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Metalepsis and/as Hermeneutics

Julian Hanebeck's *Understanding Metalepsis*

Julian Hanebeck: *Understanding Metalepsis: The Hermeneutics of Narrative Transgression*. Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter 2017 (= Narratologia 56). 288 pp. GBP 81.99. ISBN 978-3-11-050122-3

The narratological concept of metalepsis – designating a transgression of boundaries, for example the boundary between author or reader and character, or between story and discourse, or between a storyworld and reality – has received renewed attention in recent years. Notable book-length works discussing the concept include Gérard Genette's reconsideration of his initial definition of the concept (*Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction* [Seuil, 2004]), Debra Malina's *Breaking the Frame* (Ohio State UP, 2002), Sonja Klimek's *Paradoxes Erzählen: Die Metalepse in der phantastischen Literatur* (Mentis, 2010), and two edited volumes: John Pier's *Métalepses: Entorses au pacte de la representation* (EHESS, 2005) and Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek's *Metalepsis in Popular Culture* (De Gruyter, 2011). Leading scholars in narrative theory, such as Dorrit Cohn, Monika Fludernik, David Herman, Ansgar Nünning, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Jean-Marie Schaeffer discuss the concept in articles. Since Genette's (1980, 234f.) initial definition of metalepsis as the transgression of narrative levels, as when the extradiegetic narrator or narratee interferes in or seems to be situated on the level of the diegesis, or the inverse, the concept has been broadened. Critics have shown that metalepsis can enhance the realist illusion as much as disrupt it, and that metalepsis has structural and thematic functions. Metalepsis has been argued to be everywhere in fiction, and metalepsis has been read as a metaphor for authorial and readerly engagement with a text or for narratological phenomena such as free-indirect discourse. Julian Hanebeck engages with all of these approaches to the concept in his exploration of forms and functions of metaleptic narratives.

In his insightful study, Hanebeck focuses on the hermeneutic processes generative of and generated by metalepsis. Hanebeck's approach is the consequence of his understanding of metalepsis as not inherent in a text but as a potential realized in reading that takes the form of an "event of understanding" (p. 4). One of his central claims is that metalepsis is an experience that challenges the structural categories that are its prerequisite. Awareness of what happens in this event, Hanebeck argues, may help outline "the scope of narra-

tological categories" and enrich "interpretations of instances of metaleptic transgressions" (p. 151).

Situating his approach in relation to dominant narratological accounts of metalepsis, Hanebeck proposes a reconsideration of the concept based on the premise that there is a problem in defining metalepsis since structural description of the phenomenon depends on the distinction of narrative levels that metalepsis playfully calls into question and since whether a text is experienced as metaleptic depends on contextual and interpretative factors as much as on textual ones. Drawing on examples from texts frequently referenced in accounts of metalepsis, Hanebeck sharpens his readers for different dimensions of complex metaleptic effects through a scalar model that describes which properties of a diegetic universe are denied through a given metaleptic transgression. He proposes three new terms – figurative, immersive, and recursive metalepsis – to classify distinct types of narrative transgression. Figurative metalepsis subsumes epistemological and rhetorical metalepsis, and Hanebeck describes his new category as follows: "transgressions that are either 'imaginary' or limited to the denial of certain properties of diegetic universes (or to 'minimal' transgressions of those properties)" (p. 84). This is the case, for instance, when a transgression is only implied. The terms "immersive metalepsis" and "recursive metalepsis" define subcategories of ontological transgressions. *Immersive* is used by Hanebeck to express that an entity is placed in a diegetic universe to which the entity does not belong, and *recursive*, in his definition, designates that the hierarchical order of signifier and signified is exchanged or denied, which results in a violation of representational logic. Hanebeck puts his terminology to productive use in a literary-historical consideration of metalepsis. He notes (in Chapter 4) that, in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), metalepsis functions to deny the distinction between the domains of signifier and signified in general but that there are no recursive metalepses and no immersive metalepses in which a single entity moves to another level, from which Hanebeck concludes that these forms of metalepsis only appeared in later centuries.

Chapter 3 considers metalepsis as a hermeneutic experience and the hermeneutics of narratology. The chapter shows that metalepsis denies the narratological structuring of narrative that is the prerequisite for the phenomenon of metalepsis in the first place. Thus metalepsis, as Hanebeck puts it, "denies the stability which narratological practice seemingly engenders," subjecting narratological frameworks to "an aporetic movement in the event of understanding metalepsis" (p. 121). In four sections, Hanebeck concentrates on specific frameworks that are unsettled: (1) hierarchical ordering of temporally separate diegetic levels or universes; (2) mimesis; (3) realism, in particular the separation of representation and that which is represented; and (4) the separation of object language and metalanguage. His study reveals that metalepsis constitutes metadiscourse, which means that metaleptic novels contest the boundary between novelistic and critical commentary.

