and many others. A reason for and a consequence of this success is that major trends in today's narrative theory focus on the idea that narratives are modeled on the actual world – meaning that, for example, fictional minds are not fundamentally different from real minds, that there is a genetic link between everyday storytelling practices and, say, experimental novels, and so forth.

It could be argued, however, that the emphasis on real-world knowledge and the assumption that all stories are situated within a communicative context comparable to real-life narrative situations may lead to a neglect of the specific possibilities of some literary and fictional narratives – and other kinds of unnatural narratives. One of the many reasons why this matters, is that it deeply influences our understanding of what role narratives should play in the study of literature and not least what role literature should play in the study of narratives – and also in the study of language and culture for that matter. And this, in turn, affects considerations about curricula across different studies; considerations about what kind of knowledge we wish to pursue at what occasions, and the whole complex of questions about whether literature at the universities should be a means or an end or both.

After the ISSN Conference in Washington, D. C., in 2007, a small group of narrative theorists incidentally gathered in the lobby. The group included Brian Richardson, Jan Alber, Maria Mäkelä, and myself. We realized that the conference in Washington seemed to have yielded a rather strong resistance to otherwise predominant naturalizing paradigms. Consequently, we invited everyone interested to join a group on what we tentatively called “unnatural narratology.” We even bought the (given the name of the group unsurprising) web address <www.unnaturalnarratology.com>. We have since been surprised by the overwhelming interest that numerous excellent scholars have taken in the project and even more overwhelmed by the many seem-

ingly unsolvable problems that arose from trying to determine what we mean when we talk about unnatural narratology and when we tried to delimit what we talk about. What are unnatural narratives? And what exactly do you do if you are interested in doing unnatural narratology? The conference conducted in Freiburg by Jan Alber and Rüdiger Heinze is one step in the process of trying to find answers to these questions. In this article, I take up an especially challenging invitation to introduce some ideas I put forward in an article¹ and then connect and compare these ideas to ideas about the role of the real author in fictional narratives. In the following, I will very briefly recount the main arguments for an impersonal voice, and then turn to Rüdiger Heinze's brilliant article on a very similar topic.² Subsequently, I will try to negotiate between my views and his and to consider the role of the author. Finally, I will deal with the question of whether it is possible to provide a definition of "narrative" that includes fictional and non-fictional as well as natural and unnatural narratives at the same time. In that latter context, I will say a few words about the differences between naturalization and conventionalization in order to try to describe the specificity of unnatural narratives.

2. Impersonal Voices

At several occasions I have recently suggested that the voice we hear in fiction is actually often the voice of the author and not the voice of a narrator.³ I realize that saying that this voice in fiction – even in first-person fiction – is both impersonal *and* the voice of the author sounds like taking self-contradiction to new limits. However, in fact, I do not think it is a contradiction at all. And I will try to explain why in this paper. First let me notice that there is some common ground between the two statements, namely that we should be careful to not always attribute the words of fictional narratives to narrators.

While there is always a global communication between the author and the reader in force, this needs not take the form of someone telling somebody about something that happened like a narrator would be expected to do to

¹ Nielsen, Henrik Skov, "The Impersonal Voice in First-Person Narrative Fiction", in: *Narrative*, 12, 2004, Nr. 2, 133–50.

² Heinze, Rüdiger, "Violations of Mimetic Epistemology in First-Person Narrative Fiction", in: *Narrative*, 16, 2008, Nr. 3, 279–97.

³ Nielsen, Henrik Skov, "Natural Authors, Unnatural Narratives" in: Jan Alber / Monika Fludernik (eds.), *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, Columbus forthcoming 2010; Nielsen, Henrik Skov, "What's in a Name? Double Exposures in *Lunar Park*", in: Naomi Mandel (ed.), *Bret Easton Ellis*, forthcoming.

a narratee, but rather the form of fictional invention and world creation. Strange as it may seem, the suggestion that the person referred to by the pronoun "I" need not really be the narrator in first-person narrative fiction is an attempt to solve a specific problem that has haunted narrative theory since Käte Hamburger. Hamburger takes her point of departure in an at once fundamental and radical distinction between epic and non-epic statements, claiming that in epic fiction, there is no statement subject. According to Hamburger, the sentences of the epic are not sentences that can be true or false in respect to reality but are sentences about something that only exists by virtue of the sentences:

