

Mimetic Narratives and the Poetics of Immersion

Raphaël Baroni



From ancient epics to television series and from novels to immersive documentaries, certain narratives transport us to a different world. This book explores the specificity of these mimetic narratives, where the audience is plunged into an imaginary scene in which characters take shape, time thickens, and the future remains open.

Drawing on the latest research in cognitive, rhetoric, trans-medial, and cultural narratology, Raphaël Baroni shows how mimetic narratives awaken our empathy and trigger suspense, curiosity, or surprise, and why they constitute a laboratory for ethical and existential experiences.

This book is not just a theoretical contribution, it is a deep-dive into the social and emotional power of stories, shedding light on both our need for fiction and the force of certain factual narratives.

“In this book, Baroni offers original insights into highly relevant questions in narratology” (Marie-Laure Ryan)

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Introduction

On November 14, 2015, the following account appeared in *Le Monde* describing the terrorist attacks that had taken place in Paris the previous day:¹

This is the first attack of this type in France. Several suicide bombers blew themselves up on the evening of Friday November 13 after a number of deadly attacks: first outside the Stade de France in the suburb of Saint-Denis, then in five locations in central Paris: Rue de la Fontaine-au-Roi, Rue Bichat, Boulevard Voltaire, Rue de Charonne and the Bataclan concert hall, after the audience were taken hostage. These attacks, which due to their staged approach are known as “coordinated,” were inspired by a form of violence that has existed for several years in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria. Until now, France believed itself safe from this type of attack.

After describing how this type of attack, common in South Asia and the Middle East, usually unfolds, later paragraphs recount the main events of the evening in a somewhat fragmented manner:

According to the initial findings of the investigation conducted by the public prosecutor’s office, the four assailants who attacked the Bataclan were wearing explosive belts when they entered the premises. They detonated

¹ Jacques Follorou, « Une attaque « complexe » inédite sur le sol français », *Le Monde*, Saturday, November 14, 2015. All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated.

them only when the police launched their assault. Only one of the four failed to detonate himself. He was killed by the special forces during the assault.

Using their automatic weapons, the four men had already killed many people before the police assault, shooting at people on the ground as well as at those who were trying to flee. "They were clearly out to die as martyrs," said an investigator who was present throughout the night at the scene of the attack.

A few days later, a very different account of the same event was published in the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*,² whose editorial team was mourning the loss of one of its journalists in the attack on the Bataclan concert hall. The first lines of this article begin as follows:

Paris, Friday, 10:00 pm. Half an hour after the first shooting at Le Carillon bar near Saint-Martin canal, around fifteen police cars raced onto Boulevard Voltaire. They closed the road off while a fleet of Red Cross ambulances moved into position. On Avenue de la République, cafés lowered their metal shutters. Local streets were unrecognizable with fire trucks parked across them. One in every two was closed off; it was difficult to know where to go. We soon found ourselves surrounded by red and white warning tape, unable to tell whether we were walking towards the danger zone or away from it.

Suddenly, at the corner of Rue Crussol and Boulevard Voltaire, a cry froze us to the spot: "Stay where you are!" The voice was filled with panic. It was impossible to tell where it was coming from until a man hidden behind a motorbike suddenly leaped out into the darkness, a gun in

² Marie-Lys Lubrano, «Trois heures d'horreur au Bataclan», *Les Inrockuptibles*, n°1042, 2015, pp. 10-14.

hand. It took us a moment to realize that he was a policeman. “Stand back,” he yelled, “or I’ll blow your head off!” We stood back. He crouched back down again between the motorbikes on the pavement. We were in front of 41, Boulevard Voltaire. The Bataclan is No. 50. The rumors flying around the streets were true: it was 10:40 pm and a hostage situation was underway in the legendary concert hall.

Following this introduction, a flashback transports us inside the Bataclan. From then on, the story focuses on three main witnesses, referred to by their first names: Yves, a 36-year-old writer accompanied by his friend Elea; Alice, aged 23, whose story is told by her sister Cécile because Alice was too upset, and finally Julien, described as “tall and strong with a shaved head,” who was at the concert with “his nephew and two friends,” Xavier and Mathieu. From the flashback onwards, the sequence of events follows a timeline that is carefully reconstructed, based on the timestamps of the mobile phones used by witnesses. The story follows the intertwined fates of several people, drawing us fully into the victims’ uncertainty regarding the attacks, whether through their mistaken interpretation of events (“like the others, she thought that the first gunshots were firecrackers. Until she saw the group suddenly running off the stage”) or the way in which they think about virtualities that are not followed through:

In the pit, Alice noticed a small space under the sound engineers’ box; maybe she could slip into it. Next to her, the attackers were whispering in French. She heard the word “grenades” and realized that they were going to blow the hall up. Hiding in a hole is not necessarily a good idea if there’s a bomb, or if you have to get out. So she didn’t move.

The narrative tension accompanying Julien's story is particularly compelling, since the journalist keeps the reader in a state of suspense until the last sentence of her article. We meet Julien as the first survivors of the Bataclan are evacuated from the hall:

Julien was trying to reassure his sister on the phone. "But I didn't leave him behind! I was dragged along by the crowd rushing toward the emergency exit! I couldn't do anything!" His voice was raw with anguish, as he tried to explain that he hadn't abandoned his nephew. In the minutes following the attack, he managed to contact his nephew, telling him to hide and to turn off his phone so that he wouldn't be noticed. He receives a text message from his friend Mathieu, who is hiding under the roof with his nephew.

Julien only learns that his nephew is safe half an hour after the rescue operations have finished. Since the journalist waits until the last paragraph of her article before delivering this revelation, this information acts as a cathartic ending to the tragedy:

Julien wasn't able to phone his sister again. His battery was almost flat, and he didn't know what to say. The Bataclan was evacuated almost half an hour ago, and Xavier had called him straight away. But Mathieu and his nephew hadn't. Julien was trembling. Some journalists filled him in: seven attacks took place in Paris, and apparently almost one hundred people were killed at the Bataclan alone. Julien couldn't take it in. At last his phone rang. He answered and started to cry. His nephew was with Mathieu. They were fine. They had managed to stay hidden under the roof. "Shit, that's one hell of a kid," smiled Julien through his tears.

Both articles are factual accounts of the same event. Both can also be considered narratives, insofar as a sequence of information refers to a sequence of particularly dramatic events. However, only one of these two accounts is related to the art of storytelling as defined by Percy Lubbock when he said that “the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown” (1954, 62). When we look more closely at how this story was told, we see that the fundamental parameters of narrative are presented in radically different ways in each article. The first prioritizes clarity and explanation, while the second aims to immerse the reader into the heart of the action, which delays our understanding of what finally happens. In the article in *Le Monde*, the locations of the drama are mentioned matter-of-factly, while in *Les Inrockuptibles*, the journalist takes the time to describe the setting of the action in detail. In the former, people are referred to exclusively by their functions or general attributes, while in the latter, several characters are individualized and serve as pivotal figures in the narrative. Last but not least, the temporality of the explanatory narrative remains distant, merely summarizing events and ordering information by importance, while the second begins *in medias res* and, after a flashback, anchors the representation in the witnesses’ frame of reference, following the chronology of events while opening up perspectives on virtualities, on what might happen at any given point in the narrative.

We can see here that a verbal narrative can compete with graphic, theatrical, or audiovisual representations when it comes to immersing the audience into the heart of a narrated event, and that this experiential form of storytelling has nothing to do with the so-called fictionality of the story. We must therefore better specify the aspects of narrativity that give these stories their particular form, without focusing a priori on the fictional dimension of the story being told or on the specific characteristics of a particular medium. The

distinction between the explanatory narrative as presented in the article in *Le Monde* and the immersive narrative published by *Les Inrockuptibles* illustrates a more fundamental distinction that has long remained outside the scope of structural approaches, as it lies on a functional and stylistic level.³

The Specificity of Mimetic Narratives

This book deals with mimetic narratives. By “mimetic,” I mean all media incarnations of narrativity—whether verbal, scenic, graphic, or audiovisual, whether fictional or factual—whose primary function is to immerse their audience in the unfolding of narrative events experienced by a character. While most research in the field of narratology has focused on this prototypical form of narrativity, its specificity has not been clearly identified in the structuralist models because mimetic storytelling does more than reconfigure the narrated time.

The narrated time in mimetic narratives is characterized by a specific depth, involving the construction of a scene in which the event is enacted. Only then does the story become part of a dense network of virtualities, and the characters become embodied agents, sometimes unpredictable or inscrutable, with their potential actions weighing on an open future. The responsibility of a person is thus engaged, and the existential value of his or her destiny can be evaluated with each iteration of the thread of his or her life. Moreover, telling stories to *intrigue* the audience entails the implementation of a specific type of communication, whose divergence from the ordinary rules governing verbal interaction

³ Some elements of this introduction are taken from an article published in 2018 in issue 34 of the journal *Questions de communication*. The article was translated into English in 2022 and is available on the journal website <https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.23526>.

becomes all the clearer when compared with informative narratives. Whereas the aim of many factual stories is to overcome the discordance of something that has disrupted the routine of our world, to explain what happened in light of general rules or structures, the function of mimetic narratives is instead to plunge us back into the gap opened in our daily routines. Thus, in mimetic narratives, we can measure the shortcomings of all predictions or retrospective explanations and reach an experiential understanding of what truly happened.⁴

Although this book is first and foremost an exploration of the specificities of mimetic narratives, it is also a reflection on the evolution of narrative theory, because approaches in the fields of rhetorical, transmedial, cognitive, and cultural narratologies have opened up converging avenues for better understanding the social power of narrative artifacts. It is important to emphasize, however, that the meaning attributed to the term “mimetic” in this study differs substantially from its use in the context of unnatural narratology. Within unnatural narratology, the distinction between mimetic and nonmimetic (or antimimetic) narratives is based on the contrast between narratives understood as being bound by pragmatic constraints derived from everyday storytelling practices and, conversely, fictional narratives that depict events considered impossible in the real world or that adopt narrative forms departing from established conventions (Richardson 2015). However, my use of the term

⁴ My understanding of mimetic narratives aligns with what Mary Louise Pratt (1977) terms a “display text,” that is, a form of communicative act whose primary function is not the transmission of factual information but the presentation of a narrative for the audience’s evaluation or enjoyment. As Pratt emphasizes, display texts encompass both literary works (such as novels) and so-called “ordinary” speech acts (such as personal anecdotes). Their tellability derives from the fact that they recount events perceived as unusual, noteworthy, or otherwise significant enough to warrant the audience’s attention.

“mimetic” does not refer to the real or realistic nature of the representation, but to its density, its experiential or immersive character. In other words, the account of a terrorist attack that actually took place can be as mimetic as the story of an omniscient and eternal sandworm, as in Frank Herbert’s novel *God Emperor of Dune*. Narrative techniques associated with experiential literature only become antimimetic (in my sense of the term) when they hinder these immersive and experiential qualities.

It should also be noted that the term “mimetic” will not be used here to define a mode of representation linked to a specific type of medium and traditionally opposed to verbal narrative, but rather a manner of telling a story, in any medium. To explain this, I must return to the ancient opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis*.

Mimesis as a Form of Diegesis

For a long time, rooted in ancient discussions by Plato and Aristotle, *mimesis* and *diegesis* were treated as mutually exclusive, as if one had to choose between two distinct modes of storytelling: either a diegetic mode, where the story is told verbally, or a mimetic mode, where actions are directly represented on stage (or on screen.). When Lubbock (2015) suggested that “a novelist” can “show” a story, he opened a rift in the classical opposition between *diegesis* and *mimesis*, since he suggested that verbal narrative can be more or less mimetic.

However, a closer examination reveals that even the Greek philosophers never conceived *mimesis* and *diegesis* as a strict either/or dichotomy; perhaps unexpectedly, their views were closer to Lubbock’s position than is often assumed. As André Gaudreault explains, it was later commentators who flattened the nuance of their arguments, reducing the relationship between the two notions by placing them on the same conceptual level:

The opposition that has been made since Genette between *mimesis* (imitation) and *diegesis* (narrative) is an operation that creates a mesh in the net of narratological theory that even the use of the Ancients cannot justify, since for Plato the *mimesis* is not, contrary to what is too often advanced, an opposite category to *diegesis* but one of its forms. (Gaudreault 1999: 24)

Even though Plato and Aristotle diverged on many points (including the moral status of mimetic representation), both acknowledged that *diegesis* can take mimetic forms or that *mimesis* may include *diegetic* elements. For Plato, there are three ways of telling a story—that is, three modes of *diegesis*: narrators may speak in their own voice without ever adopting another identity; they may perform the story on stage, where the teller ceases to be a narrator and becomes an actor impersonating a character; or they may alternate between these two modes.

“Is not everything that is said by fabulists or poets a narration of past, present, or future things? [...] What else could it be?” he said. “Do not they proceed either by pure narration or by a narrative that is effected through imitation, or by both? [...] This too,” he said, “I still need to have made plainer.”⁵ (Plato, *Republic*, III, 392d)

If one aims to produce a “pure” narration (*haple diegesis*), events must be told without resorting to direct dialogue, because using this would require the storyteller to alter the voice and *imitate* the characters’ speech—bearing in mind that, in antiquity, even written literature was perceived primarily as spoken discourse rather than as a silent text. A second option is to introduce in a verbal narrative occasional

5 Translation provided by Perseus.

direct speech and lively descriptions, creating the illusion that characters are acting and speaking before the audience, even though the story is told by the poet. A third possibility is to rely solely on direct speech, which leads to a scenic representation of the action, as in tragedy, comedy, or other dramatic forms. In Plato’s moral perspective, drama is the most objectionable form of art because it “tells through imitation” (*diegesis dia mimeseos*) and is therefore less honest than “simple narration” (*haple diegesis*), where the storyteller states what happened without pretending to be somebody else, even occasionally. Yet this framework makes it clear that storytelling is not tied to a single expressive mode: mimesis is merely one way of narrating. Plato also acknowledges that certain narrative techniques—such as direct speech or vivid description—introduce mimetic elements into a diegesis, thereby giving rise to mixed forms.

	Diegesis (narration)	
Haple Diegesis (simple narration)	Diegesis di Amphoteron (mixed narration)	Diegesis dia Mimeseos (narration through imitation)
Dithyrambe (narration without dialogue)	Epic (narration with dialogues)	Tragedy & Comedy (only dialogues and live action)

Aristotle adopts a different position, yet he also conceives the relation between mimesis and diegesis in terms of inclusion rather than opposition. For him, all forms of telling fall under the broader category of *imitation*, since narrating entails, in some manner, the representation of actions (*mimesis praxeos*). Whereas epic poetry presents this imitation through a verbal narration delivered by the poet, tragedy constitutes a more direct form of mimesis, in which the action is enacted by performers on stage (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a).

We might put the issue in contemporary terms by saying that *narrative* is a representation of actions (*mimesis praxeos*), which may be conveyed either through direct imitation—as in comedy or tragedy—or through an imitation mediated by a narrator, as in epic poetry. Scenic representation appears to offer the most immediate form of mimesis, yet verbal narration can equally be understood as an imitation of actions, distinguished only by the fact that it is transmitted through the verbal performance of a narrator. Aristotle further maintains that imitation is inherently valuable—not only because of the well-known (and still debated) notion of *catharsis*, but above all because human beings are creatures who learn through imitation. For this reason, he acknowledges that mimetic representations—especially fictional ones that depict what could happen by necessity rather than what did happen by contingency—are indispensable tools for educating citizens.

Mimesis Praxeos (narrative arts as representation of actions)	
Diegesis (the epic genre as an imitation through verbal narration)	Tragedy & Comedy (a live performance featuring actions and speeches performed by actors)

We can therefore observe that neither Aristotle nor Plato conceived diegesis and mimesis as operating on the same level; consequently, they would likely not be surprised by the notion of what I shall call a *mimetic narrative*—an artistic form grounded in the construction of an imaginary scene, whether presented directly in a dramatic form or mediated through graphic, audiovisual, or verbal narration. Yet even if Plato and Aristotle had used the expression “mimetic narrative,” they would not have meant the same thing. For Aristotle, it would designate an imitation of action conveyed through the mediating voice of a poet;

for Plato, it would rather refer to a narration delivered in an imitative mode (*diegesis dia mimeseos*). In both cases, the concept would be understood in a much narrower sense than the one I intend to propose.

My aim, instead, is to generalize the notion by drawing simultaneously on Aristotle's definition of *mimesis* and on Plato's definition of *diegesis*. This cross-referencing makes it possible to consider that texts, plays, comics, films, and other representational forms are all capable of telling stories (they possess a potential for *diegesis*) and are also capable of imitating actions—that is, representing them as an enactment of the story, (as if) unfolding on a stage. It should be added immediately that verbal discourses, such as theatre, comics, or film, can also serve other purposes: they may communicate content that is not narrative, and they may tell stories in ways that deliberately avoid producing an illusion of imitation. The term “mimetic” refers here to narrative forms that engage audiences in experiential and immersive ways, aligning with concepts from cognitive narratology.

Cognitive Reconceptualization of Narrativity

Marie-Laure Ryan (2005c, 4) has explained that what all mediatic avatars of narrativity have in common is their ability to give rise to a “mental image” that includes several aspects of what we understand by a meaningful and tellable story:

If the transmedial identity of narrative lies on the side of the signified, this means that narrative is a certain type of mental image, or cognitive template, which can be isolated from the stimuli that trigger its construction. I propose to define the cognitive template constitutive of narrative through the following features.

1. Narrative involves the construction of the mental image of a world populated with individuated agents (characters) and objects (spatial dimension).
2. This world must undergo not fully predictable changes of state that are caused by non-habitual physical events: either accidents (happenings) or deliberate actions by intelligent agents (temporal dimension).
3. In addition to being linked to physical states by causal relations, the physical events must be associated with mental states and events (goals, plans, emotions).

David Herman, meanwhile, has emphasized the importance of thinking about the story not only as a structure of events, but also as a *storyworld*. According to this approach, narrative is fundamentally based on “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate” (2005, 570). The last term must be emphasized. This *relocation* in a storyworld highlights the central role of the “mental image” evoked by Ryan, which provides an essential spatial and temporal anchor, allowing characters, objects, and events to be placed within it. A similar concept lies at the heart of the deictic shift theory, at the intersection of cognitive science and linguistics, which Erwin Segal summarizes as follows.

The Deictic Shift Theory (DST) argues that the metaphor of the reader getting inside of a story is cognitively valid. The reader often takes a cognitive stance within the world of the narrative and interprets the text from that perspective. We show that there is much data to support this idea, and we attempt to specify some mechanisms and computational processes that could implement it. DST claims that how a text is interpreted depends on the cognitive stance of the reader. (Segal 1995, 15)

Monika Fludernik's emphasis on the "experiential" dimension of narrativity (1996, 26) has also helped pave the way for a new approach that foregrounds the concept of embodied cognition (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021). Marco Caracciolo claims that experientiality is a necessary condition for defining narrativity, as well as for evaluating its effects on the audience.

No matter how distant from the laws and conventions of what we consider to be our real world, stories are always bound up with human experience: they speak to human concerns and help us negotiate values that are part of our everyday reality. In other words, narrative is deeply implicated in what has been variously called "the repertoire" (Iser 1978) or "the experiential background" (Caracciolo 2014) of recipients. We can therefore conclude that experientiality is a necessary—but not sufficient—condition for narrativity. (2013, §10)

As Marie-Laure Ryan has shown, narrative immersion can be approached from several complementary perspectives. Drawing on her framework, the chapters of this book alternately "take a closer look at the textual features and mental operations responsible for three forms of involvement with narratives: spatial immersion, the response to setting; temporal immersion, the response to plot; and emotional immersion, the response to character" (Ryan 2001: 121). By focusing on narrative objects whose primary function is to immerse their audience in a storyworld and to foster empathy with characters confronted with complex situations, this book seeks to examine the narrative techniques through which storytelling acquires its distinctive existential force.

Mimetic storytelling

Whereas much research on the experiential dimension of narrative has concentrated on the subjectivity of characters, the first part of this book argues that mimetic storytelling is, above all, grounded in a mode of communication that departs from ordinary communicative frameworks.

The first chapter examines this discursive dimension through the lens of Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber's relevance theory (2002) and Henry Paul Grice's (1989) principle of cooperation. Drawing on the seemingly scandalous account of an accident and an uncooperative witness statement embedded within a detective novel by Émile Gaboriau, I argue that a factual narrative that might appear irrelevant or in violation of conventional conversational norms can, in fact, serve as an ideal basis for a compelling mimetic narrative. In this sense, the principles of relevance and cooperation are systematically subverted in the context of mimetic storytelling, indicating that the aesthetic value and dramatic intensity of this narrative mode depend not only on the content conveyed but equally on the manner in which it is narrated.

As Chapter Two seeks to illustrate, the divergence from ordinary rules governing verbal interaction becomes particularly evident when contrasting mimetic storytelling of real events—such as a plane crash—with its counterpart: the narrative report, or what I term an informative narrative. Typically, the purpose of many factual narratives, including news articles, is to resolve the disruption caused by an unexpected event by situating it within general rules or frameworks that render it more predictable and comprehensible. To achieve this, the discourse must eschew ambiguities, strategic omissions, intentional delays, or cliffhangers. In other words, reports are largely structured as “suspense killers”—stories devoid of tension—where the most effective headlines

function as spoilers, enabling readers to grasp the essentials without engaging with the full text. Generally, these narratives avoid mimetic elements: characters serve merely functional roles, and there is little to no effort to construct a narrative scene that the audience can vividly imagine. In contrast, the aim of a mimetic narrative is to immerse the audience anew in the rupture that a tellable event imposes upon everyday experience. This mode of factual storytelling seeks to expose the limitations inherent in retrospective explanations while cultivating a deeper, embodied understanding of an individual's lived experience.

However, Chapter Three shows that when an event is recounted mimetically with the claim of authenticity, it must adhere to specific pragmatic constraints to prevent its reduction to mere fictionalization. Regardless of the literary devices or media conventions employed to reconstruct a lived experience, the narrative is expected to offer a faithful and honest account of an individual's life. This includes the capacity to disclose the methods by which the reconstruction was achieved and to provide various forms of verification or attestation. This discussion draws on the well-known example of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* to elucidate key principles that govern the production and reception of mimetic narratives when they purport to offer faithful representations of real events. In doing so, it engages with the pragmatic and transmedial boundaries between fact and fiction. This inquiry is particularly timely given the increasing prevalence of mimetic forms within autobiography, historiography, and narrative journalism, all circulating within a society deeply concerned with the manipulation of storytelling and the proliferation of "fake news." Against this backdrop, it becomes crucial to affirm that narrative techniques characteristic of mimetic forms are not exclusive to fiction but are subject to rigorous pragmatic constraints that demand vigilant critical engagement from audiences.

Mimetic time

As the second part of this book will show, mimetic narratives do more than merely reorganize narrated time within the framework of the narration's temporality. Time in mimetic narratives is distinguished by a particular intensity and depth, manifested through the construction of a scene where events are literally *dramatized*—or, in some respects, enacted—for the audience. It is crucial to highlight that the core meaning of dramatization pertains here to the theatrical nature of representation. In verbal narratives, this dramatization functions metaphorically as the staging of action, which must possess the coherence and immediacy of an event unfolding before the audience and include, among other techniques, the frequent use of dialogue.

As I argue in Chapter Four, the process of dramatization involves a redefinition of the fundamental categories employed by Genette to describe anachronies—a topic that has received relatively little critical attention to date. Early intermedial comparisons between verbal and audiovisual narratives, however, have already challenged the uncritical extension of the concept of analepsis to encompass flashbacks. As Seymour Chatman (1978) and David Bordwell (1985) have observed, cinematic narratives convey information about the fabula's past in two distinct ways: either through a character's verbal recounting of prior events or through a direct disruption of the space-time continuum by visually depicting those events. While Chatman regarded this capacity to manipulate spatiotemporal reference as specific to audiovisual media, a transmedial perspective reveals that the same distinction exists across all narrative forms—particularly verbal narratives, where specialized linguistic mechanisms provide comparable flexibility in the representation of time.

Drawing on deictic shift theory (Galbraith, 1995), mimetic narratives are conceived as vessels for temporal navigation,

capable of delving into multiple layers of temporality without confronting the ontological distinction between an actual here-and-now and mere temporal projections towards past or future. This perspective also demonstrates that narratives can incorporate numerous anachronic elements without necessarily disrupting the linear progression of the immersive timeline. Moreover, the distinction between analepsis and flashback offers a valuable framework for examining stylistic differences between the mere evocation of the past and its scenic representation. This process of dramatization aligns with Lubbock's conception of "showing" and can be illustrated through the analogy between verbal, graphic, and cinematic flashbacks.

Chapter Five will also discuss new ways of approaching narrative speed from the perspective of experientiality, the opposition between scene and summary being reconfigured in the light of reflections by Kathryn Hume (2005) on narrative rhythm. Indeed, the dramatization of representation linked to a scenic representation appears to be one of the necessary conditions for producing an effect of suspense, and thus for energizing the progression of a narrative. Consequently, what Genette defined on a structural level as a slowing down of the narrative can, in many cases, induce a feeling of acceleration, especially when dramatic actions are associated with a deeper immersion into the storyworld. This framework enables a dialogue with Kathryn Hume's (2005) reflections on narrative rhythm, offering a novel approach to narrative pacing grounded in experientiality. Indeed, the dramatization inherent in scenic representation is a crucial condition for eliciting suspense and thereby energizing narrative progression. As a result, what Genette identified structurally as a deceleration of narrative pace can often create the impression of acceleration, particularly when heightened dramatic action coincides with intensified immersion in the storyworld.

Chapter Six addresses another dimension of temporality, focusing on the intensity of duration in narrative representation. It discusses the classical narrative structure of an arc progressing towards a climax, followed by a resolution. Although instrumental music is not inherently narrative, the distinctive quality of temporal experience it elicits sheds light on a fundamental aspect of emplotment in mimetic narratives. Musical sequences structured through the alternation of harmonic tensions and resolutions exemplify an abstract variant of a dramatic experience of duration—one that unfolds independently of any predetermined meaning. I argue in conclusion that mimetic narratives seek to emulate this dynamic by combining the tension inherent in plot development with immersive engagement in the unfolding events of the storyworld.

Mimetic storyworld

The third part of the book examines the distinctive features of mimetic storyworlds. When engaged with a mimetic narrative, the audience encounters a story embedded within a dense network of possibilities, and the characters acquire the semblance of real individuals who may appear unpredictable or opaque. As the narrative unfolds, the characters' decisions seem to shape a future that remains open, thereby implicating them in forms of responsibility whose stakes are continually reassessed with each new turn in the trajectory of their lives.

Chapter Seven traces how narratologists have theorized characters, from structuralist frameworks that underscore their artificial and functional dimensions to more recent approaches that foreground their mimetic qualities and their role in plot dynamics. This discussion particularly underscores the importance of conceiving characters as plausible persons, noting that this mimetic effect is not contingent on

the literal realism of their depiction. A talking animal can, for instance, acquire the same existential depth as a character in a realist novel, provided they exhibit behaviors analogous to those of human beings, with all the attendant mental complexity and relative indeterminacy. The partial inscrutability of their thoughts and the unpredictability of their actions make them not only ideal agents for advancing the plot but also powerful conduits for identification, sympathy, or antipathy—transforming their narrative trajectories into a kind of ethical laboratory.

Chapter Eight addresses the notion of virtuality, which is central to defining the distinctive character of mimetic narratives. Using Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* as a case study, the chapter examines how a narrative is not simply an immanent structure imposed on events but a labyrinthine construct that enables the audience to consider not only what did occur but also the expansive network of what might have occurred. As various narratological models have shown, virtualities are embedded both in the structural logic of the narrative and in the interpretive horizons that the plot opens for the audience. The shift from deterministic to probabilistic models of plot thus marks a significant development in recent narrative theory, shedding light not only on the fundamental dynamics of mimetic narratives but also on their broader social and anthropological implications.