In Chapter 4, Hanebeck focuses our attention on the metaleptic potential in a work that has hardly been considered in the recent attention that metalepsis has received because the focus is frequently on contemporary literature. In a compelling close reading, Hanebeck instead details metalepses in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which stands at the beginning of a by now long tradition of metaleptic novels. Hanebeck calls Sterne "the phenomenon's early master" (p. 8) and describes *Tristram Shandy* as "one of the most radical explorations of the metaleptic potential of narrative" (p. 8). Hanebeck's discussion of *Tristram Shandy* is structured by three hypotheses, which he tests in separate sections: (1) that figurative metalepses in Sterne's work foreground the uncontrollability of time, in so doing challenging conventional understandings of narrative temporality; (2) that ontological first- and third-person immersive metalepses cast doubt on traditional understandings of reality and representation; and (3) that ontological second-person immersive metalepses enact the dialogue between text, reader, and tradition that takes place in understanding narrative. Hanebeck shows, for instance, that *Tristram Shandy* reminds us of the impossibility of mimesis through drawing attention to the reader's active part in creating the diegetic universe. This happens through invitations by Tristram to the reader such as the following: "[A]ny one is welcome to take my pen, and go on with the story for me that will" (Vol. IX, Ch. xxiv) – invitations to take over where Tristram reaches limits, to continue or challenge his narration. Throughout his nuanced reading of *Tristram Shandy*, Hanebeck highlights that the event of understanding metalepsis in Sterne's book is an experience that challenges narratological concepts but also how we conventionally make sense of narrative in reading. He reminds us that this experience itself is unstable, which means that what is challenged by metalepsis is continuously unsettled – is, in Hanebeck's words, "forc[ed]" into "a dialogical openness that resists objectification and 'finalization'" (p. 8). Readers, as Hanebeck argues, find in *Tristram Shandy* a commentary on their own interpretative practice, but this commentary is always open to questions.

The implications Hanebeck draws from his analysis of *Tristram Shandy* are not merely narratological and literary-historical but also philosophical. He argues, for instance, that *Tristram Shandy* engages with the most fundamental of the aporias of time. Philosophical lessons that metalepsis can teach us are at the center of Hanebeck's final chapter, which deals with Mel Brooks's films (including *Spaceballs* [1987] and *Blazing Saddles* [1974]), Cullen Bunn's comic *Deadpool Kills the Marvel Universe* (2012), and a Tibetan non-fictional religious narrative from the seventh century called *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Hanebeck reveals that, in *Deadpool Kills the Marvel Universe*, metalepsis unsettles narrative scripts structuring human experience and that, from the perspective of Buddhist monks, as evidenced in their scriptures, metalepsis is not fictional and does not constitute a transgression since the scriptures introduce what Hanebeck calls "a hermeneutics of ultimate belonging" (p. 262) without dichotomies between self and other or self and world. In highlighting that metalepsis is a

phenomenon not particular to a specific period or medium, the chapter provides an important addition to Hanebeck's reading of *Tristram Shandy*.

Understanding Metalepsis lends a new dimension to the study of a complex concept pertinent to narratological and philosophical discussions. Hanebeck's monograph brings to consciousness that metalepsis is a hermeneutic process that in turn sheds light on hermeneutics. Of particular interest is Hanebeck's exploration of *Tristram Shandy* as an early and as of yet rarely discussed example of metaleptic narrative. By revealing an imbalance in terms of period in how metalepsis has largely been approached, Hanebeck's study invites analyses of other potentially metaleptic texts from before the 20th century, which would serve amongst other things to test his literary-historical inferences on the basis of a larger corpus. This valuable contribution to the flourishing body of scholarship on metalepsis thus opens up avenues for future research and holds interest for all those interested in narrative theory and in the phenomenon of reading and interpretation.

Bibliography

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How to cite this article:
Effe, Alexandra: "Metalepsis and/as Hermeneutics. Julian Hanebeck's *Understanding Metalepsis* [Review of: Julian Hanebeck: *Understanding Metalepsis. The Hermeneutics of Narrative Transgression*. Berlin 2017]". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 6.2 (2017). 203-207.
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20171121-122019-7
URL: https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/279/398