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Reading Unnatural Narratives

1. Introduction
This paper seeks to illustrate how readers can respond to and make sense of unnatural narratives, that is, texts that represent physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios or events (cf. Alber 2013a and 2013b). Arguably, impossibilities in narrative texts – such as, say, inanimate narrators, dead characters, retrogressive temporalities, or flying islands1 – constitute particularly interesting gaps ("Leerstellen") in the sense of Wolfgang Iser (2001, 1675) because it is difficult for readers to fill them and thus 'produce' the aesthetic object of the work. The major problem with regard to the interaction between unnatural textual segments and their recipients has to do with the fact that the representation of the impossible moves beyond our real-world experience: since the unnatural cannot be experienced in the actual world and is clearly "non-actualizable" (Ronen 1994, 51), we are often at a loss when it comes to the question of how to respond to and interpret narratives that represent impossibilities. In what follows, I will first define the term 'unnatural.' In a second step, I will then discuss two types of interaction between text and reader, i.e., two possible ways of responding to the unnatural. In doing so, I try to contribute to the development of a reader-response theory that focuses on the interplay between the human mind and the unnatural.

2. Defining the Unnatural
In my usage, the term 'unnatural' denotes physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events. That is to say, the represented scenarios or events have to be impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, accepted principles of logic (such as the principle of non-contradiction), or standard human limitations of knowledge or ability.2 Professor Kepesh, the narrator of Philip Roth's novel The Breast (1972), for instance, constitutes a physical impossibility because he has transformed into a huge female breast. He portrays his current state as follows:

I am a breast. A phenomenon that has been variously described to me as 'a massive hormonal influx,' 'an endocrinopathic catastrophe,' and/or 'a hermaphroditic explosion of chromosomes' took place within my body between midnight and four A.M. on February 18, 1971, and converted me into a mammary gland disconnected from any human form [...]. They tell me that I am now an organism with the general shape of a football, or a dirigible; I am said to be of a spongy consistency, weighing in at one hundred and

1 Let me mention a few examples of these unnatural phenomena: Tobias Smollett's The History and Adventures of an Atom (1769), for example, is narrated by a speaking atom, while the father in Harold Pinter's Family Voices (1981) has already died and thus speaks (or writes) from the grave. Furthermore, Martin Amis's Time's Arrow (1991) presents us with a situation in which time moves backward at the level of the story, and Lemuel Gulliver, the narrator of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726, amended 1735), visits the flying island of Laputa.
2 For alternative definitions by Brian Richardson, Henrik Skov Nielsen, Stefan Iversen, and Maria Mäkelä, see Alber et al. (2013).
fifty-five pounds (formerly I was one hundred and sixty-two), and measuring, still, six feet in length. (Roth 1972, 12)

The co-existence of mutually exclusive event sequences, as in Robert Coover’s short story "The Babysitter" (1969) is also logically impossible: in this narrative, the contradictory sentences 'Mr. Tucker went home to have sex with the babysitter' and 'Mr. Tucker did not go home to have sex with the babysitter' are true at the same time, and this feature of the text violates the principle of non-contradiction. 3 Saleem Sinai, the telepathic first-person narrator of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), finally, displays a humanly impossible quality: he can actually hear the thoughts of other characters, which is also impossible in the real world. Sinai describes "the mental peculiarity" (Rushdie 1981, 167) of his "miracle-laden omniscience" (149) as follows:

My voices, far from being sacred, turned out to be as profane, and as multitudinous, as dust. Telepathy, then; the kind of thing you're always reading about in the sensational magazines. […] It was telepathy; but also more than telepathy. […] Telepathy, then: the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space within my head. (Rushdie 1981, 166-167)

The unnatural is measured against the foil of 'natural,' i.e., real-world, cognitive parameters. In this context, the term 'natural' denotes frames and scripts that are derived from our existence in and experience of the world (cf. Fludernik 1996). Readers have certain assumptions about the temporal and spatial organization of the actual world as well as its inhabitants, and these postulations obviously plays a role when they try to make sense of narrative texts. This real-world knowledge is not found "as a loose assembly of individual bits of information, but is stored in meaningful structures" (Schneider 2001, 611), namely in cognitive frames and scripts. 4 Among other things, we know that human beings are either alive or they are dead; we know that time moves forward; we know that islands do not fly; and so forth. Generally speaking, I conceive of real-world parameters in terms of hypotheses that have not yet been falsified, i.e. refuted by experience, in the sense of Karl Popper (1959, 41; 53-54): one day, speaking corpses might exist in the real world; however, as long as I have not seen a speaking corpse, I accept the idea that corpses do not speak as a valid hypothesis that has not yet been falsified.