Chapter Nine further demonstrates that narrative virtualities remain perceptible with each iteration of a mimetic narrative and continue to carry emotional and ethical significance, even when the outcome is already known. The episode of Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane serves to illustrate how the aesthetic and moral values of a narrative are deeply entwined with the virtual pathways inscribed within its structure, revealing how foreknowledge can coexist—and at times conflict—with the enduring presence of hope.

The conclusion builds on the preceding arguments to argue for a more restrictive definition of narrativity, with the aim of countering the conceptual dilution of the term and more precisely accounting for the distinctive capacity of mimetic narratives to engage with the social, political, and ecological challenges of our time. It contends that experiential narratives display a distinctive capacity to mobilize embodied cognition, elicit emotional engagement, and reconfigure values, which accounts for their central role in shaping social imaginaries and generating counternarratives. At the same time, their reliance on localized perspectives and event-centered plots limits their ability to represent large-scale, slowly unfolding processes—such as climate change and other forms of “slow violence”—thereby raising critical questions about the extent to which mimetic forms can adequately respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene. By refining the concept of “narrative,” this book advances a set of conceptual tools designed to specify when and how stories can meaningfully transform perceptions, affects, and behaviors.

Part 1

Mimetic Storytelling

The Relevance of Being Irrelevant*

In this chapter, I argue that the specific mode of narrative communication I refer to as *mimetic* challenges nearly all the foundational principles that govern ordinary language use. In contrast, other narrative modes—such as those I term *configurational*, *explanatory*, or *informative*—generally adhere to these principles, as their primary function is to provide clarity and convey knowledge about past events. On the basis of this distinction, I contend that it becomes problematic to define what counts as relevant or irrelevant when relying solely on general principles assumed to apply uniformly across all forms of discourse, as is often the case in both relevance theory and narratology. Before addressing these theoretical concerns in detail, I will begin with a concrete example that illustrates the issues at stake: a narrative told by a boy during a phone call with his father.

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Hi Dad! Guess what... Mom had a terrible accident today! That's why I'm calling you from the hospital. Hang on, let me start from the beginning. You remember when we got up this morning, the weather was awful, and Mom had to take the car to work. It was raining, but she looked so happy in her beautiful red dress. She heard on the radio that the traffic on the highway was really bad, and because she could never have imagined what would happen next, she thought she would save time by taking the bridge over the Hudson River. But you know how bad visibility is at this time of the year and how slippery the road on the bridge is when it's raining. So then... Oh no, sorry! I have to go, something's come up. I'll call you back in an hour or two. Bye!⁶

Interpretations of this narrative change completely depending on the narrative genre identified by the audience. If the story is thought to be a joke (let's say some kind of Monty Pythonesque dark humor), the audience might find it quite funny, because it is totally absurd that the son does not give his father the crucial information he is no doubt waiting for, namely, how is the mother? We infer from the genre that the tension between the expected information and its deferral would probably devastate the father, but its effect on the audience is anxiety blended with pleasure, or some kind of enjoyable suspense. The story's cliffhanger ending, combined with the still unsolved mystery of the mother's health, is therefore a meaningful frustration. We are dealing here with an open ending that can be interpreted as a surprising conclusion, and it has to be said that surprise is a good way to end a joke. Even the mention of the "red dress" should not be dismissed as a superfluous detail. On the contrary, it plays

⁶ This story is a fictional example created for the purposes of discussion.

a pivotal role in the narrative by serving a dual function: on one hand, it delays the delivery of key information, thereby heightening the audience's frustration; on the other hand, it contributes to the vividness of the scene, fostering immersion in a simulated reality. Barthes would probably have considered the mention of the color of the dress as a "catalysis" (1975, 248–49), or as a diegetic element designed to achieve a "reality effect" (1982). Indeed, it increases the reader's empathy, postpones the resolution, and thus, reinforces the dramatic effect of the scene.

Conversely, if this text were the transcript of an actual conversation, it would clearly violate nearly all the conventions that govern efficient information-oriented communication. In such a context, the most crucial information should be delivered upfront rather than postponed to a later exchange. One would expect the son to begin with what, in a fictional context, would amount to a spoiler—for example: "Hi! Mom is okay, but she had a terrible accident today..." Similarly, a detail such as "she looked so happy in her beautiful red dress" would appear entirely unnecessary; gratuitous or even inappropriate under these circumstances. According to the Gricean maxims (Grice 1989), this discourse might be true, but it clearly violates all the other maxims: it does not provide the information required for the purpose of the exchange, whilst simultaneously being too prolix and unordered. Furthermore, some story elements (such as the red dress) are simply irrelevant. The only way to interpret this conversation, if it were real, would be to infer sadistic intentions by the son or some kind of sociopathic mental disorder.

Consequently, the same text can be considered as relevant or irrelevant depending on the frame we use to interpret it, and the inferences concerning the intentions of the narrator rely on *textual* as well as *contextual* information, especially the knowledge of the genre exemplified and the situation in

which the speech takes place.⁷ In reality, the reader can—and inevitably will—construct a context for my artificial example. However, in this constructed situation, the genre remains indeterminate, and the ambiguity would only be partially resolved if we had access to the actual context of a real communicative act. As long as the example remains a fictional construct within a narratological argument, both possible interpretations are equally inaccurate, since the true relevance of the text depends on its real context and, more specifically, on the intentions of its actual producer. To correctly grasp my purpose, the reader must recognize that the narrative is meant to illustrate how relevance theory is intrinsically dependent on the context of discursive interaction. In this case, what is at stake is not merely the narrator's intentions within the story, but rather those of the author—who communicates implicitly behind the narrator's back.

Moreover, it becomes clear that relevance in a narrative is determined not only by *what* is told, but also by *how* it is told. In other words, when relevance theory is applied to narrative discourse, the focus cannot be limited to aspects such as tellability, eventfulness, newsworthiness, or completeness of the story told. Just as crucial is the relationship between the content of the story and the manner in which the information is delivered.

In certain contexts, emotions such as suspense, curiosity, or surprise may be regarded as the very essence of narrative, or even as defining features of narrativity itself. In other contexts, however—such as when breaking news is shared in conversation or via information media—there is an expectation that the narrator will refrain from generating tension within the discourse. In these cases, tension is already present in the communicative situation, and the priority is to

⁷ On the importance of framing operations for the interpretation of values, see Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2014).

convey the facts as clearly and rapidly as possible in order to alleviate the audience's anxiety.

Harald Weinrich (2001) describes the first narrative prototype, which he terms *erzählte Welt*, or "narrated world," as a discourse generated in a calm, uneventful context, intended to counteract this inertia by immersing the audience in a storyworld filled with internal tensions. He contrasts this with another prototype, the *besprochene Welt*, or "commented world." Building on a similar distinction, Jean-Paul Bronckart (1996, 159) differentiates narratives aligned with what I refer to as the mimetic pole from more interactive forms of storytelling, which are directly shaped by and responsive to the immediate communicative situation between narrator and audience.

In interactive forms of storytelling, a chronological narration may not be the most relevant way to tell a story, since linear progression often generates suspense—an effect that may be inappropriate in certain situations. When the audience primarily needs to learn the outcome of an unexpected event, the Gricean maxim "be orderly" should be interpreted as: "do not follow the chronological order," "do not begin at the beginning," and "start with the most important piece of information." Accordingly, William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967) have shown that conversational narratives typically begin with an abstract—a brief summary of the story's point—which may even serve as a prerequisite for being permitted to narrate the event.

Before proposing a more refined account of a relevance theory tailored to the specificity of mimetic narratives, I will first seek to clarify the main points of convergence and divergence between narratology and relevance theory. This preliminary step should help us recognize both the potential benefits and the inherent risks and challenges involved in attempting to bring together two distinct theoretical traditions.

Convergences between narratology and relevance theory

Relevance theory shares some fundamental epistemological principles with the recent evolution of narrative theory, especially if we consider how the latter has evolved since its formalist heyday. On the one hand, as stated by Sperber and Wilson,

relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out in detail one of Grice's central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions [...]. In developing this claim, Grice laid the foundations for an inferential model of communication, an alternative to the classical code model. (Sperber & Wilson 2002, 249)

This approach has proved to be particularly useful for deciphering the functioning of irony, of implied meaning, and of other figures of indirect communication that could not be explained otherwise. On the other hand, structuralist narratology initially set aside considerations of authorial intention and discursive communication, focusing instead on providing an objective analysis of narrative structures. However, some years later, narrative theory experienced a "pragmatic revolution," beginning with an exploration of the principles underlying "narrative cooperation" within the framework of "reception theory" (Eco 1979). As stated by Umberto Eco: the "*fabula* is the result of a continuous series of abductions made during the course of the reading" (1979, 31), and therefore, the text must be considered as a lazy machine that requires the bold cooperation of the reader in order to fill in the gaps of the narrative world (1985, 29). As in

relevance theory, rhetorical narratology assumes that interpretation is guided by the recognition of the implied author's intentions. This framework led James Phelan (1989) to analyze the reader's progression through the narrative alongside the effects that the implied author aims to produce—such as maintaining interest, negotiating ethical dimensions, or generating irony. Karin Kukkonen has emphasized the link between the rhetorical approach to “unreliable narration” and relevance theory:

Booth sees unreliable narration as an instance of irony, in which the (implied) author and the reader communicate behind the narrator's back. [...] Uncooperative narration can be seen as a mimetic representation of someone breaking the maxims of communication and “jeopardizing the CP” (Pratt 1977, 217). As a mimetic representation in literary narrative, breaking the maxims contributes to the characterization of the narrator, while the actual Cooperative Principle between the reader and the author remains intact. (Kukkonen 2013, 209)

I adopted a similar application of relevance theory when I posited that the story of the accident—once identified as fictional—should be interpreted either as a joke or as a meaningful illustration of a theoretical issue, implying not merely a sadistic narrator but also an ironic author. This example thus reveals how an apparently irrelevant speech act, when evaluated at the level of narrator–narratee communication, may nonetheless acquire relevance when situated within the broader framework of the implied communication between the author and reader.

Another factor that has facilitated the convergence between relevance theory and narratology lies in a significant methodological shift. While relevance theory initially

concentrated on everyday communication, classical narrative theory remained largely devoted to the analysis of fictional texts, with a strong focus on the poetics of decontextualized literary works. However, beginning in the mid-1970s, there emerged a growing interest in broadening the scope of narratological inquiry by examining the relationship between so-called “natural narratives” and their “artificial” counterparts. This evolution culminated in the development of what Monika Fludernik (1996) has termed “natural narratology”—a theoretical framework that encompasses not only oral and literary narratives, but also a wide array of media capable of prompting the construction of a storyworld.

Teun Van Dijk (1975) and Mary Louise Pratt (1977) were among the pioneers of this shift, both emphasizing the shared features of natural and artificial narratives. Crucially, their work was grounded in the premise that narratives are deliberately constructed representational devices, shaped to express the communicative intentions of their creators—an idea succinctly articulated by Gregory Currie (2010: xvii), who states that “narratives are intentionally fashioned devices of representation that work by manifesting the communicative intention of their makers.”

In their analysis of conversational narratives, Labov and Waletzky (1967) emphasized the importance of elements such as “evaluation devices,” “tellability,” and “point,” arguing that narrative structures cannot be meaningfully described without considering the functions they serve within discursive interaction. However, within the structuralist paradigm, it was far from evident that the same applied to literary texts. For Barthes (1989), who famously proclaimed the death of the author, texts were considered autonomous entities. One of Pratt’s central objectives was to challenge this assumption by bridging the divide between artificial and natural narratives, notably through

the application of the Cooperative Principle to literary discourse:⁸

Far from being autonomous, self-contained, self-motivating, context-free objects which exist independently from the “pragmatic” concerns of “everyday” discourse, literary works take place in a context, and like any other utterance they cannot be described apart from that context. (Pratt 1973: 115)

Divergences between narratology and relevance theory

Despite notable points of convergence, I wish to emphasize persistent divergences between relevance theory and narrative theory, largely because certain principles governing ordinary language use do not align with the specific nature of what I term mimetic narratives. To begin with, the truth value of a narrative is typically irrelevant in most fictional works. For example, when interpreting the story of the accident within a fictional frame, there is no point in wondering whether the account is true or false, since the discourse does not consist of serious assertions. This condition, in fact, diminishes much of the narrative’s pathos—or at least reframes it in a way that sustains interest in that pathos. As noticed by Teun Van Dijk:

First of all, artificial narratives need not respect a number of pragmatic conditions. Well known is the fact that such narratives need not be true, although they may be true. (Van Dijk 1975, 291)

⁸ Jim Fanto underlines that: “Pratt’s [...] application of Grice’s theory to literature considerably extends the use intended by the speech act philosopher. She proposes that the Maxims count as genre rules for whatever type of discourse the fictional narrator is producing. When the narrator violates a Maxim, the reader must [...] interpret this act as an intentional flouting on the author’s part.” (Fanto 1978: 136)

Most importantly, as previously noted, the fictional nature of artificial narratives allows for a multilayered mode of communication, wherein an uncooperative narrator may obscure the ironic intentions of an implied author. However, as we will explore in the next chapter, mimetic narratives can also be factual or arise within conversational contexts; thus, the primary distinctions lie not in the story's content but in the manner of its telling. As Jim Fanto observes:

When Grice formulated his Maxims and CP, he had in mind a conversation in which the participants intend to communicate the maximal amount of information about the real world as efficiently as possible. He did not, however, rule out other purposes for other discourse. Therefore, Mary Pratt proposed a purpose for natural and literary narratives that differentiates them from other kinds of language. (Fanto 1978, 135)

Accordingly, Pratt expanded the scope of the original Cooperative Principle, replacing its general maxims with more specific "special maxims." More broadly, this mode of communication challenges one of the fundamental tenets of relevance theory as later articulated by Sperber and Wilson:

In relevance-theoretic terms, other things being equal, the greater the PROCESSING EFFORT required, the less relevant the input will be. (Sperber & Wilson 2002: 252)

The classical hermeneutic tradition rests on the contrary assumption that the aesthetic value of a literary work often correlates with the cognitive effort it demands. This perspective extends beyond avant-garde literature or the challenge of reconstructing the horizon of a distant author; it also applies more broadly to narrative elements such as progression, tension, surprise, curiosity, and suspense.

However, I contend that not all narratives operate according to the same set of rules. Rather, we can distinguish between two prototypical forms based on how they engage with the principles governing ordinary communication. As I have argued, this distinction does not align with the conventional categories of factual versus fictional, nor with the natural versus artificial dichotomy proposed by other scholars. Instead, I suggest framing the contrast in terms of the “intriguing function,” characteristic of mimetic narratives, versus the “informative function” found in other types of narrative representations (see Baroni 2009, 45–94). This distinction draws on the terminology developed by Paul Ricoeur in his analysis of the functions of emplotment (Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988). I adopt his terms precisely to challenge the common yet misleading assumption that “emplotment” and “configuration” are synonymous or inherently convergent. In my view, these two narrative modes are fundamentally different in their design, as they serve distinct functions and aim to produce different effects on the audience.

Many factual narratives aim to provide a transparent and coherent account of past events. To achieve this, they strive to maximize representational concordance, even when constrained by incomplete or imperfect source material. By contrast, most fictional narratives—though not exclusively fictional ones—seek to captivate the audience by aesthetically recreating the raw experience of a character navigating an obscure or unpredictable storyworld. In order to do so, they often rely on the deliberate introduction of representational discordance, at least temporarily. As José Prieto-Pablos notes:

As recipients of a verbal message, we expect it to be transmitted promptly and clearly, in accordance with the principles of conversational cooperation outlined by Grice [...]; if the message is to be of a certain length, we expect to be

given a summary or abstract with the essential pieces of information, so that we can put all the pieces in the rest of the message together [...]. Underlying these practices or expectations, there is a basic need to control the conditions of the transmission and reception of information. The kind of delay or concealment of information featured in suspense texts challenges this basic need and naturally produces anxiety. (Prieto-Pablos 1998, 100)

Some narratives—whether in everyday conversations, newspaper articles, or other forms of narrative communication aimed at impatient readers—rely on summaries, abstracts, and explanatory structures. I refer to these as “informative” narratives, as their primary purpose is to convey knowledge by providing information about the events told and minimizing the cognitive effort required from the addressee to learn about them.

In the case of mimetic narratives—which predominantly include fiction of all kinds conveyed in a wide variety of media, but also extend to some autobiographies, literary journalism, or vivid conversational anecdotes—the goal is not to deliver direct information about the events, but rather to immerse the audience in a simulated experience of them. As the narrative gradually unfolds, it presents events as still unresolved, creating the impression of sharing a lived experience of them. To enhance this immersive effect, the narrator often includes seemingly superfluous details, which serve to heighten the sense of realism and postpone the narrative resolution.

Although these two prototypes may appear to be fundamentally opposed, or even contradictory in their underlying principles, they are better understood as representing the two ends of a continuum. Along this spectrum, any narrative—whether factual or fictional—can be positioned according to its proximity to one pole or the other. In practice, the

effectiveness of immersion depends on a certain degree of intelligibility within the scene; without it, the reader risks becoming disoriented in an incoherent stream of information. For instance, as Marie Vanoost has shown, literary journalism relies on “the close interaction between the two functions of narrative, the intriguing and the configuring”—the second term referring to the way in which the narrative gives meaning to the event being recounted:

Moreover, the role each function plays—or the way they are used—also varies, and not necessarily as one might expect. A narrative that largely uses temporary uncertainties to recreate a form of experience can nonetheless incline towards concordance through the way it shapes the events, even in its headline and its very first sentences. A very informative narrative about a rather dry topic such as science can be organized according to a plot and play on narrative tension. A narrative about a most outrageous story can allow some kind of nuance by respecting the complexity of people and life. (Vanoost 2013, 94)

Besides, as stated by Monika Fludernik, “experientiality includes this sense of moving with time, of the now of experience, but this almost static level of temporal experience is supplemented by more dynamic and evaluative factors” (1996, 29). Consequently, the reader can expect that the resolution will display some meaningful picture of the story as a whole, while simultaneously accepting the “delays” and “concealment of information” as an exciting challenge.

Nevertheless, a clear distinction must be made between a narrative primarily oriented toward configuring knowledge and one that emphasizes its mimetic dimension. In the former, the narrator seeks to guide the narratee as efficiently as possible toward the point of the story, minimizing interpretive

effort. In the latter, by contrast, the aim is to heighten discursive tension in order to engage and entertain the audience.

In the case of a novel, one could easily alleviate the curiosity of the audience by skipping ahead to the final pages, yet readers typically refrain from doing so, preferring instead to follow the rules of the narrative game—rules that entail adhering to a more or less linear progression through the story. Even once the story has concluded, the audience of a mimetic narrative may find satisfaction in an ambiguous ending, since the goal of the representation was not to provide a definitive explanation or to deliver a clear-cut message, but rather to shape an experiential understanding—one that elicits cathartic anxiety, empathy, or ethical perplexity. Mimetic narratives are typically open to an ongoing and potentially infinite process of interpretation, as they are deliberately crafted with this openness in mind. The audience, in turn, perceives this intention as relevant within the framework of the communicative exchange.

Relevance theory adapted to mimetic narratives

Based on the principles I have outlined, we can rephrase the rules governing the discursive cooperation when a mimetic narrative is in play. In this case, the guiding principles of the interaction seem to systematically contradict the cooperative principles outlined by Grice:

- *Quantity*: provide insufficient information concerning the story or, conversely, give an overabundance of information, so that your audience has to guess what is happening or what will happen next.
- *Relation*: be relevant by increasing the processing effort of the audience; make inferences concerning the story as difficult as possible to process, at least until the last sentences of your narrative.

- *Manner*: avoid clarity, be overly prolix, be disordered, or try, by any means, to be obscure and ambiguous.

In fiction in general, but even more so in popular fiction such as fantasy or science fiction, there may also be an inverted “maxim of quality” that could be rephrased as follows:

- *Quality*: tell, as if it were true, what you know to be false, impossible, incredible, or even unthinkable.

Concerning the guiding principles underlying the relevance theory outlined by Sperber and Wilson, we can also redefine the most important parameter:

- Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort required, the more relevant the narrative will be. The point of the story (i.e., its implied meaning) should never be easy to find, and if there is one, it should remain at least partially ambiguous. By doing so, the story is open to a plurality of interpretations.

When the point of a story is too obvious, it loses its complexity, which reduces its existential or ethical interest. This is frequently due either to a lack of narrative skill on the part of the author or to the fact that the story functions primarily in the service of a higher-level discourse—such as an educational fable, a politically motivated argument, or propaganda. In such cases, the overtness of the message signals a deviation from the conventions of mimetic storytelling, and this departure is meaningful only insofar as the narrative is subordinated to another, more dominant discursive purpose.⁹

⁹ On the hierarchy of prototypical heterogeneous sequences such as argumentation, explication, or narration, see Adam (1997). Here I consider *configurational narratives* as a kind of “narrative explication,” where explicative function dominates.

Or course, if all these rewritten principles were applied at the same time, we would end up with something unreadable—*Finnegans Wake* rather than *Dubliners*. Nevertheless, we can consider that the occasional use of one or other of these inverted maxims, in a narrative that is otherwise relatively readable, has the effect of increasing the story's interest, rather than undermining the cooperative principle that governs mimetic narratives.

I must acknowledge that some scholars have attempted to apply the standard version of Relevance Theory to account for the functioning of narrative suspense. However, this approach requires interpreting suspense as a retrospective effect—an interpretation that appears quite implausible given the fundamentally forward-oriented, teleological nature of this aesthetic experience. This is, notably, the explanation proposed by Seiji Uchida:

To put the reader in a state of suspense means to increase his or her processing effort. However, given the presumption of relevance, no unjustifiable effort should be demanded: there should be contextual effects to offset the processing effort though they might be a delay in the availability of these effects. [...] This effect would often be retroactive [...]: when readers find the answer and are set free from the state of suspense, they will return to the point where they initially entered suspense and interpret the text again in the light of the newly obtained perspective. (Uchida 1998, 164)

Uchida concedes that suspense increases the “processing effort,” but in order to save the relevance of this apparently uncooperative way of telling a story, he postulates that “no unjustifiable effort should be demanded,” that suspense is not “long lasting,” and that, eventually, the reader will be rewarded by a retroactive “contextual effect.” By contrast, I

argue that suspense need not serve any purpose beyond the pleasurable anxiety it elicits, nor does it require resolution in order to satisfy the audience. To experience suspense, one must be immersed in the unfolding of an unpredictable sequence of events—an immersion that inevitably heightens the audience's processing effort—and the narrative representation must delay the outcome through a process of *suspension*, which is precisely what defines the identity of this aesthetic effect.

Suspense, by its very nature, is fundamentally proactive rather than retroactive; it need not acquire meaning at a later stage of the reading. In adventure narratives, for instance, even when the outcome appears predictable—such as the hero's inevitable triumph—we still take pleasure in being challenged by a deliberately intricate narrative structure. As illustrated by my artificial example, even without knowing the mother's fate by the story's end, we can still appreciate the craftsmanship of a narration designed to surprise us with an open-ended conclusion. In more sophisticated mimetic narratives, suspense is not merely a device to toy with the audience—it functions more deeply as a means of reproducing the temporal orientation of unresolved experiences in real life. In doing so, it offers a way to engage with and reflect upon this inescapable aspect of the human condition.

Monika Fludernik (1996) identifies experientiality as an essential component of narrativity. Based on this more restrictive definition—which excludes what I have referred to as informative narratives—she understandably concludes that “historical writing and action reports are not actually narrative in the fullest sense” (1996, 26). In my own approach, I would argue that “mimetic narratives” should be regarded as a form of seemingly “uncooperative discourse” when contrasted with informative narratives. However, they remain cooperative in a different sense, provided we acknowledge that they operate according to distinct conventions—similar

to those governing jokes or role-playing games. Such narratives engage in a playful and often deliberately deceptive use of language, a phenomenon Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1999) aptly describes as an “intended playful pretense.”

To summarize, on the one hand, if we want to apply relevance theory to mimetic narratives, we should accept that general principles underlying relevance theory must be reset in order to correspond to the purpose of these specific “intentional-communicative artefacts” (Currie 2010, xvii). On another hand, I think it would be reductive to restrict all kinds of narrative representation to the purposes guiding mimetic narratives. There are also informative narratives that mostly obey the ordinary rules defined by relevance theory. For example, when a witness is interrogated by a judge, not only the truthfulness of his story is crucial, but also the strict respect of all Gricean maxims. Even implicit communication or irony should be avoided, as well as any rhetorical strategies that would increase the processing effort of the addressee. Otherwise, it could be assumed that the judge might react strongly and find ways to regulate the interaction by using their authority.

An interesting instance of uncooperative testimony appears in Émile Gaboriau’s novel *The Widow Lerouge*. In the scene in question, Judge Daburon is about to receive vital information concerning the murder by Madame Lerouge’s husband. At the outset, the judge imposes explicit constraints on the unfolding discourse.

“In what intrigues did your wife mingle?” asked he. “Go on, my friend, tell me everything exactly; here, you know, we must have not only the truth, but the whole truth.”¹⁰

¹⁰ This translation has no pagination. It was published on April 12, 2006, on the website of the Project Gutenberg in the form of an EBook (#3802): URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3802/3802-h/3802-h.htm#link2HCH0018>

Unfortunately, Monsieur Lerouge proves to be a terrible witness because, despite his best efforts, he cannot give his testimony in the manner expected of him. He tells his story “with difficulty, laboriously unscrambling his recollections,” and very often “the worthy fellow” appears “lost in the midst of his recollections.” The magistrate is constantly obliged “to bring him back into the right path,” and is said to be “boiling over,” and moving “impatiently in his chair,” constantly saying to M. Lerouge, “Go on, go on.” At the end of his statement, the judge even replies to another of M. Lerouge’s digressions with “a heavy blow of his fist on the table.”

If we are to admit that an ideal testimony in front of a judge should produce a story that helps clarify the past, or, in Ricoeurian words, that the narrative should be a configuration of information giving shape to a coherent story, we must consider that M. Lerouge’s speech act is unsuccessful, because his narrative produces unintentional tension in the interaction instead of resolving it. But as this story is embedded in a fiction, it achieves the purpose of this mimetic narrative, and its “relevance” appears at a second level of interpretation. The difficulties experienced by the judge appear intentional to the reader, because they are the direct consequences of the plot designed by an implied author. Therefore, all the reactions affecting the judge can be understood as a diffracted mirror of the reader’s experience, but the crucial difference lies in the connotation of the emotions. We read that

M. Daburon was confounded. Since the beginning of this sad affair, he had encountered surprise after surprise. Scarcely had he got his ideas in order on one point, when all his attention was directed to another. He felt himself utterly routed. What was he about to learn now?

This erratic progression through the narrative—centered on the fundamental question, “What was he about to learn

now?”—can be experienced as either frustrating or pleasurable. What likely determines the affective tonality of this experience is the key to distinguishing between the perspective of a judge and that of a reader of fiction—between what counts as relevance in an informative narrative and what constitutes relevance in a mimetic one.

To Intrigue or to Explain? How to Convey 2 What Happened*

In this chapter, a key argument will be that narrative immersion can be attained only at the cost of a more global understanding of a chain of events, not only because temporal immersion requires the reader to remain within the unfolding act of reading, but also because *informing* and *intriguing* function as opposing discursive strategies.¹¹ Drawing on articles referring to a plane crash found in daily newspapers and magazines, I will show that news stories usually favor the informative function, but the genre of literary journalism can sometimes emulate the immersive qualities of mimetic narratives. We will also see that when an event cannot be fully recounted, information undergoes a process of serialization, giving rise to what will be termed a “natural plot.” In such

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¹¹ As Marie Vanoost has shown (2013), in “narrative journalism,” most narratives blend the two functions, but the respective textual manifestations of the two prototypes remain locally discernable.

cases, narrative tension, twists, and resolution may become features of a series of informative texts, yet they stem from the unfolding properties of the event itself rather than from deliberate discursive strategies.

Experiential storytelling versus report: opposite paradigms for narrativity?