That is, the narrative poet is not a statement-subject. He does not narrate about persons and things, but rather he narrates these persons and things [...].⁴

Das heißt, der erzählende Dichter ist kein Aussagesubjekt, er erzählt nicht von Personen und Dingen, sondern er erzählt Personen und Dinge [...].⁵

In first-person fiction, however, Hamburger maintains that the situation is very different because such fiction is more like autobiography than like epic fiction. For Hamburger, epic narrative operates according to rules that differ from those of reality statements, first-person narratives do not:

A constitutive feature inherent in the concept of the feigned reality statement is the fact that here the *form* of reality statement occurs. That is, we have a subject-object correlation, whose decisive characteristic is that the statement-subject, the first-person narrator, can speak about other persons only as objects. He can never free them from his own experience-field.⁶

In dem Begriffe fingierte Wirklichkeitsaussage ist als konstituierendes Moment enthalten, daß hier die *Form* der Wirklichkeitsaussage vorliegt, d. h. eine Subjekt-Objekt-Korrelation, für die entscheidend ist, daß das Aussagesubjekt, der Ich-erzähler, von anderen Personen nur als von Objekten sprechen kann. Er kann diese niemals aus seinem eigenen Erlebnisfeld entlassen.⁷

In Hamburger's view, if there *is* a statement subject, then it will narrate something that (in the world of fiction) exists prior to its narration. If there is no statement subject, then the sentences of fiction will produce the world they describe. Consequently, as Hamburger herself recognizes, there is an insurmountable difference between the ontology of the narrated world in the two cases, and, for her, only the narrated world of the first case belongs to the domain of true fiction. In this way, Hamburger concludes that fictional first-person narrative does not belong to the domain of true fiction. Hamburger's

⁴ Hamburger, Käte, *The Logic of Literature*, Bloomington 1973, 136.

⁵ Hamburger, Käte, *Die Logik der Dichtung*, Stuttgart 1957, 74.

⁶ Hamburger, *Logic*, 315.

⁷ Hamburger, *Logik*, 224.

conclusion seems very counterintuitive to me and it frequently reappears in subsequent discussions of the status of the narrator. Historically, fictional first-person narrative has always been an obvious problem for any no-narrator theory, since it seems unquestionable that the first-person narrative is narrated by a personalized first-person narrator. It has seemed impossible to make room for fictional first-person narrative in a theory that does not have room for the narrator. This is the problem that I try to solve.

Suffice it here to refer to just one example from my article where I provide many examples from different periods. *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, which is one of the very first first-person fictional narratives as such, contains a curious passage. In books 5 and 6, one finds the very elaborate story of Cupid and Psyche related by an old woman. Immediately afterwards, we read the following: "This the trifling and drunken old woman declared to the captive maiden, but I, poor ass, not standing far off, was not a little sorry in that I lacked pen and book to write so worthy a tale."⁸

The context leaves no doubt that the ass is sorry because the story, long and complex as it is, cannot possibly be remembered without the ability of writing to support memory. Furthermore, any possibility that the old woman might retell the story at some later point is eliminated by the fact that she is hanged immediately after having told the story (295). The passage makes it clear that when we "hear" the story about Cupid and Psyche there is no temporal distance and afterwards, the ass cannot possibly remember it. Thus the story, as the old woman told it, is forever forgotten and lost, and yet it is there in front of our eyes, where it continues to exist in this *hic et nunc*, where it is told. The question, now, is how should we interpret passages and narratives like this?

According to my proposal, it is not a question of the first-person narrator lying or being untrustworthy since he renders what he cannot remember, nor is it a question of the ass making up the details missing in memory. The story comes to the reader as an authoritative one. What we read is the impersonal voice of the narrative narrating what the ass will not be able to remember (and that he will not be able to remember it). The reader is requested to believe *both* that the old woman told the story *exactly* as we read it for thirty pages and that the ass cannot remember it. This is unnatural in the specific sense that both things could never be true at the same time in any naturally occurring storytelling context.

When sentences in a fictional narrative that would clearly mark the narrator as unreliable or even insane in a nonfictional narrative come to the

⁸ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Cambridge, MA 1973, 285.

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reader as authoritative, it is because the sentences should not unambiguously be ascribed to (a later version of) the character but rather to the impersonal voice of the narrative. This conclusion has a further consequence of vital importance: as opposed to the sentences of autobiography but akin to those of third-person narrative, the sentences of first-person narrative fiction do not form statements about reality. Instead they produce a fictional world that does not exist independently of these sentences.