It is perhaps also worth noting that I do not conceptualize the relationship between the natural and the unnatural in terms of a binary opposition. Rather, both involve a

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3 In his short story "Sylvan’s Box" (1997), the logician Graham Priest presents his readers with a logically impossible object, namely a box that is empty and full at the same time. More specifically, the narrator comes across a small box which he describes as follows: "At first, I thought it must be a trick of the light, but more careful inspection certified that it was no illusion. The box was absolutely empty, but also had something in it. Fixed to its base was a small figurine, carved of wood, Chinese influence, Southeast Asian maybe. [...] The experience was one of occupied emptiness. [...] The box was really empty and occupied at the same time. The sense of touch confirmed this" (Priest 1997, 575-76; my emphasis). Priest concludes from his own story that "there are, in some undeniable sense, logically impossible situations or worlds. [...] In particular, a [logically] impossible world/situation is (partially) characterized by information that contains a logical falsehood but that is closed under an appropriate inference relation" (ibid., 580).

4 Frames and scripts are cognitive parameters; the former are static, the latter are dynamic. “Frames basically deal with situations such as seeing a room or making a promise while scripts cover standard action sequences such as playing a game of football, going to a birthday party, or eating in a restaurant” (Jahn 2005, 69).
process of simulation, and it might be helpful to briefly relate the unnatural to the two divergent conceptions of mimesis as they were developed by Plato and Aristotle. In Book X of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates equates mimetic art with "the art of imitation" (Plato 1970, 431, 595A; 439, 600C: 443, 601B). According to Socrates, art merely reproduces empirical reality and is illusory because it does not take us to the perfect World of Ideas. Since Socrates conceives of art as being just a misleading shadow of a shadow (namely a shadow of the empirical world which is itself nothing but a shadow of the World of Ideas), he bans art from the ideal state. By contrast, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle equates mimesis with the process of representation, projection, or simulation (Aristotle 1995, 33-37; 1448a-b). For him, "mimesis coincides with artistic representation as such: epic poetry, drama, the art of dithyrambs, of flute and lyre, painting, choreography, and religious poetry are all mimetic" (Schaeffer and Vultur 2005, 309). According to Stephen Halliwell, Aristotle employs "mimesis or representation [...] as a supple concept of the human propensity to explore an understanding of the world – above all, of human experience itself – through fictive representation and imaginative 'enactment' of experience" (1999, vii-viii).5

The unnatural is clearly anti-mimetic in the sense of Plato because it does not try to imitate or reproduce the world as we know it; rather, it involves scenarios or events that are physically, logically, or humanly impossible. However, the unnatural is quite obviously mimetic in the sense of Aristotle because impossibilities can be represented in the world of fiction. The natural and the unnatural are two slightly different manifestations of Aristotle's mimesis; they both involve processes of simulation and thus what P.N. Johnson-Laird calls the construction of "mental models" (1983, 10-12), i.e., mental representations of states of affairs evoked by the narrative. From the perspective of representation, the natural (which is modelled on the real world) and the unnatural (which is modelled on the impossible) can be found on a continuum; they are not diametrically opposed to one another.

In this context, I want to explicitly dissociate myself from what Jean-Marie Schaeffer calls "the antimimetic attitude," which results in "a support brought to works that 'subvert' their mimetic [imitative in the sense of Plato] basis and in a condemnation of the other ones, that, instead, develop imitative techniques (resemblance, naturalism, reality effect, trompe l'oeil) and by that reinforce the mimetic 'illusion'" (2010, 4-5).6 For me, the unnatural is on an equal footing with the natural because both involve forms of representation. It is not the case that the physically, logically, or humanly impossible is in any sense superior to the purely realist. Yet in narrative studies, the natural has so far received more critical attention than the unnatural, and, personally, I find unnatural forms of representation to be more challenging than natural ones – but this is of course only a matter of taste.

