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Unnatural Narratology

Basic Concepts and Recent Work

Jan Alber / Rüdiger Heinze: *Unnatural Narratives – Unnatural Narratology*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2011 (= *Linguae & Litterae* Vol. 9). 273 pp. EUR 99,95 / USD 140.00. ISBN 978-3-11-022904-2

Per Krogh Hansen / Stefan Iversen / Henrik Skov Nielsen / Rolf Reitan (Eds.): *Strange Voices in Narrative Fiction*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011. (= *Narratologia* Vol. 30). 268 pp. EUR 79,95 / USD 112.00. ISBN 978-3-11-026864-5

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Unnatural narratives can be identified as those texts that violate mimetic conventions by providing wildly improbable or strikingly impossible events; they are narratives that are not simply nonrealistic but antirealistic. Much post-modern fiction falls under the rubric of the unnatural, but the category is much larger than this. It also comprises most of the plays of Aristophanes, the work of Rabelais, many texts by Jonathan Swift, and modern metadrama and theater of the absurd. It is also present in some oral tales (the “shaggy dog story”), children’s literature (*Alice in Wonderland*), and many works of popular culture: Bugs Bunny cartoons, Bob Hope/Bing Crosby “road” movies, and self-conscious graphic fiction.

Theorists of unnatural narratives point out that narrative theory from Aristotle to cognitive narratology has had a pronounced mimetic bias, and thus their theoretical models are necessarily inadequate. Virtually every theory of story adheres to some version of the *fabula/sjužet* distinction, but none explore the consequences of texts from which a consistent story or *fabula* cannot be derived. Like nearly every other one, Genette’s model of narrative temporality presupposes a storyworld in which time behaves rather like it does in the actual world. It cannot comprehend distinctively fictional constructs of time, such as the dual inconsistent chronologies of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or Woolf’s *Orlando*, contradictory story sequences (Coover’s “The Babysitter,”

Churchill's *Traps*), or narratives in which time flows backward (Aichinger's "Spiegelgeschichte," Amis' *Time's Arrow*). There are comparable problems with the traditional concepts of narration: how do second-person or first-person plural narratives fit into the homo-/heterodiegetic opposition they seem invented to conflate? The same is true of the categories of sequence (what to do with works with variable beginnings and sequencing as in hyperfiction?), narrative space (how to situate logically contradictory spaces?), and representations of consciousness (where do postmodern violations of mimetic norms fit in?).

An entire literary tradition from Aristophanes to postmodernism and hyperfiction has been ignored or neglected by traditional, mimetic centered narrative theories. The consequences are significant: a mimetic approach might claim, as do James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz, that "narrative is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something" (Herman, et al, *Core Concepts*, 3). This is not a definition of narrative, we would argue, but simply a definition of mimetic or realistic narratives. It applies very well to natural narratives and to literary narratives that model themselves on natural or nonfictional narratives. But this definition can in principle say little or nothing about narratives that problematize its implicit mimetic assumptions. The narrator of Beckett's *The Unnamable* is not an individual human being, his audience is ambiguous, the space is contradictory, the purpose dubious, and the "something" that "happened" may not have happened at all.

One area of continued discussion among theorists of the unnatural is the relation between the unnatural and the conventional. At what point does an inventive, unnatural practice become an unremarkable convention, and how can such a technique then become unnatural again? If the flight to the moon in Lucian's *Verae Historiae* is unnatural, are comparable space voyages penned by Jules Verne or H. G. Wells equally unnatural? There seems to be no question that a realistic story of space flight in a contemporary setting is not an example of an unnatural narrative. Animals can't speak human languages, though beast fables seem to be a universal feature of human culture. Some of us reserve the term "unnatural" for more innovative, antimimetic strategies, as when an animal talks about the difficulties it is having getting its story down on paper. We also debate cross-cultural issues and historical changes in the nature of what is impossible. Is astral projection unnatural in Western Europe but not in rural India? For Brian Richardson, this does not present a problem since for him the supernatural is a different mode, distinct from the antimimetic practices that constitute the unnatural for him. For Jan Alber, it would be unnatural in both instances because it is equally physically impossible in both locations.

