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Unnatural Narrative

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1 Definition

An unnatural narrative violates physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world. However, narratives are never wholly unnatural; they typically contain 'natural' elements (based on real-world parameters) and unnatural components at the same time. Furthermore, the representation of impossibilities may not only concern the level of the story but also the level of the narrative discourse: in you-narratives, for example, a neutral and telepathic voice addresses the central protagonist, somehow knows his innermost thoughts and feelings, and tells him his own story.

The unnatural may exist in two different forms. On the one hand, there are the physical, logical, or epistemic impossibilities found in postmodernist narratives that have not yet been conventionalized, i.e. turned into basic cognitive frames, and thus still strike us as odd, strange, or defamiliarizing in the sense of Šklovskij ([1917] 1965). On the other hand, there are also physical, logical, or epistemic impossibilities that have over time become familiar forms of narrative representation (such as speaking animals in beast fables, magic in romances or fantasy narratives, the omnimentality of the traditional omniscient narrator, or time travel in science fiction).

2 Explication

Unnatural narratives are a subset of fictional narratives. The unnatural (or impossible) is measured against the foil of 'natural' (i.e. real-world) cognitive frames and scripts which are derived from our bodily existence in the world (see Fludernik 1996: 22) and involve natural laws and logical principles as well as standard human limitations of knowledge. The criterion for identifying unnaturalness is actualizability, which bears on the question of whether the represented scenario or event could exist in the real world or not (see also Ronen 1994: 51). The island in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for example, is fictional, but such an island

could exist in the actual world: it is based on ‘natural’ parameters. The flying island of Laputa in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726/1735), on the other hand, could clearly not exist in the real world; it therefore constitutes an unnatural phenomenon.

An unnaturalness that concerns the level of the story can be found in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991). In this novel, intradiegetic time, i.e. time within the storyworld, moves backwards. Hence, the first-person narrator does not swallow his food; rather, he gulps it up:

> You select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skilful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon (Amis [1991] 1992: 11).

The novel’s retrogressive temporality contradicts our experience of time in the real world; here, the scripts of daily life are reversed.

An impossibility that concerns the level of narrative discourse occurs in Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). This novel confronts us with a narrative voice which addresses the unnamed protagonist, knows his inner life, and tells him his own story in the following manner:

> You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head. The club is either Heartbreak or the Lizard Lounge (McInerney 1984: 1).

In the real world, we cannot tell our addressees detailed and comprehensive versions of stories that actually happened to them (rather than us). Monika Fludernik thus describes the unnaturalness of you-narratives in the following words: “Second-person fiction, which appears to be a prima facie fictional, nonnatural form of story-telling, enhances the options already available to conversational narrative and extends the boundaries of the nonrealistically possible in emphatic ways” (1994: 460).

The represented impossibilities in unnatural narratives often lead to modifications or extensions of existing narratological conceptions of storytelling situations,

narrators, characters, time, or space. Firstly, in unnatural narratives, the narrator can be an impossibly eloquent child, a baby without a brain, a female breast, an animal, or a tree. In other cases, the narrator has already died or is still unborn. Further impossibilities concern the telepathic first-person narrator (see Nielsen 2004 , 2013; Heinze 2008); you-narratives; and we-narratives in which the 'we' comprises the minds of people who have lived over a period of one thousand years (see also Richardson 2006; Alber et al. 2012). Secondly, in unnatural narratives, characters can be half-human, half-animal or speaking corpses. Also, they may transform into other entities, or they can exist in numerous co-existing but incompatible variants (see also Iversen 2013). Thirdly, unnatural temporalities challenge our real-world ideas about time and temporal progression. Examples are retrogressive temporalities (in which time moves backwards); eternal temporal loops; conflated time lines or "chronomontages" (which yoke different temporal zones together); reversed causalities (in which, say, the present is caused by the future); contradictory temporalities (which consist of mutually exclusive events or event sequences); and differential time lines (in which inhabitants of the same storyworld age at a different rate than others) (see also Richardson 2002; Ryan 2006, 2009; Alber 2012; Heinze 2013). Fourthly, impossible spaces undo our assumptions about space and spatial organization in the real world through containers that are bigger on the inside than they are on the outside; shape-shifting settings; non-actualizable geographies; visions of the infinite and unimaginable universe; or metaleptic jumps between zones that we know to be separate (see also Alber 2013c; Alber & Bell 2012 ; Ryan 2012).