Narratives such as Philip Roth's *The Breast*, Robert Coover's "The Babysitter," and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* constitute combinations of natural and unnatural elements. As a matter of fact, I would like to argue that most, if not all, narratives involve the interplay between the natural and the unnatural (i.e., the physically, logically, or humanly impossible). Purely unnatural narratives might exist but I

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5 Kendall L. Walton also uses the term "mimesis" to refer to the process of "representation." Furthermore, he argues that "what all representations have in common is a role of make-believe" (1990, 3-4; emphasis in the original).

6 See the articles in Federman (1975) and Lyotard (1997) for numerous examples of this anti-mimetic attitude.
think that no reader would be able to make sense of them. Along the same lines, Teresa Bridgeman argues that we as readers

[...] continue to require spatio-temporal hooks on which to hang our interpretations. If these are not consistently provided or their uncertainty is highlighted in a given narrative, we experience disorientation and a degree of unease as an essential part of our engagement with that narrative. (2007, 63)

What kind of information, then, does the unnatural provide? Sämi Ludwig, for example, argues that representations of the impossible (i.e., what I call the unnatural) are "digital rather than analogic," that is to say, they offer particular types of information, namely "processed information ('meaning') rather than mimesis of the outside ('imitation')" (1999, 90). Furthermore,

[...] there is no direct or proportional 'likeness' involved: Depending on whether they are more important or less important to human beings, elements and experiences of outside space and time are allotted larger or smaller presence on such a customized map. This kind of representation, then, must be seen as the careful recording of useful information, which is based on one's needs and one's experience with the environment; it reflects the purposeful negotiation of space and time by living people. (ibid., 190; emphasis in the original)

Even though the unnatural does not reproduce the outside world, there are purposes or reasons for the representation of impossibilities, and it is one of my goals to address these. In this context, I assume that even the strangest text is ultimately about humans and/or human concerns as well as the world we live in (cf. Fludernik 1996, Ludwig 1999, and Herman 2002). This assumption closely correlates with what Stein Haugom Olsen calls the "human interest' question" (1987, 67), i.e., the argument that fiction always focuses on "mortal life: how to understand it and how to live it" (Nagel 1979, ix). I do not see what else narrative texts could potentially be about. I therefore agree with the argument of the postmodernist John Barth, who comments on the relationship between fiction and life as follows: "Not only is all fiction about fiction, but all fiction about fiction is in fact fiction about life. Some of us understood that all along" (1984, 236). As I will show, even though the representation of impossibilities transcends our real-world experience, unnatural scenarios and events are not completely alien to our cognitive architecture. We can in fact productively engage with the impossible. Although the unnatural urges us to deal with impossibilities, it does not paralyze our interpretive faculties.

3. The Reception of Impossibilities

How then can readers respond to and/or make sense of the unnatural? For unnatural narratologists such as Henrik Skov Nielsen (2013) and Stefan Iversen (2013), the unnatural is different in kind from other (more realist) narrative segments and thus calls for a different interpretive approach. In a recent article, Nielsen (2013) tries to do justice to this difference by offering what he calls "unnaturalizing reading strategies." However, as I see it, Nielsen does not actually present strategies or navigational

7 James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and Christine Brooke-Rose's novel *Thru* (1975) are texts that seem to completely abandon real-world parameters. The result in both cases is that we experience radical disorientation because we frequently do not know what is happening to whom in which spatio-temporal context.
tools; rather, he shows – correctly, I believe – that in certain cases, readers have to simply accept the fact that narratives move beyond real-world frames. I feel that Nielsen's strategies only concern the cognitive reconstruction of the unnatural (or what one might call the process of world-making), while they bracket out the question of what the unnatural might mean or say about us (or what one might call the process of meaning-making). By contrast, the reading strategies I outline in what follows comprise both the process of world-making and the process of meaning-making. Like Nielsen, Brian Richardson also argues that "anti-mimetic texts [i.e., unnatural narratives] play with and problematize our conventional reading strategies" (2012, 155). I think that this claim is only true to a certain extent: it is true that unnatural scenarios and events urge us to create frames that transcend real-world possibilities (such as that of the speaking atom, the dead character, the retrogressive temporality, or the flying island). At the same time, however, I agree with Marco Caracciolo's argument that our engagement with narratives is always projected against our experiential backgrounds, that is, repertoires of past experiences and values that guide our interaction with narrative texts (cf. Caracciolo 2012).