Expressed this way, the narrative situation in first-person narrative fiction closely approximates the narration in third-person narrative. In fact, if we briefly return to Hamburger, we find that the concept of an impersonal voice of the narrative simply eliminates Hamburger's distinction between narratives with and those without a statement subject. Third-person narrative and first-person narrative are thus both characterized by not having a narrator who speaks *about* something that exists independently of the narrative fiction, but rather an impersonal voice that creates the world to which it refers. In that sense I think of the proposal as simple and economical. The first-person narrator, like all the other elements of fiction, is created because the impersonal voice of the narrative refers to it. This goes for trees, houses, space ships, and all persons including the person referred to by the pronoun "I."

In his rich and well-argued article "Violations of Mimetic Epistemology in First-Person Narrative Fiction" (2008), Rüdiger Heinze mentions a whole range of very interesting examples of first-person narratives displaying knowledge that their first-person narrators could not possibly possess. Some of the examples are to some degree similar to the Apuleius-example. Heinze's examples are all very good, and I have immediately put them into my bibliography of unnatural first-person narratives. Heinze proceeds to establish a typology of different types. And he refers to the examples as different kinds of *paralepsis* in first person narratives where something is disclosed that the first person narrator could not know.

In this context, I wish to make two remarks. The first is this: the term '*paralepsis*' means "saying too much" in the sense of disclosing knowledge you could not possess. In one sense that is a very apt term for the phenomena we are discussing and I do not want to challenge it. I just wish to mention that it is only a question of *paralepsis* if we still think of the first person as narrator. In so far as an impersonal voice is narrating, it is not saying more or less than it knows – it is inventing and creating a world including the first person and his knowledge and lack of knowledge. In that sense "*paralepsis*" serves in its own way to naturalize the understanding – and as I understand it, Heinze deliberately wishes to stress that readers naturalize for a good reason.

The second thing that interests me here is an important objection Heinze raises. He formulates it as follows:

Nielsen himself introduces one main dilemma: "[O]n the one hand, in first-person narrative fiction it is very common to find a number of features that would be highly unlikely in a nonfictional narrative and sometimes features that clearly show us that the sentences cannot possibly be narrated by a personal first-person narrator. On the other hand, it is just as significant that the protagonist in first-person narrative is often recognizable by his idiolects, idiosyncrasies, prejudices, etc., as these directly appear in the rendering of the narrative" (136). If we take this comment seriously, then Nielsen's hypothesis does not work for texts such as Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama*, as he claims it does, because "impossible" comments here clearly carry the distinct mark of the voice of the I-narrator and thus belong to the character function: "I walk into the frame, not noticing the black limousine parked across the street" (168). To limit these often humorous or ironic comments as belonging merely to an impersonal voice misrepresents the style of Ellis' I-narrator.⁹

The last sentence is true indeed. And I would find it ill-advised to say that such comments belong "merely" to an impersonal voice. Again it may be illuminating to compare this scenario to the situation in third-person narration. In first-person narrative fiction, the protagonist has a voice with idiolects and personal characteristics, and this voice may interfere in the presentation of the narrative just as the characters' voices may interfere in the presentation of the narrative in heterodiegetic narration, i.e. the third-person mode. This could be in the form of a dual voice of free indirect speech in one of its shapes. This only affirms that the impersonal voice presents and creates all characters along with the characteristics of their respective styles, and this goes for the protagonist in fictional first-person narratives as well. It is very true that the style here belongs to Victor. He and his style are both created by the very utterance of the words by a voice which is not limited to his knowledge.

If the two voices were always present only one at the time, the objection would be correct, but in fact they are intertwined throughout a narrative. Only sometimes is it possible to determine with certainty that some words or thoughts could not possibly be the first person's. This second voice is impersonal in the precise sense that it does not belong to any of the characters although it creates the characters and refers to one of them as "I" and lets this person talk in a way that is characteristic of his or her style. What is probably most important, though, is a point on which we agree. We simply arrive at inadequate interpretations if we deem first-person narrators unre-

⁹ Heinze, "Violations", 288.

liable, insane (e.g., schizophrenic), or wrong whenever they transcend the limits of natural (real-world) storytellers. Heinze provides very strong support for that claim.

