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Beyond “Mimetic Reductionism”

Exploring Unnatural Narratology

Jan Alber / Henrik Skov Nielsen / Brian Richardson (Eds.): *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press 2013. Pp. 234. GBP 63.95 (cloth), GBP 14.95 (cd). ISBN 978-0-8142-1228-8 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8142-9330-0 (cd)

Structure of the Book

A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative is a remarkably transformative contribution in the field of narrative studies, representing a first attempt to provide a coherent and organic theoretical basis for unnatural narratology. Ultimately, the main aim of the book seems to describe the phenomenon of unnatural narratives, i.e. “texts that present extremely implausible, impossible, or logically contradictory scenarios or events”. Nonetheless, unnatural narrative analysis “seeks to draw attention [...] to the largely invisible unnatural elements cached within ostensibly mimetic works” (p. 3).

Moving from these premises, the ten foundational contributions efficaciously explore the varied ways in which the concept of “unnaturalness” can be understood and applied, touching on all of the core narratological concepts. Notably, not only this anthology dialogues with major approaches in narrative theory – rhetorical and cognitive, above all – but also revisits and reconceptualizes many traditional narratological categories, including story, time, space, voice, minds, narrative levels, realism, nonfiction, hyperfiction, and narrative poetry. This is undoubtedly the greatest merit of the volume, as rarely have these key notions been reconsidered in such an original, thorough and consistent way.

The objects of analysis mostly include experimental and antirealist works “that feature strikingly impossible or antimimetic elements” (p. 1), comprising such well-known or canonical authors as S. Beckett, A. Robbe-Grillet, H.G. Wells. Nonetheless, several essays take into account also the great masters of realism, as G. Flaubert, Ch. Dickens, L. Tolstoy, M. Twain, F.S.K. Fitzgerald. Other investigations observe from an unnatural perspective less-well-known writers, as A. Castillo, M. Darrieussecq, Stuart Moulthrop.

In order to make sense of the “nature” of unnatural narratives, Brian Richardson’s essay is probably the most illuminating, and easy to follow even for

the inexperienced reader. His working hypothesis is quite straightforward: “[a] conventional, realistic, or conversational natural narrative typically has a fairly straightforward story of a certain magnitude that follows an easily recognizable trajectory. Unnatural narratives challenge, transgress, or reject many or all of these basic conventions; the more radical the rejection, the more unnatural the resulting story is” (p. 16). Drawing from this assumption, through the analysis of extreme and decidedly antimimetic works, Richardson investigates the innovative practices typical of unnatural narratives, concentrating on sequences and narrative progressions. His study of Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiabnala Letters* strengthens the importance of an inclusion of the analytical category of multilinearity, without which it would be difficult to accurately evaluate the different possible stories implied by this and other narratives.

One of the most interesting contributions to the volume is Maria Mäkelä’s essay, which focuses on an intrinsic apory that can often be found in classical realist novels. Comprehensively investigating the topics of (i) perception, (ii) psychological and motivational verisimilitude, and (iii) discursive agency, Mäkelä successfully tries to “recover the unnatural essence of the *conventional* in narrative fiction” (p. 142). Ultimately, she demonstrates how classical works are infused with unnatural elements, such as individually plausible but collectively inconsistent propositions or conflicting events or interpretations. Remarkably, this study sheds new light on realism, arguing in favour of a reassessment of the project itself.

***A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* and the current debate on unnatural narratology**

In recent years, “unnatural narratology” has become a buzzword in the field of narrative theory. Since the publication of Brian Richardson’s groundbreaking work *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006) many other studies on the subject were published (chiefly cf. Alber et al. 2011, Alber et al. 2013), motivated by an urgent “desire to provide some new coordinates for narrative theory at large” (Mäkelä, p. 164). Moreover, panels on unnatural narratology feature regularly at the Narrative conference organized by the International Society for the Study of Narrative. In the Introduction to *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson resume the lively debate over the most adequate definition of the field, paying attention even to its terminological implications. In fact, after the discussion that appeared on *Narrative* in 2012 (Alber et al. 2012, Fludernik 2012), the authors felt the need to further clarify, articulate and delineate this new discipline’s goals and objects of investigation, convincingly differentiating it from existing narratological frameworks. The meaning and scopes of this new, “most exciting new paradigm in narrative theory” (p. 1) are clearly stated:

[u]nnatural narratology seeks to challenge general conceptions of narrative by accentuating two points: (1) the ways in which innovative and impossible narratives challenge mimetic understandings of narrative, and (2) the consequences that the existence of such narratives may have for the general conception of what a narrative is and what it can do. Unnatural narrative theory regularly analyzes and theorizes the aspects of fictional narratives that transcend the boundaries of conventional realism. (pp. 2f.)

Despite the precision and plainness of this acute introduction, the discussion on the subject is still open (see, for example, Klauk et al. 2013). Nonetheless, such openness does not seem to disturb the editors who, on the contrary, “are interested in assembling a dialogue of overlapping perspectives and watching them enrich, modify, and extend each other’s insights” (p. 12). Indeed, the volume does not introduce a unique, standard formula, but rather presents individual interpretations that promote a “productive tension” (p. 12). Such a variety, the authors argue, “has proven productive for the field of narrative theory as a whole, and it would be surprising if this were not also the case with regard to the thriving subdiscipline of unnatural narratology” (p. 12). If the diversity of the approaches presented in the book might at first appear as a jigsaw, it should be underlined that they are “all drawn to the same basic features and qualities of narrative fiction: the impossible, the unreal, the preternatural, the outrageous, the extreme, the parodic, and the insistently fictional” (p. 9).

In addition to this, *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* distinguishes itself from previous contributions on the topic, as the authors of the volume show a deep sensibility towards the fluidity and dichotomy-resistant nature of unnatural narratives, especially with Richardson’s claim: “we will be most effective as narrative theorists if we reject models that, based on categories derived from linguistics or natural narrative, insist on firm distinctions, binary oppositions, fixed hierarchies, or impermeable categories” (p. 139). Such elucidation was much needed, particularly after Monika Fludernik’s remarks on the adjective “unnatural” (see Fludernik 2012).

Notably, *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* goes beyond Jan Alber and Rüdiger Heinze *Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology* (2011), a book which is focused on four essential areas of inquiry: historical perspectives; narrators and minds; time and causality; worlds and events. Indeed, the former adds new issues, related to character study, hypertext fiction, and poetry.

***A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* and the future development of unnatural narratology**

Although each essay contained in *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* focuses on texts that narrative theory has tended to neglect, it is impossible not to observe that all the corpora taken into account pertain to Western literature, and mainly to the United States and France. Thinking about a *really* neglected area in narrative studies, it is mandatory to mention Eastern literature, from Russia to Japan. The inclusion of such cultures could certainly make a difference, since the

“unnatural approach is usually an inductive one – beginning with the full range of the literature that exists and then going on to construct theories around it” (p. 4).

A historical, diachronic investigation concentrating on the presence of unnatural elements in works that belong to different periods other than modern and postmodern fiction is also desirable for the development, and further establishment of the discipline. Such a path, which has already been undertaken by Jan Alber (cf. Alber 2011, Alber 2013), undoubtedly needs further in-depth inquiry in order to better elucidate what is “unnatural”, and the evolution of such a concept through history.

Furthermore, since “literacy is in its essence unnatural” (Holquist 2008, 569), unnatural narratology could benefit from a dialogue with the concept of “fictionality”, as Richard Walsh described it in his 2007 book *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction*.

Readership

By addressing core questions concerning assumptions, methods, and purposes of unnatural narratology, the book demonstrates the vitality of this new field of research with rewarding results. *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* will certainly be of great interest to all scholars interested in narrative studies – across disciplines –, as well as in history and theory of modern fiction. Accessibly written, this volume promises to be an indispensable resource accounting for the most radical and provocative movement in narrative theory.

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