From my perspective, Caracciolo's claim is even true of our dealings with the unnatural. On the basis of this argument, I have developed nine reading strategies or navigational tools which may be used by recipients to make sense of physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios or events. These reading strategies relate to both our real-world knowledge (acquired through our embodiment – or physical presence – in the world) but also to our literary knowledge (acquired through our exposure to narrative literature); and these types of knowledge are stored in cognitive frames and scripts.

(1) "The Blending of Frames"
When we are confronted with physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios, our task as readers becomes a Sisyphean one: we have to conduct seemingly impossible mapping operations to orient ourselves within storyworlds that refuse to be organized with the help of real-world parameters. In such cases, we are urged to blend pre-existing frames and create what Mark Turner calls "impossible blend[s]" (1996, 60) to adequately reconstruct the unnatural elements of the storyworld.

According to Schank and Abelson, a script (or frame or schema) comprises "specific knowledge to interpret and participate in events we have been through many times" (1977, 37), and can be used as points of reference to help us master new situations. Furthermore, such cognitive parameters are "dynamic" knowledge structures that "must be able to change as a result of new experiences" (Schank 1986, 7; my emphasis). Similarly, Marvin Minsky points out that "when one encounters a new

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8 For these and further differences within unnatural narratology, see also the debates of Alber et al. in Narrative (2012) and Storyworlds (forthcoming 2013).
9 The term 'experientiality' denotes "the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience'" (Fludernik 1996, 11): the basic idea is that all narratives are derived from or rely upon our embodiment or physical being in the world. For me, the unnatural is one possible manifestation of experientiality.
10 For a first-draft version of these navigational tools see Alber (2009). In what follows, I will relate my reading strategies to other navigational tools such as Tamar Yacobi's integrating mechanisms, which are designed to deal with textual incongruities or discrepancies (1981), and Marie-Laure Ryan's reading strategies, which concern logical impossibilities (2006). See Amit Marcus (2012) for an extensive critique of my reading strategies (Alber 2009). I have reordered and partly reformulated my navigational tools on the basis of his critique and would like to thank him for his input.
situation (or makes a substantial change in one’s view of a problem), one selects from memory a structure called a frame. This is a remembered framework to be adapted by changing details as necessary” (1979, 1). Lubomír Doležel, for example, argues that fictional texts often urge us to change our cognitive architecture, which is largely based on our real-world knowledge, and create new frames:

[…] in order to reconstruct and interpret a fictional world, the reader has to **reorient his cognitive stance** to agree with the world’s encyclopedia. In other words, knowledge of the fictional encyclopedia is absolutely necessary for the reader to comprehend a fictional world. The actual-world encyclopedia might be useful, but it is by no means universally sufficient; for many fictional worlds it is misleading, it provides not comprehension but misreading. (1998, 177; 181; my emphasis).

Indeed, when readers are confronted with physical, logical, or human impossibilities, they are invited to generate new frames by blending pre-existing schemata. Mark Turner explains the process of blending by pointing out that

[...], cognitively modern human beings have a remarkable, species-defining ability to pluck forbidden mental fruit – that is, to activate two conflicting mental structures [...]
[such as tree and person] and to blend them creatively into a new mental structure [...]
[such as speaking tree]. (2003, 117)

Monika Fludernik also points out that the creation of new and what she calls "non-natural storytelling frames [such as first-person 'omniscience' or you-narratives] arise[s] from the blending of previously familiar 'natural' or naturalized storytelling scenarios” (2010, 15).

In a recent experiment, the Dutch neuroscientists Mante S. Nieuwland and Jos J.A. van Berkum have shown that subjects try to make sense of unnatural entities (such as an amorous peanut or a crying yacht) through the blending of frames. They report that the subjects needed

[...] to construct and gradually update their situation model of the story to the point that they project human characteristics onto inanimate objects [...]. This process of projecting human properties (behavior, emotions, appearance) onto an inanimate object comes close to what has been called 'conceptual blending,' the ability to assemble new and vital relations from diverse scenarios. (2006, 1109)

I would like to highlight that the process of blending, which "open[s] up new conceptual spaces” (Zunshine 2008, 158), plays a crucial role in all cases in which we try to make sense of the unnatural. Since unnatural scenarios and events are by definition physically, logically, or humanly impossible, they always urge us to create new frames (such as, say, that of the telepathic narrator, the dead character, the retrogressive temporality, or the shape-shifting room) by recombining, extending, or otherwise altering pre-existing cognitive parameters.