Peter Brooks has described emplotment as the art of intentionally deferring the resolution of an uncertainty, thus linking plot dynamics to a “system of energy”:

Desire is the wish for the end, for fulfillment, but fulfillment must be delayed so that we can understand it in relation to origin and the desire itself. [...] Because it concerns ends in relation to beginnings and the forces that animate the middle between, Freud’s model is suggestive of what a reader engages when he responds to plot. It images that engagement as essentially dynamic, an interaction with a system of energy which the reader activates. (Brooks 1984, 111–12)

Plot dynamics as outlined by Brooks has obviously little to do with the way historians or journalists write about past or actual events. The experiential nature of fiction also seems incompatible with historiography, as Monika Fludernik advocates:

I here argue the *narrativity is a function of narrative texts and centers on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature*. This definition divides the traditional area of inquiry (i.e., narratives) along unexpected lines, claiming narrativity for natural narratives (the term *text* is therefore employed in a structuralist sense) as well as drama and film (narrative is therefore a deep structural concept and is not

restricted to prose and epic verse). On the other hand, the definition tentatively excludes historical writing from the central realm of prototypical narrativity, namely to the extent that historiography consists in a mere calibration of events which are then reported as historical facts. (Fludernik 1996, 26)

Yet, as this quote asserts, the difference might not be between fiction and nonfiction, since natural narratives are often experiential, but rather between different ways of organizing narrative forms. When dealing with “natural narratives,” two paradigms can be opposed: “experiential conversational storytelling” (1996: 57) and “narrative report.”

Much narrative does not develop into a proper “story” but simply provides a summary of the speaker’s doings of certain events or developments. In so far as this type of narration can be analyzed in terms of “narrative clauses” (Labov 1972), it is necessarily *narrative*. However, since no experiential quality can be attributed to the subject matter of the narrative (which is, precisely, a report and not a *story*), the discourse structure and narrative patterns observable in narrative reports are demonstrably different from those in experiential narrative. (Fludernik 1996, 58)

While Fludernik regards “mimetic” representations (1996: 35–38) as the primary prototype for narrativity, we may hypothesize that “narrative reports”—like historiography or conventional news stories—belong to a distinct class of narratives, one shaped by their informational function and by the specific conditions of their production and circulation, as suggested here:

Report is used to summarize or present the facts of the case, to provide *information*. Report is predicated on

second-hand experience or on a summary of first-hand experience rendered non-experientially. It therefore fully correlates with objectivity, distance, and the “point” of a story. (Fludernik 1996, 71)

I propose to nuance Fludernik’s position and to acknowledge that “mimetic” representations should not be considered as the only prototype for narrativity. Many news stories, and most historical books, are based on second-hand experiences, on testimonies gathered by news agencies or accessed through official sources. In these genres, events are usually told in an informative and objective way, and they try to make sense of what happened by conferring a point to the story. In addition, I think that a dual model might help to better understand in what sense experiential narratives can be considered mimetic, and how they supplement their narrative counterparts by bringing other forms of understandings to the audience.

Moreover, as Fludernik suggests, the distinction between experiential and informational narratives should not be conflated with the opposition between fictional and factual discourse. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer argues, narratives that mobilize “immersive simulationist processes” (2015, 246) do not *fictionalize* the events depicted, even though fiction can push the power of immersion further than a factual narrative:

The reason for this is that when we read a factual narrative, we are supposed to engage in a critical “monitoring” activity regarding the truth value of the narratively transmitted content. We do not need to have such scruples in fiction, since by definition the question of referential truth is bracketed there. (Schaeffer 2015, 246).

As Marie Vanoost has shown, literary journalism can be written without necessarily sacrificing the journalistic

standards of accuracy, because they involve long inquiries, the gathering of factual evidence, and cross-checked interviews with firsthand witnesses. Vanoost shows that “journalistic narratives are still journalism: their mission is to inform—even if it is in a different way, through experience” (Vanoost 2013). Again, even though the discursive features seem closer to the prototype of mimetic narratives usually associated with fiction, it is not necessarily because they involve a process of fictionalization, but because their organization obeys the same laws as any immersive and intriguing narrative. We see here the necessity of not reducing the complexity of a factual or fictional narrative by attaching it *by essence* to a single prototype of narrativity. Even literary fiction can sometimes blend the same techniques used in news reporting or historiography. Indeed, sometimes we read novels to obtain more information about a society or a historical period that provides the frame for the fictional events, and many authors like to play the role of amateur sociologist or historian when commenting on the storyworld of their novels, sometimes with more detail than the reader would consider necessary.

It therefore seems to me more productive to single out two prototypes of narrativity, which form two extreme poles between which factual and fictional narratives are distributed, depending on whether their main task is to provide a simulated experience by immersing the audience in the storyworld, or to explain the events by associating them with broader interpretative frameworks and objective data. The first category can be described as the pole of the *mimetic narrative*, thus emphasizing the importance of immersion, imagination, emplotment, and the focus on a simulated experience. The second category could be called the *informative narrative*, this expression referring to an inverse prototype, consisting in configuring events to increase their intelligibility and objectivity. I hope to demonstrate the productivity

of having two paradigms of narrativity instead of one in the analytical part of this chapter, which will highlight the existence of forms of narration of the same type of event obeying totally different textualization procedures in connection with divergent discursive functions.

I propose to narrow the use of the terms *plot* and *emplotment* to mimetic narratives, because in the aftermath of the discussion opened by White (2010) and Ricoeur (1984), I think that these concepts have lost their distinctiveness and referential relevance.¹² In French, for instance, “intrigue” and “plot” are one and the same thing, thus, “to intrigue” or “be intrigued” appear as mere derivations from the process of emplotment (*mise en intrigue*). Even for the English-speaking community, it must be said that the fact that White (2010) used the word *plot* to refer to the structure of historical writing was first seen as a provocation. Besides, several narratologists over the years have acknowledged that *plot*, like the French concept *intrigue*, has something to do with the building of narrative tension, with the arousal of suspense or curiosity. As outlined by the classical definition by R. S. Crane, a rhetorical definition of the “form of the plot” must include its distinctive “working of power” (Crane [1952] 2009, 132). More recently, from a cognitive perspective, Hilary Dannenberg described this power as the capacity to elicit the “cognitive desire” to transform a “matrix of possibilities” into a more stable “configuration” (Dannenberg 2008, 13).

So, obviously, when a narrative is configured to inform an impatient audience, it is too cooperative to elicit this kind of desire. Accordingly, the restrictive definition I give to *plot* is meant to highlight that the specific function of emplotment is not to provide meaning or to configure a chaotic experience of time. On the contrary, it seems that

¹² For a more detailed discussion of Ricoeur’s concept of plot and configuration, see Baroni (2010).

the most salient quality of a mimetic narrative is its great rhetorical efforts to postpone (sometimes permanently) the disclosure of the meaning of a narrative situation, its function being rather to intrigue. With this device, the reader is placed at the heart of an experience captured in the uncertain course of its completion.

How to deal with a plane crash

The following account of a plane crash that occurred in Iran can be found in the *Los Angeles Times* of January 8, 2020:

170 Killed in Jet Crash, Iran TV Says

The Ukrainian plane that went down near the Tehran airport is suspected to have had mechanical problems.

STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

TEHRAN—A Ukrainian airplane carrying at least 170 people crashed Wednesday shortly after takeoff from Tehran's main airport, killing all on board, state TV reported.

The plane had taken off from Imam Khomeini International Airport, the report said. The crash is suspected to have been caused by mechanical issues, it added, without elaborating.

An investigation team was at the site of the crash on the southwestern outskirts of Tehran, civil aviation spokesman Reza Jafarzadeh said.

"After taking off from Imam Khomeini International Airport, it crashed between Parand and Shahriar," Jafarzadeh said.

"An investigation team from the national aviation department was dispatched to the location after the news was announced."

State TV earlier said there were 180 passengers and crew aboard. The discrepancy could not be immediately reconciled.

Flight data from the airport showed a Ukrainian 737-800 flown by Ukraine International Airlines took off Wednesday morning, then stopped sending data almost immediately afterward, according to website FlightRadar24. The airline did not respond to a request for comment.

A photo later published by Iran's state-run IRNA news agency showed rescue officials in a farm field, with what appeared to be pieces of the aircraft nearby.

The crash came hours after Iran launched a ballistic missile attack targeting two bases in

Iraq housing U.S. forces in retaliation for the killing of Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

The Boeing 737-800 is a very common single-aisle, twin-engine jetliner used for short- to medium-range flights. Thousands of the planes are used by airlines around the world. Introduced in the late 1990s, it is an older model than the Boeing 737 MAX, which has been grounded for nearly 10 months after two deadly crashes. Boeing has said the 737 Max is quieter and more fuel efficient than the older 737 NG.

A number of 737-800 aircraft have been involved in deadly accidents over the years. In March 2016, a Fly-Dubai 737-800 crashed while trying to land at Rostov-on-Don airport in Russia, killing 62 on board. A flight from Dubai, operated by Air India Express, crashed in May 2010 while trying to

land in Mangalore, India, killing more than 150 on board.

In November, the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board recommended that part of the plane's engine be redesigned to prevent parts from coming loose. The NTSB's recommendation came after a woman on a Southwest Airlines flight in 2018 was partially suc-

ked out of the plane's window and died. The NTSB found that a fan blade on an engine broke off and triggered the incident.

Chicago-based Boeing Co. was "aware of the media reports out of Iran and we are gathering more information," spokesman Michael Friedman said.

Boeing, like other airline manufacturers, typically assists

in crash investigations. However, that effort in this case could be affected by the U.S. sanctions in place against Iran since President Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018.

Times staff writer Samantha Masunaga contributed to this report

If we look at the title and subtitle, we see that the number of victims and the possible cause of the accident are the main elements of information, thus they are presented first, while in a mimetic narrative, their unveiling would probably be deferred to build curiosity or suspense. As explained by Alan Bell, the flux of information induces this sort of anti-chronological order in the text: "It is a common principle of news writing that it is not the activity or the process which takes priority but the outcome. It is this principle which enables news stories to be updated day after day or hour by hour. If there is a new outcome to lead with, the previous action can drop down in the story" (Bell 1995, 312). Moreover, when reading such an article, we can see several features typical of the informative narrative. First of all, we note that no effort has been made to restore the natural order of events. If we use the technique introduced by Genette (1980, 37), we can indicate with more or less accuracy the order of narrative propositions with letters, while the order of the events will be indicated with numbers. This would result in the following pattern:

A11 - B8 - C13 - D11 - E13 - F8 - G9 - H10 - I12 - J7 -
K6 - L2 - M1 - N3 - O4 - P5 - Q14

The chronology of the events mentioned explicitly in the text can be restituted as follows: (1) May 2010, a Boeing 737-800 crashes in India; (2) March 2016, a Boeing 737-800 crashes in Russia; (3) 2018, a woman is partially sucked out of a Boeing 737-800 and dies; (4) NTSB finds that a fan blade of an engine is the cause of the accident; (5) November 2019, the NTSB recommends a redesign of Boeing 737-800 engines; (6) General Qassem Suleimani is killed; (7) Iran launches ballistic missiles in retaliation; (8) a Ukrainian plane takes off from Tehran's main airport; (9) the plane stops sending data; (10) the plane does not respond; (11) the plane crashes; (12) rescue officials are in a farm field; (13) investigation team is at the site of the crash; (14) Boeing team may not be authorized to assist the investigation.

What appears to be a chaotic way of configuring narrative information is not actually so, since the order is not intended to plunge the reader into the midst of the event but to provide to a time-short audience the most important and recent information first, followed by associated developments based on the search of causal chains, similarities with related events, and anticipation of possible consequences. Genette could have called the principle guiding several portions of this text (especially propositions L-M-N-O-P) a "syllepsis":

Having christened the anachronies by retrospection and anticipation *analepses* and *prolepses*, we could give the name *syllepses* (the fact of taking together)—*temporal* or other—to those anachronic groupings governed by one or another kinship (spatial, temporal, or other) [...]. Thematic syllepsis governs in the classical episodic novel with its numerous insertions of "stories," justified by revelations of analogy or contrast. (Genette 1980, 85n)

At this stage of the investigation, since the origin of the crash remains impossible to determine with certainty,

the syllepsis allows the journalist to link this tragedy with a wider range of similar events, thus extending the potential for meaning. We can see also the importance of mentioning sources of information and calendar references, including indications of months or years. An objective grasp of time thus prevails over subjective projections towards past and future, as described by phenomenology (Ricoeur 1984). Another typical characteristic of informative narrative is the absence of singular agents, idiosyncratic descriptions, proper names, and so on. The passengers and crew of the plane are only described as casualties, and the victim sucked out in the 2018 accident is simply referred to as “a woman.” The only names provided are not actors in the event but commentators or spokespersons, such as Reza Jafarzadeh or Michael Friedman. There are, therefore, no vectors of immersion,¹³ and readers are not encouraged to adopt the perspective of the victims or of a witness of the crash. Most importantly, the building of an explanation comes from the reconfiguration of what first appears as an unpredictable and contingent event but which is now connected with several other similar events and implicit possible causes.

We see here that the discursive function of such an informative narrative is very different from the experiential dynamics of a mimetic narrative. To give a striking example of how a journalist could cover a similar event from the opposite end of the spectrum, I shall briefly comment on a famous case of literary journalism: “The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy” by Michael Paterniti, first published in *Esquire* on July 1, 2000, which covers the crash of SR111 off the coast of Halifax on September 2, 1998. In the first part of the article, the reader is placed in the position of a witness hearing the crash, from the perspective of the inhabitants of Peggy’s Cove:

¹³ On the notion of “vector of immersion,” see Schaeffer (2010).

Yes, something terrible was moving this way. There was a low ceiling of clouds, an intense, creeping darkness, that electrical taste. By the lighthouse, if you had been standing beneath the revolving green light on that early-September night, in that plague of clouds, you would have heard the horrible grinding sound of some wounded winged creature, listened to it trail out to sea as it came screeching down from the heavens, down through molecule and current, until everything went silent. (Paterniti 2000, 94)

The spatial setting is presented carefully, with descriptions of the foggy night, the village, and the lighthouse, the text being also illustrated with photographs. Instead of using calendar time (the crash happened on September 2, 1998), the author recounts the moment of the crash by anchoring the description in a deictic center situated in the storyworld. The text begins with apparently contradictory information: "It was summer; it was winter" (Paterniti 2000, 94). Only later, a more precise account of the time frame is given when we read that the events are situated in "late summer," and more precisely on an "early September night." Yet the exact date is not relevant, because what matters here is the subjective feeling of the witnesses, an impression that may blur the difference between a cloudy summer night and the prefiguration of winter. Duration is also rendered in great detail when the sound of the crash is heard by the witnesses: "Seconds passed, disintegrating time [...] and then, suddenly, an explosion of seismic strength rocked the houses of Peggy's Cove. One fisherman thought it was a bomb; another was certain the End had arrived" (Paterniti 2000, 94). We read here the reactions of two singular characters. Both are temporarily giving a false interpretation of the sound; instead of trying to be as informative as possible, the journalist is exploring the confusion of those who were amid the events.

Later, the narrative moves back in time, not through the figure of a syllepsis, but through the process of a dramatized analepsis, bringing us back to a moment before the plane took off and following the path of several particular passengers. Later, Paterniti offers a reconstruction of the accident from the inside, first from the perspective of the pilots, whose conversations have been preserved in recordings. In this part, Paterniti uses the technique of free indirect discourse to give direct access to the perceptions and thoughts of the pilot:

So now here they were, in their corridor, talking, Urs and his copilot, Stephan. About their kids; both had three. About the evening's onboard dinner. It was an hour into the flight, the plane soaring on autopilot, the engine a quiet drone beneath the noise in the main cabin, the last lights of New England shimmering out the west side of the aircraft, and suddenly there was a tickling smell, rising from somewhere into the cockpit, an ominous wreathing of—really, how could it be?—smoke. (Paterniti 2000, 95)

I don't need to offer a full account of the literary techniques that are being used to increase the experiential side of the narrative, but we see here the importance of mentioning the first names of the pilot and copilot, as well as idiosyncratic biographical elements, such as the number of children. Earlier in the text, we even get a detailed physical description of the pilot. We can also note the use of the deictics "now here" attached to the coordinates of the storyworld, which is another obvious hint of an experiential form of storytelling, a phenomenon labeled in cognitive linguistics as "deictic shift" (Duchan, Bruder, and Hewitt 1995). This effect is combined here with the use of free indirect speech ("really? How could it be?"), used to describe the pilot's thoughts just as the first signs of the drama are perceived.

Of course, such a detailed reconstitution necessitates a long and complex investigation that goes beyond what is usually accessible to journalists working on a daily newspaper. It is worth noting here that the article was published in a monthly magazine almost two years after the crash.¹⁴ Yet the existence of such narrative techniques in literary journalism attests that prototypical forms of emplotment can be found in nonfiction. Even if a reader may find a reconstruction with this level of detail incredible, it should be considered as “incredible but true,” as expressed in this comment found on the blog of another journalist:

The thing that struck me when I first read Paterniti’s piece was how surreal it seems; it’s hard to believe something this horrible could have happened, or that Paterniti was able to gather so many details to write a vivid and true account. Remember, this reconstruction isn’t fictionalized at all; Paterniti found out all of the details he used in the article. To me, that level of reporting is just astounding. (Ukura 2008)

Even if the process of writing such narrative supposes some literary skill and a great deal of investigation, we see that mimetic nonfiction can be as immersive as fiction. In this case, emplotment functions to immerse the reader in the past instead of trying to explain or make sense of what happened through causal explanations, analogies, or generalizations. The idea is rather to get as close as possible to the original experience of this disturbing event, to get a sense of what it was to be truly involved in such a tragedy, whether as

¹⁴ However, it should be noted that mild forms of dramatization and emplotment can also be traced in daily newspapers, or even in television news, when journalists only have a couple of hours before broadcasting their reports. For an analysis of the “dramatization” of a plane crash by television news, see Merminod (2018).

a witness, a victim, or a relative of those who went missing that day. As explained by Kibédi Varga:

How can we characterize the knowledge that the narrative seems to be called upon to convey? It is not scientific knowledge in the strict and positivist sense of the term, but rather human knowledge, an accumulation and extension of the reader's experiences: a broadened and confirmed experience. (Varga 1989, 73)

Even though we know the outcome, when immersed in the narrated time, we momentarily occupy a position where the future is still open. We are invited to share the experience of characters wondering about the sound they hear in the middle of the night, or what the "tickling smell" rising into the cockpit is. The fact that readers know more than what is understood by the characters only increases the suspense of the scene, because, as Hitchcock explained with the example of the ticking bomb, anticipating danger triggers the impossible wish to warn the victims. Consequently, this narrative is configured through a process of emplotment: not only does it immerse the audience in the storyworld, but it arouses narrative interest by inducing narrative tension until an inescapable, tragic resolution.

It must be said that the contrast between these opposed configurations does not preclude certain convergences or overlaps. First, both can be considered as narratives because they refer to a sequence of dramatic events connected in time, thus satisfying the basic definition of "narrativehood" outlined by Prince (2008). In their own contexts, each narrative has a high degree of "narrativeness," considering the specific interests of their respective audiences: one audience is in a hurry and needs to be informed and make sense of

eventful situations¹⁵ that have happened recently; the other audience is more detached but wishes to have an experiential understanding of an event that is more distant but nevertheless moving.

Second, even though Paterniti's narrative is far removed from the configuration of an informative narrative, through his detailed account of what happened before, during, and after the tragedy, the reader learns a great deal about the cause of the crash, the reaction of the crew, and the investigation that took place after the accident. In contrast, an informative narrative found in a daily newspaper almost inevitably involves some kind of cliffhanger, because writers and their readers are both immersed in the actuality of the world and therefore, despite the efforts of the journalists, news reports can only be partially told. The unresolved developments of the narrative published in the *LA Times* lies in the fragile nature of the proposed configuration, since new explanations and new consequences can always be later associated with the event. Discordance is actually even legible in the text through the uncertainties expressed by the author, who is cautious when mentioning possible causes or consequences:

- “The crash *is suspected* to have been caused by mechanical issues.”
- “However, that effort in this case *could be* affected by the U.S. sanctions in place against Iran.”

Here, we see that news reports cannot present events with the same certitude as fiction, and this lack of assertiveness is the most salient stylistic difference between factual and fictional discourses, since the former is always dependent on external sources of information. Another form of discordance

¹⁵ On “eventfulness,” see Hühn (2016).

can be read in the body of the article when the journalist recalls that “the crash came hours after Iran launched a ballistic missile attack targeting bases in Iraq housing U.S. forces.” By mentioning this apparently unrelated fact—which can be considered as another syllepsis—the journalist implies that, despite the officially given explanation, the coincidence is too strange not to be mentioned. Besides, in a later development, this lead will prove to be fruitful.

So, on the basis of these discernible discordances, we see that the narrative is not exclusively informative but somehow also intriguing: it is oriented toward a possible continuation and fuels the “cognitive desire” for a resolution. According to Bell’s explanation, the flux associated with the serialization of information when media refer to ongoing events explains why the most recent piece of information is usually given first. As such, titles become elements for a progression of a different kind, a progression that takes place on an intertextual level. In an illustration of this and by following the headlines of the *LA Times* over the days that followed, it is easy to see how the story was serialized:

- Wednesday, January 8, 2020. *170 killed in jet crash, Iran TV says* (A3)
- Thursday, January 9, 2020. *Plane crash inquiry* (A2)
- Friday, January 10, 2020. *Iran probably downed jet by accident, officials say* (front page)

Note that practically the same story line could be found in other newspapers and that we often switch from one source of information to the next when following the same story. Indeed, if we read, for instance, the titles of the *New York Post*, the profile of the plot is quite similar, though it is more salient because the journalists are less cautious when reporting events and readily dramatize the inquiry:

- Wednesday, January 8, 2020. *Fatal Ukraine-jet crash in Tehran*

- Thursday, January 9, 2020. *Fatal crash's "black" cloud. Iran coy on terror amid jet-box secret*
- Friday, January 10, 2020. *Iran shot down civilians. 176 killed by "missile mistake"*

In this case, the plot of the crash accident takes the classic form of a detective story: first there is a mysterious unexplained accident followed by an investigation and the surprise confession of the person responsible, who can no longer hide the "mistake" that led to the tragedy. Here we have all elements required for the dynamic definition of a plot, with its characteristic increase in narrative tension and progression toward a congruent resolution. But we might consider that the plot we are dealing with is *natural*, because the progression was not configured by a single intentional artifact but by an inchoate and collective form of narrativity, the sequence emerging from an aggregation of disseminated episodes subject to the unpredictable development of a real investigation.¹⁶

In summary, we have discussed three distinctive cases, based on the two prototypes outlined before:

1. *Mimetic narrative*: This case is exemplified by "The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy," where the author wants to provide readers with an experiential understanding of an event; even though it is not fiction, it is based on a form of emplotment.
2. *Informative narrative*:
 - a. The first case is the narrative report covering the crash of the Ukrainian jet in Iran, which does not offer a form of emplotment because its function is

¹⁶ Note that natural plots formed by serialized information are closely related to the prototype of "small stories" as discussed by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008). This form of narrativity is fragmentary, interactional, and collective. Although it refers to past stories, it is more concerned with current and future developments of an event than with reconstructing what has already happened.

mostly to inform readers and make sense of a disruptive event.

- b. The second case relates to the serialization of several informative narratives (in this case, about the same crash in Iran), which results from the inscription of these texts into the “natural plot” that emerges as journalists cover an ongoing unresolved event.

We can highlight some specificities of natural plots when compared to intentional forms of emplotment. In this case, as we are dealing with collective events, the experiential nature of the plot is tempered, because it mostly involves the curiosity of the audience, not that of a personified character such as an investigator. Furthermore, on the production side, the notion that informative narratives become intriguing *despite* the efforts made by the writers to avoid incompleteness and not because they follow an intentional discursive strategy must be reassessed. Indeed, when information is limited or when an event is still ongoing, it is impossible to provide a full explanation or tell a full story; here, incompleteness is transformed into a cliffhanger, leading to possible, yet unpredictable, twists and revelations. Consequently, except in cases when some agents orchestrate the retention and/or the divulgence of information, natural plots are generally unplanned, and they are also decentralized, because they can be told by an unspecified plurality of narrators confronted by the same sources and the same gaps of information. It must be added that this polyphony has been increased by new technologies providing fast and unrestricted access to data, while augmenting the plurality of channels through which to follow the progression of a story. This serialized form of information began to settle with the introduction of the news press, and from there, it has spread through the multiplication of

audiovisual and digital channels, giving birth to a “serialized mediatic experience.”¹⁷ A last, important feature of natural plot is the fact that the resolution is always temporary. For instance, although uncovering the true cause of the crash functioned as a closure in the *New York Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* provided some extensions to the narrative. Closer to Paterniti’s article, the *Los Angeles Times* provided, for instance, a retrospective account of the tragedy to give more flesh to the story, which was still resonating after its causes were revealed: On Saturday, January 11, 2020, a long article focused on the story of “newlyweds among dead in Iran crash,” with a photograph of the couple, thus accentuating (or paying tribute to) the pathos of the tragedy. The next day, it also covered the political consequences of the tragic mistake admitted to by the Iranian government.

- Sunday, January 12, 2020. *Ukrainian jet disaster revives street protests in Iran’s cities*. As Tehran admits the plane was shut down in what it called a mistake, a mood of national unity alters (front page)

We see here an aspect highlighted by Hayden White (2010) when he argued that even when recounting nonfiction, the teller can decide where the story began and where it ended, with this configuration transforming the meaning and shape of the story told. In the first article of the *Los Angeles Times*, it is suggested that the story may have begun in 2010, with the first crash of a Boeing 737-800, and four days later, as the responsibility of the Iranian government is implicated, readers understand that the story may not be completely over yet.

¹⁷ With regard to “serialized media narratives” in newspapers, most of my reflections are based on research in which I participated between 2005 and 2008, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and led by Françoise Revaz (SNSF No. 109950). For more information on this research, see, for example, Baroni, Pahud, and Revaz (2006).

Many versions of the same event can be creatively told, even when the tellers remain truthful to the information they can access at different times.

Imitating or remediating the discordance of life?

As we have seen, an informative narrative is very different from a mimetic narrative, because each prototype is meant to accomplish a different intention. In the terms used by Prince (2008), if both forms share “narrativehood,” their “narrativeness” is determined by different contextual factors. In Ricoeur’s words, for narratives situated closer to the informative pole, the aim is to make sense of a “discordant” situation, and therefore, the narrative must find and arrange elements of “concordance,” while the reconstitution of the natural order of the events or of their experiential nature remains secondary. For narratives situated closer to the mimetic pole, the aim is to provide the experiential reconstitution of an event, either past or invented, by virtue of the building of *emplotment*. And finally, when we are plunged into a natural plot, we are trying to make sense of an ongoing unresolved event, often by producing, reading, or exchanging informative, yet incomplete, narratives. In both cases, *emplotment* means to be caught in an unstable matrix of possibilities leading to the desire to reach a resolution point where a more stable configuration can be achieved, while in between, the characters belonging to the story or the audience of an intriguing narrative try to anticipate this resolution through the shaping of “probability designs” (Kukkonen 2020). In other words, if we consider with Ricoeur (1984) that *prefiguration* refers to the direct experience of an ongoing event, then:

- *informative narratives* are meant to remediate the discordance of prefiguration by inscribing the story in a more stable and meaningful configuration;

- *mimetic narratives* are meant to imitate the discordance of prefiguration by the process of emplotment, in order to give the audience an experiential understanding of the story.

The presence of narrative tension, suspense, curiosity, or surprise in serialized informative narratives is a good way to understand the kind of mimesis entailed by the process of intentional forms of emplotment, because it leads us to another duality:

- *natural plot* comes from the temporary or permanent impossibility of understanding the cause, nature, or consequences of real eventful situations;
- *intentional emplotment* comes from the elaboration of experiential narratives about eventful situations, and it is based, among other narrative techniques, on deferring, temporarily or permanently, the resolution of the plot. This narrative strategy fuels the “cognitive desire” of the audience for progress in the narrative, and, on the way, it provides a simulation of natural plots in which humans are intricately.¹⁸

In short, artificial forms of emplotment appear to imitate natural plots, but they transform the unescapable incompleteness of the dramatic events of our lives into an intentional feature of their discursive strategies.