In a forthcoming article, Stefan Iversen addresses this issue in a particularly compelling way:

Say I read a story about a man who wakes and finds himself transformed into a giant bug but still in possession of a human mind – and then have the end of the story tell me it all took place in a dream. Or say I read a story about a brilliant, but gentle and fragile scientist turning into a giant green thing who beats

up super-villains when he gets really angry. Or say I read a story about a man situated in a possible world which looks very much like my own who wakes up as a giant bug with a human mind and stays like that while trying, to the best of his newfound physical abilities, to act in accordance with what is expected of him as the human he no longer is, at least not in his physical appearance.

These three examples are alike in that they all present the reader with combinations of physical and mental attributes that are impossible in my world, but they differ because they prompt rather different readings. As I see it, the mind in the first case is naturalized by the fact that the transformation takes place in a dream, in the sense that it doesn't really happen. A slightly different logic can be applied to case two. Here, the transformed mind is unnatural in the sense that it is impossible in a real world scenario but the mind may be conventionalized with the help of my knowledge of the genre in which it appears: in certain action hero comic books fragile, but brilliant scientists are known to transform into raging beasts. In the third case, however, I am unable to naturalize or conventionalize the consciousness resulting from the physically impossible metamorphosis. This monstrous irregularity cannot be exterminated in the name of sense-making with the aid of text-external cues such as knowledge of how actual minds typically work ('this happens all the time to central-European sales people'), knowledge of genre or literary conventions ('this type of text is easily resolved with recourse to an allegorical reading'), or text-internal cues ('Unnatural Minds' in Alber, Nielsen, and Richardson, forthcoming).

We also explore the often hidden unnatural elements of seemingly realistic fiction. While unnatural narrative practices may be flagrant and widespread, as in much postmodern fiction, the instances may also be much more restrained, intermittent, or submerged, as when, at the beginning of the otherwise mimetic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the fictional character Huck complains about the verisimilitude of his representation in Mark Twain's earlier novel, *Tom Sawyer*. This metaleptic passage is usually quickly forgotten by readers, and doesn't substantially alter the basically mimetic nature of Twain's text. Normally we don't consider a work to be unnatural unless it has a significant number of antimimetic scenes. However, a single strategy that alters the entire work will also qualify an entire text as unnatural, as in the case of the antirealist example of the abrupt, alternate ending of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

It is important to note that different expositors of unnatural narratology define their subject slightly differently. For Richardson, an unnatural narrative is "one that conspicuously violates conventions of standard narrative forms, in particular the conventions of nonfictional narratives, oral or written, and fictional modes like realism that model themselves on nonfictional narratives. Unnatural narratives furthermore follow fluid, changing conventions and create new narratological patterns in each work. In a phrase, unnatural narratives produce a defamiliarization of the basic elements of narrative" ("What Is Unnatural Narratology" in *Unnatural Narratives – Unnatural Narratology*, 34). Furthermore, Richardson differentiates between what he calls nonmimetic or non-realistic poetics that govern traditional nonrealistic works such as fairy tales, ghost stories, supernatural fiction, etc, and the antimimetic work of an author like Beckett that defies the principles of realism. He limits the unnatural to antimimetic and defamiliarizing scenes, entities, and events such as impossible spaces, reversed causal progressions, and acts of narration that defy the parameters of natural conversational narratives.

Jan Alber, on the other hand, defines the term “unnatural” as denoting physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios or events and discriminates between the unnatural in postmodernism, which still strikes us as disorienting or defamiliarizing, and the conventionalized unnatural in other genres, which have become important features of certain generic conventions (see Alber’s essay, “The Diachronic Development of Unnaturalness,” in *Unnatural Narratives – Unnatural Narratology*, 41-67). Examples of the conventionalized unnatural are the speaking animals in beast fables; the use of magic in epics, romances, Gothic novels, weird tales, and fantasy fiction; the telepathy in ‘omniscient’ narration and the reflector-mode narratives of literary modernism; time travel and intentional robots in science fiction; and so forth.