3 The History of the Concept and its Study

3.1 Postmodernist Unnaturalness and its Precursors

In comparison to earlier narratives, postmodernist texts acquire their specificity through the concentration and radicalization of unnaturalness. However, the unnatural scenarios and events of postmodernism are not brand-new phenomena. Rather, they have been anticipated in a wide variety of ways (see also Alber 2011). Many older narratives represent scenarios or events that are impossible in the real world as well. There is no proper point at which the unnatural first enters literary history; rather, fiction always already involves the representation of impossibilities. Unnatural scenarios and events can, for example, be found in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the ancient Indian *Vedas*, the ancient Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, and the Old Testament.

During the course of literary history, numerous impossibilities have been conventionalized and turned into familiar aspects of generic conventions. In a

surprising number of cases, the transformation of impossibilities into cognitive frames goes hand in hand with the creation of new generic configurations. The development of the genre of the beast fable written in the manner of Aesop, for instance, closely correlates with the conventionalization of the speaking animal. Similarly, the development of the epic involves the conventionalization of supernatural forces such as mythic monsters and superhuman heroes. Once an unnatural element has been conventionalized, it can be used for a different purpose, which typically leads to the creation of further genre configurations. For instance, while beast fables use speaking animals as stand-ins for humans to mock human follies, 18th-century circulation novels and children's stories focus on the suffering of animals and use talking animals to critique cruelty against animals.

Analogously, impossibilities that have to do with supernatural forces do not only occur in epics; rather, they continue to play a crucial role in medieval romances, Gothic novels, nonsense fiction, and fantasy novels. They may concern different aspects of human experience (such as courtly manners or chivalric codes in the romance or the evocation of fear and awe in the Gothic novel), but they typically involve the idea that the struggle between good and evil forces in our world is somehow regulated or determined by supernatural entities. Despite the deliberate movement away from the supernaturalism of the romance, the omniscient narrator in realist novels and the narrative medium in the reflector-mode narratives of literary modernism also involve a certain degree of magic. Like wizards (such as Merlin), these narrators or narrative media are capable of telepathy: in contrast to real-world agents, they can literally read the minds of the other characters (see also Alber 2013a).

The unnatural elements in science-fiction novels (aliens, rebelling robots, time travel, many-world cosmologies, and spatial impossibilities) also ultimately have their roots in the supernatural (see Todorov [1973] 1975: 173). It is only that in these cases, unnatural elements are no longer explained as supernatural occurrences; rather, they have to do with extrapolations based on technological innovations, or simply with the fact that the narratives are set in the distant future. In this sense, there is a short distance between genres in which impossibilities can be explained through magic or the supernatural, and science-fiction narratives in which similar phenomena are explained through technological development (see also Miéville 2004: 338).

Numerous manifestations of satire also involve the unnatural because satirical exaggerations, distortions, or caricatures are frequently so extreme that they merge with the impossible. Stableford, for example, argues that "the artifice of satire," which proceeds by means of "incongruous exaggeration," was "crucial to the

development of self-conscious fabulation [i.e. postmodernism, J. A.], beginning with the earliest fables" ([2005] 2009: 358). In the case of satire, represented impossibilities (such as the speaking objects in the circulation novels of the 18th century or the flying island of Laputa) typically serve a didactic purpose: they mock and critique certain psychological predispositions or states of affairs.

The proliferation of the unnatural in earlier narratives suggests that postmodernism is not the completely innovative and wholly unprecedented explosion of anti-mimeticism that certain critics consider it to be. Rather, postmodernist narratives hark back to conventionalized impossibilities in well-known genres; they draw on features of earlier narratives via a shared concern with the unnatural. More specifically, postmodernism can now be construed as being an intertextual endeavor which blends our actual-world encyclopedia with the encyclopedias (see Doležel 1998 : 177) of established literary genres by using the impossible storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces of earlier narratives in the context of otherwise realist frameworks where we would not expect them.