¹⁸ For a phenomenological reflection on this entanglement in stories, see Schapp (2012).

Fact and Fiction: Pragmatic Constraints on Mimetic Nonfiction*

While graphic narratives were mostly used for fictional genres until the late 1970s, in recent decades, the explosion of graphic production in the fields of autobiography, narrative journalism, and didactic genres of all kinds has shown that this medium is well suited to nonfictional representations. Nevertheless, in a chapter with the evocative title “Graphic Memoir: Neither Fact nor Fiction,” Nancy Pedri has recently argued that many scholars tend to emphasize the fictionality of this genre:

Some argue that since the “formal grammar [of graphic narratives] rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous” (Chute 2008, 457) and thus “everything in [its] represented world is very overtly *as if*” (O’Neill 1994, 99, original emphasis), the graphic memoir’s proposed (and expected) factual portrayal of self is openly caught

* This chapter is a revised version of an article previously published and reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher. The original reference was: Baroni, Raphaël. 2021. “Of Mice as Men: A Transmedial Perspective on Fictionality,” *Narrative* 29.1: 91–113.

up in the cartoon image's constructed and interpretative quality. Cartooning, the argument goes, renders overt the inevitable subjective register of self-representation, openly operating under the pretense that all that is presented was "transformed through somebody's eye and hand" (Wolk 2007, 118). Although much can be said to weaken claims that fictionality is inherent to the medium of comics, these readings serve to illustrate the complex reading demands born from complementing the fidelity constraint with more general interests in storytelling. (2013, 129)

To challenge this so-called inherent fictionality of graphic narratives, I will begin by reconsidering the opposition between nonfictional and fictional representation from a pragmatic and transmedial perspective, which will lead me to claim that no medium can be considered inherently non-fictional or fictional.

In order to support this view, I will discuss photography, a medium often considered the most factual of all, and I will compare it with verbal and graphic forms of representation. If we base our concept of fictionality on a pragmatic definition, there is no reason to believe that some media should be considered more fictional than others. Yet, I will show that the medium parameter is not irrelevant when discussing the fidelity of the representation, because some aspects of a fact are more "mediagenic" than others, and the medium determines how the sender handles the illocutionary constraints of his/her nonfictional representation. I will discuss the famous case of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in order to reevaluate the most obvious aspects of a graphic narrative that could be wrongly interpreted as signposts of fictionality. We will see, among other things, why comics readers are not necessarily deceived or embarrassed by scenic reconstructions of lived experiences, and that the indirect representation of people

in the form of animals (e.g., mice, cats, pigs, and frogs in Spiegelman's *Maus*) does not appear to compromise the sincerity of the narrative.

For a transmedial conception of fictionality and nonfictionality

According to John R. Searle (1975), fiction should be viewed as an intended playful pretense, or, in the rhetorical definition shaped by James Phelan (2022), it can be described as intentionally communicated invention, projection, or other means of directing an audience to imagine nonactual states or sets of events. Yet, we must add another pragmatic condition to this rather broad rhetorical definition in order to reflect the specific use of invented elements in an assertive discourse. The fundamental difference between a serious assertion on one hand and a fictional assertion on the other hand is the fact that the former can be judged right or wrong, honest or deceitful, while the latter is not bound to this dichotomy, because it is not supposed to relate to any previously existing facts. Accordingly, Olivier Caïra considers that fiction is "a pragmatic instruction removing the constraints of cross-checking and isomorphism from the framework of a communication" (2011, 79). Thus, a fiction can be successful or unsuccessful in eliciting the aesthetic response it aims to elicit, but it is neither correct nor wrong, which is why, as we will see, a metaphor in a fiction does not have the same status as a metaphor embedded in a nonfictional representation.

If we consider that the difference between nonfictional and fictional artifacts is mostly pragmatic rather than formal, then the medium used to convey the message should not be considered a relevant parameter. According to this nonformal perspective, the illocutionary rules guiding the production of the message and the way the representation is

being framed and interpreted by the receiver¹⁹ are the most important aspects, and thus, it is perfectly possible to consider that any medium, if representational, can be used in a fictional or a nonfictional way. Moreover, we can also argue that signposts of fictionality can be found in any representation or utterance, but that they are not decisive elements when deciding the status of the artifact.

Therefore, photographs should not be considered as intrinsically nonfictional, even if they capture indexical images of real objects. A photograph by Cindy Sherman, for instance *Untitled Film Still #21*, may be clearly framed as an intended playful pretense, according to the expression coined by Searle (Figure 1). Meanwhile, an image taken by Robert Capa (Figure 2) would usually be classified as a visual testimony of some historical event captured in a “decisive” moment—to use the expression coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson—and this will have direct implications for the commitment of the photographer toward the authenticity of the document and the critical monitoring of the audience.

My claim is that the logical status of fictional discourse discussed by Searle can help us to discriminate between these two images, as long as we agree to treat visual documents as verbal assertions. According to Searle:

The identifying criterion for whether or not a text is a work of fiction must of necessity lie in the illocutionary intentions of the author. There is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction. What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes toward it, and that stance is a matter of the complex illocutionary intentions that the author has when he writes or otherwise composes it. (Searle 1975, 325)

¹⁹ On the notion of “framing” and its impact on the judgment of the fictionality of a narrative, see Korthals Altes (2014).



FIGURE 1 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21* (1978).²⁰



FIGURE 2 Robert Capa, *Falling Soldier* (1936).

²⁰ 2026 Cindy Sherman/ProLitteris, Zurich, Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth 2026, ProLitteris, Zurich.

In the case of the first image, the illocutionary intention of the author is clear, and nobody doubts whether the image displays the referent faithfully. The photograph by Cindy Sherman is immediately identified as a fiction, not only because of its use of dramatization techniques typical of Hollywood productions, such as a low angle shot combined with an off-screen glance, but also because of its title and the reputation of the artist. In this case, it is clear that this is not a true self-portrait of Cindy Sherman, because she is playing a role and pretending to be somebody else. Even the skyscrapers do not necessarily denote any particular city, because they refer more directly to the conventions of film noir and thus serve as the setting for a fictive action. With this example, if we frame something—even a photograph—as a fictive representation, it is easy to find some degrees of fictionality.

On the other hand, the fact that many people still doubt the authenticity of the *Falling Soldier* by Robert Capa only shows that the logic presiding over the interpretation of this image is completely different. According to Searle, when a sender presents their work as factual, at the same time they agree to comply with a complex network of pragmatic constraints:

- (1) The essential rule: the maker of an assertion commits to the truth of the expressed proposition.
- (2) The preparatory rule: the speaker must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition.
- (3) The expressed proposition must not be obviously true to both the speaker and the hearer in the context of the utterance.
- (4) The sincerity rule: the speaker commits to a belief in the truth of the expressed proposition. (Searle 1975, 322)

This image was first published in *Life* magazine on July 12, 1937, with a caption stating “Robert Capa’s camera catches a

Spanish soldier the instant he is dropped by a bullet through the head in front of Cordoba" (19). According to the photographer, who was risking his life in reporting the Spanish civil war, the anarchist soldier Federico Borrel Garcia died on September 5, 1936. Following its release, and because of other contextual information, the authenticity of the picture was hotly debated, with some arguing that it was only a reconstitution of the event, staged some thirty miles away from the place where it was supposed to have happened. When this kind of critical monitoring is activated, some viewers search for visual cues in order to decide whether they can trust the representation. In this case, the blurriness of the picture might be interpreted as a typical aspect of the real capturing of a decisive moment, but the quality of the composition and the perfect timing, even though accidental, might arouse suspicion. Or perhaps the graphic quality of the picture might just be a way of complying with the third illocutionary rule described by Searle, because it legitimates the relevance of showing this specific image, chosen among hundreds of others, in an article focusing on the "500,000 lives that the civil war had taken in one year" (1937, 19).

We see that the conclusive elements for viewing an image as nonfictional are based on the recognition of an intention, which in this case is made clear by the fact that Capa published his picture in a magazine that disseminates information about a historical event and that no mention whatsoever is made that the photograph might be a fictive or staged reconstitution. This first interpretive decision entails a second judgment concerning the possibility of seeing the photograph as deceitful. The judgment concerning this secondary point is led by the search for different cues, inside or outside the representation, that may question a photographer's commitment toward "the truth of the expressed proposition," thus eventually forcing them "to provide evidence for the truth."

To sum up, if we base the discussion on a pragmatic conception, I think it is safe to say that the distinction between fiction and nonfiction works the same way in all media. If some media over the years have been used more extensively than others to convey nonfictional representations, all can potentially be used as such. Even photos were not “born as factual,” as stated by Marie-Laure Ryan (2018, 49). If we look at the history of the medium, we can see that, for a long period of time, photographs were used as substitutes for painting, or as mere attractions. It was only later, when technological developments made cameras portable and more reactive, that journalists began using photography to capture decisive moments of historical events. If the technical aspect of the medium was essential to considering its product as nonfictional, we might have expected that the erosion of photography’s indexicality due to the replacement of film techniques by digital technologies would have changed the photograph’s functional role. In fact, it has increased our distrust of the so-called “facts” displayed by the images, but digital photographs continue to be widely used as documentation.²¹ It can also be noted that filmic representations have favored fiction over documentary, while using the same basic techniques found in analog photography: the indexical recording of pro-filmic elements staged in front of a camera.

Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh state that “fictionality is an interpretive assumption about a sender’s communicative act,” and that “no formal technique or other textual feature is in itself a necessary and sufficient ground for identifying fictive discourse” (2015, 66). If no “formal technique” is *per se* fictional or nonfictional, then we could extend this thesis beyond verbal representation to include every medium with the capacity to refer to a real or an invented object. Their conception of fictionality

²¹ On the history of photography, see Tagg (1988).

as “founded upon a basic human ability to imagine” (2015, 63) is also transferrable to every medium, since all media can display imagined elements, as we have seen with the photograph composed by Sherman. Yet, while they claim that “fictive discourse is a clear alternative to nonfictive discourse” (2015, 64), Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh add that there is a continuous exchange between the extreme poles of fictionality and nonfictionality: “Because we ‘regularly and pervasively employ’ fictionality outside of generic fictions, nonfictive discourse is peppered with hypotheticals, counterfactuals, speculations, and other deviations from the actual” (2015, 64).

If we agree with this nuanced vision, we might suspect that the accumulation of imagined elements would weaken the truth value of a nonfictional representation. With the same reasoning, we may even conclude that a medium containing more imaginary elements than others could end up being considered overall more fictional than nonfictional. For instance, Marie-Laure Ryan proposes that there are intermediary artifacts that gain in meaning between the poles of “strong fictionality” and “strong factuality.” On the pole of “weak factuality,” which corresponds to “narrative of personal experience,” she considers that “the narrator is granted some freedom from the truth for the sake of tellability” (2019, 83). Accordingly, she argues that a graphic memoir such as *Maus* includes too many “features” based on imagination to be regarded as a “faithful account of historical truth”:

The autobiographical dimension of the text is evident, but I would be hesitant to classify it as factual history, because the conventions of the medium of the graphic narrative impose formal features that are incompatible with a strict report of documented facts: features such as an organization of content into distinct frames, a reliance on freely recreated dialogue, and the fact that drawings are not indexical and cannot therefore make strong

claims of truth. In addition, the metaphorical representation of Jews as mice, Germans as cats, and other nationalities as pigs, frogs, and dogs prevents the storyworld from being regarded as a faithful account of historical reality. (2018, 43–44)

The rest of the discussion will elaborate on this specific point, because even if graphic narratives rely more on imagination than photographs, I don't think that this necessarily entails that they should be regarded as unfaithful accounts of reality. I will show that subjective or invented elements are treated differently in the case of nonfictional representation, and that each medium can develop stylistic strategies complying with the illocutionary constraints of serious assertions outlined by Searle.

When animals represent humans in graphic narratives

Although comics have privileged fiction for much of their relatively short cultural history, autobiographical comics began to flourish in the late seventies, becoming one of the most successful and discussed genres of graphic narratives. Despite the many drawing styles and representational conventions adopted by contemporary graphic memoirists, I think that in our days, most readers familiar with the genre would be surprised to learn that *Maus* was once considered fiction by some of its readers. Yet, as Christopher D. Kilgore reminds us, when it was published, what appeared at the time to be an unprecedented graphic treatment of the Holocaust misled some readers:

Thanks primarily to its graphic form—using mouse-headed cartoon characters to narrate a story of the Holocaust—*Maus* is so distinctly odd that Cioffi declares

that its world “by no means coincides with our own” (119), and Budick describes it “as fiction” *tout court* (388). In fact, the *New York Times* itself initially called it fiction. (Kilgore 2020, 73)

Hillary Chute explains that “Spiegelman publicly and successfully fought the *New York Times* to get his book moved from the fiction to the nonfiction best-seller list” (2008, 457). If some journalists or critics mistakenly classified *Maus* as fiction, I believe that this might be because their experience with “classical” literature did not prepare them for the conventions of graphic memoirs and comics in general. Regardless, according to Phelan, we must differentiate specific cases of indirect representation from nonfictional representation, mouse-headed cartoon characters being an interesting case:

If the author deploys a figure as an invention that indirectly advances a communicative purpose, then it is an instance of fictionality. Alternatively, if the author treats the figure as a standard, non-inventive way to engage with actual states, then it is not an instance of fictionality. (2022, 246)

Accordingly, in order to consider visual metaphors such as mice, cats, pigs, frogs, and dogs as signposts of fictionality, we must first evaluate their *inventiveness* when compared with the stereotypes of the graphic language of comics. For an audience accustomed to the reading of comics, rather than being seen as signposts of fictionality, these conventional metaphors are more likely to be interpreted in the light of a graphic culture that includes characters such as Mickey Mouse and Herriman’s Krazy Kat. These historical figures, and many others, have conventionalized the nonmimetic use of characters with animal heads acting like human beings. As stated

by Ann Miller, in graphic memoirs, “the identity of the extra-textual author (whose name is on the cover), the narrating ‘I,’ and the character can be, and almost invariably is, established verbally” (2011, 242). When the equivalence between a real person and a drawn character is asserted textually, a mouse, a cat, or a pig can become a graphic convention for denoting existents, just as a personal pronoun, a metaphor, or a hypernym can do so in a verbal medium.²² The only difference between these visual metaphors and personal pronouns such as “he”/“she”/“they,” or hypernyms referring to the nationality of a person such as “the German” or “the Pole,” is the fact that the author is free to shape the identifiers and add connotative values by choosing which image may fit best with a specific referent. Still, we must remember that we have the same choice when we use verbal language and decide to call our genitor by his first name, or with terms such as *daddy*, *father*, or *sir*. In *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman explains that he got his inspiration by realizing that cartoon figures were part of a long tradition of representing minorities in the form of animals, like the Mickey Mouse of *Steamboat Willie*, who could be compared to an Al Jolson with big ears. He thought that if African-Americans could be represented as mice, he could also represent members of the Ku Klux Klan as Ku Klux Kats.

Animal figures are in fact so conventional in graphic narratives that the author had to work them out in order to keep them as a living metaphor. Kilgore²³ explains that “*Maus I* lets readers ‘naturalize’ the associated textual features by

²² As Catherine Mao explains: “Comics seems to exclude a priori the possibility of self-portraiture. Indeed, in the flow of reading, the face is first caught in a process: it must be similar from one panel to another to allow the reader to identify it. The self-portrait may dissolve during this prior objectification, the *I* is merged into a *he*” (2013, §17, emphasis original).

²³ Kilgore states that “If Spiegelman told the story simply and unproblematically with animal figures, Horstkotte and Pedri, Ewert, Ma, and others would be able to close the debate, calling the mouse-people simply a matter of metaphor” (2020, 73).

maintaining clear distinctions between the narrative layers" (2020, 75), but he adds that in *Maus II*, the multiplication of diegetic levels and the complex interactions between narrative layers problematize the metaphor. For example, Spiegelman represents himself as a mouse, but sometimes, he draws himself wearing a mouse mask, as if to suggest that he is faking his identity. More explicitly, in a highly metadiegetic scene, Spiegelman stages his research for the graphic representation of his wife, who is French but converted to Judaism, and he discusses the implications of choosing a specific animal for representing her (Figure 3). The graphic representation does not simply mimetically reconstruct the scene when Spiegelman had a discussion with his wife about how to draw her, but it reveals the contingent nature of the characters depicted in the scene, and it turns the already established convention into a matter of choice made by the author.

As expressed by Françoise Mouly and her husband in this dialogue, in a nonfictional graphic narrative, the audience should not be concerned by the fact that humans are represented with animal heads, but rather by the truth-value of the connotations these metaphors invoke. Readers are free to interpret or ignore these connotations, but if they raise doubts about the metaphors, their question should not concern the artificiality of the drawings, but rather their assertive value: if we represent the French as bunny rabbits or Françoise as a mouse, will it bring accurate connotations to these existents? Besides, the metaphorical reading of animal faces in *Maus* is encouraged by the first volume's peritext, which comprises a quote by Adolf Hitler: "Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human." Just as Jews were dehumanized by the Nazis, so too does our author dehumanize the Nazis. By doing so, Spiegelman reminds his readers that Jews were occasionally represented as rats in the fascist iconography, and that Germans became predators for this



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FIGURE 3 Art Spiegelman, *Maus. A Survivor's Tale. II: And Here my Troubles Began* (1991, 11).²⁴

Visual metaphors don't completely escape the illocutionary constraints of nonfictional discourse: if one challenges this way of depicting identities, like the doubts raised about the *Falling Soldier* photo, this critique would only confirm that

²⁴ Page from *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. Copyright © *MAUS: A Survivor's Tale. II: And Here My Troubles Began*, Art Spiegelman, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991, used by permission of The Wylie Agency (UK) Limited.

the graphic invention of Spiegelman is evaluated according to the illocutionary norms of nonfictional discourse.²⁵

As Mao sums it up, the “mask” of the persona not only designates the identity of the character but is also chosen to reveal the “role that each person plays in society” (2013, §16). Indeed, the conventions used by Spiegelman in his graphic memoir are far from being an isolated case. Lewis Trondheim, one of the most famous and prolific authors in Europe, has been drawing himself as a cockatoo for over two decades. In this case, Miller explains that Trondheim “avoids grappling directly with the question of physical likeness by drawing himself and his entourage as birds and animals” (2011, 243), but this does not mean that a consideration of the truth-value of the metaphor should be dismissed. She adds that in the epilogue of his first autobiographical book, *Approximativement*, the people depicted in Trondheim’s graphic narrative “are invited to comment on how far a resemblance has been achieved. Fellow *bande dessinée* artist Charles Berberian says that he would not have seen Lewis as a cockatoo, or himself as a badger, but admits that ‘Lewis’s vision of things is accurate’” (Miller 2011, 243–44). Of course, Trondheim doesn’t *seriously state* that he is a cockatoo or that Berberian is a badger, but he is asserting something about those identities through these indirect representations, which can be evaluated as accurate or misleading.

²⁵ As Kilgore explains: “Readers *create* story (including the narrator and the act of narration) out of textual material in a highly similar way whether they read fiction or nonfiction, but they *use* the story differently—matching and measuring it against their experience in different ways—when primed to understand the resultant storyworld as ‘reality’” (2020, 95, emphasis original).

Scenic representation and nonfictional immersion

As we have seen, if we want to deal seriously with the way a medium determines the nature of a nonfictional representation, we have to start with another assumption than that of the so-called “artificiality” of drawn images or the “born as factual” reputation of photographs. Nevertheless, it is relevant to discuss how the formal resources of a particular medium can be used when the aim is to build an honest representation of a fact or of a true experience related to that fact. Instead of arguing that some media are more fictional than others, it would be more theoretically sound to single out which aspects of a reality are more suitable for a rendering by a specific medium, and what formal possibilities exist when dealing with the illocutionary constraints engaged by serious representations. As explained by Jan Baetens, even though we can use any medium in a nonfictional way, each will only reveal a limited aspect of the reality to which it refers:

If it is true that the encounter of a medium (comics) and a genre (autobiography) has a real impact on the way autobiography is approached in general, it is imperative to take a further step and ask whether the meeting in question does not also invite us to rethink reading, or how we experience comics. Here we touch on the place that the notion of “mediageny” can take in the study of comics. From this perspective, the inclusion of content in a medium is never done in a neutral way. A media does not accept content independently of the properties of its material basis, which in turn has a significant influence on the mediated content. Like it or not, a written autobiography cannot be identical to an oral, filmed, drawn, etc. autobiography. (Baetens 2004)

Based on a parallel with the adjective “photogenic,” Philippe Marion coined the expression “mediageny” to designate narrative contents having a particular affinity with a specific medium, such as the western with cinema, or talking animals and superheroes with comics. If we consider the rendering of a nonfictional reality, photographs are obviously most suitable for displaying portraits of people or for showing the setting of an event, while graphic, filmic, or verbal narratives are more easily able to tell a series of actions or to affirm the subjective dimension of a lived experience. Here, important questions are raised by the fact that comics, like plays or movies, are traditionally built on an articulation of *scenes*, involving a setting, singular actions performed by individual agents, and the representation of interactions involving dialogues reproduced in the form of speech balloons. It could be tempting to jump to the conclusion outlined by Dorrit Cohn and assert that narratives that give readers the illusion that events are taking place before their eyes are always fictions, because the past is unreachable and is always betrayed by scenic reconstitution.

However, Jorge Semprun writes in *Literature or Life* that when a representation tries to capture the experiential truth of a historical event, the narrative cannot escape scenic representation, however difficult it may be to reconstitute. According to him, a lived experience, even if unbearable, is not necessarily unspeakable. However, in order to render its substance, the narrative must reach what he defines as a “transparent density”:

I start to doubt the possibility of telling the story. Not that what we lived through was indescribable. It was unbearable, which is something else entirely (that won't be hard to understand), something that doesn't concern the form of a possible account, but its substance. Not its articulation, but its density. The only ones who will manage to

reach this substance, this transparent density, will be those able to shape their evidence into an artistic object, a space of creation. Or of re-creation. Only the artifice of a masterly narrative will prove capable of conveying some of the truth of such testimony. (Semprun 1998, 125)

According to Semprun, reaching this “transparent density” involves “artifice,” “creation,” or “re-creation,” but these “artistic” operations must not be confused with fictionality. For Semprun, the “artifice” of a “masterly narrative” (*un récit maîtrisé*) is simply the only way to transmit the “truth of such testimony.” As Pedri puts it:

To highlight the union of fact and fiction in graphic memoir is to suggest that fact and truth telling have little to do with reference. Instead, here they rest, at least in part, in openly confronting that the real, the remembered, and the subjective share center stage with fictional creativity. (Pedri 2013, 133)

It should be noted here that, in my view, representing the remembered or the subjective requires an imagination that should not be confused with fictionality, because if we adopt a phenomenological view,²⁶ facts exist essentially because they have been subjectively experienced, subjectively discussed, and/or subjectively represented. Objective reports are only a stylistic option among many others, and they are based on more or less subjective operations (among them, at least, selectivity of the available data) and intentions. As we have said, “scenes” are mediagenic material for graphic narratives, and therefore, nonfictional representations usually focus on the narration of lived experiences, which may imply the more

²⁶ For a phenomenological view on autobiography, see Schmitt (2017). I also discuss the fidelity of autobiography in Baroni (2009, 251–280).

or less “transparent density” of a mimetic reconstitution. By linking “fictional creativity” to the way in which graphic narratives deal with subjectivity, Pedri reassesses the value of imaginative components of graphic memoirs:

Working within the fidelity constraint, doubt feeds the readers’ need to know not only what happened, but also how it is perceived to have happened as well as how the narrator/author struggles to communicate faithfully that subjective perception. (Pedri 2013, 134)

Acknowledging the subjective (or constructed) nature of reality does not lead to a conception that would dangerously blur the frontier between fact and fiction, because, as we have seen, from a pragmatic point of view, the way we deal with an asserted reality and with an intended playful pretense is completely different. As Schaeffer argues, the difference between fictional and nonfictional immersion is “not in the representation itself, nor in its mode of operation (which is immersive in both cases), but in its subsequent destiny” (2015, 246–47). In nonfictional immersion, readers need to know how the author struggled “to communicate faithfully that subjective perception”; it is usually echoed by the inclusion in the narrative of many elements reflecting what Searle called the “preparatory” and the “sincerity” rules. I will rapidly review four formal parameters specific to graphic narratives²⁷ and exploited by Art Spiegelman to deal with this pragmatic constraint: (1) the degree of abstraction of drawn images, which plays on the extension of the gap-filling activity of the audience; (2) the degree of “graphiation” of drawn images, which connects the picture to the hand of the

²⁷ I am not mentioning here the inclusion of photographs in *Maus*, because this intermedial strategy is not distinctive of the comics language, and it has been discussed extensively by, among others, Pedri (2013) and Ryan (2018).

cartoonist; (3) the interplay between text and image; and (4) the construction of the page layout.

(1) Pedri states that variations in the degree of visual abstraction in comics raise a set of questions “as to how the factual can accommodate the interpretative initiatives signaled by such changes” (2013, 136). When Art Spiegelman draws a scene on the basis of his father’s narrative, he may have to imagine some things in order to supplement the information missing from the verbal account. Not only does he have to craft dialogues, but he must also show the clothes that characters wore or imagine how the room where they were standing was furnished, including, for example, the wallpaper design. He may have some photos to help him in this reconstruction, but most of the time, faced with missing elements, he must use his imagination to fill the gaps in his documentation. Yet the author is free to choose how many details he wants to give when reconstructing a scene. As Miller²⁸ explains, contrary to filmic representation, in graphic narratives “selectivity is [...] a key resource of a medium whose representational system is based on metonymy” (2011, 246). When Spiegelman chooses not to fill the gaps in his father’s testimony, the audience may use their imagination to complete the scenic representation, but the missing elements remain visible in the image, thus affirming the honesty of a limited reconstruction. As abstraction belongs fully to the language of comics, the audience is used to this gap-filling activity and it is not an obstacle for immersion, even as the incompleteness of the graphic representation may elicit a critical monitoring of the reenacted past. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the style of *Maus*, as with most graphic memoirs, is far from realist. In many instances,

²⁸ Miller refers to an article by Elizabeth Bruss on autobiographic films in order to reevaluate “the question of truth-value [in comics] by contending that it must be assessed in relation not only to veracity but also to sincerity” (2011, 246).

settings are no more than sketches indicating general concepts such as a street, the home of a bourgeois family, or the dormitory of a death camp. Again, drawn images are as much abstract graphic signifiers as they are iconic imitations.

(2) The granularities of a scene description, which assert the distance between reality and its representation, are not the only important aspects of graphic style to be considered, since drawings do not only point toward their referent but also toward their origin. As explained by Baetens, in comics the instance of the narrator is duplicated: “Alongside the verbal enunciator or narrator in the classical sense of the term, it is also possible to assume the existence of a graphic enunciator,”²⁹ which has been proposed to be called ‘graphiator’” (Baetens 2004). Marion has recently discussed the role of graphiation in nonfictional graphic narratives in general, and in comics journalism in particular:

The advantage of the graphic narrative medium is the constant signature effect that characterizes it. The permanence of the trace of a graphic enunciation [...] guarantees almost ontologically this assumed subjectivity, even this posture of doubt in action. The constant graphic interpretation of comics offers, almost effortlessly, the very material for a *close distanciation* to flourish, which is well suited to the aesthetics of new journalism in general, and of comics journalism in particular. *Distanciation* because drawing is always already an interpretation of the world. *Close* because the grasp of this world through graphic interpretation undoubtedly favors proximity to it. (Marion 2018, §10)

²⁹ For a more detailed description of the distinction between graphic and textual narrators, sometimes referred to as “monstrators” and “recitants,” see Groensteen (2010) and Thon (2013). Marion has coined the term “graphiator” in order to insist more on the traces a graphic enunciation leaves in the drawing, like sketch effects. This notion is discussed extensively in Baetens and Frey (2015).

According to Marion, the presence of a graphiator is accentuated in *sketch effects*, which are particularly visible in the work of Art Spiegelman. Chute also explains how the body of the author is made visible in the graphic image itself: “The non-transparency of drawing—the presence of the body, through the hand, as a mark in the text—lends a subjective register to the narrative surfaces of comics pages that further enables comics works to be productively self-aware in how they ‘materialize’ history” (2008, 457).