(2) "Generification (Evoking Generic Conventions from Literary History)"

In some cases, the projected unnatural scenario or event has already been conventionalized and turned into a perceptual frame. In other words, the process of blending has

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11 As an example, Mark Turner mentions the character of Bertran de Born in Dante's *Inferno*. This narrative confronts us with "a talking and reasoning human being who carries his detached but articulate head in his hand like a lantern." Turner argues that "this is an impossible blending, in which a talking human being has an unnaturally divided body" (1996, 62, 61; my emphasis).
already taken place, and we have converted the unnatural into a basic cognitive category that is part of certain generic conventions. In such narratives, the unnatural no longer strikes us as being strange or unusual: we can simply account for the unnatural element by identifying it as belonging to a particular literary genre, i.e., a suitable discourse context within which the anomaly can be embedded.

For example, we know that animals can speak in beast fables and children's fiction; we also know that magic exists in epics, certain romances (such as Breton lais and romances about the 'matter' of Britain), Gothic novels, and later fantasy narratives; we know that we can read the minds of the characters in cases of 'omniscient' narration and modernist fiction; we know that time travel is possible in science-fiction narratives; and so forth. In such examples, the unnatural has been turned into a literary convention, i.e., a possibility in the world of fiction (cf. Alber 2011).

In the experiment quoted earlier on, Mante S. Nieuwland and Jos J.A. van Berkum have shown that subjects typically process impossible entities (such as an amorous peanut) by seeing them "as actual 'cartoon-like entities' (i.e., a peanut that walks and talks like a human, having emotions and possibly even arms, legs and a face)." Hence, they assume that "the acceptability of a crying yacht or amorous peanut is not merely induced by repeated specific instances of such unusual feature combinations, but somehow also – perhaps even critically – by the literary genre [...] that such instances suggest" (2006, 1109; emphasis in the original). That is to say, the evocation of a particular genre (such as the cartoon), i.e., the construction of a supportive context, helps us come to terms with represented impossibilities.

This reading strategy ("generification"), which plays a role in cases of conventionalized impossibilities, is similar to Tamar Yacobi's "generic principle," i.e., the idea that the "generic framework dictates or makes possible certain rules of referential stylization, the employment of which usually results in a set of divergences from what is generally accepted as the principles governing actual reality" (1981, 115). Stanislaw Lem also notes that "the genre affiliation of a creative work is not an abstract problem of interest only to theorists of literature. It is an indispensable prerequisite to the reading of a work" (1985, 122).

(3) "Subjectification (Reading as Internal States)"
Some physically, logically, or humanly impossible elements can simply be explained as parts of internal states (of characters or narrators) such as dreams, fantasies, visions, or hallucinations. This reading strategy is the only one that naturalizes the unnatural insofar as it reveals the ostensibly impossible to be something entirely natural, namely an element of somebody's interiority. This strategy therefore serves as a veneer between the natural and the unnatural. For example, one can explain the impossible spatial and temporal parameters in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1967) by ascribing them to the dying narrator's hallucinations.

Tamar Yacobi refers to this reading strategy as "the perspectival principle" and argues that we can sometimes attribute the unexplainable "to the peculiarities and circumstances of the observer through whom the world is taken to be refracted" (1981, 118). Similarly, Marie-Laure Ryan refers to this navigational tool, in which the

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12 What Marie-Laure Ryan refers to as "magic" is actually a subcategory of my reading strategy: she argues that when we appeal to the supernatural, we admit "the irrational or fantastic nature" of the represented world (2006, 670).
impossible does not exist objectively in the storyworld but only in the subjective vision of the narrator or one of the characters, in terms of "mentalism" (2006, 669).

(4) "Foregrounding the Thematic"

Other examples of unnaturalness become more readable when we look at them from a thematic angle and see them as exemplifications of themes (rather than mimetically motivated occurrences). I follow the definition of the term 'theme' as

[...] a specific representational component that recurs several times in the [narrative], in different variations – our quest for the theme or themes of a story is always a quest for something that is not unique to this specific work. [...] A theme is [...] the principle (or locus) of a possible grouping of texts. It is one principle among many since we often group together texts considered to have a common theme, which are importantly and significantly different in many other respects. (Brinker 1995, 33)

Similarly, Boris Tomashevsky defines the term 'theme' as "what is being said in a work" and argues that it "unites the separate elements of a work. The work as a whole has a theme, and its individual parts also have themes" (1965, 63).

