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Simultaneity in Narrative

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1 Definition

In the strict, literal sense simultaneity is the property of two or more events, actions or processes which satisfy the following formula for temporal location: x is simultaneous with y if and only if for every time point or interval in which x is (or was or will be) present, y is (or was or will be) present (Le Poidevin [1996] 2011: 55). In other words, events are simultaneous if they are isochronous or occupy exactly the same temporal interval. In a more relaxed sense, if the time interval of event b is a proper subset of that of event a, b can be said to be simultaneous with a, but not vice versa. In the context of narrative, simultaneity may refer to events on the *histoire* or the *discours* levels as well as to the relation between events or actions on these two levels.

2 Explication

In narrative, simultaneity is a relation which can obtain between two or more events/actions on the level of the narrated, of narration (= concurrent acts of speech by two or more narrating instances) and at the nexus of the two levels (= concurrent narration).

On the narrated level, the simultaneous events or actions can be physical, mental (including focalization) or verbal and may involve one or more agents. In the case of one agent, it is usually the pairing of simultaneous mental and physical, mental and verbal, and physical and verbal activities which is portrayed, because it is obviously possible to carry out at the same time more than one physical or mental act, or even activities of all three kinds. When two or more agents are concerned, comparisons and contrasts are meaningful only if the same kind of simultaneous activity is undertaken by all of them. Collective narratives (Margolin 2000) emphasize the identity or at least marked similarity of the activities of any kind undertaken by all agents involved in a given scene, thus creating the image of a supra-individual collective agent. In the majority of cases, however, such as in big city novels or in crowd and battle scenes, it is the diversity or contrast of the simultaneous actions of the participants which is of the essence. Multi-strand narratives, especially novels,

are based on several long-term chains of events (e. g. the Anna and Levin strands in *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoi) involving different groups of people (such as families), sometimes at different locations, running in parallel, and intersecting every now and again.

While simultaneous actions by themselves are a most obvious phenomenon, their scenic representation in a unilinear medium, where only one action can be represented at any given moment (i.e. in any given text segment), has been a major challenge to writers from the *Iliad* (Homer) to postmodernist narratives. It is true that coexisting static rather than dynamic elements (e.g. features of a complex object, landscape, etc.) can also be represented one at a time only. But in this case there is not the sense of missing out, of loss of immediacy, which is inevitable when simultaneous transitory activities have to be rendered in succession. The scenic representation of simultaneous narrated acts, or of acts of narration for that matter, can proceed in one of the following three manners:

(1) Alternating block presentation in different successive paragraphs, chapters or even books of different concurrent processes or activities, the successive textual parts thus retracing the same temporal interval. This obvious and rather unsophisticated procedure is mockingly referred to as “Meanwhile, back on the ranch.”

(2) Repeated intercutting, sometimes with ever increasing frequency, between two or more simultaneous narrated actions or acts of narration (Flaubert’s *commice agricole* in *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert), book 22 of the *Iliad* (Homer)).

(3) Turning the text on the page from a one- into a two-dimensional object by splitting the page into two or more distinct rows or columns running in parallel, each representing one of the concurrent activities or acts of narration (Butor’s *Niagara* (Butor), Josipovici’s “Mobius the Stripper” (Josipovici)).

Concurrent narration, “I say it as I see it” in Beckett’s terms, whether hetero-, homo- or autodiegetic, is faced with the inexorable difficulty of configuring into a meaningful whole that which is still in the process of becoming at narration time.

3 History of the Concept and its Study

3.1 Studies of Simultaneity

There seems to be no systematic study of the different kinds of simultaneous actions in narrative and the modes of their presentation, even though close readings of individual texts involving this issue abound. The first scholar to tackle this