3.1 Theoretical Conceptualizations of Unnaturalness

The systematic study of the unnatural begins with the work of Richardson, who discusses unnatural temporalities (2000, 2002) as well as unnatural narrators and storytelling scenarios (2006), anticipated by McHale's analysis of metafictional strategies in postmodernist narratives (1987, 1992) and Wolf's more general work on anti-illusionism from a diachronic perspective (1993). Recently, a number of younger scholars such as Alber (2009, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), Heinze (2008, 2013), Iversen (2011, 2013), Mäkelä (2013), and Nielsen (2004, 2010, 2013) have also begun to look at the ways in which unnatural narratives move beyond real-world understandings of time, space, and human beings (see also Alber et al. 2010; Richardson et al. 2012). This interest in the unnatural is a reaction to Fludernik's 'natural' narratology (1996), which is critiqued from various different perspectives.

Important in this context is the question of how to approach or make sense of unnatural narratives. Alber argues that readers are ultimately bound by their cognitive architecture, even when trying to make sense of the unnatural. Hence, the only way to respond to narratives of all sorts (including unnatural ones) is through cognitive frames and scripts. On the basis of cognitive studies, frame theory, and possible-worlds theory, he has outlined a number of reading strategies enabling readers to come to terms with and make sense of the unnatural (Alber 2013b: 451–54).

Other researchers take exception to such reading strategies: they argue that the possibility should be left open that unnatural narratives might contain or produce

effects that are not easily (if at all) explainable or resolvable with reference to everyday phenomena or to the rules of the represented storyworld. Richardson, for example, seeks to “respect the polysemy of literary creations, and a crucial aspect of this polysemy can be the unnatural construction of recalcitrant texts.” From this perspective, “we need to recognize the anti-mimetic as such, and resist impulses to deny its protean essence and unexpected effects” (2011: 33). Similarly, for Iversen, “one major limitation inherent in a full-blown cognitive approach to narrative [...] is that it runs the risk of reducing the affective power and resonance of such narratives” (2013: 96). Mäkelä also points out that she “would not construe ‘the reader’ as a mere sense-making machine but as someone who might just as well opt for the improbable and the indeterminate” (2013: 145). Along the same lines, Nielsen develops what he calls “un-naturalizing reading strategies,” arguing that when confronted with the unnatural the reader “can trust as authoritative and reliable what would in real life be impossible.” Furthermore, the unnatural “cue[s] the reader to interpret in ways that differ from the interpretation of real-world acts of narration and of conversational storytelling” (2013: 91–2).

From this perspective, a cognitive approach cannot do justice to the representation of impossibilities because it potentially leads to normalizing or domesticating the unnatural. On the other hand, the alternative approach involves the danger of monumentalizing the unnatural by leaving it outside the bounds of the comprehensible: one might argue that since represented impossibilities are created by human authors, it makes sense to address the question of what they have to say about us and the world we live in. This argument closely correlates with what Stein Haugom Olsen calls the “‘human interest’ question” (1987: 67), i.e. the idea that fiction focuses on “mortal life: how to understand it and how to live it” (Nagel 1979: ix). The unnatural is a human phenomenon, rather than a transcendental or godly phenomenon that human beings cannot even begin to make sense of.

4 Topics for Further Investigation

Open questions concern (1) the role of impossibilities in poetry, film, painting, religious texts, computer games, and so forth, as well as (2) the functions of the unnatural in literatures written in other languages than English. (3) The fusion of the study of the unnatural with feminist, queer, and/or postcolonial approaches appears to be a promising endeavor and, more generally, the ideological underpinnings and/or political implications of represented impossibilities. (4) The unnatural should be investigated from the perspective of the rhetorical approach to narrative, and the place of implied authors behind representations of impossibilities and the question of what is to be understood by the authorial audience should be determined.

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