3. Report and Invention, Narration and Communication

Another narratologist who has dealt resolutely with some of the very problems mentioned above is James Phelan, whose approach is rhetorical. His well-known and often re-iterated definition of narrative is: "narrative itself can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened."¹⁰ Phelan himself is aware that this conception runs into troubles in some narratives, e.g. narratives as the ones mentioned, in which something is narrated that the character-narrator need not, will not, or cannot tell. In these cases Phelan makes a division:

Communication in character narration occurs along at least two tracks – the narrator-narratee track, and the narrator-authorial audience track. Along the narrator-narratee track, the narrator acts as a reporter, interpreter and evaluator of the narrated for the narratee, and those actions are constrained by the narrative situation (a character narrator, for example, cannot enter the consciousness of another character); let us call these actions 'narrator functions.' Along the narrator-authorial audience track, the narrator unwittingly reports information of all kinds to the authorial audience (the narrator does not know that an authorial audience exists); let us call this reporting 'disclosure functions.'¹¹

Phelan's explanations have great advantages: they explain why examples such as Apuleius' and many others should not be considered mistakes on behalf of the author, and why the passages appear as authoritative rather than unreliable. But a potential problem remains. The potential problem is the word "report." When something is narrated that is beyond the limits imposed by the narrative situation, it is still referred to as report by the narrator – only now unwittingly and to an audience (the authorial audience mentioned in the quote) he/she does not know exists.

One could object that this approach underestimates the consequences of the fact that fictional narratives are not reports, but inventions. The general problem is that if all narration is report and communication – I use the two words as synonyms as Phelan seems to do – then there must be a reporter. And this brings me directly to the question of the author. The need for a re-

¹⁰ Phelan, James, *Living To Tell About It: A Rhetoric And Ethics Of Character Narration*, New York 2005, 18.

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

porter is the main reason why the author tends to be excluded from narratological interest. In fictional narratives the author is obviously not a reporter and not telling that something happened; the author is inventing. Thus, in order to be able to view fictional narratives as reports, narratologists have taken interest in the narrator instead. But as soon as it becomes obvious that the narrator is not reporting (if for instance he/she does not know what is told), the need for the author returns. Phelan meets the demands of this need for a reporter in his examples by saying that the implied author interferes and has the narrator narrate to audiences and for purposes the narrator is unaware of.

The general logic – a logic not specific to Phelan, but common to all narratological conceptions that equate communication and narration – is that from the observation that the author is not reporting one concludes that the narrator is; and from the observation that the narrator is not reporting, one concludes that the author is. As is obvious from my way of putting this, I think this logic comes close to circularity. And I will suggest that there is a simpler way of approaching the problem. The suggestion is simply that not all narration is report and communication as seems to be the implication of Phelan's definition. Fictional narratives are inventive instead of reporting. In my opinion Phelan's formula is even more accurate – and necessary as well as sufficient – as a definition of communication than as a definition of narrative.

Invention and non-report are techniques of fictionality. But fictionality is not necessarily a global quality of a narrative. It may also be local. Not all works of non-fiction refrain from techniques of fictionality, and not all works of fiction employ such techniques.

Let us take a look at the following simple example: "The two men on the couches next to me are both sound asleep. [...] I fade in and out. The TV is narcotic. In and out. In. Out. In. Out."¹² The words form, quite literally, "unspeakable sentences," to use Ann Banfield's expression. As opposed to Banfield I try to stress that non-communication does not only appear in narrative fiction and, conversely, that not all narrative fiction is non-communicative. Whether the example is fictional or not matters little (and actually the discussion is still ongoing about the status of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*) because regardless of the global status of the narrative as fiction or not, this is not communication. In so far as "out" describes a state of mind, of not being conscious, it clearly could not at the same time be reported. In the quote there is no one to tell to and no one conscious to do the telling.

¹² Frey, James, *A Million Little Pieces*, New York 2003, 286.

However minimal, I have never encountered a definition of *communication* that did not include a sender and a receiver. But neither of the two parties necessary for *communication* to take place need to be present for a *narrative* to exist. If nothing happened or no one told it, or told it to no one etc. – then there could still be narration, but the narration would not entail the report from anyone that something happened. When things are told that a narrator could not know, the inventive aspect of fiction is foregrounded.