phenomenon explicitly, more than a century ago, seems to have been Zielinski (1901). In newer scholarship, several fundamental distinctions are made by Harweg ([1991] 2011: 159), who distinguishes between the following: a “longitudinal” sequence, where events are presented in chronological order; a “latitudinal” sequence, where isochronous strands of events run in parallel, i.e. in a point-by-point co-presentation of isochronous, parallel fact-sequences occurring in different places or with different agents, resulting in “spatial” distribution (159); and an “altitudinal,” side-by-side or intermittent presentation without distinction of different tokens of the same type of event located at the same place with the same agents but at different points in time. This is telescoping, synchronization or blending of events, often produced by acts of recollection and giving an impression of simultaneity, while at the same time creating an occasional paradigm with an underlying abstract arch-event. De Toro ([1991] 2011: 130–31) enlarges on this, noting that any side-by-side presentation of events from different times and, one might add, without clear temporal indexing, tends to create the impression that everything is narrated as happening at the same time. Present-tense narration tends to enhance this impression. De Toro also alludes to the possibility of simultaneous narrations, as when a story is presented through several narrators whose perspectives and speech cannot be separated, when different speech acts merge into one speech act and hence into one single temporal interval. This can occur on the highest level of embedding, but it is more frequent on the level of the narrated, where different intercutting voices would be reporting on or reacting to one and the same recent occurrence. (One example is Wittig’s *Les guérillères* (Wittig).) Frank’s much celebrated essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” ([1945] 1991) is concerned in part with the rendering of simultaneous actions. The author notes modern writers’ desire to force readers to perceive story elements as juxtaposed in space rather than unfolding in time. In the famous agricultural fair scene in *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert), for example, “The flow of time is thus stopped and one’s attention is directed to the interplay between the levels inside the scene. The significance of the scene resides precisely in the interrelations between these levels and in the simultaneous perception of all three” (16–7). On a much larger scale, it was Joyce’s purpose in *Ulysses* (Joyce) to create an overall portrayal of a city in one day, juxtaposing people, locations, sights and voices, and thus to project a sense of simultaneous activity occurring in different places. And it is to this end that Joyce created the elaborate network of cross-references subtending his novel (17–8).

3.1 Narrating Simultaneous Events

The representation of simultaneous events in a unilinear medium is most problematic when the *scenic* representation of two or more *ongoing activities* or sequences of events is at stake, while both the summary presentation of

simultaneous durative activities as well as the scenic presentation of momentary/punctual ones can be accomplished within the confines of a single complex sentence. An adequate profile of any given set of simultaneous activities would involve numerous parameters. These include the number of agents involved: one, two or three, or a multiplicity; the nature of their actions (physical, mental, verbal); and the unity or multiplicity of location(s). In drama and opera, the simultaneous activities, verbal or physical, of multiple agents are usually in the same location and are necessarily presented on the page sequentially. But in performance they all take place at the same physical and represented time, while the unitary actual space of the stage can be partitioned into different represented sub-spaces so that the different agents cannot see or hear each other, while the full effect of the multiple simultaneous actions is preserved for the audience. In the cinema, with its split-screen option, simultaneous actions in different locations, or an agent's actual speech and the mental images crossing his mind at the same time, can be presented side by side as a matter of course.

When the intercutting method of presentation, rather than the block or split page, is employed, several more considerations come into play. First is the total duration of the simultaneous action sequence and second is the frequency of switching from one agent to another or between different kinds of activities of the same agent. Equally important is the degree of markedness of each transition (how easily it can be identified), and closely related to this is the ability to construct a coherent longitudinal sequence for each of the intermittently presented action strands. When simultaneous actions or events in a single but extended space (such as a battlefield) are concerned, the position of the observer (unrestricted, internal-fixed or internal-variable) is of major significance, since it determines how fine-grained any given action description can be. And the same applies to simultaneous actions or events occurring in different locations. On the thematic level, one of series, ranging from close affinity to randomness. No less important are the cognitive and emotive effects of juxtaposing simultaneous activities: from reinforcement to sharp irony and deflation or even a global effect of fragmentation and chaos.

Not all logically possible combinations of parameters have been actualized in literary practice, or at least not to the same extent, possibly because they are not all equally effective mimetically or aesthetically. When two simultaneous actions of one individual are in focus, the juxtaposition of outer speech and inner mental activity, necessarily represented as inner speech, is the most frequent. The method of presentation is intercutting, the duration is minutes or at most several hours, and the switches from inner to outer and vice versa are frequent. The contents of the two sequences may be closely related (e.g. thinking what to say next) or entirely unrelated. In some cases, a different kind of font is employed for each sequence,

