

Experientiality

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Created: 7. November 2013 Revised: 1. July 2014

1 Definition

The term “experientiality” was introduced by Fludernik (1996), where it was defined as “the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience” (12). Experientiality refers to the ways in which narrative taps into readers’ familiarity with experience through the activation of “natural” cognitive parameters (see Fludernik 2003), and particularly the embodiment of cognitive faculties, the understanding of intentional action, the perception of temporality, and the emotional evaluation of experience. This cognitively grounded relation between human experience and human *representations* of experience is at the root of Fludernik’s definition of narrative: any text that foregrounds the above-mentioned parameters qualifies as narrative; any text that sidelines them (including factual summaries and reports) possesses weak or zero narrativity because it “[cancels] the dynamics of experientiality” (Fludernik 1996: 28). Thus, for Fludernik, experientiality and narrativity (Abbott → Narrativity [1]) are interchangeable terms.

What remains unclear in Fludernik’s account is whether experientiality should be considered an intrinsic (and textually identifiable) property of narrative, or a psychological process triggered in the text-reader interaction. Such definitional ambiguity explains why the concept of experientiality has been used in significantly different ways in narratological discussions after Fludernik.

2 Explication

According to Fludernik, narrative’s experientiality consists in its implication or activation of a number of cognitive parameters, i.e. basic structures of human engagement with the world that straddle the divide between real-life experience and semiotic representations of experience. We may group these parameters under the headings of embodiment, intentionality, temporality, and evaluation. They are prototypically found in “naturally occurring” (that is, conversational) narrative, where a storyteller relates a past experience by conveying his or her own embodied and emotional appraisal of temporally unfolding actions. Such a “natural” narrative situation, where the experiencer and the storyteller coincide, provides the

groundwork for Fludernik's narratological model.

Among her cognitive parameters, Fludernik places a premium on the concept of embodiment, which, she argues, can subsume all other categories: it "evokes all the parameters of a real-life schema of existence which always has to be situated in a specific time and space frame, and the motivational and experiential aspects of human actionality likewise relate to the knowledge about one's physical presence in the world" (Fludernik 1996: 30). Intentionality refers to the goal-directed nature of human action whose understanding is implicit in readers' engagement with narrative (23). Finally, narrative draws on the dynamic patterning of human temporality, which is always accompanied by emotional, evaluative processes: "Experientiality *includes* this sense of moving with time, of the *now* of experience, but this almost static level of temporal experience is supplemented by more dynamic and evaluative factors" (29). These evaluations are depicted by Fludernik in terms of emotional relevance: "All experience is therefore stored as emotionally charged remembrance, and it is reproduced in narrative form because it was memorable, funny, scary, or exciting" (29).

In the conversational storytelling studied by sociolinguist Labov (1972), the evaluations that are intertwined with narrative patterns are those of the speaker and storyteller. By contrast, in fictional narrative such evaluations tend to convey the viewpoint of a character or protagonist, mirroring "her experience of events as they impinge on her situation or activities" (Fludernik 1996: 30). Hence, Fludernik's model grounds the narrativity (and experientiality) of fictional narrative in the representation of characters' experiences: "Narrativity can emerge from the experiential portrayal of dynamic event sequences which are already configured emotively and evaluatively, but it can also consist in the experiential depiction of human consciousness *tout court*" (30). In this way, Fludernik uncouples narrativity from the criteria of temporal progression and causal connectedness with which it is associated in plot-based definitions of narrative: "In my model there can [...] be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level" (13). The upshot of this view is that texts not traditionally considered narrative (e.g., lyric poetry) are said to possess narrativity, whereas purely factual accounts such as summaries or reports—which sideline embodiment, intentionality, and emotionally charged temporality—do not qualify as stories, since they lack experientiality (see 28). Any text that represents experience is, for Fludernik, a narrative text, even if it does not map onto a clear-cut sequence of causally connected events and actions.

3 History of the Concept and Its Discussion

Experientiality is one of the key terms of postclassical narratology (see Herman ed. 1999; Meister → Narratology [2]), reflecting the considerable influence exerted by Fludernik's model on the recent history of this field. However, scholars working in the wake of Fludernik's "natural" narratology have construed and utilized the concept of experientiality in substantially different ways. Since Fludernik places a premium on the narrative figuration of characters' experiences, some narratologists have equated experientiality with the textual representation of fictional consciousnesses, one of the traditional areas of narratological investigation (Hamburger [1957] 1973; Cohn 1978; Fludernik 1993). Margolin, for example, writes that experientiality is the "representation of mental activity" (2000: 604). Likewise, Palmer uses experientiality interchangeably with "fictional mental functioning" (2004 : 32). On the other hand, Herman has defined experientiality (or the "consciousness factor," in his term) more globally as narrative's capacity to "emulate through [its] temporal and perspectival configuration the what-it's-like dimension of conscious awareness itself" (2009: 137–60). Caracciolo (2012; 2014) has gone further in this direction, arguing that the experientiality of narrative arises from the tension and interaction between a narrative text and the past experiences of its recipients. All in all, after the publication of Fludernik's work, experientiality has been extended to cover the continuum between the textual representation of fictional (i.e., characters') experiences and the creation of "story-driven" experiences in narrative audiences.