4. Defining Narratives

To recapitulate: What Phelan defines is in my view not a sum of all narrative, but a sub-part – the sub-part of reporting narration. In the last part of the paper, I wish to broaden the perspective and talk more generally about the pros and cons of trying to find a definition that includes all narratives and excludes all non-narratives. Taking my point of departure in David Herman's recent and very refined prototype definition (2009), I move on to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a broader and more inclusive definition of narrative. For Herman the four basic elements of prototypical narratives are:

- i) situatedness (a specific context or occasion for telling)
- ii) event sequencing
- iii) worldmaking/world disruption (the events introduce disruption into a story-world)
- iv) what it's like (to experience these events and disruptions)¹³

Notably what is defined is a *prototypical* narrative. And Herman proceeds to introduce the extremely useful notions of “centrality gradience” and “membership gradience”:

[...] prototypical instances of a given category will be good (= easily recognized and named) examples of it, whereas more peripheral instances will display less goodness-of-fit. Thus a category like “bird” can be characterized as subject to what Lakoff calls *centrality gradience*: although robins are more prototypical members or central instances of the category than emus are (since robins can fly, for example), emus still belong to the category of bird, albeit farther away from what might be called the center of the category space. Meanwhile, when one category shades over into another, *membership gradience* can be said to obtain. Think of the categories “tall person” and “person of average height”: where exactly do you draw the line? Narrative can be described as a kind of text (a text-type category) to which both centrality gradience and membership gradience apply.¹⁴

¹³ Herman, David, *Basic Elements of Narrative*, Malden, MA 2009, 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

The term "natural" has been most prominently applied to narrative theory by Monika Fludernik. She describes the term as follows:

Natural narrative is a term that has come to define "naturally occurring" storytelling [...] What will be called *natural narrative* in this book includes, mainly, spontaneous conversational storytelling [...].¹⁵

While Herman does not subscribe to the term "natural," he still focuses on the idea that there is a genetic link between everyday storytelling practices and the features we take to be prototypical of all stories. In that specific sense, I think that what Herman provides is a definition of what Fludernik would call natural narratives. I also think there can be narratives without one or more of these four basic elements. For reasons of space I shall focus here on only one of the elements – that of situatedness. In conversational narratives, situatedness in the form of the context and occasion for telling is extremely important. It is part of what makes a natural narrative a natural narrative, and it is often decisive for our interpretation of the narrative. But to many literary theorists a large number of literary narratives would importantly be un-situated in the sense that not only is there no *identifiable* – there is even no *imaginable* – point in time and space in which the narrative act is situated.

Even in first-person narratives the lack of situatedness is often quite apparent. One example would be the following short passage from *Glamorama*:

"See you, baby." I hand her a French tulip I just happen to be holding and start pulling away from the curb.

"Oh Victor," she calls out, handing Scooter the French tulip. "I got the job! I got the contract."

"Great, baby. I gotta run. What job you crazy chick?"

"Guess?"

"Matsuda? Gap?" I grin, limousines honking behind me. "Baby, listen, see you tomorrow night."

"No. *Guess?*"

"Baby, I already did. You're mind-tripping me."¹⁶

There is clearly a character that starts out by saying "See you, baby." These words are situated in a communicative situation and uttered by the character to a female acquaintance. But at no point is there a narrator situated anywhere before, during or after the events, who says: "I hand her a French tulip." No communicative situation seems imaginable in which a narrator will narrate these words to a narratee. These next words of the text are not words

¹⁵ Fludernik, Monika, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, London/New York 1996, 13.

¹⁶ Ellis, Bret Easton, *Glamorama*, New York 1999, 19.

that Victor says, thinks or mumbles to himself or anyone else at any point. The words are unsituated: there is no context and occasion for telling them.

The impossibility of adequately describing *Glamorama* in natural terms is found also on the most general plot level of the narrative. *Glamorama* is in some respects a classical *doppelgänger*-narrative. The protagonist and first-person narrator Victor Ward apparently has a double, and this double is gradually taking over his identity. In the end, one Victor – and everything seems to indicate that he is the one we have followed throughout most of the book – dies in Italy while the other Victor, his double, enjoys life in New York. The really odd and unnatural thing about *Glamorama*, however, is that not only does the double overtake the identity of the first-person narrator on the thematic level and in the narrated universe; he even becomes the enunciator of the pronoun “I.”¹⁷ The double becomes the narrating narrator and thus takes over part of the narration.