and when this is not done and the two series are related in content, it may become progressively more difficult to tell them apart—a confusion which may well be intended by the author. When the simultaneous speech activities of two or more agents are involved and no clear speaker identification is provided, distinguishing them may become well-nigh impossible, sometimes creating the effect of verbal overload, cacophony, etc. (Tjupa → Heteroglossia [1]). A multiplicity of activities by numerous agents who are all in the same location and whose activities, both verbal and physical, may be coordinated or uncoordinated is the standard fare of battle and crowd scenes from Homer to Tolstoi and Zola. And with the total space being divided into distinct sub-spaces, this is also the case of the big city novels of Dos Passos, Döblin and many other 20th-century novelists. Here, too, intercutting is the preferred method, and the diverse actions are designed to create an impression of fragmentation, alienation and randomness or, conversely, that of a vast network of underlying interconnections, an overall unified mechanism. However, since intercutting excludes linear coherence between any two adjacent action-descriptions, any overall unified patterns can be grasped only in retrospect. The block representation of the simultaneous activities of (groups of) agents is typically associated with multi-strand narratives. By its very nature, it creates a much weaker sense of simultaneity, since distinct scenes or groups of scenes are frequently encountered here, each with its own location and set of characters, and of a duration that may extend over days or weeks. The simultaneity of events often needs to be foregrounded at the switching point through such expressions as “at the same time that…,” “while…,” and the like.

3.2 Simultaneity of Acts of Narration

Multiple simultaneous acts of narration are encountered in the narrated domain whenever several characters, all talking at once, but each in his own words, report on a recent event or action, something frequently encountered in daily life. Choric narration, i.e. several narrative agents talking in unison and reporting on the same event, is rare, but examples can be found in Wittig’s *Les guérillères* (Wittig) in the passages starting “Elles disent.” On the cusp between narrator and narrative agent is the chorus in Greek tragedy, which speaks in unison and refers to itself sometimes as an “I,” i.e. a supra-individual collective body, and sometimes as “we,” i.e. a group of like-minded individuals. In modern literature, one encounters novels (e.g. Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (Faulkner)) consisting of a series of monologues by narrators reporting different phases or aspects of an extended action in which they themselves are participants or observers. But in the absence of any indication of an overall situation of narration, it is doubtful whether one can regard this series as an instance of simultaneous narration.

Simultaneous narration of sorts occurs in Butor's *Niagara* (Butor), which looks more like a script for a stereophonic radio play for a collection of voices: here, the two constant voices, those of the Announcer and the Reader, alternate with the voices of various other characters, who change from one section to the next. Each of the voices relates some fact or event, past or present, associated with the Niagara Falls. Gabriel Josipovici's short story "Mobius the Stripper" (Josipovici) tells in the upper part of each page and in the third person the story of Mobius, and in the lower part in the first person the story of a young writer suffering from writer's block. Mobius' suicide, with which the upper part concludes, releases the writer's block and he starts writing—presumably the text of the story just read in the upper part of the page. Two sequences of events which occupy the same time frame are now also told at the same time and within the bound of the same page(s). Yet the text which relates the events of Mobius' life just read could be generated only after Mobius' death! Simultaneity and succession thus seem to clash here and to form a strange loop known as the Möbius strip. And a Möbius strip is by definition non-orientable! Succession, simultaneity and the activity of writing are all thematized and problematized in this brilliant postmodern story.

3.3 Concurrence of Narration and the Narrated

The difficulty of representing two or more simultaneously occurring events in a verbal medium stems from the medium's inability in principle to reflect temporally overlapping occurrences iconically, irrespective of the narrating instance's temporal position relative to the narrated events. On the other hand, when concurrent narration is concerned, the problem clearly becomes one of the use of deixis, created precisely by the narrating instance's temporal position relative to the action sequence. This is due to the fact that the events are still ongoing (inchoative or incomplete) at the time they are being represented, and the ensuing epistemic impossibility of fully representing, and especially configuring, that which is not yet concluded at the time of reporting. Moreover, when the concurrent narration of two or more simultaneous ongoing processes is involved, both kinds of problems and attendant limitations inevitably come into play.