These semantic oscillations reveal a number of theoretical issues left open by Fludernik's treatment. Diengott (2010), in particular, has criticized the expository blind spots and shortcomings of Fludernik's model. Consider the definition provided by Fludernik: experientiality is "the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience." Almost all of the terms used in this phrase call for clarification and tie in with age-old debates within narratology and literary theory.

Firstly, it may be wondered whether "the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience" is a necessary and/or a sufficient condition for narrativity. Secondly, depending on the exact scope of the terms "quasi-mimetic" and "real-life experience," experientiality seems to occupy different positions vis-à-vis the concept of mimesis. Thirdly, depending on how we construe the term "evocation," Fludernik's definition seems to hover between the textualist orientation of structuralist narratology and the readerly orientation of postclassical, and specifically cognitive, approaches (Herman → Cognitive Narratology [3]). The textualist perspective is at the root of interpretations of experientiality (such as those by Margolin and Palmer), focusing on the representation of characters' experiences, while the reader-response perspective leads to interpretations focusing on recipients' experiences (cf. Caracciolo

2012; 2014).

3.1 Experientiality and Narrativity

Fludernik's "natural" narratology ties a tight knot between experientiality and narrativity. As Fludernik writes, "narrativity [...] centers on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature" (1996: 26). However, starting with Sternberg (2001: 122) and Alber (2002), scholars have disputed Fludernik's claim, arguing that experientiality cannot be straightforwardly equated with narrativity (see Wolf 2003: 181; Ryan 2005: 4; Herman 2002: 168–69; 2009: 211). For instance, Alber (2002: 68–70) points out that merging narrativity and experientiality results in an overextension of the category "narrative": lyric poetry can be said to depict human consciousness (and therefore possesses experientiality) even though its narrativity is usually quite weak. Indeed, while all artistic artifacts are in some way related to human experience, not all of them can be made sense of in narrative terms. The upshot is that narrativity must be defined on other grounds than experientiality alone.

Yet the fact that experientiality cannot be taken as a sufficient condition for narrativity does not mean that stories can be devoid of experientiality. No matter how distant from the laws and conventions of what we consider to be our real world, stories are always bound up with human experience: they speak to human concerns and help us negotiate values that are part of our everyday reality. In other words, narrative is deeply implicated in what has been variously called "the repertoire" (Iser [1976] 1978) or "the experiential background" (Caracciolo 2014: 55–71) of recipients. We can therefore conclude that experientiality is a necessary—but not sufficient—condition for narrativity. Hence, theorists such as Wolf (2003) and Herman (2009) have included experientiality among their "narratemes" or "basic elements of narrative" without equating it with narrativity. Experientiality thus becomes only one of the factors that contribute to making a semiotic artifact intelligible in narrative terms.

3.2 Experientiality and Mimesis

Fludernik's definition of experientiality includes the term "quasi-mimetic," which should be understood in light of Fludernik's own discussion of mimesis: "mimesis must *not* be identified as imitation but needs to be treated as the artificial and illusionary projection of a semiotic structure which the reader recuperates in terms of a fictional reality. This recuperation, since it is based on cognitive parameters

gleaned from real-world experience, inevitably results in an implicit though incomplete homologization of the fictional and the real worlds” (1996: 35, emphasis in the original). To paraphrase Fludernik’s proposition: we make sense of narrative texts by projecting their events and existents onto a quasi-ontological domain, a storyworld or fictional world. Such a simulative—and in this sense “mimetic” (see Oatley 1999)—process draws heavily on basic cognitive and experiential parameters. However, the storyworlds of fiction can deviate significantly from these parameters: they can contain physically or even logically impossible states of affairs such as the metamorphosis of a human being into an aquatic salamander (in Cortázar’s short story “Axolotl,” 1956) or a disembodied narrator inhabiting the body of another character (in Amis’s novel *Time’s Arrow*, 1991). These narratives are now the object of so-called “unnatural” narratology (Alber et al. 2010). Yet for all their bizarreness, these stories maintain a connection with human experientiality via the themes they address (see Alber 2009). Indeed, while the advocates of unnatural narratology tend to drive a wedge between unnatural and natural approaches, Fludernik (2012) herself has pointed out how natural and unnatural elements are, in literary mimesis, intrinsically bound up.