For Henrik Skov Nielsen, unnatural narratives are a subset of fictional narratives that – unlike many realistic and mimetic narratives – cue the reader to employ interpretational strategies that are different from those employed in nonfictionalized, conversational storytelling situations. More specifically, such narratives may have temporalities, storyworlds, mind representations, or acts of narration that would have to be construed as physically, logically, mnemonically, or psychologically impossible or implausible in real-world storytelling situations, but that allow the reader to interpret them instead as reliable, possible, and/or authoritative by cuing her to change her interpretational strategies.

We wish to clarify the possible misunderstandings that can be associated with the term “unnatural.” For us, it has no connotations of forbidden or taboo sexual or cultural practices. We use it simply as a term to oppose to non-fictional conversational natural narratives as theorized by Monika Fludernik. In doing so, we recognize that some natural narratives, such as certain kinds of tall tales, are indeed antimimetic and thus, for most of us, “unnatural.” Such possible confusions are unfortunate, but since the name “unnatural” has taken hold, we are prepared to live with them.

A seminal exposition of the unnatural position was set forth in “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models” by Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, published in *Narrative* (2010). This article generated a response by Monika Fludernik as well as a reply by the authors, “What is Unnatural in Unnatural Narratology: A Response to Monika Fludernik,” in *Narrative* (2012). Another critique and response to this article is appearing in *Storyworlds* (2013).

Two important anthologies have appeared on unnatural narratology. The first was based on the first conference on unnatural narratology, organized by Jan Alber and Rüdiger Heinze and held in Freiburg, Germany in 2008. The volume, *Unnatural Narratives – Unnatural Narratology*, is being reviewed elsewhere in *DIEGESIS*, so I will here simply indicate the ways in which it extends the unnatural project. There is a helpful, capacious, and insightful introduction to the field by Alber and Heinze. Brian Richardson, in his paper, notes a number of problems in traditional narratology, examines the range and extent of the unnatural and its theoretical implications, and discusses the status of seemingly comparable genres like allegory, science fiction, and fantasy. He also

identifies the varying degrees of unnaturalness a text may possess as he approaches the question of how many unnatural events a text must have in order for the narrative as a whole to be considered unnatural. Jan Alber's essay, "The Diachronic Development of Unnaturalness: A New View on Genre" provides an important extended historical overview of the unnatural, tracing the appearance of unnatural narratives in medieval fairy tales, supernatural elements in Gothic novels, objects that narrate stories in the 18th century (*The Adventures of a Bank-Note*), and telepathic narrators in realist fiction. He demonstrates that numerous unnatural scenarios and events have already been conventionalized, i.e., turned into cognitive frames, and also that the conventionalization of impossibilities is a hitherto neglected driving force behind the creation of new generic configurations. Henrik Skov Nielsen tackles the intriguing problem of seemingly omniscient first-person narrators and discusses the foundational question of differences and similarities among fictional, nonfictional, natural and unnatural texts. Other essays that extend the analysis of the unnatural beyond the purview of postmodern fiction include Jeff Thoss' essay on metalepsis, Johannes Fehrlé's article on the unnatural in graphic fiction, Andrea Moll's piece on unnatural events in Australian Aboriginal storytelling, and Caroline Pirlet's examinations of the dynamics of consciousness and the process of narrativization in two antirealist plays, Beckett's "Quad" and Churchill's "Heart's Desire." Most intriguingly, the volume contains an analysis of an unnatural genre that perhaps should not be able to exist: Stefan Iversen's fascinating study of unnatural techniques in nonfictional works where traumatic events can lead to representations in which consciousness is unable to grasp the events it recounts. Three other essays, devoted to time, cause, and the sequence of events, explore more deeply and subtly areas that have been mentioned in earlier work on the unnatural. Per Krogh Hansen analyzes time in temporally reversed narratives, Marina Grishakova provides a major exploration of the implications of unnatural narrative causality, and Martin Hermann offers the first study of "time-loop" narratives.