Concurrent narration is by necessity durative, scenic and coterminous with the events being reported (cf. Genette [1972] 1980: 216–17: "simultaneous narration," defined as "narrative in the present contemporaneous with the action"). It consists of a series of NOW intervals which, put together, make up the ongoing narrational process; in contrast, the object of this process is an unfolding sequence of concurrent temporal stages or intervals which, put together, make up the course of events being reported (Margolin 1999: 151). Stages of the narration are accordingly

matched with those of the narrated, and these matched pairs define the overlapping NOW of discursive and reported situations. The correlated ongoing stepwise passage of time on the two levels is the specific constitutive factor of concurrent narration. Since the action is inevitably represented as a series of successive events as they occur, the reporting is endowed with scenic immediacy, which in turn lends it superior immersive power with respect to the reader, who can imagine himself as being on the scene then and there, viewing the events as they unfold, experiencing them together with narrator and characters.

Being viewed from within and in the midst of the action, the narrated domain is necessarily represented as a succession of unconfigured particulars, while narration itself becomes the gradual figuring out of what the case is as it evolves. Narration here is a record of what is seen, of what is happening at the moment, and is the antithesis of the historian's narrative statements which, retrospectively, invest acts and actions with meaning (Margolin 1999: 151). Accordingly, individual constitutive acts or occurrences can be reported, but their role in the overall action sequence and their significance in it, as well as the shape and outcome of this sequence, are not known as yet. Even the certain and complete reporting of immediate scenes and of punctual (as opposed to durative) actions that occur in these scenes is normally restricted to reporting them as mere doings or happenings, since they cannot as yet be defined in terms of action type, motivation, human significance and value. A situation can thus be recorded as it takes place but not interpreted as, say, an error or a brilliant move. Since events are reported as they occur, as a sequence of NOW moments, the sequence as a whole may have an additive, paratactic quality. Local cohesion between adjacent events can often be established, but not macro-coherence, since the series as a whole has not yet reached its terminal point. In concurrent narration, the reporting instance does not possess any temporal distance from the actions or events nor any external, later vantage point from which the structuredness and significance of the reported sequence can be surveyed and defined as an integrated whole. The narrated domain takes shape as it is being narrated and is not a bounded whole. One cannot yet elicit a pattern from the incomplete succession, but only project one tentatively, if at all.

Finally, it is necessary to distinguish between authentic and apparent concurrent narration, the criterion being whether or not the ostensible concurrent narration is embedded in a higher deictic frame. Thus in Greek tragedy we have teichoscopy, where a character such as a watchman on a tower observes events occurring in a location inaccessible to his co-agents and the audience alike, reporting on them in 'real time' to these co-agents and hence indirectly to the audience, as well. Speech time overlaps here with event time, and there is no higher temporal frame or level. Not only are the events being reported as they occur, but their immediate impact on

the co-agents is also of major importance. Apparent concurrent narration involves a deictic shift in that the events being ostensibly reported in real time as they unfold are in fact past or future with respect to the speaker's temporal position. Past events may be re-lived by the speaker or conjured before his mind's eye (the clairvoyant), while future events may be experienced in their full immediacy by a speaker-prophet, as is the case of Cassandra's vision at the conclusion of the *Agamemnon* (Aeschylus). The so-called historical present may also be understood as a case of the highest narrating instance in a third- person retrospective narration performing a temporary deictic shift whereby it places itself in the time and place of the events being reported, becoming the immediate observer of the events as well as their reporter. Now in all cases of apparent concurrent narration (unlike authentic ones), a coherent, well-configured sequence of events can be presented, since the apparently on-going, open sequence is in fact a rounded-off unit, embedded in a higher-level and more all-embracing discourse with a different temporal anchoring (Pier → Narrative Levels [2]).

4 Topics for further Investigation

As remarked above, block alternation among simultaneous strings of actions is not particularly challenging to either author or reader. Intercutting, on the other hand, seems to be worthy of further detailed investigation. One fascinating topic would be to investigate this variety of the narration of the simultaneous events throughout the ages, from the *Iliad* up to at least Modernism. Another topic would be the correlation between intercutting and a fixed or moving observer's position, especially in scenes of wider spatial scope such as battle scenes or big city activities. A related question would be whether each of the interwoven strands of simultaneous events or actions is rendered through a different narrator, or whether one voice is reporting on all of them. And finally, the relations between simultaneously occurring inner and outer speech of a character or between concurrently running streams of thought within an individual mind are worth examining both historically and typologically.

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