Audrey Niffenegger's novel *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2004), for instance, presents us with numerous instances of time travel without a time machine. Throughout the novel, Henry suffers from 'chronological displacement' and travels to the narrative past or the narrative future to visit his beloved Clare. The lovers Henry and Clare are deeply connected through Henry's numerous time journeys; and this interconnectedness, which involves a plethora of different links, serves a thematic purpose: it simulates the enduring love between Henry and Clare, i.e., the close bond between the two which transgresses natural temporal boundaries.

In the context of thematic readings, it is worth noting that James Phelan discriminates between mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of narrative (1996, 29). He explicates these three components as follows:

Responses to the mimetic component involve an audience's interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own. Responses to the thematic component involve an interest in the ideational function of the characters and in the cultural, philosophical, or ethical issues being addressed by the narrative. Responses to the synthetic component involve an audience's interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs. (2005, 20)

Following Phelan, I would like to argue that in many cases, one can link the synthetic (of which the unnatural is a subcategory) back to the mimetic by foregrounding the thematic. In other words, by identifying a specific theme, we can explicate the unnatural so that it communicates something meaningful to us. Tamar Yacobi refers to thematic readings in terms of what she calls the "functional principle:" according to her, "the work's aesthetic, thematic and persuasive goals invariably operate as a major guideline to making sense of its peculiarities" (1981, 117).

13 Since "anything written in meaningful language has a theme" (Tomashevsky 1965, 63), this reading strategy plays a crucial role in all of my readings or interpretations. More specifically, in certain cases, the unnatural can simply be read as exemplifying a particular theme (reading strategy 4), while in other cases, impossibilities are used in the contexts of hallucinations and daydreams (reading strategy 3), allegories (reading strategy 5), satires (reading strategy 6), transcendental questions (reading strategy 7), or narrative construction kits (reading strategy 8) that also address certain themes.
"Reading Allegorically"

Readers may also see impossible elements as parts of abstract allegories that say something about Everyman or Everywoman, i.e., the human condition, or the world in general (as opposed to particular individuals). Allegory is a figurative mode of representation that tries to convey a certain idea rather than represent a coherent story-world. Allegory may be defined as “the art of ‘speaking other,’ that is, of conveying multiple meaning” (Kasten 2005, 10). David Mikics argues that, depending on one’s perspective, one might either argue that “allegories turn abstract concepts or features into characters” or that allegories “transform people and places into conceptual entities” (2007, 8).

In Sarah Kane’s play *Cleansed* (1998), for instance, the character of Grace at one point transforms into her beloved brother Graham. We can make sense of this unnatural metamorphosis of one of the characters by reading it in the context of an allegory on the merits and dangers of love. Grace’s transformation can be read as highlighting one of the potential dangers of love, namely the danger of losing oneself in the relationship with one’s partner.\(^{14}\)

"Satirization"

Narratives may also use unnatural scenarios or events to satirize, mock, or ridicule certain psychological predispositions or states of affairs. The most important feature of satire is critique through exaggeration, distortion, or caricature, and the "grotesque images" of humiliation or ridicule (Mikics 2007, 271), which serve a didactic point, may sometimes merge with the unnatural.

Philip Roth’s *The Breast* (1972), for example, confronts us with a slightly obsessive professor of literature, who has transformed into a female breast. In his lectures before the metamorphosis, this professor used to teach the unnatural transformations in the literature of Gogol and Kafka while at the same time insisting that fiction influences our lives. This professor has literally become what he used to teach, and the novel uses this unnatural transformation to ridicule him for taking fiction far too seriously.

At this point, one might wonder about the precise relationship between allegorical and satirical readings (navigational tools 5 and 6) on the one hand, and the idea of evoking generic conventions from literary history (reading strategy 2) on the other. For me, a distinction can be drawn between more general modes (such as allegory and satire) and proper literary genres (such as the beast fable or the modernist novel). In principle, one could try to read any text allegorically or satirically, and therefore I base separate reading strategies on the concepts of allegory and satire.\(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Marie-Laure Ryan refers to this reading strategy in terms of “allegory and metaphor,” and argues that in some cases, the point of the impossible is to “illustrate an idea rather than to represent objectively happening courses of events” (2006, 669).