As Spiegelman explains in *MetaMaus*, his style is the result of long reflection and has changed since his first attempt to tell the story of his father in the form of a three-page strip created in 1972. Once again, the thickness, tremor, and hesitation of the lines traced by Spiegelman betray the gesture that drew them, and show as honestly as possible the imprecise, sometimes hesitant, and always subjective nature of the reconstructed scenes. As Pedri states again:

What is important to accentuate in a discussion on fact and fiction in graphic memoir is that style actually presents readers with a particularly personal vision of what is remembered as having been experienced. Style, then, speaks not so much to what is seen and remembered, but rather to the subjective interpretation of the facts. [...] When considered in this light, even the most impressionistic or abstract cartoon style fails to threaten the commitment to fidelity that governs graphic memoir. (2013, 145)

Accordingly, an honest representation should elicit the “critical monitoring” of its audience rather than divert it, especially when readers could be tempted, by the seductive nature of narrative immersion, to confuse the imitated reality with its true origin.

(3) & (4) The last points will be to discuss jointly the effect of the multimodality of graphic narratives and how a page layout can be used to deal with sincerity issues. As a hybrid form combining verbal and visual elements, comics frequently explore the diverse relationships that can emerge between recitatives and the images. As Scott McCloud (1993) has shown, these interactions between text and image can range from redundancy to complementarity or even contrast and contradiction. In this case, Pedri explains the complex organization of *Maus*, with Art Spiegelman serving “as both the extradiegetic verbal narrator (in text boxes) of the 1980s storyline in which he interviews his father in New York about his Holocaust experience (the intradiegetic storyline) and the visual narrator—i.e., drawer or graphiator—of the extra- and intradiegetic narratives” (2013, 134).

Pedri has discussed, in particular, the productive tension between the visual and the verbal narrators when Art expresses, on the visual track, doubts concerning his father’s testimony, or when Vladek himself discusses elements of his story he is not sure of. But redundancy can also be a way to deal with the illocutionary rule to “provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition” (Searle 1975, 322). When comparing the text and the image derived from it, we can see exactly how a visual equivalent has been forged on the basis of the verbal narrative of a firsthand witness.

In many instances, Spiegelman also creatively exploits the page layout in order to visually encapsulate the reconstructed scenes inside the representation of the dialogue between him and his father, which is staged in the external borders. Therefore, the same page can *simultaneously* display three layers of narrativity (Figure 4): first, we can see the scene staging the dialogue between the graphiator and his informant; then the illustration drawn on the basis of the firsthand verbal narrative, which can be compared with the

text inserted in the image; and finally, we reach the highest degree of imaginative reconstruction with a scene based on the narrative, which uses reconstructed dialogues.



FIGURE 4 Art Spiegelman, *Maus. A Survivor's Tale. II: And Here my Troubles Began* (1991, 29).³⁰

Of course, the first layer of this narrative could be interpreted by the reader as fiction if the whole book was framed as such; but once the dialogue between Art and Vladek is

³⁰ Page from *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. Copyright © *MAUS: A Survivor's Tale. II: And Here My Troubles Began*, Art Spiegelman, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991, used by permission of The Wylie Agency (UK) Limited.

recognized as referring to a real testimony, then all the other formal aspects of the page work as levers designed to comply with the constraints of a seriously asserted truth. Indeed, this example provides a summary of the techniques used by Spiegelman to reconstruct an immersive scene while yielding to the illocutionary constraints of nonfictional representation. The reconstructed nature of the last scene is made explicit because the other layers of the narrative, which remain visible, cannot be forgotten and “provide evidence or reasons” for the way things have been asserted in a certain way.

However, this does not prevent Spiegelman from reaching the “transparent density” of a scene, which remains typical of the language of comics in the last strip. Thanks to this imaginative reconstruction, the audience can get closer to the original experience lived by his father and feel empathy for him and his friend Mandelbaum (and, on this basis, for all the prisoners of the death camps). But other signs are addressed to the audience in order to highlight the approximate and forged nature of the scene, which is signified not only by the surrounding visual elements, but also, more directly, by the low degree of granularity of the scene (the setting, for instance, is very abstract, with only vertical hatches) and the high degree of graphiation.

The principles guiding the production of a nonfictional mimetic narrative

When dealing with autobiographical texts, it is impossible for readers to remain too long on the undecisive frontier between fiction and nonfiction.³¹ Autofiction is not a middle case, but a test case. While some read it as pure fiction, even if the author is a character in the story, others read it as a true

³¹ See Schmitt (2017). On the cultural and historical consistency of this frontier, see Lavocat (2016).

autobiography, even if the author uses techniques typical of literary fiction. It all depends on which “frame”³² the reader applies to the story. Graphic memoirs raise similar issues, but when they are read as nonfiction, all “re-created” elements, even the replacement of humans by animals or the “transparent density” of a scenic reconstitution, should be read according to the illocutionary constraints of serious assertions.

The difference between fiction and nonfiction is pragmatic rather than formal; it lies first and foremost in the perceived intention of the producer of the artifact. As we have seen, no medium should be regarded as having a stronger or lesser affinity for fictional or nonfictional representation, even when some media involve more “artful imagination” than others. Yet a “media-conscious narratology” (Ryan and Thon 2014) can help us realize that each medium captures different aspects of the mediated truth and handles the illocutionary constraints of nonfictional representation in specific ways. Some media, such as photographs or firsthand audio-visual recordings, may give the (dangerous) illusion that historical facts can be apprehended objectively. When, however, the representation aims to capture the transparent density of the experience of an individual, graphic and verbal narratives can provide the form of *close distanciation* needed in nonfictional immersion.

It follows that when dealing with those elements typical of graphic narratives that are often described as signposts of fictionality, we should start to interpret their truth value in the context of the cultural history of the medium. In fact, many visual and verbal elements sometimes considered as inventions are used only to enhance the truthfulness and sincerity of the representation, and not to threaten it. Even attempts to reproduce the transparent density of a lived experience, leading to a form of nonfictional immersion,

³² See Korthals Altes (2014).

are counterbalanced by other elements that elicit the critical monitoring of readers. In many instances, we have seen that a misunderstanding is grounded in the assumption that a lack of *resemblance* is the symptom of a lack of referentiality, despite knowing that the language of comics is as much symbolic as it is iconographic. In order to be honest, scenic reconstitutions must assert the distance between the real event and its representation, even when aiming to elicit the immersion of the reader. As we have seen, graphic memoirs use many techniques to achieve this goal: changing the granularity of the image, showing the gesture of a graphiator, or even experimenting with the page layout.

I think that when a reader is dealing with nonfictional representation, the question should not be: “Is the representation a reconstruction?” or “Does it involve elements of fictionality?” Rather, readers should ask: “What constitutes an honest reconstruction?” “Is it based on evidence or on a sincere effort to remain faithful to the asserted reality?” and “If using scenic reconstitution, does the author try to hide the reconstructed nature of the representation or to manipulate the reader?” When asking these and similar questions, the interpreter directly addresses the illocutionary commitment of the sender, instead of interpreting “literary techniques” (like scenic representation or the use of direct speech in dialogue) or “visual metaphors” (like the use of animal characters to represent real persons) as elements weakening the fidelity of the artifact. Analyzing graphic memoirs can help us reconsider, on a transmedial scale, some general assumptions concerning the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, especially in the case of mimetic forms of representation. This may lead to an outline of new principles that reads something like this:

- a. Any representational medium can be used nonfictionally, by respecting the illocutionary constraints of serious statements.

- b. Nonfictionality is not limited to the display and comment of objective data; it can include the transmission of experiential truths.³³
- c. When nonfiction aims to reproduce the *transparent density* of an experiential truth, the author is allowed to use their imagination to supplement missing data, but must proceed as honestly as possible.
- d. Immersion in nonfictional narratives works on the principle of *close distantiation*: even when immersing the audience in the story, the narrative must elicit the audience's *critical monitoring* or must respond to its concerns. The specificity of this critical monitoring, when compared with fiction, is to reflect on the *reliability* of the *implied author* (not of the *narrator*) and recognize the approximate nature of the reconstructed scenes, while assessing their acceptability by relating them to their plausibility and the efforts displayed by the author to work as honestly as possible.³⁴
- e. All formal elements of a nonfictional representation, even connotations, metaphors, or reconstitutions

³³ For Ryan (2018), the distinction between what she calls "strong factuality" and "weak factuality" may reflect this distinction between the representation of "objective fact" and "experiential truth." Nevertheless, my claim is that the truth of a subjective experience is also subject to illocutionary constraints inherent in a discourse that claims to be faithful to reality.

³⁴ Here we can oppose two types of audience as well as two types of nonfiction. Some audiences have a higher level of critical monitoring than others, and some nonfiction complies more seriously with the illocutionary constraints of representing past events than others. If readers can be transported into the storyworld of a nonfiction as efficiently as that of a fiction, there is always a risk that, at least momentarily, their critical monitoring may be toned down. Thus, in an honest reconstitution of a past experience, the mimetic power of the representation should always be counterbalanced by a reminder of the artificial nature of the reenacted past.

partly based on imagination, can be discussed according to their truth-value and honesty.

This proposed list remains open and, in fact, raises many new questions that still need to be answered. I will conclude by mentioning a borderline case for a transmedial conception of factuality: What about music referring to the Holocaust, or even composed in death camps? Is it possible to consider a medium referring only to a subjective feeling according to the illocutionary rules outlined by Searle? Can we assert, or deny, the truth of a purely affective fact?

Part 2

Mimetic Time

Analepsis and Flashback: Dramatizing Anachronyms*

Flashback and *flashforward*, as well as *analepsis* and *prolepsis* in the terminology of Gérard Genette (1980), are some of the few practically undisputed concepts in narrative theory, because, on a descriptive plane, their ontological status seems intuitively consistent, and on a functional plane, their usefulness for narrative interpretation is obviously relevant. But if we dig deeper into their original definitions by Genette and Russian formalist models, and if we look more precisely at how they have been adapted to visual media, we come to realize that they appear either vague or, at the very least, as an oversimplification of a more complex issue. Indeed, the handling of time in visual media invites us to look at whether *flashback* is wholly synonymous with *analepsis*. In order to add precision to narrative theory's efforts to analyze such time shifts, I propose in this chapter to introduce a distinction between *dramatized analepsis*, which is synonymous with *flashback*, and *undramatized* or *allusive analepsis*, which is not. Dramatized

* This chapter is a substantially revised version of an article previously published and reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher. The original reference was: Baroni, Raphaël. 2016. "Dramatized Analepsis and Fadings in Verbal Narratives." *Narrative* 24.3: 311–29.

analepsis and flashback are synonyms because each involves an *enactment* of the past, that is, a shift from one space-time to another. Undramatized analepsis refers to past events but does not enact a shift from one space-time to another, and thus there is no “back” to which the narrative “flashes.” After looking at how this distinction can illuminate some paradigmatic cases in film and graphic narrative, I will consider how these distinctions apply to verbal narratives. In addition, I will discuss “fading effects” in verbal narratives, effects that follow from the gradual transition from one space-time to another, in other words, a transition between analepsis and flashback. Finally, I will suggest how these tools can illuminate the handling of temporality in Guy de Maupassant’s *The Signal*. This chapter aims to show the value of intermedial comparisons, since my case about verbal narrative follows from work on narrative in visual media.

Evoking an irreversible past

In the movie *Le Passé*, Ashgar Farhadi stages a story that strictly respects the chronology of the events, from the first scene, with the arrival of Ahmad in Paris, to the last image, where Samir is in a hospital holding the hand of his wife, who is in a coma after a suicide attempt. Narration is seen as chronological, simply because images and sounds always refer to events that unfold one after the other, and yet, despite this strict linear progression, the audience wants to uncover the motive of the suicide attempt by Samir’s wife, an event that happened before the opening scene. During the narration, important clues are introduced, using different narrative techniques: some are related to the way we interpret the interactions between the characters, others are revealed through dialogue, which sometimes involve embedded narratives, but there are no real flashbacks—namely a *showing* of the past event referred to in the dialogue. In fact, some of the embedded stories appear as

misleading interpretations of what truly happened (for example, Lucie's version) or even as intentional lies (Naïma's version). In Ashgar Farhadi's movie, this purely chronological narration presents time as an irreversible dimension of life, and past as an unchangeable/unreachable perspective. Even though movies have the power to give the illusion that things could be otherwise, the director consciously chose to avoid any form of enactment of the past.

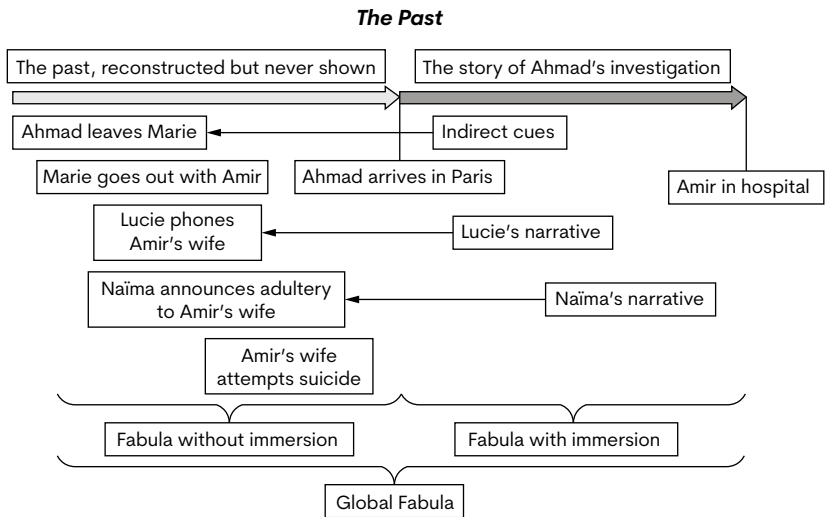


FIGURE 5 Schematization of the narrative structure of *Le Passé* (Farhadi 2013).

Before addressing the theoretical questions that this movie entails for the analysis of narrative order, I need to mention another visual narrative that offers a meaningful contrast to this first example. We find probably one of the most memorable flashbacks in early classic European comics in the eleventh story of “Les Aventures de Tintin” called *Le Secret de la Licorne*. This story was first published in a serialized

form in the newspaper *Le Soir* from June 1942 to January 1943. In the strip of August 8, 1942, Captain Haddock begins the tale of his ancestor, Chevalier François de Hadoque, a story that he has just read in an old manuscript.



FIGURE 6 Hergé, “Le Secret de la Licorne,” *Le Soir*, August 8, 1942. © Hergé-tintinimagination 2026.³⁵

The year is 1698. The UNICORN, proud third-rate ship in the fleet of Louis XIV, has left the island of Santo Domingo in the Caribbean and is sailing for Europe with a cargo of... of... well, it was mostly rum.

At this point, the story returns to follow the course of the chronological narration of the adventures of Tintin, but soon after, in the second panel of the next strip, the embedded narrative becomes a real flashback: we see the ship *Unicorn*, under the “recitative”³⁶ of Captain Haddock.

After leaving two days ago, the UNICORN is sailing on a good breeze on a full, starboard tack... / when suddenly,

³⁵ Graphics from the work of Hergé are protected by copyright and may not be used without prior written authorization.

³⁶ In comics terminology, a “recitative” is a text associated with a narrator usually situated outside the panel. It contrasts with texts referring to dialogues or thoughts usually found in bubbles, or onomatopoeic effects (see Groensteen and Miller 2013, 88–89). Recitative is closely related to the use of “voiceover” in movies.

from the topmast, comes a cry. / "Sail on the port bow!"
(Hergé, *Le Soir*, August 10, 1942)

The flashback continues in the following panels with the shout of a sailor represented using direct speech. The disappearance of the recitative highlights the fact that the narration has now developed its own autonomy from the discursive act of the teller. Thus, the *immersion* into the past takes an additional step, just as in a movie, when a fading between two scenes leads to the direct portrayal of actions and dialogues, and the disappearance of the voiceover or embedded narrator. In the fifth panel, the image even adopts the internal visual point of view³⁷ of Chevalier de Hadoque, when he discovers, through his telescope, that the sail is that of a pirate boat.

The action unfolds over the next twenty-five strips in a form of a traditional pirate story, with the pirates boarding the ship, a general fight, the imprisonment of the hero, a nighttime escape, and a duel. Eventually, the climax is reached with the fight between Chevalier de Hadoque and his nemesis, the pirate Rackham Le Rouge. The hero's victory provides a happy ending to this long flashback.

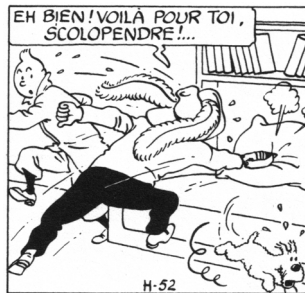


FIGURE 7 Hergé, "Le Secret de la Licorne," *Le Soir*, August 20, 1942.
© Hergé-tintinimaginatio 2026.

³⁷ In Jost's terminology (1989), this is a form of primary internal ocularization.

As we can see here, the story is told using an original combination of *telling* and *showing* that makes us switch constantly between two different time frames. This sequence also shows us that Haddock has gradually shifted his mode of telling, since he is now performing the duel. In other words, he is now acting out, in a mimetic mode, the interactions between the protagonist and his enemies. This mode of presentation emphasizes the parallel between the two levels of the story, and it even shows the blurry line separating them, but it achieves this effect without blocking the story's progression, thus producing a fluid, yet highly reflective, narration.³⁸

We can draw some important conclusions from these examples. Firstly, Hergé's comic strips show that we can receive chronological information concerning a story while observing frequent jumps between the space-time of François de Hadoque and the space-time of Captain Haddock, who is a teller, but also the imitator of a character situated in a higher-degree narrative. Secondly, the story told by Captain Haddock underlines the fact that, when confronted with a verbal narrative, some narrators and their audience can experience such a deep immersion into the storyworld that they feel the dangers threatening the protagonist as if they were threatened themselves. In addition, notice that, in this sequence, the immersed narrator encourages this deictic shift³⁹ by telling his story using verbal techniques such as the present tense: he says that "The year is 1698," or that *The Unicorn* "has left the island of Santo Domingo in the Caribbean, and is sailing for Europe."

On the other hand, when we look at the narrative organization of *Le Passé*, we see that the information we need in

³⁸ For a deeper analysis of the textual complexity of this sequence, see Baetens (2006, 35–57).

³⁹ On this concept, see Duchan, Bruder and Hewitt (1995).

order to decipher a puzzling past is not necessarily associated with a dechronologized *fabula*. In this case, the mystery is gradually solved through indirect clues picked up by the audience even though the director never really *shows* the reconstructed past. I will argue now that these phenomena, which are quite obvious in graphic or audiovisual narratives, can also be experienced in literary narratives, requiring a reinvestigation of the way we describe the interplay between *fabula* and *syuzhet*.

From the definition of intersequentiality to flashbacks

The distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* was first introduced by Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky; for better or for worse, these concepts are usually translated in English as “story” and “plot”:

The story is the aggregate of motifs in their logical, causal-chronological order; the plot is the aggregate of those same motifs but having the relevance and the order which they had in the original work. The place in the work in which the reader learns of an event, whether the information is given by the author, or by a character, or by a series of indirect hints—all this is irrelevant to the story. But the aesthetics function of the plot is precisely this bringing of an arrangement of motifs to the attention of the reader. (1965, 65)

If we consider the examples discussed above, we are confronted with an interesting problem, because according to this definition, we must first decide which story we care about before being able to decide if the *fabula* is told chronologically or not. In *Le Passé*, the story covering the few days

between the arrival of Ahmad in Paris and the last scene with Samir and his wife at the hospital is perfectly chronological, but if we agree that the *story* also covers the mysterious events not shown on-screen, which happened before the opening scene, then the narrative is not chronological at all. In this case, information is not given by the author/director through a series of flashbacks, but gradually disclosed, to quote Tomashevsky, “by a character, or by a series of indirect hints.” We can come to a similar conclusion about the sequence of Hergé’s comic strip. According to the definition given by Tomashevsky, if the *fabula* corresponds to the pirate story, we can argue that the plot is told chronologically, simply because all relevant information concerning this story is given chronologically,⁴⁰ sometimes by the author (“showing” the scene) and sometimes by the character (“telling” or “acting” the scene). In both analyses, we see that Tomashevsky’s elusive description of the two sequences remains relatively autonomous from the objective description of flashbacks, which relies on past events *shown* on the screen or in a comic strip.

Before examining the specific case of verbal narratives, we must admit that the problem is more obvious in visual than verbal narratives, because, as Christian Metz puts it, the “filmmaker is forced, when he wants to move time, to move space as an additional burden” (1972, 71). Thereby, being pluri-dimensional, temporal distortions appear more salient in movies, and scholars such as Seymour Chatman (1978) or David Bordwell (1985) have drawn interesting conclusions

⁴⁰ If we consider the story of the fight between Haddock and his imaginary enemies—a fight that might become harmful for him or for Tintin, should the latter be confused with an antagonist—we could even consider that we have two stories in parallel, Hergé using an avatar of cross-cutting editing. Nevertheless, there are differences with classic cross-cutting, because normally, the two actions would share the same temporality instead of *imitating* each other.

from this semiotic nature of the medium: they have noticed that the distinction introduced by Tomashevsky does not simply overlap what is commonly described as a flashback:

In the cinema, “flashback” means a narrative passage that “goes back” but specifically visually, as a scene, in its own autonomy, that is, introduced by some overt mark of transition like a cut or a dissolve.” (Chatman 1978, 64)

Thus, as stated by Chatman, flashbacks do not simply evoke the past but constitute some kind of “enactment” (1978, 32). In the words of Bordwell, in order to have a flashback, we must “witness and/or hear the *sjuzhet*⁴¹ *dramatizing* the significant *fabula* episode” (1985, 77):

When the *sjuzhet* presents characters communicating information about prior events by any means (writing, speech, pantomime, tape recording, film clips, etc.), we have recounting. When the *sjuzhet* presents prior events as if they were occurring at the moment, in direct representation, we have enactment. (A mixed case is the convention of “enacted recounting”: a character tells about past events, and the *sjuzhet* then presents the events in a flashback.) This distinction is an essential tool in describing the effects of a medium that can transmit *fabula* information “by report” or “by direct presentation.” (Bordwell 1985, 77–78)

Although narratologists have shown that there is a clear difference between recounting and enactment in movies and comics, such a distinction has remained mostly unquestioned

⁴¹ In this quote, Bordwell uses the spelling “*sjuzhet*” to refer to the Russian term *сюжет*. In other sections of this book, I will follow the more common and widely accepted English transliteration *syuzhet*.

for verbal narratives. Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck have briefly mentioned the distinction between “punctual” and “complete” analepsis, but as they followed the typology outlined by Genette, their distinction is based on “the stretch of time covered by the analepsis or prolepsis. If the memory concerns one particular event, then the analepsis is punctual. If it comprises an entire period, the flashback is durative or complete” (2005, 65). We can see in this quote a revealing change of terms, the authors use “analepsis” to refer to punctual information, while “flashback” refers to longer forms of recounted information. Neither Genette nor Chatman would have admitted this drift in the terminology. For Chatman, it is clear that “flashbacks and forwards are only media-specific instances of the larger classes of analepsis and prolepsis” (1978, 64). As for Genette, who claims that he does not believe in the existence of imitation in verbal narratives: “Narrative does not ‘represent’ a (real or fictive) story, it recounts it—that is, it signifies it by means of language [...]. There is no place for imitation in narrative.” (1988, 43) Following this radical separation between verbal and visual narratives, the distinction later introduced by Chatman and Bordwell between *recounting* and *enactment* could not be extended to verbal narratives.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the definition of analepsis by Genette remains as ambiguous as the definition of *syuzhet* by Tomashevsky when he designates analepsis as “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment.” (1980, 40) The term “evocation” is open to many interpretations, ranging from any kind of indirect hint disseminated in the text concerning punctual elements of the story to the detailed narration of an “entire period” of the fabula, to use Herman and Vervaeck’s expression. On this basis, Genette postulates the continuum between microtextual analysis of recounted events and macrotextual organization of the plot,

while omitting what would in effect be a “*sjuzhet dramatizing* a significant fabula episode,” to use Bordwell’s formula. It is particularly revealing to see that Genette, in his micro-textual analysis, considers any action expressed in a past perfect or present perfect tense as analepsis, as in the following sentence:

(F) ... [Swann] wore, (G) a thing he *had* never *done* previously, the decoration (H) he *had won* as a young militia-man, in '70, (I) and added a codicil to his will asking that, (J) contrary to his previous dispositions, (K) he might be buried with the military honours due to his rank as Chevalier of the Legion of Honour. (Genette 1980, 41–42)

In Genette’s interpretation, propositions G, H, and J are supposed to be three distinct analepsis, inserted into the chronological unfolding of actions F, I, and K.⁴² However, this interpretation would probably contradict what empirical readers would describe as their narrative experience of temporal continuity, since we have not left the present moment of an action consisting of a character pursuing a train of thought. Genette himself would probably agree that it would be absurd to postulate the existence of *ellipsis* between each sentence of a verbal narrative, because in order to become useful for narrative description, the concept must be narrowed to *meaningful jumps in time*. Using the same argument, we could state that analepsis become salient when the evocation of past goes deeper than in the examples given above. Thus, we need to expand the structural description of analepsis by taking into account the cognitive experience of the reader elicited by textual configurations, focusing on how the temporal and spatial coordinates of a story are set and

⁴² Note that K could also count as a prolepsis, given that it is an evocation of a future event.

how they can be displaced, linearly or not, along the narrative progression.

Cognitivist insights on deictic shifts and verbal enactment

Cognitive approaches, some of them building on linguistic hypotheses,⁴³ have enriched our understanding of how readers can shift from their actual deictic coordinates (based on the *I*, *here*, and *now*) to project themselves into a different “deictic center,” involving a different person (the character of a story) and a different space-time frame situated into the narrated world. On this basis, Mary Galbraith has shown that flashbacks are not only a question of lateral displacement on the temporal coordinate of the story, but are also a vertical “submersion” from one deictic plane to another—an operation that she calls *PUSH*—usually followed by an “emersion” that brings us back to the first level—defined as *POP*:

A story (or a reader) can always potentially change frames in one or two directions. One may emerge from one deictic plane to a higher or more basic-ontological-level deictic plane, as in awakening from a dream or looking up from reading. Borrowing a computer science term, I call this process *POPing*. Conversely, one may submerge from a basic level to a less available deictic plane, such as episodic memory (known as “flashback” in fiction), fictional story world (this may be a fiction within the fiction), or fantasy. I call this submersion a *PUSH*, the term paired with *POP* in computer science. There is theoretically no limit to the number of *POPs* and *PUSHes* possible in a fictional narrative. The most common *PUSHes* are probably

⁴³ For the linguistic origin of the “Deictic Shift Theory,” see Karl Bühler’s (1982) concept of “*deixis am phantasma*.”

flashbacks and dream sequences, and the most common POPs (other than coming back from flashbacks and dreams) are irony and narrator commentary. (Galbraith 1995, 47)

This approach helps to bring the problematic of immersion (with PUSH and POP operations) closer to the description of narrative order, by suggesting that a simple evocation of the past should not be considered a flashback if such immersion is lacking. Thus, a flashback occurs when displacement on the horizontal timeline is combined with the immersion into a storyworld holding its own deictic center. As summarized by Marie-Laure Ryan, the “world metaphor thus entails a referential or ‘vertical’ conception of meaning, that stands in stark contrast to the Saussurian and poststructuralist view of signification as the product of a network of horizontal relations between the terms of a language system. In this conception, language is meant to be traversed toward its referent.” (2001, 91–92)

More recent perspectives offered by “second generation” cognitive studies have deepened our understanding of the embodiment of mental processes, allowing us to deal with the way readers may experience a form of mental enactment of a fiction, beyond the mere “representation” of a storyworld. These theories bring to the fore “the enactive, embedded, embodied, and extended qualities of the mind. To this list we may add ‘experiential’ and ‘emotional’, since this new paradigm gives experience and emotional responses a much more important role in cognition than first-wave, computational cognitivism” (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2014, 261). Indeed, research on mirror neurons using “mental-imagery” has offered empirical grounds for proving the existence of phenomena of embodiment in the reading experience. As summarized by Anežka Kuzmičová:

Briefly put, it has been suggested that in the processing of language referring to sensorimotor contents, whether it is an isolated phrase such as “grab the cake” (Raposo et al.) or a full-fledged narrative (Speer et al.), our sensorimotor cortex becomes automatically activated in much the same way as if we were acting out the represented actions and perceptions ourselves. For instance, when a story protagonist is reported to pick up an object, e.g., a textbook, this is reflected not only in the motor but also in the visual area of the brain that would be active if the reader actually picked up the same object. (Kuzmičová 2014, 277)

Kuzmičová offers an interesting typology by distinguishing between different levels of embodiment, the reader being either an *experiencer*, a *visualizer*, or a *listener*. She shows that these different experiences are linked with typical textual cues and involve different degrees of medium awareness. (1) *Enactment-imagery* refers to a modality that “entails a sense of medium transparency. In the instant of experiencing enactment-imagery, the reader-imager comes as close as one possibly can to forgetting that the experience was in fact mediated by a string of words on a page. The imager is directly situated with regard to the storyworld, experiencing no mediating filter between her embodied mind and the referential text contents” (283). This deepest form of immersion is typically elicited by the direct narration of interactions between the character and the storyworld. (2) *Visual-imagery* refers a lower degree of immersion, when the reader is confronted only with the description of static objects. In this case, the referential domain “is experienced from an outer stance,” as if “the imager’s body [was] situated outside the storyworld” (283). (3) *Speech-imagery*: the third category is realized when the reader receives the text “as if it were spoken out loud by an extraneous speaker” (284). In those moments, the reader may “have the impression that there was actual pitch, timbre,

volume, pace, and so forth to the narrator's voice" (285). Even if the reader has the illusion of hearing a voice, this form of embodiment involves a higher degree of medium awareness. As noted by Kuzmičová, such experience can be elicited by narratorial interventions, while it is more unlikely to happen when reading Hemingway's behaviorist prose. What Benveniste (1966) defined as the formal apparatus on enunciation, is probably linked to this effect, since Kuzmičová states that "speech-imagery marks a degree of situatedness often accompanied by referential imagery of the communicative situation" (2014, 285).