Strange Voices in Narrative Fiction is an anthology of theoretical articles devoted to exploring "strange narratives, narratives of the strange, or more generally with the strangeness of fiction, and with some [corresponding] strange aspects of narratology" (2). A number of the essays in this volume are especially pertinent to the study of unnatural narratology. In "Alternate Strains are to the Muses Dear': The Oddness of Genette's Voice in *Narrative Discourse*," Rikke Kragelund Andersen shows just how far Genette's system can be extended to encompass a number of unnatural textual practices. Henrik Skov Nielsen poses the wide ranging question, "What are the implications of treating all narratives, including fictional ones, as if they were instances of natural narratives that occur in real life?" in his essay, "Fictional Voices? Strange Voices? Unnatural Voices?" By analyzing peculiar narrative forms such as first-person present tense narration, second person narration, and paraleptic first person narration, he attempts to identify what is and what is not unique about fictional narration. Lars-Åke Skalin continues this general line of questioning in "How

Strange Are the Strange Voices of Fiction?” Skalin makes the bold statement that narration in works of fiction is unmotivated by comparison to the obvious exigency of conversational natural narratives; he goes on to argue, on the basis of close readings of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, that if anyone took these as narratives that copy accounts of the real world, he or she would certainly need a most unnatural logic to account for the difference of fiction. Stefan Iversen critiques contemporary cognitivist approaches to narration by showing their fatal limitations when confronted by strange narratives that simultaneously evoke the mutually exclusive reading practices connected to fiction and nonfiction. Such narratives defiantly challenge the possibility of answering the Genettean question of “Who speaks?” and thereby call for more supple theoretical formulations that can do justice to the distinctive practices of fiction.

Rolf Reitan meticulously surveys and judiciously evaluates the major theoretical approaches to second-person narration and makes his own contribution to the field. Marina Grishakova provides a fascinating typology of virtual narrative voices, beginning with those in ordinary speech situations, such as simultaneously talking to and for a cat desperately trying to get a family member’s attention. Her subsequent account of virtual narrative voices in fiction includes a number of unnatural types, including generalized or impersonal forms, such as found in “one” or “we” narrations, overtly fictive or projected voices as found in Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, metaleptic virtual voices (a heterodiegetic narrator addressing his or her creations), and the alternative voices of divided or schizophrenic consciousnesses. In “Masters of Interiority: Figural Voices as Discursive Appropriators and as Loopholes in Narrative Communication,” Maria Mäkelä provides a daring analysis of represented thought in free indirect discourse and comparable forms stretching back to the eighteenth century that problematize the distinction between the character’s voice and the narrator’s voice. Poul Behrendt and Per Krogh Hansen provide an intriguing discussion of the possibilities of unreliable third person narration and the permeable border between narration and focalization in their article, “The Fifth Mode of Representation: Ambiguous Voices in Unreliable Third-Person Narration,” which traces the strange third-person voices in Isak Dinesen’s “Sorrow-Acre” and Henry James’ “The Liar.” Brian Richardson’s essay, “Unnatural Voices in *Ulysses*: Joyce’s Postmodern Modes of Narration,” attempts to document the variety of unusual and unnatural kinds of narration in *Ulysses*, including subjective third person narration, the supernarrator, verbal text generators, and numerous examples of impossible narration.

Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates examines the basic questions of narrative theory from four different perspectives: rhetorical (James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz), feminist (Robyn Warhol), mind-oriented (David Herman), and unnatural (Brian Richardson). The book has a unique structure: after providing an introduction to each of the theoretical approaches, it systematically explores six fundamental areas of narrative theory – authors and narrators; story and plot; characters; narrative space; readers; and values. Each

topic is examined from four different approaches; and each approach is presented in a comprehensive manner. Thus, one can find in one volume an unnatural perspective (here usually called “antimimetic”) on fictionality, authors, implied authors, and narrators; *fabula*, temporality, beginnings, narrative sequences, and endings; avowedly fictional and intertextual characters; impossible narrative spaces and worlds; actual and implied readers; and narrative, ideological, and literary values. The same of course is true of the other theoretical positions; students, critics, and theorists will find it very handy to have the rhetorical, feminist, and cognitive theories systematically expounded and developed. Each theory is also applied to a different text (respectively, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Austen’s *Persuasion*, McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*, and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*) followed by a diacritical segment in which each theorist critiques and debates the approaches of the others.