\(^{15}\) I would like to thank David Herman for these insights. The case of satire is even more complicated than the case of allegory because the term ‘satire’ designates both “a mode, that is, a tone and an attitude” and “a genre, a class of literature with a distinct repertory of conventions” (Real 2005, 512). I would therefore like to distinguish between satire as a broad discourse mode (which, quite generally, involves critique through exaggeration), and satire as a genre that deploys the satiric mode in a certain way and has a specific object of ridicule (such as the beast fable, the Menippean satire, the circulation novel of the 18th century, the social satire, the mock literary history, or parodies of fantasy novels or science fiction).
Readers can explain some projected impossibilities by assuming that they are part of a transcendental setting (such as heaven, purgatory, or hell). It is perhaps worth noting that one does not have to believe in the actual existence of heaven, purgatory, or hell to be able to imagine that a fictional narrative is set in such a transcendental realm.

Samuel Beckett's play *Play* (1963), for example, confronts us with a circular temporality. That is to say, at the end of the play, the story returns to its beginning and continues indefinitely. *Play* thus suggests that its three characters, who are trapped in urns while a light consistently forces them to talk about their past lives, are caught in an endless temporal loop. A very common way of explaining this unnatural temporality is to argue that the play is set in a transcendental realm, namely some kind of purgatory without purification, in which the three characters (M, W1, and W2) are doomed to relive as a form of punishment the events of their past lives, which involve a love triangle, in a continuous cycle.

Marie-Laure Ryan has shown that we can explain the logically incompatible storylines of some narratives by assuming that "the contradictory passages in the text are offered to the readers as material for creating their own stories" (2006, 671). In such cases, the text serves as a construction kit or collage that invites free play with its elements. Robert Coover's short story "The Babysitter" (1969), for instance, confronts us with numerous logical impossibilities. One might argue that this narrative uses mutually incompatible storylines to make us aware of suppressed possibilities and allows us to choose the ones that we prefer for whatever reason (cf. Alber et al. 2010, 118).

This reading strategy closely correlates with Roland Barthes's ideas about "the birth of the reader," which, according to him, must be "at the cost of the death of the Author" (2001, 1470). Barthes argues that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. [...] When the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic" (ibid., 1469). In stories such as "The Babysitter," on the other hand, the Author cannot be found; the Author is absent and does not guide the reader at all. Hence, readers have to make up their own minds, and construct their own stories.

The aforesaid notwithstanding, I want to make sure that my attempts to make sense of the unnatural do not destroy more than they create, or perhaps even become "an act of Gleichschaltung" in which "the diversity of fictional worlds is reduced to the uniform structure of the complete, Carnapian world" (Doležel 1998, 171). With reference to what he calls "the stubborn," James Phelan argues that "by always assuming that everything can be explained, we overlook the possibility that sometimes recalcitrance may not be overcome – that is, may not be overcome without some sacrifice of explanatory power" (1996, 178). Hence, as a radical alternative to my more or less in-trepid moves of sense-making, all of which follow the "human urge to create significance" (Fludernik 1993, 457), I would also like to mention what one might call "the Zen way of reading."

The Zen way of reading presupposes an attentive and stoic reader who repudiates the above-mentioned explanations, and simultaneously accepts both the strangeness
of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, worry, and panic that they might evoke in her or him. If invoking the Zen way of reading seems too far-fetched, then what the Romantic poet John Keats calls "Negative Capability" (Forman 1935, 72; emphasis in the original) can be used as another way to think about the attitudes that many unnatural scenarios invite us to adopt: the state of being in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason" (ibid.). I am not sure that many readers can engage in the Zen way of reading or accept Keats's uncertainties but I would like to encourage everybody to try this out when he or she is confronted with an unnatural scenario or event.16

My reading strategies constitute ways of filling the gaps of the unnatural. Furthermore, they cut across Lubomír Doležel's distinction between "world construction" and "meaning production" (1998, 165; 160) because to my mind, the cognitive reconstruction of storyworlds always already involves a process of interpretation. Nevertheless, I feel that (1) and (2), i.e., my first two strategies, correlate with cognitive processes that are closer to the pole of reconstruction or world-making, whereas the others are closer to the pole of interpretation or meaning-making. Also, I would like to claim that (1) and (2) involve more automated cognitive processes, while the other strategies are slightly more conscious ones. Moreover, I do not conceive of the mental operations of my reading strategies in terms of a chronological before-after sequence. Rather, I assume that these cognitive mechanisms are layered on top of each other simultaneously during the reading process. Furthermore, they are not intrinsically connected with specific examples but constitute options that readers may try out when they are confronted with unnatural scenarios. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that one can approach the same unnatural phenomenon from the perspective of several navigational tools, and that these strategies may occasionally overlap in actual readings or interpretations.