In the following section, these concepts will be used in order to describe, as precisely as possible, how a verbal narrative can displace its deictic center leading to a gradual immersion in the past of the fabula. In this operation, the highest degree of immersion will be achieved when the reader reaches what is described by Kuzmičová as "enactment-imagery," while "speech-imagery" might function as an opposed force (POP directed), because it highlights the deictic center of the narrator.

Of course, embodiment can be influenced by multiple factors, especially by psychological and contextual parameters; therefore, it is more or less unpredictable in a singular empirical reading. For instance, some readers may have a more vivid imagination than others, and a quiet environment, among other contextual factors, is a necessary ingredient for optimal immersion into the storyworld. Nevertheless, as Kuzmičová puts it, it is still possible to evaluate "the text factor, i.e., the task of determining the imagery potential of discrete narrative strategies" (280). According to this idea, my focus will be mostly on verbal cues designed to elicit deictic shift, which can be described as a (more or less) gradual dramatization of the representation. Thus, the linguistic side of the analysis will help to deal with cognitivist issues because the formalist distinction between dramatized and

undramatized analepsis is tied to how embodied cognition works differently in response to different strategies used by the implied author.

Dramatized time shifts and fading effects in verbal narrative

In the comic strips by Hergé, not only have we seen that a verbal narrative can become highly mimetic when the teller and the audience are immersed in the story, but it shows that Captain Haddock uses linguistic tricks to give the illusion of a direct enactment of the scene, for example, the use of present tense or the performance of direct speech. All this can be done in a literary text, even though the mimo-gestural show of the fight remains, of course, a specificity of oral or dramatic performances. Along this line, a few basic principles can guide us in order to define the prototypical ingredients that can be combined when building the dramatization of a shift from one space-time frame to another. For example, as a minimal requirement, we can postulate that past events should not be verbalized using retrospective tenses (like past perfect or present perfect), but rather with simple past or simple present, so they can refer to important actions unfolding in the *actuality* of the time frame of the character. Secondly, the feeling of a space-time shift would increase dramatically if events were singular instead of iterative and include some kind of embodiment in a character's experience. Ideally, events must belong to a *scene*⁴⁴ involving spatial descriptions and direct dialogues. Most importantly, the reader must feel that the events told are leading to some future development, including multiple virtualities. Notice that these elements are similar to the basic ingredients needed for building a

⁴⁴ See next chapter for a cognitive reconceptualization of this notion.

prototypical definition of narrativity.⁴⁵ So we could simply conclude that, as a minimal attribute, dramatized analepsis in verbal narratives need to appear as *embedded narratives*,⁴⁶ even though they don't necessarily need to be associated with the explicit description of an intradiegetic narrator.

A further step would be to consider the possibility of analyzing *fading effects* in literary narratives similar to those we find in movies or comics, where the transition from one space-time to another is gradual, using the ephemeral permanence of the "voice" of the teller, associated with the visual enactment of the scene. This technique of "enacted recounting" (as evoked by Bordwell) has become a convention in filmmaking probably because the voiceover "helps to situate temporally and to measure analepsis" (Jost & Gaudreault 1990, 108). But gradual transitions can also have a "mimetic" function, in the sense that they imitate the way verbal narratives induce in the audience a gradual immersion into the storyworld, the discourse seeming to slowly fade away, until a point is reached where the audience almost "forgets" the verbal nature of the narrative and fancies that "no one is speaking here, the events seem to narrate themselves" (Benveniste 1966, 241). Based on our strict definition of dramatized analepsis, we can show that gradual transitions can be observed in many verbal narratives, especially when a story is embedded in a conversation. Maupassant's short stories, which often take the form of embedded narratives, provide many examples of these transitions leading to various degrees of immersion. One striking example can be found in the story *The Signal*, where Madame de Grangerie tells a friend, Madame de Rennedon, about a dramatic event that recently happened to her.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Monika Fludernik's definition of narrativity and its relation to experientiality.

⁴⁶ Note that this condition of "high narrativity" makes my use of the term "embedded narrative" much more restricted than the way Ryan uses it to describe the connection between logical complexity and tellability.

In the first mention of the event, the protagonist evokes the consequences on her actual emotional state. At this stage, she is using simple present, referring to the discursive interaction, and present perfect tenses, referring to the recent past, which clearly indicates that the story is still firmly anchored in the deictic center of the teller:

Then, when the maid had left the room, Madame de Rennedon went on: "Well, tell me what it is."

Madame de Grangerie began to cry, shedding those pretty, bright tears which make woman more charming, and she stammered without wiping her eyes, so as not to make them red: "Oh! my dear, what has happened to me is abominable, abominable. I have not slept all night, not a minute; do you hear, not a minute. Here, just feel my heart, how it is beating." (128)⁴⁷

At this point, despite the mention of something "abominable" that "has happened," it is very unlikely that the reader would feel that this is a dramatized analepsis of any kind. The indirect reference to a mysterious recent past functions as a teaser. On the first level (aside from some authorial digressions like "those pretty, bright tears which make woman more charming") the narrator remains mostly discreet, helping the reader immerse themselves into the actuality of the interaction, which is told chronologically as a sequence of events leading to an unpredictable future. On a second level, the immersion into the "abominable" event evoked in the dialogue is impossible, because the narration only produces evaluative statements in a speech saturated

⁴⁷ This translation of "Le Signe" is based on the web edition by eBooks@Adelaide (<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/maupassant/guy/signal/>), nevertheless, several elements have been revised on the basis of the French version published by Gallimard in the "folio classique" edition. All references are given according to the French edition.

with deictic shifters referring to the actuality of the dialogue. So, at this stage, the reader may only experience a “speech-imagery” of the narrative to come, while “enactment-imagery” in this embedded story is still impossible (or more exactly, it refers to the situation involving the narrator, Madame de Grangerie, and her narratee, Madame de Rennedon). Later, the teller begins a longer monologue, introducing many elements helping the narratee (and the authorial audience likewise) to build a new space-time frame.

It happened to me yesterday during the day ... at about four o'clock ... or half-past four. I don't know exactly. You know my apartments well, you know that my little drawing-room on the first floor, the one where I always sit, looks onto the Rue Saint-Lazare; and that I love to sit at the window to look at the people passing by. The neighborhood of the railway station is very gay; so full of motion and lively ... That is exactly what I like! So, yesterday, I was sitting in the low chair which I had placed in my window recess; the window was open and I was not thinking of anything; I was breathing in the fresh air. You remember how fine it was yesterday! (128–29)

At this stage, we have the definition of a specific moment that took place the day before, a detailed description of the weather, the protagonist's situation, and the animation of the street. Thus, the reader is pushed into a frame distinct from the discursive interaction and is invited to visualize the scene. But the embedded narrative is still blended with digressions, deictic shifters, and oral expressions, so it is difficult to completely forget the discursive interaction. In other words, we notice the tension between two different time frames: a “speech-imagery” orienting the attention towards the ongoing conversation (that produces a POP effect) and a “visual-imagery” referring to the object of the conversation

(that favors a mild PUSH effect). Nevertheless, after the context has been built, a new threshold is crossed with the mention of a singular event that captured the attention of the protagonist:

Suddenly, on the other side of the street, I notice that there is also a woman at the window, a woman in red; I was in mauve, you know, my pretty mauve costume. I did not know the woman, she is a new lodger who has been there for a month, and as it has been raining for the past month, I had not yet seen her, but I saw immediately that she was a bad girl. At first I was very much shocked and disgusted that she should be at the window like I was; and then, by degrees, it amused me to examine her. She was resting her elbows on the window ledge, and looking at the men, and the men looked at her also, all or nearly all. One might have said that they were apprised beforehand by some means as they got near the house, which they scented as dogs scent game, for they suddenly raised their heads, and exchanged a swift look with her, a freemason's look. Hers said: "Will you?" (129–30)

At this stage, most deictic elements have receded, even though some do remain ("you know," "it has been raining for the past month"), but we have a more precise account of a series of events happening one after the other. Note also the salient use of a present tense now referring to the actuality of the story told ("I *notice* that there *is* also a woman at the window"). In this case, the author imitates a classic figure used in conversational narratives in order to dramatize the events told, just like Captain Haddock when he pretends that "The year is 1698." Soon after, the French version of the dialogue switches for the first time to the *passé simple*, which is a way, as Benveniste has shown, to accentuate the autonomy of the story from the discursive interaction: "Je *m'aperçus* tout de

suite que c'était une mauvaise fille. D'abord je *fus* dégoûtée et très choquée" (130). This effect is specific to French, because a narrator can choose to tell the main actions of a story using the *passé simple* or the *passé composé*, the latter not being limited to the expression of completed actions. When a story is told with the *passé composé*, the narrator signals the existence of a stronger bond between past and present, thus diminishing for the audience the possibility of forgetting the discursive interaction.⁴⁸

Also, notice that the narrator focalizes the story through the inner perspective of the woman in red, referring to her thoughts and visual experience of the scene. The focalization culminates with the direct speech: "Will you?" that corresponds to the way the protagonist is mentally interpreting the behavior of her neighbor. No doubt that, at this stage, the immersion in the storyworld has dramatically increased, reaching the point of "enactment-imagery." Even though some traces of the discursive interaction remain in the background, the main deictic center has now switched to the day before.

My primary aim was to examine the verbal strategies employed to dramatize the shifts from one space-time framework to another; yet it is also worth asking what purpose these gradual transitions serve: why did Maupassant not simply opt for an abrupt switch from the narrator's context to that of the adventure she recounts, maintaining the same impersonal style across both narrative levels? The naturalist

⁴⁸ *Passé simple* was often found in dialogues in novels until the mid-19th century, because authors followed a rule popularized by grammarians that specified that the tense should be used if the speech refers to an event that happened more than twenty-four hours ago. In practice, the use of *passé simple* in oral narratives receded from the late seventeenth century, and almost completely disappeared in the middle of the nineteenth century. As Maupassant's short story was published in 1886, we can consider this use of *passé simple* as unnatural, also because the story happened fewer than twenty-four hours ago. In this case, the author seems to sacrifice realism for increased immersion into the story.

aesthetic may have led him to pursue a heightened reality effect by imitating the oral qualities of the teller's performance—marked by deictic markers, frequent direct addresses to the narratee, and the fleeting use of the *passé composé* and the present tense. Yet this gradual fading can also be read as producing an ethical effect: by foregrounding the distance between the implied author and the embedded narrator, these progressive transitions invite a more detached reception of the social values articulated by the character.

In this case, the embedded story tells how Madame de Grangerie, a married aristocrat, sleeps with a stranger, after imitating the gesture of a prostitute she saw across the street. In her story, she pretends that her gesture was just an imitation game and that it was not really intended to invite a passerby to come up to her room. Yet, a man in the street, described as “a tall, fair, very good-looking fellow” (133), reacts to the gesture by visiting her. He insists on fulfilling the “transaction” despite the protestations of the Baroness. In her version, she says that she had to sleep with her “customer” only because she was afraid that he might stay until her husband returned.

Just then the clock starts striking five, and Raoul comes home every day at half past! Suppose he were to come home before the other had gone, just imagine! Then ... then ... I lost my head ... completely lost my head ... I thought ... I thought ... that ... that ... the best thing ... would be ... would be to get rid of the man ... as quickly as possible ... The sooner it was over ... you understand ... and ... and so ... since I had to ... and I was obliged, my dear ... he would not have gone away otherwise ... So I ... I locked the drawing-room door ... There! (135)

It is interesting to note that this part of the story is again saturated with deictics and oral markers (hesitations,

unfinished sentences, etc.) that have a POP effect by once again focusing the attention on the discursive interaction situated in the first-degree narrative. We can also notice the use of tenses that match the fade-in sequence: in the original version, the narrator switches from the simple past to the simple present (“et voilà la pendule qui se *met* à sonner cinq heure”), and then to a series of *passé composé*: “j’ai perdu la tête,” “j’ai pensé,” “j’ai mis le verrou” (135, my emphasis). Although this sequence of events could be seen as the climax of the story, it is actually a kind of fade-out sequence. Here, the ellipsis are supposed to express shame and remorse. She claims that her actions were motivated solely by a desire to preserve her reputation, rather than by any temptation to engage in an extramarital affair. Yet when measured against the values upheld by the implied author, this account appears highly unreliable. Her guilt appears hypocritical through a series of indirect cues (for example, the way she describes the “good-looking fellow”), and because it is shown that Madame de Grangerie mostly fears the consequences of her act—her “client” has said he would come back the next day for another transaction.

Thus, at the end of the story, the pragmatic advice and the cynical comments given by Madame de Rennedon—who maintained a virtual presence throughout due to the deictic shifters addressed to her—convey the traces of the irony of an implied author:⁴⁹

“There is something that worries me very much ... very much indeed ... He left two twenty-franc pieces on the mantelpiece.” “Two twenty-franc pieces?” “Yes.” “That’s all?” “Yes.” “That is not much. I would be ashamed by that.

⁴⁹ In a recent article (submitted), I revisit this short story to interrogate its ethical implications, since, despite Maupassant’s narrative staging, Madame de Grangerie is still the victim of sexual violence: her “client” has intercourse with her despite her repeated protests.

And?" "So, what am I to do with the money?"

The little Marchioness hesitated for a few seconds, and then she replied in a serious voice:

"My dear ... you should ... you should get your husband a little present ... It's only fair!" (137)

Dramatizing time shifts

I have identified two different ways of manipulating the chronology of the story, linked to two different figures and leading to variable functions in narrative interpretation.

(1) *Undramatized* or *allusive analepsis* corresponds to information concerning a story's past conveyed through indirect hints or allusive discourse, at the exclusion of dramatized analepsis as described below. In visual narratives, undramatized analepsis can take the form of a verbally "recounted past," but it can also include visual cues, as in the opening scene of *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), where a tracking shot shows a leg in plaster with a message on it and a series of photographs on a desk, allowing us to understand the background story of the protagonist. While undramatized analepsis can play a fundamental role for narrative interpretation, it does not produce an immersion into the past, and consequently, the storyworld is perceived by the audience as if it was following the natural order of chronology, even when the interpreter mentally reconstructs an event that will never be "shown on the screen," as in *Le Passé* by Ashgar Farhadi. In verbal narratives, isolated evocations of the past using past perfect or present perfect tenses can be considered as undramatized analepsis.

(2) *Dramatized analepsis* corresponds to flashbacks in graphic or audio-visual narratives (comics or movies), but the concept can be widened to verbal media and literature if we consider instances of the reader experiencing a shift from

one space-time frame to another.⁵⁰ It involves some kind of *enactment* of the past, which alters the linear unfolding of the fabula. In visual narratives, enactment minimally requires the showing of the new space-time situation. In verbal narratives, enactment can be based on an embedded discourse involving some prototypical ingredients of narrativity. This reorganization of the chronological order of the narration can be related to the operation of a discreet authorial narrator or to the telling act of a character staged by a first-degree narrative.

The transition from one space-time to another can be immediate or gradual, but it always involves some kind of immersion into the storyworld situated in the past. A *fading effect* is realized when the act of telling is staged in the beginning of the sequence, for example, by using a *voiceover* in audio-visual representation or a *recitative* in graphic narratives, but also deictic or oral markers, digressions, and subjective or expressive modalities associated with the teller in the context of a verbal narrative. The shift is completed as references to the discursive act recede, and the audience becomes immersed in a new storyworld where the storyline is autonomous from the original situation. In movies, the long monologue of a character whose discourse possesses a high degree of narrativity could produce a *mild* example of a verbal dramatized analepsis, but the image showing the narrator prevents us from completely forgetting the context of the narrative act.⁵¹ It is possible for a story to be narrated

⁵⁰ Susan S. Lanser and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (2022) prefer to describe such cases in terms of a shift in chronotope. However, as Hans Färnlöf has explained (2007), this concept, borrowed from Bakhtin, carries symbolic implications far deeper than a mere reference to a spatio-temporal framework.

⁵¹ These monologues are more frequent in drama, since the media has limited possibilities for representing the past. We find examples in *Antigone* (death of Hæmon) and in *Ædipus Rex* (mutilation of Ædipus) by Sophocles, also in *Phèdre* by Racine, with Theramene's narration.

chronologically using the alternance of recounting (undramatized analepsis) and enactment (dramatized analepsis), as in the fight between Chevalier de Hadoque and Rackham le Rouge. A similar effect can be achieved in verbal narratives: in *Manon Lescaut*, in the middle of the novel, the narration briefly returns to the description of the interaction between Des Grieux and Renoncour, before the former describes the end of his tragic romance.

A comparable distinction could be drawn in the case of prolepsis and flashforwards; however, the latter introduce an additional layer of complexity due to the tension between whether the future depicted is already accomplished or merely projected. In other words, an evocation of the future may refer either to a simple narrative potentiality—such as a plan or a desire—or to an anticipatory presentation of what will in fact come to pass. In the latter case, exemplified by the narrative anticipations interwoven throughout Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, one could legitimately wonder whether the greater part of the narrative should be regarded as a massive flashback relative to a later narrative situation from which the story is recounted. Alternatively, as in the television series *Lost*, it may be possible to identify a principal narrative thread—namely, the chronological sequence of events on the island—punctuated by excursions into the past or future in the form of flashbacks and flashforwards situated outside of this main timeframe. It should also be noted that when a narrative representation dramatizes disruptions in chronological order, time itself becomes relative; consequently, the hierarchy between a present—associated with a timeline designated as primary—and various excursions into a subordinate past or future becomes crucial for categorizing segments of the narrative as flashbacks or flashforwards.

When it comes to future events that remain mere narrative potentialities, the possibility of dramatization nonetheless persists, as is strikingly illustrated by the final confrontation

in the *Twilight* saga or, more prosaically, by the frequent use in television series of brief flashforwards depicting characters' mental projections (see, for example, the series *Based on a True Story*, 2023). Another dramatic example can be found in the final scene of Vincent Gallo's *Buffalo '66* (1998), in which the protagonist commits a murder—only for the audience to discover that this act was merely the projection of a possible future imagined by the main character, who ultimately opts for a happier ending. Such dramatized prolepses are frequently employed without their speculative nature being immediately disclosed to the viewer; consequently, they initially appear as a straightforward continuation of the plot's chronological development, until a subsequent return to the present moment prompts a re-evaluation of the temporal status of what has been shown.

This redefinition of time distortions aims to show that intermedial analysis can help us renew our understanding of narrative concepts, not only by adapting the tools developed for the analysis of literary narratives to their visual counterparts, but also, in return, by using this detour to rethink some fundamental narratological concepts. My aim was not to claim that there are no differences between media. Indeed, I agree with Brian Henderson when he claims that “film's multi-channelled textuality raises durational problems, and opportunities, not found in literature. Image, dialogue, voice-over, music, sound effects, and written materials may contribute, complementarily or redundantly, to a single duration; or they may create multiple, simultaneous, or contradictory temporalities” (1983, 9). But, like Werner Wolf, I am convinced that an “intermedial approach can [...] help to avoid one-sided generalizations which could be observed in previous mono-medial research, be it focused exclusively on verbal texts (as has been the case in literary studies) or on the visual arts (as has been the practice of most scholars of art)” (193). I have tried to show that a combination of theories

dealing with embodied cognition and linked with precise linguistic tools offer new perspectives for further analysis of dramatized time distortions and, in general, of immersion and enactment in verbal narratives.⁵²

⁵² I am grateful to Anaïs Goudmand, Emma Kafalenos, Karin Kukkonen, James Phelan, and Eyal Segal. Their precious comments helped me to improve this chapter.

Scenes and Summary: Dramatizing Rhythm*

A narratological inquiry into the experience of narrative pace—whether perceived as slow or rapid—inevitably raises the question of whether the tools of structural narratology suffice to account for effects of acceleration and deceleration, and whether it might be fruitful to reconsider these tools in light of recent developments in rhetorical and cognitive narratology. This new field of investigation for narratology has been opened by Kathryn Hume in her seminal article “Narrative Speed in Contemporary Fiction.” As she explains, while narrative theory has mostly been concerned with the exploration of “retarding techniques”⁵³ and with the attempt

* This chapter is a substantially revised version of an article previously published and reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher. The original reference was: Baroni, Raphaël. 2024. “Summaries and Scenes as Decelerators and Accelerators of Narrative Speed.” In *Slow Narrative Across Media*, edited by Marco Caracciolo and Ella Mingazova, 35–52. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

⁵³ On this aspect, Kathryn Hume mentions the work of Viktor Shklovsky, but we could extend her discussion to the way Barthes discusses the “delays” associated with the “hermeneutic code” (1974, 75) or the functioning of “catalyses” (1975, 248).

“to describe speed in numeric terms so that texts could be compared mathematically” (2005, 106), these approaches have so far failed to give a satisfactory explanation for the fact that

many contemporary novels subject their readers to a breathless sense that events are hurtling past too quickly for real understanding. Scenes and focal figures change rapidly, and helpful transitions are missing. The resultant feeling of excessive rapidity is what I mean by narrative speed. (Hume 2005, 105)

When Hume attempts to highlight the techniques used for generating this kind of excessive “narrative speed,” she considers that the structuralist opposition between scene and summary “does not explain the contemporary phenomenon” (Hume 2005, 106). To illustrate her point, she mentions the case of Robert Coover’s *Gerald’s Party*:

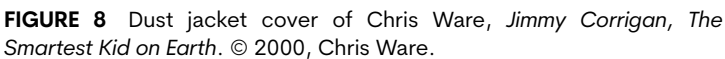
Coover achieves the effect of uncomfortable and even upsetting speed in a three-hundred-plus page novel that covers roughly a dozen hours or very approximately two and a half minutes’ action per page. *Gerald’s Party* is very slow in Genette’s terms, but not in readers’ experience of that text. (Hume 2005, 106)

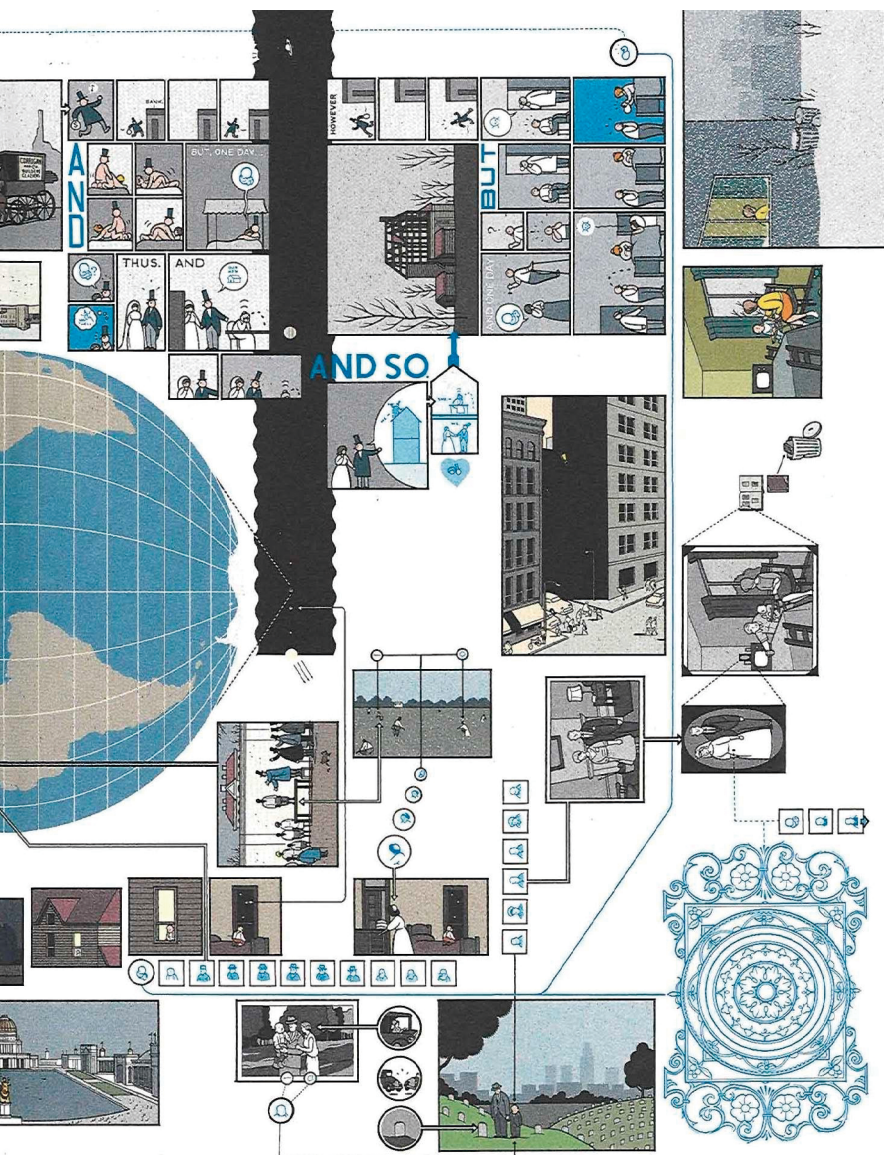
On the same basis, Karin Kukkonen concludes that the “organization of time in narrative and its reorganization in (especially literary) narrative has [...] relatively little to say about a fundamental way in which we experience time, namely, speed” (2020a, 74). It seems that we are confronted with a paradox, insofar as an effect of acceleration results from the suppression of summaries, which are, however, supposed to constitute the passages in which the narrative progresses most quickly. What seems to be a paradox is actually

a very common phenomenon, even in classical forms of storytelling. If we take the case of graphic narratives, it is easy to show that some of the longest formats, including manga series, usually offer the fastest reading experiences. For instance, in *Monster* by Naoki Urasawa, a single action scene, such as an assassination attempt in a library, can spread over seventeen chapters and more than 130 pages, while constituting one of the most intense sequences of the story.⁵⁴ This kind of narrative strategy contrasts with the extremely slow pace generally associated with Chris Ware's graphic novels, where the contemplation of a single page can sometimes take dozens of minutes if one hopes to grasp all the details spread out over its surface. For instance, the external cover of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (Figure 8) can be seen as a *summary* of the entire storyworld through a complex network of micronarratives distributed on a world's map; these narratives relate to several generations of migrants and to the fate of the protagonist's family. In these two examples, we see that a detailed scene can correlate with a feeling of speed for someone plunged into the flow of the narrative, while an extremely distant representation of the storyworld, not only spatially, but also temporally, can be seen to induce a very slow reading experience.