This phenomenon certainly seems to correspond to no manner of natural real-world discourse. And the understanding of just the basic events and the storyline in *Glamorama* hinges crucially on understanding this pronominal takeover. But literary narratives told in the first-person present tense are clearly not the only potentially un-situated literary narratives. ‘Omniscient’ third-person narration is also more often than not without a specific place or situatedness for a narrator within (or perhaps rather outside) the narrative. And many narratives told in the second person will go well beyond any imaginable communicative situation between a ‘you’ and an ‘I.’ I shall not here demonstrate the lack of situatedness in a wide array of literary narratives, but I think it is fairly uncontroversial to say that if conversational, naturally occurring storytelling is prototypical of narrative, then many literary narratives will diverge from this prototypicality. They will then be more or less “un-typical.” Herman does elegantly make room for the a-typical and divergent in the description of the prototypical with its basis in the natural, and this, then, is where *centrality gradience* and *membership gradience* become relevant. One could argue that just as emus are birds even though an ability to fly is not really realized in these species, many literary texts are narratives even though they are not really situated – and even though one or more of the other three basic elements may not be fully realized.

In that case unnatural narratology is a bit like ornithology with a special interest in emus. To my mind, however, it is not unproblematic to assume

¹⁷ See also Nielsen, Henrik Skov, “Telling Doubles and Literal Minded Reading in Bret Easton Ellis’ *Glamorama*”, in: Naomi Mandel / Alain-Philippe Durand (eds.), *Novels of The Contemporary Extreme*, London/New York, 2006, 20–30.

that many novels and short stories and other literary narratives are to the category of narratives what emus are to the category of birds. To put it bluntly, while staying in the ornithological realm, it amounts to assuming that Andersen's fairy tale "The Ugly Duckling" is itself an ugly duckling instead of a beautiful swan when compared to other narratives. So while there is room for both the natural and the unnatural in Herman's model the choice of the prototypical has a consequence. In its attempt to cut across the fiction/non-fiction divide and to work across media, it may run the risk of marginalizing important and central narratives.

But is it even possible to imagine a positive definition of narratives that includes all narratives, natural and unnatural, and which at the same time excludes non-narratives? Can we clearly discriminate between non-narrative texts on the one hand, and unnatural narratives on the other? Notwithstanding all its inadequacies I wish to offer for discussion a definition that may well contend for a prize in the category of very short definitions of narrative. I do so not least with the aim of helping to facilitate another interpretation of the limitations and advantages of Herman's proposal. My suggestion is:

Narrative = disruption experienced

Compared to Herman, what has happened and why? "Disruption" equals Herman's "event sequencing" and "world disruption" at the same time for reasons of economy and simplicity, since it seems to me that we cannot have disruption without event sequencing and we cannot have either of them outside a world – imagined or real, following the laws of nature and logic or not. So the world and the event sequencing both seem to me sufficiently implied in "disruption." Furthermore, "experienced" equals Herman's "what it's like."

I can think of narratives in which almost no disruption takes place, but very often these narratives at the same time represent the emphatic absence of a potential disruption. And I can think of, for example, historiographic narratives which do not directly represent the mind or thought of any experiencing character, but they will probably often cue readers to imagine what it is like to live in times or under circumstances like the depicted. Almost all narratives whether in the form of film, literature, conversational storytelling or something else, will score high on one and mostly both of these parameters.

One could ask whether it is not the case that there must be a framing, representation or mediation of some kind and if a more complete definition would have to be something like "Narrative = the representation of disruption experienced." Narrative may well need representation in its defi-

and of putting things into small boxes, I wish to suggest the following schema that distinguishes between four categories by combining the natural/unnatural dichotomy with the conventional/unconventional dichotomy.

	Conventional	Unconventional
Natural	Oral storytelling. Conversational narration. Many autobiographies.	Truly mimetic, unsorted, unhomogenized representations of, say, five minutes of thought. Unorganized, abrupt, without marked beginning and end, etc.
Unnatural	Many literary narratives. Many traditional works of realism: use of omniscient narration, homogenized thought and speech representation etc.	Experimental fiction. Postmodernist narratives. Non-fictional trauma-narratives?