4. Conclusions

To summarize: from my perspective, fiction is interesting and special because physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events can only be represented in the worlds of fiction. The unnatural cannot exist anywhere else. Nevertheless, we as readers are of course bound by our cognitive architecture (even

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16 Many thanks go to Jim Phelan for suggesting Keats's idea to me. Incidentally, Luis Buñuel describes his collaboration with Salvador Dalí on the script of the surrealist film Un Chien Andalou (1929) as follows: "Our only rule was very simple: No idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted. We had to open all doors to the irrational and keep only those images that surprised us, without trying to explain why" (1984, 104). I thank Alan Palmer for mentioning this quotation to me.

17 Apart from the principles that I have discussed so far (the generic, the perspectival, and the functional), Tamar Yacobi mentions "the genetic principle," which explains discrepancies in causal terms related to the production of the text by its author (1981, 114-15), and "the existential principle," which reconciles discordant elements in terms of a unique storyworld that cannot be accounted for by the constraints of a known genre (ibid., 116-17). I am not really convinced of the explanatory power of the genetic principle when it comes to the unnatural. I feel that, unless one tries to explain slips or mistakes, invoking "the historical producer" (ibid., 114) does not explain very much. The existential principle, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in all my reading strategies (with the exception of reading strategy 2, which explains the unnatural through generic conventions, and reading strategy 3, which naturalizes the unnatural as a fantasy of a character or the narrator). All my other navigational tools concern unique storyworlds that have a peculiar structure because physical, logical, or human impossibilities objectively exist.
when we try to make sense of the unnatural). Therefore, the only way in which we can possibly respond to narratives of all sorts (including unnatural ones) is on the basis of our experiential backgrounds. I emphatically argue in favor of a cognitive approach to the unnatural, and I do not think that an alternative approach that somehow circumvents or moves beyond our cognitive architecture is even theoretically possible.

The unnatural primarily concerns the question of "what it is like" for humans to experience the transcending of physical laws, logical principles, and standard human limitations of knowledge. Even though unnatural scenarios and events contradict real-world parameters, readers can still make sense of them. At the end of the day, all examples of unnaturalness can be read as saying something about us and the world we live in. This focus on human problems is essential because without it, we would probably not be interested in unnatural texts (and we would not even consider them to be narratives in the first place). Since my examples of unnaturalness all make statements about human concerns, they can still be read as narratives. They may not be the most prototypical ones, but they certainly say more about us and our being in the world than Herman’s example of zero narrativity: "Oe splubba fībblo. Sim oe gingy beebie ca yuck, I ca splubba orpia" (2002, 101).

Let me end by saying a few words about the potential surplus of the unnatural. In the words of Lisa Zunshine, represented impossibilities have a hitherto neglected narrative potential because they "open up new conceptual spaces" that "make possible, and perhaps even necessary, narratives that explore such spaces" (2008, 158; emphasis in original). Indeed, the stimulation of our imagination through the depiction of impossibilities, which is based on "the power of the human mind to produce imaginary things" (Bartlett 2008, 107), closely correlates with an aesthetic kind of pleasure that is perhaps valuable in itself insofar as it draws us "forwards towards the new, into strange, unfamiliar and monstrous compounds" (Gibson 1996, 272).

To paraphrase Werner Wolf, one might also argue that the unnatural celebrates the faculty of the imagination, i.e., "the faculty of the human mind to engage in the field of 'the imaginary' regardless of rational 'impossibilities'" (2005, 102), as a source of enjoyment and stimulation.

5. Works Cited


18 Similarly, Brian Richardson points out that the "desire to 'make it new'" is "a primary motive" behind representations of the unnatural (2006, 135).


—. "What Really is Unnatural Narratology?" *Storyworlds* 4, forthcoming 2013.