Notwithstanding the apparent paradox noted by Hume, the distinction between scene and summary remains a valuable heuristic tool for describing the narrative techniques that shape a story's pace. Following Kukkonen, I contend in this chapter that plot dynamics constitute a crucial factor in generating effects of narrative acceleration and deceleration. However, in contrast to her position, I aim to show

⁵⁴ I refer to chapters 68 to 75 of the fifth volume in the French edition, where the protagonist, Kenzo Tenma, attempts to kill his nemesis. The whole scene covers only a couple of hours in the temporality of the storyworld, but it is mixed with a series of flashbacks and intercalated with various sequences focusing on other characters.





that suspense—and the specific form of acceleration associated with this narrative interest—fundamentally depends on a scenic mode of representation. As Genette explains,

the contrast of tempo between detailed scene and summary almost always reflects a contrast of content between dramatic and nondramatic, the strong periods of the action coinciding with the most intense moments of the narrative while the weak periods were summed up with large strokes and as if from a great distance [...]. The real rhythm of the novelistic canon, still very perceptible in *Bovary*, is thus the alternation of nondramatic summaries, functioning as waiting room and liaison, with dramatic scenes whose role in the action is decisive. (1980, 109–110)

One might be tempted to conclude that only thematic units govern the narrative's pace. Yet I would argue that the contrast between the "detailed" presentation characteristic of scenes and the "great distance" typical of summaries plays a significant role in explaining the relationship between the depth of the narration and the perceived effects of speed or slowness during reading. In this context, as in the previous chapter, the notion of narrative depth should be understood as the narrative's ability to create an immersive experience for the reader within the storyworld.

As Alison Griffiths puts it, immersion entails "the sense of being present in a scene, the cognitive dissonance that comes from feeling like you're elsewhere while knowing that you haven't moved and forgetting for a moment about the mediating effect of the technology" (2008, 4). Drawing on this understanding of the imaginary process of displacement within a narrative universe, I propose a reconceptualization of the opposition between scene and summary, arguing that their fundamental distinction may not lie in their

temporal span, as structuralist theory suggests, but rather in the degree of immersion they produce. The polysemy of the term *scene* also highlights the fact that narrative immersion involves not only a temporal dimension, but also a spatial and emotional one, as Ryan (2001, 121) points out.

We can find an initial indication of this approach in Hume's own argumentation when she explains the excessive rapidity of some contemporary novels as being due to a lack of "helpful transitions." On this point, Hume would probably agree with Genette that a summary often has the function of "waiting room and liaison" between "dramatic scenes" (Genette 1980, 109). Therefore, when *summaries* are missing—as well as when *explanations* and *descriptions* are insufficient—the pace of the narrative seems too rapid. Summaries typically entail a temporary reduction of dramatic tension in the unfolding narrative, yet they may also function as preparatory devices that enable a subsequent and rewarding acceleration of narrative pace.

Therefore, when encountering narrative slowness and seeking to interpret it through a narratological lens, the initial question should be whether this slowness is produced by means of summary—offering a distanced representation of the storyworld—or through immersion in a scene characterized by a low degree of *eventfulness*. Conversely, when confronted with a rapid sequence, one might ask whether the effect of speed arises solely from thematic factors or whether the scenic depiction of a suspenseful event also contributes to accelerating the narrative's pace. In this respect, my aim aligns with Kukkonen's in being both narrower and more ambitious than the perspective outlined by Hume: rather than investigating the political or social implications of particular narrative speeds, I seek to identify what I regard as the fundamental parameters for a poetics of narrative rhythm—both its acceleration and its deceleration.

A difference in depth between scene and summary

One might imagine that examining readers' experience of speed would necessarily lead to idiosyncratic descriptions of singular aesthetic experiences, but instead Hume invites us to explore the "narrative techniques" (2005, 107) used by authors to build a feeling of rapidity in contemporary fiction. As such, her approach can be labeled "rhetorical," because she is considering how specific narrative parameters can be strategically used by an author to modulate reading pace. In her discussion with Baetens, Hume outlines three main categories of speed-setting techniques: thematic, stylistic, and narrative (Baetens and Hume 2006, 351). However, as Kukkonen explains, by focusing exclusively on elements resulting in a loss of comprehension and, consequently, an acceleration in modern forms of storytelling, Hume overlooks the fundamental parameters influencing the pace of a narrative. Therefore, while basing my discussion on the same tripartition proposed by Hume, I will attempt to provide a more comprehensive description.

1. *Thematic components*: The *content of the storyworld* has a direct impact on the speed of the narration. Kukkonen mentions, for instance, what she calls "storyworld speed," namely "the speed with which characters move in the fictional world" (2020a, 74). More fundamentally, a narrative situation functions as an accelerator when it exhibits a high degree of eventfulness, when its progression remains unpredictable, or when its origin or nature is shrouded in mystery. Conversely, the depiction of stillness, routine, or boredom generates precisely the opposite effect.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ On the aesthetics of boredom, especially in Chris Ware's narratives, see Schneider (2016).

2. *Stylistic components*: The pace of a narrative artifact is also fundamentally determined by the material organization of its medium. In verbal narratives, this encompasses the rhythm of sentences as well as the coherence and linkage between them. While a very long sentence with complex syntax may slow down the reading process, as in novels by Marcel Proust, the hectic juxtaposition of unconnected short sentences may produce the opposite effect. In other media, film editing (or the organization of a page layout in a graphic narrative) may play the same role. Kukkonen (2020a, 80) also mentions segmentation into installments, episodes, or chapters, which confers a slower or faster rhythm to the narrative.
3. *Narrative components*: It is possible to single out some *narrative structures* affecting the pace of the reading experience, such as the contrast between *scene* and *summary*, or the dynamics of *emplotment*.⁵⁶ For example, although suspense is intimately connected to the eventfulness of thematic elements, it also relies on the narrative artifact's ability to immerse the reader in the storyworld and, as already explored in the first part of this book, on the discourse's deliberate withholding or delayed revelation of the outcome of events. I thus regard narrative suspense as the most potent accelerator within a narrative, even though curiosity can also serve to enhance the pace

⁵⁶ In her cognitive conception of plot dynamics, Kukkonen foregrounds what she calls "probability design." She differentiates "first-order plot [events], transforming the overall probabilities for the progress of the narrative, accelerating plot speed" and "second-order plot [events] that leads readers to reinterpret several previous plot events and the way in which they generate plot speed, turning them from decelerations into accelerations" (Kukkonen 2020: 5). Meir Sternberg also considers suspense, curiosity, and surprise as basic elements of his definition of narrativity.

of progression, albeit often through a more distanced mode of storyworld representation.

In order to show how the opposition between *scene* and *summary* can help us to highlight some crucial mechanisms of acceleration or deceleration, we must also redefine this pair of concepts on a cognitive basis.⁵⁷ As in the previous chapter, I borrow Mary Galbraith's terminology (1995, 47) to define different levels of immersion, with the term PUSH for a deeper form of narrative representation and POP for the opposite movement. In her conception, POPs and PUSHes are related to transitions from a narrative level to another deeper or higher level, as in flashbacks or dream sequences: while a PUSH movement indicates that the reader is moving from a superficial layer of narrative to a deeper layer (e.g., immersing themselves in a fiction, or in a flashback or embedded narrative within the fiction), the POP movement indicates a movement of emersion and the return to a more superficial layer. I propose to extend the use of this terminology to describe different degrees of immersion remaining on the same level of the storyworld. In my view, passing from a *scene* to a *summary* produces a POP effect, because we are distancing ourselves from a state of maximum immersion, while passing from a *summary* to a *scene* could be viewed as a PUSH effect, because we are dragged deeper into the flow of the events told with the help of several narrative techniques: vivid descriptions, direct dialogue, display of character's perceptions, emotions, or thoughts, etc.

When Seymour Chatman explains how cinema can produce a *summary* effect, he mentions "a collection of shots showing selected aspects of an event or sequence usually

⁵⁷ In another context, but on the same basis, I have discussed the necessity for distinguishing between allusive and dramatized analepsis and prolepsis (Baroni, "Dramatized Analepsis").

integrated by continuous music" (1978, 69). A prototypical example of this type of "montage-sequence" is found in *Rocky Balboa* during the protagonist's training for his match in the first film of the series. In this sequence, each shot functions iteratively, while intradiegetic sounds and dialogue are supplanted by the iconic track *Gonna Fly Now* composed by Bill Conti. Consequently, the sequence offers a more distanced mode of representing the storyworld and produces a perceptible POP effect. This, however, does not entail any diminution of dramatic intensity, as the character is depicted running, and the vigorous music, together with the quick succession of shots, imparts significant dynamism to the sequence. Yet no significant event capable of altering the narrative's trajectory—such as an accident during training—is likely to occur in this segment; if such an event were to arise, it would necessitate integration within a more immersive scene.

We can once again use the model developed by Anežka Kuzmičová (2014) to distinguish between different levels of immersion. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in verbal narratives, the most superficial levels of immersion involve a focus on the verbal qualities of the text, while at deeper levels, one might have the feeling of participating in the action. Kuzmičová associates these different levels of immersion to specific aspects of the narrative discourse, such as *digressions* for the most distanced form of speech-imagery, *descriptions* for perceptual imagery, and *narration* for the deeper level of enactment-imagery. While Kuzmičová does not mention the opposition between *summary* and *scene*, she mentions the importance of *pause* for "description-imagery."⁵⁸ Building on this model, I propose that a *scene* is a narration designed to

⁵⁸ Kuzmičová notes that "to the extent that description is noticeable as a pause in narrative, a description-image is not always organically situated (in contrast with enactment-images) with respect to the preceding flow of reading experience. It may rather be perceived as a semi-autonomous experience" (284).

produce *enactment-images*—that is, a form of aesthetic experience in which the reader imagines themselves acting within the storyworld—while in *summary* the events are told in a remote way, thus preventing a detailed experiential representation from being produced. We cannot associate *summaries* with a specific form of mental imagery, but we can consider that they produce a mild POP effect when used as a “liaison” between two immersive scenes.⁵⁹ In this case, the narration refers to actions, but it does not achieve full immersion, because some details are lacking or other elements build obstacles, like the extradiegetic music in *Rocky* that replaces the intradiegetic sounds of the storyworld.

A distanced way of telling can fulfil important functions, some of which are fundamental for plot dynamics. A distant telling of background events can serve, for instance, as a “helpful transition” or “retroactive explanation,” to use Hume’s words. Summary is also a necessary adjunct to narration and description, as iterative behaviors or habits cannot usually be rendered in a scenic form, and descriptions are more directly concerned with static elements of the storyworld. Indeed, a summary may at times be regarded as an integral component of a description, and in other instances, description can be embedded within a scene without being perceived as a distinct narrative element. We can find more salient forms of summaries when they cover, in a distant and non-immersive way, some significant portions of the story, as on the cover of *Jimmy Corrigan*. When they serve as transitions, or “waiting rooms,” salient summaries are likely to be found in the exposition phase of a narrative, or at the beginning of different segments (a chapter, an episode, etc.).

⁵⁹ A full POP effect would result in a change of narrative level, as described by Galbraith when she mentions flashbacks, the interruption of a reading, or the awakening from a dream.

Finally, in traditional forms of storytelling, the distanced segments associated with summaries often serve to refine the profile of narrative arcs, as they highlight the contrasts between “weak” and “strong periods” in the narrative progression. If each event were mentioned at the same level of detail, thus providing a continuous form of enactment-imagery, it would be difficult to assess their relative importance and how they contribute to illustrating the story’s point. In a movie, for instance, the end of a summary indicated by the return of intradiegetic sounds after a “montage-sequence” almost automatically builds the expectation that a dramatic event will occur in a close future.

On this cognitive basis, we can reconceptualize the opposition between summary and scene, the fundamental difference being the relative distance in the way events are depicted, and consequently, it is only in scenes that enactment-images can be fully experienced in the reader’s mind.

- *Summary*: the narration does not offer full immersion, because it serves other means, such as describing routines, preparing a scene or retrospectively explaining its missing elements. If a summary makes a transition between two scenes, it produces an ephemeral POP effect.
- *Scene*: the narration furnishes enough details to induce enactment-imagery. A scenic representation is a necessary ingredient for arousing narrative suspense, but there are also scenes in which very little happens, and therefore their function is to provoke an aesthetic feeling linked to this vacuity, which can range from contemplation to boredom.

Although scenic representation is not invariably linked to rapid pace, it is worth noting that it remains essential for generating suspense—an effect that constitutes one of the primary means by which an author can accelerate narrative

tempo, since experiencing narrative tension presupposes the reader's engagement in an unpredictable chain of events.

Correlation between acceleration and scenic representation in a short story by Maupassant

To substantiate my argument, I shall briefly examine Maupassant's short story *Le Tic* (first published in 1884), which illustrates the techniques of emplotment characteristic of nineteenth-century fiction. The beginning, with its presentation of a realistic environment, piques the interest of the audience and induces a feeling of curiosity. The story then accelerates gently until reaching a horrific scene of pure suspense, largely inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Without parodying or simply recasting Poe's narrative, this story is the paradigm of a thriller, offering an almost explicit reflection on its own effects on the audience.

The opening paragraph is an interesting example of a *scene*, but one that develops at a relatively slow pace. The narrator describes an evening meal in a hotel, portrayed as a single event, as outlined by the use of the *passé simple* in the original version. The action described seems to indicate a smooth beginning ("the waiters *began* their service *quietly*"), and the paragraph remains dominated by the use of the *imparfait* (four occurrences against one *passé simple*).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ In French, the *imparfait* is a tense used for different purposes: it can denote a routine (like the construction "would + infinitive") or refer to the aspect of an unfinished action (like the *past continuous*). It can also refer to background information, sometimes to minor actions or events simultaneous with actions or events considered as more relevant for the progression of the story, the latter being expressed with the *passé simple*. In all cases, the *imparfait* is normally unsuitable for the narration of a succession of important actions linked by causal or intentional links.

The hotel guests slowly entered the dining-room and took their places. In order to give latecomers a chance and thus avoid the trouble of bringing in the dishes a second time, the waiters began their service quietly. The old bathers, the habitués whose season was almost over, glanced up at the door whenever it opened, to see what new faces might appear. (81)

From a formal perspective, several of the essential elements required for visual-imagery are gradually introduced, while no single focal character or deictic center is explicitly established at this point. The actions depicted are to be understood as an exemplary instance of routine, as clarified in the subsequent four paragraphs, which operate as a pause through an extended digression inducing a mild POP effect:

This is the principal distraction of spa towns. People look forward to the dinner hour in order to inspect each day's new arrivals, to find out who they are, what they do, and what they think. We are inhabited by a vague desire, a desire to meet pleasant people, to make agreeable acquaintances, perhaps to embark on a love adventure. In this life of social connections and neighbors, unknown strangers take on immense importance. Curiosity is aroused, sympathy is waiting to be expressed, and sociability is the order of the day. (81)

As the waiters begin their service, the narrative unfolds at a leisurely pace, yet it already seeks to generate interest by establishing a set of expectations for a subsequent scene. Much like the hotel guests, the readers' curiosity is piqued, for in approaching a work of fiction, they naturally anticipate an encounter with new characters and discovering their life stories. True to this expectation, after a lengthy digression, the narrator announces the arrival of two "unknown figures."

So, this evening, as on every other evening, we awaited the appearance of unfamiliar faces. Only two appeared, but they were quite remarkable, a man and a woman—father and daughter. They immediately struck me as being like Edgar Poe characters; and yet there was about them a charm, the charm associated with misfortune. I imagined them as the victims of fate. (82)

At this stage, not only is the event singularized (“this evening”), but an homodiegetic narrator and focal character is gradually constructed, first indirectly, with the use of the first-person plural (“we”), then more directly, with the first-person singular pronoun (“me,” “I”). Most importantly, the description of the arrival of these two characters, described as “Edgar Poe characters,” promises entertaining developments. But the pace of the narrative remains slow, since the eventfulness remains highly contextual and does not lead to dramatic consequences: the actions are still described as routine and even the daughter is characterized by her apathy, as she moves with “extreme slowness.” The protagonist remains passive, serving primarily as an observer, which in turn heightens the descriptive imagery and reinforces the sense of hiatus:

The man was very tall and thin, somewhat stooped, with perfectly white hair, too white for his comparatively youthful physiognomy; and there was in his bearing and in his person that austerity peculiar to Protestants. The daughter, who was probably twenty-four or twenty-five, was small in stature, and was also very thin, very pale, and she had the air of one who was worn out with utter lassitude. We meet people like this from time to time, who seem too weak for the tasks and the needs of daily life, too weak to move about, to walk, to do all that we do every day. She was rather pretty; with a transparent, spiritual

beauty. And she ate with extreme slowness, as if she were almost incapable of moving her arms. (82–83)

This long description of the mysterious couple deepens the visual immersion, giving more flesh to the main characters, while at the same time paving the way for hypothetical developments, including the reason for their mysterious qualities.

They sat facing me, on the opposite side of the table; and I at once noticed that the father suffered from a very singular, nervous twitch.

Whenever he wanted to grasp an object, his hand underwent a sort of zigzag before it succeeded in reaching what it was in search of, and, after some time, this movement annoyed me so I turned aside my head in order not to see it.

I noticed, too, that while eating, the young girl wore a glove on her left hand. (83)

The next phase does not really move the story forward. The style remains consistent with the beginning, and the narrator simply says that, after dinner, he “went for a stroll in the park of the bathing establishment.” Here again, the slowness of the life in “spa towns” is mentioned as part of a long description of this volcanic region of Auvergne:

The “Puy de Dome” is the highest of the domes, the Peak of Sancy is the loftiest of the peaks, and Cantal is the most precipitous of these mountain heights.

It was a very warm evening, and I was walking up and down a shady path, and listening, from a slight rise overlooking the park, to the opening strains played by the casino band.

Suddenly, two elements combine to accelerate the narrative pace and transform it into a *scene*. Coordinated actions are performed, and one is even accompanied by the adjective “sudden,” highlighting the father’s reaction:

And I saw the father and the daughter advancing slowly in my direction. I bowed as one bows to one’s hotel companions in a spa town; and the man, coming to a sudden halt, said to me:

“Could you not, monsieur, suggest a short walk for us, pretty and not too steep; pardon my troubling you?”

Thematically, the actions remain relatively low in eventfulness, but the presence of direct speech is a clear sign of the transition toward a deeper scenic representation, and indeed it opens up the possibility for an explanation for the father’s mysterious twitch. At this point, when the scenic representation is firmly in place and a resolution becomes possible, we find several stylistic signs of acceleration, with sentences becoming shorter and the use of a dense semantic field associated with intensity and speed: “immediately,” “twitching,” “violent,” “nerves” (twice), “suddenly,” “ah!” (twice), “spasm,” “emotion” (twice), “terrible,” “surprise.” While these words do not necessarily increase immersion, they clearly help set this scene in motion by stressing the dramatic value of the narrated event. After discussing the therapeutic qualities of the water, the father goes on to describe his daughter’s condition, and the narrator eagerly takes advantage of this occasion to ask about his hand “spasm”:

Immediately the memory of the violent twitching movement of his hand came to mind, and I asked him:

“But is this not the result of heredity? Are not your own nerves somewhat affected?”

He replied calmly:

"Mine? Oh, no, my nerves have always been very steady."

Then, suddenly, after a pause, he went on:

"Ah! You were alluding to the jerking movement of my hand every time I try to reach for something? This is because of a terrible experience I had. Can you imagine, my daughter was actually buried alive!"

I could only utter, "Ah!" so great were my astonishment and emotion.

The second part of the short story takes the form of an embedded narrative, implying a PUSH into a dramatized analepsis. This sequence, which is roughly the same length as the first part, is characterized by a much faster pace leading to a dramatic scene: the "terrible experience." However, it is preceded by several obvious summaries, which play different narrative functions as we will see. The first occurs before the dramatic scene and serves as a transition. It provides all the necessary information for understanding the scene's starting point:

Here is the story. It is simple. Juliette had been subject for some time to serious heart troubles. We believed that she was suffering from an illness of that organ and were prepared for the worst.

One day she was carried into the house cold, lifeless, dead. She had collapsed in the garden. The doctor confirmed her death. I kept vigil over her for a day and two nights, before laying her with my own hands in the coffin, which I accompanied to the cemetery, where she was deposited in the family vault.

Here, when we compare the two paragraphs, we see that the extent of the summary can vary enormously. The first

paragraph provides information on an undetermined period concerning health issues affecting the daughter, while the second covers a single incident: her apparent death, and its direct consequences over the following days. If the category for a summary was based only on a temporal criterion, it could be said that the second paragraph does not meet the conditions, but the absence of detailed descriptions, or of direct speech, makes it a very distanced narrative, and as such both paragraphs are summary-like. For instance, despite the extremely dramatic nature of the event, no information is provided concerning the emotions felt by the father or the exact circumstances of the daughter's death. These elements are missing because we are only concerned by the consequences of this dramatic incident, which are related to the origin of the twitch. Stylistically, the speed of the pace increases, with shorter, simple sentences, but there is no attempt to build narrative suspense, as the temporal depth is insufficient to achieve this effect. This tragic summary thus functions merely as a transition leading to the main dramatic scene of the embedded narrative.

Things change completely in the next sequence, which describes how the father witnessed the return of his daughter. The temporal scope of the scene is unclear, but we see here that after two short digressive sentences, important stylistic and thematic efforts are made to accentuate the experiential dimension of the events:

You may easily imagine my state of mind when I re-entered our home. She was all I had, for my wife had been dead for many years. I found my way to my own apartment, half-crazed, utterly exhausted, and sank into my easy-chair, without the capacity to think or the strength to move. I was nothing better now than a suffering, vibrating machine, a human being who had, as it were, been flayed alive; my soul was like an open wound.

The sequence develops with a short dialogue between the father and his old valet Prosper, and then, two paragraphs provide more details about that night:

I know not how many hours slipped away. Oh, what a night, what a night! It was cold. My fire had died out in the huge grate; and the wind, the winter wind, an icy wind, a winter hurricane, blew with a regular, sinister noise against the windows.

How many hours slipped away? There I was unable to sleep, powerless, crushed, my eyes wide open, my legs stretched out, my body limp, inanimate, and my mind torpid with despair. Suddenly the great doorbell, the great bell in the vestibule, rang out.

I think we should consider these paragraphs as fully belonging to a *dramatic scene*, because the description serves to bring the reader closer to the narrated event and give access to the father's thoughts and impressions. We see that the narrative, in order to enhance the dramatic dimension of the situation, must provide a great deal of detail, but the scene does not need to specify whether the time covered is short or precisely delineated. Again, in order to differentiate summaries from scenes, there is no need to compare the temporal scope of the events covered by the narrative, or the so-called isochrony between story and discourse; instead, one should assess the degree of detail in a narrative situation and, consequently, its power to build a PUSH or a POP effect. And we can add that in the specific case of Maupassant's story, the obvious PUSH effect is a means of building narrative tension. Indeed, the dramatic return of the daughter, who rings the doorbell, gives rise to a short narration followed by a dialogue sequence. Narrative tension is enhanced again by the semantic field, but also by the explicit formulation of the questions occurring in the father's mind.

Suddenly the great doorbell, the great bell in the vestibule, rang out.

I started so suddenly that my chair cracked under me. The solemn, ponderous sound vibrated through the empty country house as through a vault. I turned round to see what the hour was by the clock. It was just two in the morning. Who could be coming at such an hour?

And, abruptly, the bell again rang twice. The servants, without doubt, were afraid to get up. I took up a candle and descended the stairs. I was on the point of asking: "Who is there?"

Then I felt ashamed of my weakness, and I slowly drew back the heavy bolts. My heart was throbbing wildly. I was frightened. I opened the door brusquely, and in the darkness, I distinguished a white figure, standing erect, something resembling an apparition.

Then, embedded in the discourse of the revenant, a new summary provides an explanation for the reason of the return and for the mysterious glove:

"Do not be afraid, papa," said the apparition. "I was not dead. Somebody tried to steal my rings and cut off one of my fingers; the blood began to flow, and that restored me to life."

The identity of this "somebody" is later revealed when Prosper, the father's valet, falls dead after seeing the daughter resurrected from her grave:

It was he who had opened the vault, who had mutilated and then abandoned my daughter; for he could not efface the traces of the theft. He had not even taken the trouble to put back the coffin into its place, feeling sure, besides, that he would not be suspected by me, as I trusted him absolutely.

Here again the embedded narrator uses a retrospective summary—which can also be qualified as an allusive analepsis—to provide another explanation for the climactic scene. In conclusion, we see how the opposition between a central dramatic scene and various forms of preparatory and explanatory summaries, can help modulate the classic shape of the plot, with a slow scenic beginning and gradual acceleration until reaching a climactic scene of pure suspense.

Scenes as accelerators

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate how a scenic representation can accelerate the pace of a narrative not merely through its dramatic content, but also by heightening suspense via detailed narration that fosters deeper immersion into the storyworld. Indeed, the fundamental function of a scene is to plunge the reader into the events as they unfold, whether by intensifying suspense or, conversely, replicating the tedium experienced by the characters. Chris Ware's comics contain many examples that illustrate the latter case, as in this six-panel page, in which the single "ring" of a telephone, the trajectory of a bird, and a falling drop are the only forms of action.

In both cases, we see that the subjective feeling of acceleration or deceleration relies on the thematic component of the scene, but also on PUSH effects regulating the deepness of immersion in the storyworld. Thus, scenes are *narratively* connected with narrative pace, which can be slow or fast, while in summaries, the distant representation of the storyworld hardly correlates with plot dynamics, as we have seen with the telling of the apparent death of the girl in Maupassant's short story. If summaries can lead to a feeling of acceleration, it is not narratively, but only on the basis of thematic or stylistic components such as the soundtrack composed by Bill Conti in *Rocky*, the fast editing of the shots,



FIGURE 9 Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*, p. 10. © 2000, Chris Ware.

and the physical efforts and speed displayed by the character. In other cases, long summaries, like the cover of *Jimmy Corrigan*, can only slow down the narrative speed. With his extremely distant summaries and his scenes of stillness and boredom, Ware has found two very different ways of decelerating the speed of his graphic novels. Maupassant, instead, offers a classic use of this pair of concepts in his short story, with summaries surrounding a dramatic scene, which is presented as the nexus of the narrative.

Although the sole opposition between scene and summary seems inadequate to describe how a narrative speeds up or slows down, it remains one of the relevant factors influencing the rhythm of reading. But in order to grasp this correlation, it is necessary to rethink this pair of concepts inherited from the structuralist period by approaching it not

from a quantitative perspective—by comparing, for example, the number of words with the duration of events—but from a rhetorical and a cognitive perspective that takes into account the degree of immersion strategically elicited by the representation of the storyworld and its correlation with dramatic tension.

The Musicality of Plot: Dramatizing Duration*

Music, plot, and narrativity

The relations between plot and music are asymmetrical: whereas we can easily speak of a plot's musical qualities,⁶¹ it is harder to envision the plot-like qualities of music—or at least “pure,” or “instrumental,” music.