Those interested in unnatural narrative theory will be particularly interested in the discussion of the relationship between fictionality and the unnatural (20-25) and the discussion of the value(s) of unnatural narratives (176-80). This last section notes the ways in which unnatural texts contest the boundaries of narrative and defamiliarize the conventions of the novel; how politically engaged works employ unnatural techniques to underscore specific ideological positions or present the viewpoints of socially marginalized individuals, including women, minorities, colonial subjects, and gays. It further discusses unnatural techniques as aesthetic critiques and vehicles of innovation and describes how authors employ extreme textual practices to depict extreme emotional or historical events.

An important forthcoming volume is *A Poetics of Unnatural Narratives*, with essays by Jan Alber on unnatural narrative space, Stefan Iversen on unnatural minds, Henrik Skov Nielsen on unnatural narrators and narration, Brian Richardson on unusual beginnings, middles, and endings, Alice Bell on hyperfiction, Rüdiger Heinze on impossible temporality, Maria Mäkelä on unnatural aspects of traditional realism, Brian McHale on the unnaturalness of poetry, James Phelan on “redundant telling,” and Werner Wolf on metalepsis. The book is being published in July, 2013 by Ohio State University Press. Both Jan Alber and Brian Richardson are currently completing wide ranging monographs on the history and theory of unnatural narratives.

Interested students and theorists will also want to view the Unnatural Narratology website, which includes the *Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology*:

<http://nordisk.au.dk/forskning/forskningscentre/nrl/unnatural/>

An interesting critical and theoretical dialogue and debate has begun between the two newest paradigms for narratology: cognitivist and unnatural. Many unnatural theorists are frustrated or impatient with the naïve mimeticism assumed by so many cognitive narratologists; in their opinion, such simplistic models produce a vulgar mimeticism that is incapable of addressing the distinctive features of experimental fiction (see Stefan Iversen’s “States of Exception” in *Strange Voices*, Maria Mäkelä’s work, as well as Brian Richardson’s critique of overly mimetic theories of character in Herman, et al, *Core Concepts*

132-142 and 238-240). Other theorists like Jan Alber, Marina Grishakova, Porter Abbott, and Lisa Zunshine are interested in applying analytical tools from cognitive studies to unusual and unnatural narrative texts. This exchange promises to be a very fruitful one. Another extremely interesting dialogue that is just beginning to emerge is that between unnatural and feminist narratology, each of which has much to share with the other. Earlier work by Ellen Peel and Susan Sniader Lanser is seen as parallel and complementary to current unnatural theory and analysis.

We may identify several areas of research in the latest work on unnatural narratology: 1) the debate over the most adequate definition of the field; 2) the attempt to demarcate the unnatural from seemingly similar forms; 3) the ongoing establishment of the full history of unnatural narratives; 4) the analysis of unnatural narratives in genres other than fiction or hyperfiction; 5) the refining and extending of basic concepts of unnatural narratology and of narratology from an unnatural perspective. In addition, we can point to other areas in which we can expect to see new developments and applications of unnatural theory. These include the analysis of unnatural narrative practices in Asian literatures and in ideologically charged texts, such as postcolonial, minority, and gay narratives, where disempowered groups employ unnatural techniques to better express their positions. One may also expect trauma studies to embrace the unnatural as a powerful set of narrative strategies to express unnatural pain. Finally, we are beginning to see an especially far-reaching development; the reconstruction of large stretches the history of literature as unnatural narratives are given their rightful places.

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