A very good example of a narrative form that swiftly became conventionalized would be the emergence, within just a decade, of thousands of narratives cast in the first person, present tense in the nineteen nineties. These narratives seemed strange and difficult to theorize at first (cp. Cohn as late as 1999).¹⁹ Today, however, audiences are familiar with narratives cast in the first-person present tense. They may be familiar to an extent, perhaps, where they do not even notice it. Examples are legion, but include Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Ellis' *Glamorama* (1999), and Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003).

The same conventionalization seems to be just about to happen to second-person narratives. There is no doubt that new forms and techniques become conventionalized over time. To my mind, however, this does not mean that they become *naturalized*. This difference between naturalization and conventionalization is crucial: without it, any conventionalization of new techniques or forms would amount to naturalization. I would like to stress instead the unnaturalness also of conventional forms, like, say, the use of omniscience in traditional works of realism and the use of present-tense first-person narration in much recent fiction. And actually I think I am completely in line with Fludernik here except for the choice of words, since she writes first that she uses "[...] narrativization to describe a reading strategy that naturalizes texts by recourse to narrative schemata [...]" (34), but towards the end stresses that:

¹⁹ Cohn, Dorrit, *The Distinction of Fiction*, Baltimore 1999.

nition, but for the moment I will bracket the question of whether this representation needs to be some kind of formal framing or could just amount to the mental representation of the (perhaps by nature narrative) experience of disruption in the mind of the experiencer.

Compared to Herman's definition, the suggested one suffers from the obvious disadvantage that it is very general and unspecific. It may indeed be true, as Jim Phelan suggested to me that "unnatural narratives mean that after a certain minimal set of identifiers it may not be possible to arrive at a definition that applies to all and only narratives." It is therefore much less suited to describe features that in fact are central to a whole range of natural narratives in which situatedness et al. are central characteristics. This very objection, however, points the way to a different interpretation of the four basic elements of Herman's definition: From a certain viewpoint these four elements may be conceived of not as features that are proto-typical of all narratives but instead as specific limitations certain conditions impose. In this view unnatural narratives do not negate or mock natural conditions. It is just as much the other way round: *Certain* conditions impose the necessity of situatedness. And likewise in *some* situations world-making is a central element. World-making seems to me to belong to fictional genres. In my opinion the slash between "world-making" and "world disruption" seems simultaneously to create and hide the distinction between fictional and nonfictional works that the definition attempts to bridge. Only fictional works are world-making *in any literal sense*, whereas world-disruption has a neutral stance towards the fiction/non-fiction distinction. *Some* narratives cue their audience to think of them as world-making, that is, as fictional. The situated and the un-situated are equally exceptional as are the fictional and the non-fictional.

A definition, then, that includes narratives that are unnatural in the sense that they transgress the rules of everyday storytelling practices will not be the opposite of a natural definition. Expansion, not negation of the territory of narratives will be the result. In this view, the basic elements are – to different degrees – optional or context-specific limitations. It is not the case that they *negate* the broad definition of "disruption experienced;" instead they specify particular limitations and conditions of specific contexts. As briefly touched upon above, this is even true to some degree for "disruption" and "experienced."

When Monika Fludernik famously redefined narrativity as "mediated experientiality" her model had the great advantage of being able to include texts and plays like the ones of Beckett under the umbrella of narratives, since they could be constructed as rich in experientiality while totally or almost plotless. That meant that highly sophisticated cultural achievements

were moved from the domain of non-narratives to that of quintessential narratives. The price paid by relying solely on experientiality, however, was significant, since historiography and several other text-types were now given zero narrativity.

Fludernik, though, also writes: "However, since all narrative includes non-experiential sequences, I will allow a place in the model for such forms of narrative, categorizing historical writing as narrative with restricted narrativity [...]."¹⁸ If we do not want to entirely dismiss plot or disruption as criteria for narrativity we could extend this idea to include both parameters so that some narratives have restricted narrativity as regards disruption and others as regards experience. In narratives, disruption and experience respectively can be exactly as small as men of average height can be tall. If one is large the other can be insignificant: A text by Beckett could contain a lot of "experienced" and pretty little disruption, whereas historiography or a news report about the war on Iraq could be heavy on disruption, but low on representing the "experience" of this disruption.

This may again imply that any definition that tries to include all narratives and exclude all non-narratives may have its blind spots.