Experientiality as narrative’s mimetic relation with human experience should not be conceptualized as a one-way exchange in which narrative can only *draw on* recipients’ familiarity with the real world (2014). Indeed, both conversational and fictional stories can impact recipients’ interaction with reality by leaving a mark on their values and attitudes. This phenomenon, known in social psychology as “narrative persuasion” (Green & Brock 2000), shows that experientiality is a complex, dynamic relation in which real-world and story-driven experiences become intertwined (cf. Fludernik’s “incomplete homologization of the fictional and the real worlds”). Thus, engaging with narrative not only taps into recipients’ repertoire of past experiences (or “experiential background”), but can also produce shifts and changes in this repertoire. This double movement between storytelling and background is, according to Caracciolo (2014: 49–50), constitutive of experientiality. Ricœur’s ([1984] 1985) tripartite theory of mimesis already gestured towards this interaction between narrative and recipients’ past experiences: by temporally organizing or “configuring” a series of events (“mimesis 2”), narrative exploits recipients’ pre-understanding of the world (“mimesis 1”) in a way that can restructure or “refigure” their perception of reality (“mimesis 3”). From this hermeneutic perspective, narrative experientiality is bound up with interpretation *qua* our basic way of engaging with the physical, social, and cultural world. The boundaries of human experience—and thus of what humans consider possible or impossible, natural or “unnatural”—are constantly renegotiated through a cultural, interpretive dynamic that is, at least in part, driven by the experientiality of

storytelling practices (see Bernaerts et al. 2014).

3.3 Experientiality in an Interdisciplinary Context

Taken in its psychological sense, experientiality can be seen as narrative's capacity to give rise to experiential states and responses in recipients. Experientiality thus ties in with a larger movement within contemporary narratology—a movement that focuses on the psychological processes underlying recipients' engagement with stories. The investigation of the experiential texture of storytelling can benefit from the rising interest in experience itself within contemporary cognitive science: traditional, AI-inspired cognitivism sidelined experience, concentrating instead on abstract, unconscious processes and their function in shaping behavior (Chalmers 1996: 15). By contrast, embodied and situated approaches to cognition highlight the subject's experiential history of interaction with the environment (Varela et al. 1991; Lakoff & Johnson 1999). Psycholinguists have shown how this history plays a role in discourse and narrative comprehension through the activation of memories of past experiences (or "experiential traces"; see Pecher & Zwaan 2005). In sum, the interdisciplinary convergence on experience as an object of theoretical as well as empirical inquiry can help narratologists come to grips with two dimensions of narrative experientiality, both of them contained—in an inchoate form—in Fludernik's discussion of cognitive parameters: firstly, neo-phenomenological approaches within the philosophy of mind (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008) can yield insight into the temporal and emotional structure of story-driven experiences; secondly, cognitive-psychological research can explain how cognitive-level (i.e., unconscious) mental processes interact with experiences (Gerrig 2011).

While this interdisciplinary exchange with the cognitive sciences can open up new avenues of investigation into narrative experientiality, it also creates unprecedented challenges for narrative theory. As soon as the emphasis shifts from the textual pole (experientiality as the representation of characters' experiences) to the readerly pole, any reference to the text and its structures as autonomous and independently describable objects becomes problematic: textual properties exist only as experienced by particular recipients; yet the story-driven experiences of each recipient depend not only on the text but also on his or her own experiential background (predispositions, interests, competencies, etc.). As a result, the text-reader interaction becomes a "black box" where it is difficult to disentangle the text from the (more or less shared) cognitive make-up and presuppositions of the audience. It is likely that textual properties are responsible for some aspects or structures of recipients' experiences. However, characterizing these aspects or structures is a daunting task, especially given the wide diversity of recipients' responses to narrative (which reflects the diversity of their experiential

background). The empirical-phenomenological project launched by literary scholar Miall and psychologist Kuiken (see, e.g. Kuiken et al. 2004) seems to pave the way for this investigation into the structures of story-driven experiences.

4 Topics for Further Investigation

It is argued above that the concept of experientiality lends itself to two interpretations: it can refer to the textual representation of experience, but it also hints at the experiences undergone by the recipients of narrative. We should be open to the possibility that studying narrative strategies for representing characters' experience and studying recipients' story-driven experiences are essentially independent enterprises. But at this stage it seems important to follow Fludernik in attempting to build a synergy between the text-first and the recipient-first approach to experientiality. Hence, future research should concentrate on how specific textual cues can modulate recipients' experience of narrative. Empathy for characters appears to be crucial to bridge the gap between the textual and the readerly pole of experientiality. Although this phenomenon has received increasing attention in recent years (Keen → Narrative Empathy [4]), we know relatively little about the textual strategies that can encourage recipients to empathize with a character. Other relevant questions include: how can narrative manipulate the experiential "feel" of emotions? How can it create moods and other "existential feelings" (Robinson 2005; Ratcliffe 2008)? What is the role of mental imagery in the reading experience, and to what extent does it depend on textual cues? How can stories produce a sense of presence in the storyworld ("immersion") and other bodily responses such as proprioception and kinesthesia? Finally, how do all the experiential processes just mentioned influence recipients' engagement with the thematic and interpretive meanings of narrative?

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To cite this entry, we recommend the following bibliographic format:

Caracciolo, Marco: "Experientiality". In: Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.): *the living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University. URL = <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/experientiality>
[view date:12 Feb 2019]