5. The Conventional and the Natural

To Fludernik, as mentioned, natural narratives are prototypes of all narratives. I will conclude this paper with briefly comparing an unnatural approach to Fludernik's natural one by distinguishing between the conventional and the natural. When new techniques or modes of telling are invented they often appear strange at first, but then – if they are successful – become conventionalized and cease to appear strange. More often than not, theorists then realize that the form is not entirely new, but that many historical examples exist. Fludernik's model has a tremendous explanatory value in demonstrating how new forms emerge, become conventionalized and flourish and cease to appear strange or surprising. Some examples could be 'omniscience,' free indirect discourse, and psychonarration, which became frequent in third-person narratives and then later also in first-person narratives. Another example – at a completely different level – would be the explosion in recent years of so-called auto-fictions.

All of this is well known not least thanks to the diachronic studies of Fludernik. It does however call for a distinction, I think. Living up to the expectations of a stereotypical classical narratologist equally fond of dichotomies

¹⁸ Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, 26.

Non-natural textual constellations refer to text-types that are naturally *non-occurring*. For this reason new generic options (such as reflector-mode narrative) do not in the process of narrativization *become* natural, although they become *naturalized* [...].²⁰

I agree with the point but would suggest then to say instead that they become conventionalized.

To stick to first-person present-tense narratives: they have surely become conventionalized. But what does this tell us? Has first-person, present tense emerged because of some real-world emergence, like that of, say, live sport reports?: "I am sitting at this moment here at Stamford Bridge watching Chelsea ready to progress to the champions league final." In other words: do existing and natural forms help us understand new forms? My answer – my polite answer – would be: perhaps, to some degree.

There is, though, also a two-way traffic here in which emerging new forms tell us about existing ones. For example, rather than understanding first person, present tense narration as some sort of report like that of a soccer match, it can be understood as foregrounding the non-report and resistance to real-world descriptions – and accordingly as foregrounding the power of invention that some techniques of fictionality possess. So we understand new forms by means of old ones, but perhaps we also sometimes misunderstand new forms by means of old ones. This could be the case if we assume that they *must* be like naturally occurring narratives and hence situated, told by someone, etc.

In this sense the argument can be made that unnatural narratives and the invention of new techniques and hitherto "impossible" ways of telling is a major force in narrative history. New ways of telling are not just new ways of telling the same stories. They expand our cognitive repertoire and the repertoire of what is altogether tellable and narratable. The narratives excluded from view if we take all narratives to be natural and communicational are by no means only marginal. They include much postmodernist and experimental fiction but also narratives of trauma, of encounters with foreign cultures, with incomprehensible thoughts or deeds. It seems to me an important task for the study of narrative to develop models that account for the specific properties that characterize all these narratives.

The prototype approach tends implicitly to place some narratives in the centre and other in the periphery and to devote less interest to the specificity of what it considers the *emus*. The – for lack of a real word – "context-specific limitation"-approach on the other hand tends to compartmentalize and

²⁰ Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, 330.

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devote less attention to the general. The latter approach may be unable to see the wood for the trees, whereas the former may only see the wood and not any single tree.

In David Herman's introduction to *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, he distinguishes between "making sense of stories" and "stories as sense-making."²¹ In Richard Walsh's words this means that in one perspective, narrative is the *object* of interpretation; in the other, it is a *means* of interpretation. In that sense the two approaches seem to some degree to correspond to two different kinds of interests: sometimes the interest is primarily in describing and understanding the enormous role narratives play in the way we make meaning of almost all aspects of life ("stories as sense-making"). At other times the primary interest is the specificity and the specific possibilities of a certain kind of narrative – in the form of, say, a witness narrative from the Holocaust or an experimental novel ("making sense of stories"). If the latter is the case, then we may lose sight of some of the specific features of these narratives and even miss some of the very reasons why they are worth studying if we take natural narratives as models for *all* narratives.

Models that account also for the unnatural features of some narratives (no one telling to no one on no occasion and for no reason about nothing happening) will have a profound impact on the way we think about storyworlds, about experientiality, about the relation between story and discourse, and about representations and narratives that resist description based on linguistic understandings of natural, oral communication.

Highly sophisticated cultural documents like good fictional novels or complex non-fictional testimonies merit attention as privileged artefacts in need of theories and methods of their own not because they are isolated in some theoretical realm detached from the real world, but on the contrary because they *expand* the repertoire of what is understandable, narratable, and possible in this world.

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