The “musicality” of narratives, a quality ascribed mainly to their sequential and temporal organization, stems in part from the semiotic properties of the ancestor of verbal narratives: the poem. Indeed, the most ancient narrative works often took the form of verse, sometimes sung and accompanied by instruments—hence Aristotle's claim in *Poetics* that “since [...] imitation comes naturally to us, and melody and rhythm too [...], in the beginning it was those who were

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⁶¹ On the “musicality of plot,” see Wolf (1999).

most gifted in these respects who, developing them little by little, brought the making of poetry into being out of improvisation" (1967, 1448b, 21). More recently, in *Laocoön*, Lessing (1990) reiterated poetry's essential diachrony and thus its kinship with music and its distance from the visual arts, which represent bodies in space rather than actions in time. In his seminal commentary on *Sarrazine*, meanwhile, Barthes does not shy away from treating the codes of the Balzacian novel as a polyphonic partition, adding that "there is the same constraint in the gradual order of melody and in the equally gradual order of the narrative sequence" (1974, 30). Barthes further specifies the existence of "two sequential codes: the revelation of truth [the hermeneutic code] and the coordination of represented actions [the proairetic code]" (1974, 30). It is the proximity between these two means of configuring a plot and musical sequence or melody that I aim to explore in this chapter, suggesting that there is, in this proximity, perhaps more than a simple metaphor.

Still, as I mentioned at the outset, it is much less convincing to describe melody unfolding like a plot than to describe plot unfolding like a melody. For many narratologists, this asymmetry exists because the notion of plot is essentially related to the *story told*—that is, to the chronological and causal order of the narrative signified, which may not necessarily replicate the order presented at the level of the narrative signifier. The problem recalls what the Russian Formalists called the *fabula*–*syuzhet* dialectic, which provides the basis for all forms of anachrony, as seen in Chapter 4. No such duality would seem to capture music, which is *syuzhet* without *fabula*, *signifier* without *signified*; music is a semiotic system liable to elicit in listeners various feelings and reveries without ever referring to anything other than to itself. As Werner Wolf argues: "Music resists the referentiality and representational dimensions of narrative" (2005, 326). For Michael Toolan, meanwhile, music may be made up of more

or less ordered “musical events” (2016, 138) and “music is no less intrinsically sequential than literature. But there seems to be no scope for anachrony (analeptic or proleptic) in purely instrument-based musical forms (sonata, symphony, etc.)” (2016, 131). While music and narrative are evidently both temporal and sequential arts, a musical sequence would seem to depend entirely on the structuration of the *syuzhet*, whereas a narrative sequence—that is, what many narratologists call “plot”—implies the content of the *fabula*. As Toolan continues: “The hardest thing to see [in the relations between music and narrativity], it seems, is the presence or achievement, in the course of those performances or our reception of them, of something describable as plot” (2016, 145).

I wish, however, to question this logic, which depends, after all, on our definition of plot—a notoriously polysemic term and concept in literary criticism and narratology.⁶² In fact it seems to me that if plot, during the formalist and structuralist era, appeared to be constituted essentially by the chronological and causal constitution of the *fabula*, we can now reimagine it under a different theoretical framework, one better attuned to its interactions with and actualization by a recipient, and thus to reconceive of plot in its relations to musical form.

Plot as the interplay of tension and resolution

During narratology’s golden age, structuralist semantics appeared to monopolize the question of sequence and narrativity. Following the method instigated by Vladimir Propp,

⁶² As Hilary Dannenberg puts it: “Many key definitions of narrative hinge on the aspect of temporal sequentiality, and the repeated attempts to redefine the parameters of plot reflect both the centrality and the complexity of the temporal dimension of narratives” (2005, 435).

the starting point for studying plot was the principle that those sequences in which narratives are inscribed could be described by abstracting the essential or invariable actions occurring in the *fabula*, without consideration, at this level of analysis, for how the events were represented in the *syuzhet* or for the dynamics of reading. Later, a new approach arose that focused on analyzing how “narrative discourse” (to cite Genette’s seminal work) can more or less radically shuffle the “simple form” constituted by the *fabula*; yet this approach was not really concerned with plot, the narrative sequence, or the interest it elicits during the reading process. It is therefore uncontroversial to state that the idea at the time (and to some extent still today) was that plot occurs at the level of the *fabula*, and that the only way to configure a narrative is to tell a story in which a “complication” (for example, some kind of “misdeed” or “want”) arises to perturb an initial equilibrium.

Even during this period, however, certain theorists were implicating the reader’s responses in the production of plot. Roland Barthes was aware that “what sings, what flows smoothly, what moves by accidentals, arabesques, and controlled ritardandos through an intelligible progression” was not only the procession of actions and events but also “the series of enigmas, their suspended disclosure, their deferred resolution” (1974, 32). And Tzvetan Todorov, in his typology of detective fiction, identified two aspects of interest, each one serving to configure different kinds of plot:

The first can be called *curiosity*; it proceeds from effect to cause: starting from a certain effect (a corpse and certain clues) we must find its cause (the culprit and his motive). The second form is *suspense*, and here the movement is from cause to effect: we are first shown the causes, the initial *données* (gangsters preparing a heist), and our interest is sustained by the expectation of what will happen, that is, certain effects (corpses, crimes, fights). (Todorov 1977, 229)

Relatedly, in arguing that plot arises from the narration of conflict and the anticipation that is consequently elicited in the reader, Boris Tomashevsky defined “resolution” in relation to location in the *syuzhet* (it is situated “at the end” because it does not awaken “the reader’s anticipation”), and not in the *fabula*:

If a situation containing the conflict furthers the progress of the story, then, since the coexistence of two conflicting forces is impossible, one must inevitably prevail. The later harmonious situation, which does not require further development, will neither evoke nor arouse the reader’s anticipation. That is why the condition at the end of a work is so static. (Tomashevsky 1965, 71)

Thus, if a narrator began narrating a conflict from its resolution, by means of anachrony, the result would not “awaken the reader’s sense of anticipation”; it would not elicit the suspense needed to set a plot in motion. Narrative interest would shift from questions of “what” toward questions of “how,” from *suspense* toward *curiosity*. While the plot might still then be set into motion, it would be in a rather different modality, one closer akin to Barthes’ “hermeneutic code.” In other words, if we put aside the notion that plot must necessarily implicate the level of *story*, it becomes clear that tension and resolution follow each other, in an irreversible order, at the level of *syuzhet* and not *fabula*.⁶³ Granted, a plot can be set into motion by the represented (narrated) conflict

⁶³ It is interesting to note that in the French translation of this essay, the terms “fabula” and “sujet” are clearly distinguished from the term “intrigue,” which is defined strictly by the dynamics of the narrative tension and its resolution. In the original text, Tomashevsky actually uses this borrowing from French, “интрига,” to designate a sequential structure based on the progression of the reader’s interest, which is achieved through a certain combination of *fabula* and *syuzhet*.

itself—that is, by what occurs in the world of the story; in such cases, however, the narrative must at least partially respect the chronology of events and thus create a degree of suspense to be resolved at the sequence's end. What is more, the conflictual nature of events in themselves does not allow us to isolate and identify the necessary and sufficient traits that define *what plot is*; they just happen, in some cases, to present some accidental elements that can, in certain circumstances, instigate a plot.

To put it more simply: in the economy of plot, the essential element is instability, the “dramatic motion” this instability engenders, the “anticipation” it awakens in a reader, spectator or listener, who fumbles along with the narrative until its eventual resolution. And this necessary tension does not inhere necessarily in the narrated action; the repertoire of techniques that can set a plot in motion is vast. One such means, as Barthes and Todorov affirmed, is the interplay of secrets and deferred enigmas. Another involves abrupt or devious digressions from an expected script. What is fundamental in any case is a sort of “reticence,”⁶⁴ in the representation, the withholding of information that some theorists have discussed in terms of deferral, deviation, discordance, or dissonance. By refusing to get right to the point (the ending) or to follow the expected discursive paths, the narrator, instead of resolving the external tension concerning “what happened,” elicits a tension internal to the act of narration; as a result, the audience must impatiently anticipate the eventual resolution. Discourse time is thus eroticized, through a game of complications, tensions, and potential resolutions.

Rather than being situated in the storyworld, then, plot must be redefined as a mechanism, at the level of the *syuzhet*, that introduces tension into the narrative progression. At least, that's the position taken by Meir Sternberg, James

⁶⁴ This aspect will be discussed in more detail in the third part of this book.

Phelan, and Peter Brooks, albeit with different nuances and terminology. Sternberg (1978) proposed replacing the formal or structural approach to narrative with a functional approach founded on the key emotional engagements of narrativity: suspense, curiosity, and surprise. For Phelan, *progression* (instead of *plot*) reflects the dynamism of narrativity, its tensions or instabilities, the engagement that arises between an intriguing representation and an intrigued recipient, and he postulates that “such movement is given shape and direction by the way in which an author introduces, complicates, and resolves (or fails to resolve) certain instabilities” (Phelan 1989, 15). Similarly attentive to plot’s dynamism, Peter Brooks adopts a Freudian framework that foregrounds plot’s anthropological, psycho-affective function:

Desire is the wish for the end, for fulfillment, but fulfillment must be delayed so that we can understand it in relation to origin and to desire itself [...]. Because it concerns ends in relation to beginnings and the forces that animate the middle in between, Freud’s model is suggestive of what a reader engages when he responds to plot. It images that engagement as essentially dynamic, an interaction with a system of energy which the reader activates. (Brooks 1984, 111–112)

Stressing plot’s “energetic” dimension, Brooks highlights how the effect of the denouement depends directly on the narrator’s previous creation and maintenance of tension, whose resolution then becomes how plot fulfills the “desire” it has elicited. As in the game of *fort-da*⁶⁵, plot’s psycho-dynamic highlights an interplay of drives, its submission to the

⁶⁵ The *Fort-Da* game is a symbolic play observed by Freud where a child masters the anxiety of their mother’s absence by repeatedly staging the disappearance (“Fort”) and return (“Da”) of a wooden reel.

reality principle, which requires deferral and fulfillment, and the release that accompanies the reestablishment of a temporarily concealed form.

Even Ricoeur, for whom plot serves to transmute the “dissonance of our temporal existence” into the “consonance characteristic of narrative” (1984, 139), “emplotment is never the simple triumph of ‘order’” over disorder (1984, 73). Indeed, he writes, “as long as we place the consonance on the side of the narrative and the dissonance on the side of temporality in a unilateral fashion, [...] we miss the properly dialectical character of their relationship” (1984, 139), for “even the paradigm of Greek tragedy makes a place for the upsetting role of *peripeteia*, those contingencies and reversals of fortune that solicit horror and pity” (1984, 73). It follows, then, that Aristotelian *catharsis* should occur at the confluence of a dissonance and a consonance, of a transformation and a configuration; these two incontrovertible dimensions of narrative constitute the very heart of plot’s functioning.

Putting aside formalism in favor of a more functionalist and dynamic perspective, plot avails itself of redefinition: it is not in this view the semantic expression of a narrated action but, rather, a sequence connected, at the level of *narrating* action, by means of intentional dissonance that is embodied in the recipient (reader, spectator, listener) as a feeling of surprise, curiosity, or suspense. This dissonance, which can be understood as the plot’s energy or force, orients the recipient’s attention toward a possible resolution, which itself might constitute the sequence’s possible (though not necessary) closure; the resulting pleasure depends on the more or less tortuous path that has led to the final resolution, as well as on the delays and surprises encountered over the course of the progression. Such a definition is not incompatible with musical form, which can also unfold through the alternation of dissonances and consonances, tensions and resolutions, surprises and expected repetitions. As Wolf asserts, “music

can create suspense by disharmonious passages or excursions into foreign keys [...] before coming to harmonious resolutions or returning to the home key” (2005, 327). In the context of multimedia narratives, furthermore, it is not uncommon for musical dissonances to serve as a means of intensifying the tension and intrigue. In a horror film, for example, ominous music playing over a perfectly black screen is enough to induce a powerful sense of tension and, consequently, to set plot into motion.⁶⁶

Musical plots

In the context of tonal music, the interplay of tension and resolution is evident; it also constitutes, as we have seen, the essential dynamic of plot. In his first Cello Suite in G major, BWV 1007, Johann Sebastian Bach set ups a spectacular case of harmonic tension, “dramatizing” the last bars of the piece just before its perfectly consonant denouement. He does so by means of an ascending chromatic scale that exploits every interval within and outside of the suite’s tonality, a more or less dissonant series of notes that immediately resolves in a succession of arpeggios in the last four bars.



FIGURE 10 Johann Sebastian Bach, excerpts from *Prelude, Cello Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007*. All rights reserved.

⁶⁶ This homology enables Robbe-Grillet (2001: 153) to claim that, fundamentally, music and novel both engage the “practically antagonistic” pleasures of “surprise” and “recognition,” which themselves depend on the play of repetition and novelty, order and disorder, expectation and deferral.

Note how the climax occurs, strategically, in the suite's final bars; this allows the piece to grow gradually more intense and retrospectively to structure the entire progression of the piece. After such intensity, in fact, the listener expects not only to hear some kind of harmonic resolution but also to find closure—without which the piece would effectively fizzle out. Such a “dramatization” of the melodic line, whose effects requires no external referent,⁶⁷ confronts us with what Martá Grabócz calls a delivery system for “grand tension-resolutions and catharses [that can be] felt by any listener” (2007, 250). There is indeed a striking homology, both structural and aesthetic, between this “dramatic” musical progression and the development of narrative tension in adventure novels, as described by Tomashevsky:

The more complicated the conflict within the situation and the stronger the opposing interests of the characters, the greater the *tension* of situation. The increase in tension is proportionate to the proximity of a great change of fortune. Tension is usually achieved by preparing for the change in the situation. Thus in the typical adventure novel the villain, seeking to destroy the hero, constantly has the odds in his favor. He prepares for the hero's defeat, but at the last possible moment, when the hero's downfall seems positively certain, he is unexpectedly saved and the machinations of his enemies frustrated. Such preparation increases the tension [...]. Tension usually reaches its highest point just before the ending. (Tomashevsky 1965, 72)

Baroque music is hardly unique in using deviations from an expected sequence to generate tension; indeed, the

⁶⁷ The title of the piece, for example, refers not to a program but, rather, to the catalog of compositions by Bach, hence “Cello Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007.”

technique echoes throughout music history because the desired effect of such deviations tends to become attenuated as they grow familiar, thereby requiring the development of ever new deviations. In the case of Beethoven, for example, Alain Robbe-Grillet has noted how the composer, by making the resolution of dissonances a general principle, ended up subverting the entire previous tonal system. The next milestone in this evolution, for Robbe-Grillet,

is Wagner, in whose music Bach's system is still present, but in which each chord can now belong to numerous tonalities at once—the so-called “vague harmonies”—preventing listeners from settling into any given tonality or from predicting the return to the starting tonality. Listening to *Tristan*, for example, everything happens as if, from start to finish, one was caught in the perpetual and slightly painful pleasure of permanent deferral, an immense unresolved dissonance. (Robbe-Grillet 156)

Only in serialism has musical sequence apparently freed itself from the desire for resolution, managing to maintain melodic dissonance at the heart of a form whose repetitions need not run through an alternation of tensions and resolutions.⁶⁸ In jazz, meanwhile, even compositions that undergo multiple tonal changes often use a stereotyped harmonic progression with a striking resemblance to the three-act plot described in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1450b). Known as the “ii-V-I progression,” this cadence is named for the succession of chords whose roots progress from the second (supertonic), fifth (dominant), and first (tonic) degrees, in either major or minor keys (in the key of C major, for example, the chord

⁶⁸ By denying from the outset all hope of resolution, such a sequence might destroy the temporal dynamic of melody or, alternatively, allow other sonic elements to reconfigure the stressed and unstressed beats of the composition.

progression would be D minor, G major, C major). In such configurations, jazz soloists often introduce, in their improvisations, strong harmonic tensions on the dominant chord (in our case, G major) by, for example, playing the melodic line on a chromatic scale, on a whole tone scale, or simply by alternating fifths. These tensions, however, are generally resolved by the final chord, on whose arpeggio at least part of the melody comes to be superposed. The tensions between melody and tonality thus help dramatize the ii-V-I progression, but also to structure it. The first chord is effectively essential to the progression because it marks the sequence's opening and determines, *inter alia*, the tonality in relation to which the melody is situated. The second chord—itsself already the site of tension because it includes a minor seventh and a major third—enables a deviation from the tonality and the introduction of the harmonic tension that will mark the middle of the sequence as well as its climax. Finally, the third chord acts as the site of a possible resolution, marking the end of the sequence and the “fulfilment” of the musical tension, which resolves itself in the arpeggio.

Because jazz scores generally feature numerous tonal shifts, which cannot really be predicated from the initial chorus, those ii-V-I sequences are essential for giving a piece its dynamic structure. They allow the audience to navigate their listening experience, to interpret dissonances not as mistakes but, rather, as intentional tensions designed to enhance expressiveness. These stereotyped sequences also facilitate the soloist's improvisations, providing a repertoire of melodic motifs and more or less idiosyncratic phrasings that can be played in different contexts. It is often on the ingeniousness, originality, and even intrepidity of these phrasings that the greatness of a musician or song is judged. The ubiquity of these ternary structures, in classical music as well as in jazz and popular music, reveals the balance between the cycles of a repetitive, invariable structure (which is obviously

necessary for structuring both the production and the reception of musical works) and the interplay of tensions and their resolutions—hence the dynamism of a form that is partially rambling and yet, despite its deviations from expectation, familiar.

The sequence of progressive tension culminating in a climax and followed by some form of resolution can, of course, take many other forms, some of them far more elaborate. Tension can be achieved in many ways, not only through deviation from an expected tonality, or through contrasts between melody and accompaniment; it can also emerge from modulations in volume, from rhythm, from shifts in timbre, and from the possibility of deviating from a score. To illustrate these various means, I now briefly comment on Charles Mingus's *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, probably one of the most “narrative” of instrumental works in modern jazz. Mingus himself describe its structure in narrative terms:

This composition is actually a jazz tone poem because it depicts musically my conception of the modern counterpart of the first man to stand erect – how proud he was, considering himself the “first” to ascend from all fours, pounding his chest and preaching his superiority over the animals still in a prone position. Overcome with self-esteem, he goes out to rule the world, if not the universe, but both his own failure to realize the inevitable emancipation of those he sought to enslave, and his greed in attempting to stand on a false security, deny him not only the right of ever being a man, but finally destroy him completely. Basically the composition can be divided into four movements: (1) evolution, (2) superiority-complex, (3) decline, and (4) destruction.

The first three movements are played in an ABAC form by the group, the alto and tenor together describing the second movement; then each soloist repeats this

form, telling the story in his own way. After the alto solo, the group again plays the original form, except that the third movement now develops into what I have called the fourth movement. The last movement is based on the third, but increases in tempo and intensity and reaches a definite climax, indicating the final destruction in the manner that a dying organism has one last frantic burst of motion before gasping its last breath.

Admittedly, such a composition could be called program music: its narrativity owes a lot to the above-quoted “authorial peritext” from the album’s liner notes. This hypotext could be said to condition how listeners perceive the music, prompting them to *narrativize* it and interpret it as a story. The composition’s title and that of the eponymous album also facilitate a referential reading of the music, as Philippe Carrard (2011) has argued, while the album’s cover art by Julio de Diego plainly tells a visual story: in the style of a cave painting, it sequentially represents a man’s fall from a bipedal to quadrupedal stance.⁶⁹

In the piece itself, however, Mingus is evidently able to use purely musical means to configure a non-referential plot, demonstrating a striking isomorphism between musical narrative progressions. We might even wonder, in this case, whether the plot outlined by Mingus in the liner notes might be derived from the composition’s musical form, rather than the other way round. *Pithecanthropus Erectus* would then constitute, according to the typology proposed by Martá Grabócz, an *internalized* narrative program; in such scenarios, the musical structure assimilates the external narrative program (the subject matter, in the case at hand, suggested

⁶⁹ The image can, of course, be read in two directions: from left to right, it suggests the fall of *Pithecanthropus*, from right to left its ascension to upright posture.



FIGURE 11 Julio de Diego, cover art to the album *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (Atlantic Records, 1956).

by the title, cover art, and liner notes), absorbing it “without compromising its internal (formal) narrativity through this act of integration; on the contrary, the extra-musical subject accommodates itself to the conventional musical form” (2007, 244).⁷⁰ Indeed, the first part of *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, corresponding to the evolution of *Homo erectus* from quadruped to biped, involves a shift from *basso continuo* to what is

⁷⁰ Martá Grabócz defines three modes of musical narrativity: (1) external narrativity (typified by program music); (2) interior or interiorized narrativity; and (3) narrative deep structure, based on the structural principles of Greimasian semiotics (Grabócz 2009, 59–76).

called in jazz *walking bass*. With this shift, the piece begins literally to walk: from repeating each chord's root note, the double-bass frees itself, as it were, and improvises a melodic line whose harmonic progression includes diatonic, chromatic, and arpeggiated movements. Meanwhile, the other instruments, which began by slavishly following a very simple chord chart with no determined melodic line, begin adopting the classic jazz principle of alternation between theme and improvisation; thus the musicians too free themselves from the score.

This drift is initially modest: the soloist's melodic line develops contrapuntally from the accompaniment provided by the other musicians, who remain in the background. The instruments thus evoke a society led by the first man to stand upright and free, a hierarchical society organized around a leader (the soloist) and his subjects (the accompanists). Eventually, however, according to the scenario outlined by Mingus, the accompanists also emancipate themselves, beginning to improvise their own melodic lines, which intermix with the others in a polyphony whose dissonances are increasingly marked. The piece starts approximating free jazz. The heightening of tension is accompanied by an increase in volume and tempo, the ensemble culminating in a deafening, chaotic racket before returning to the initial theme. From this point, the story we can follow in this "interiorized" musical plot is no long solely that of *Homo erectus*; it is also the history of jazz from the emergence of walking bass in the 1920s,⁷¹ through the development of improvised music in its classical form (hierarchical repartition of roles between soloist and accompanists), up to the point when free jazz makes its appearance, in the 1950s, and explodes the preceding structure. Even if the composition's narrativity was

⁷¹ The use of *walking bass* was conventionalized in the 1920s by the double-bassists John Kirby and Walter Page.

initially induced by its title, the cover art, and the authorial peritext of Mingus's evolutionary myth, I am suggesting that these "external" narrative elements are still merely metaphorical, verbal renderings of the composition's internal narrativity and its musical retelling of jazz history (which was, after all, the likely source of the composer's inspiration).

Making time an aesthetic experience

The foregoing argument might suggest an attempt to eradicate all difference between plot and musical sequence, given that both can be defined, fundamentally, as the interplay of tensions and resolutions, the staging of a more or less harmonious or dissonant relation between the repetition of an expected structure and the more or less unpredictable development of a dynamic form. One might even suggest that the quasi-identity of plot and musical sequence arises from an even more elementary phenomenon, thereby shifting the grounds of our attention toward philosophy, anthropology, or cognitive psychology. It could be that plot and melodic line are fundamentally temporal artistic forms that fulfil the anthropological function, among others, of playing back, in aesthetic terms, the elementary, essential, and primordial experience of being in time.

In this view, humans can apprehend temporality only through the psycho-affective experience of alternations between repetition and deviation, tension and resolution, shifts that affect mood more or less dramatically, subtly, brutally, or diffusely, but that in any case prompt cognitive reconfigurations that range from the banal to the creative. At the two extremes of this experience, time becomes abolished: we are confronted either by a progression of fully predictable forms or by chaos, a situation without beginning or end in which temporal experience dissolves into pure duration. On one hand, duration is spatialized by the unchanging repetition

of an invariable form: past, present, and future become equivalent, held together by relations of synchrony and symmetry instead of an irreversible diachronic relation in which actualized, actualization, and actualizable are ontologically distinct. On the other hand, the total absence of landmarks makes time meaningless, the horizons of past and future desperately blank or impenetrably opaque; nothing then can orient our sense of anticipation or attention to passing time. Whether in the over-regimented nine-to-five or in the horror of formlessness, we find time dead of monotony, frozen, sinking into the mud, or falling apart. As we well know, all it takes to put the wheels of time into motion is a public-transit strike or other such disturbance of routine. Then we begin worrying about the future (“Will I arrive on time?”) and perhaps lean onto the mysterious past that has confronted us with an unforeseen consequence. And if the subway does follow the schedule, we can always pass the time by reading a gripping novel, listening to music, or whistling a tune. An unexpected event, as Jerome Bruner argues in “The Narrative Construction of Reality” (1991), is what breaks the monotony of a canonical order, transforming lived experience into a “tellable” story, an inchoate narrativity that invites the creation of a narrative.

So, with apologies to Ricoeur, I would claim that music is, no less than plot, the “guardian of time.” As in narrated action, melody or rhythm offer the possibility of having the fundamental experience of dynamic relations between a *form* and the *forces* it contains. Narrative art and musical art converge to inscribe the tension of existence—which can be fully resolved only in ending—into an aesthetic form whose beauty serves as a balm for the fatal promise that lies on the upcoming horizon. On this threshold we join Nietzsche in his reflection, in the conclusion to *The Birth of Tragedy*, that

music and tragic myth are equally the expression of the Dionysian capacity of a people, and are inseparable from

each other. Both originate in an ultra Apollonian sphere of art; both transfigure a region in the delightful accords of which all dissonance, just like the terrible picture of the world, dies charmingly away; both play with the sting of displeasure, trusting to their most potent magic; both justify thereby the existence even of the “worst world.” [...] If we could conceive an incarnation of dissonance—and what is man but that?—then, to be able to live this dissonance would require a glorious illusion which would spread a veil of beauty over its peculiar nature. This is the true function of Apollo as deity of art: in whose name we comprise all the countless manifestations of the fair realm of illusion, which each moment render life in general worth living and make one impatient for the experience of the next moment. (Nietzsche 1910, 185–86)

To conclude, I would like to suggest that understanding the dynamics of plot in terms of the interplay of dissonance-resolution, as found in musical sequence, is not necessarily to claim that music has intrinsic narrativity.⁷² If there is, after all, an essential difference between musical and narrative sequences, it is the former’s higher degree of abstraction relative to the latter.⁷³ As Robbe-Grillet affirmed, music is a “simpler and therefore more powerful ordered

⁷² On the possibility of musical narrativity, see Nattiez (1990), Wolf (2005, 326–27), Grabócz (2009), Tarasti (2007), and Ryan (2009).

⁷³ Eero Tarasti states that “in the case of the purest musical form—the ‘absolute’ music of the Western art-music tradition—the signification that a work seeks to transmit should be considered in terms of an abstract plot” (2007, 209). What enables Tarasti to connect this “abstract plot” to “signification” is the system of contrary and contradictory oppositions in a Greimasian semiotic square. In my view, I see no interest in “semanticizing” the link between tension and resolution, which is perfectly amenable to articulation without need for any reference to the semiotic square and, indeed, from any semantic meaning; all that is needed is the interplay of (harmonic or rhythmic) repetitions and deviations between pure musical forms.

system than novelistic writing" (2001, 154). In a narrative, plot is always entangled with the more or less mysterious representation of a more or less eventful *story*;⁷⁴ for this reason, the tensions within it are to some degree dependent on a second-degree semiotic production—of an *interpretant* that no longer engages solely the temporality of the *representation* (*representamen*), but also that of the represented *object*.⁷⁵ By contrast, music offers itself as the direct experience of the harmonic and rhythmic tensions and resolutions that are inscribed in the time of performance and is therefore, in this respect, more transparent than literature.

Despite this difference, let us redefine plot—be it direct or indirect, abstract or concrete—not in relation to a narrated story but, rather, as the dynamic formation produced by successive phases of tension and resolution. In this light, plot would no longer constitute the point of divergence between narrative and music but, on the contrary, one of the most visible points of convergence between two fundamentally diachronic semiotic forms. Admittedly, though, ordinary language⁷⁶ tends to understand the *tension* and *resolution* (*dénouement*) of a so-called plot (*intrigue*) to the more or less foregrounded represented events in a *story*. In tonal music,

⁷⁴ If, for Meir Sternberg (1992), plot and, by extension, narrativity are defined dynamically and functionally as the interplay of suspense, curiosity, and surprise, he also insists on the interdependence of sequence at the level of the narrated story (*fabula*) and at the level of the telling (*syuzhet*). This interplay produces three possible configurations: suspense (the narrative is chronologically ordered), curiosity (the narrative belatedly introduces an element of the story that had been partially obscured or withheld, amounting to an anachrony), and surprise (the narrative belatedly introduces an element of the story that had been completely occulted).

⁷⁵ Here, as may be obvious, I am working within the framework of Pierce's semiotics rather than that of Greimas.

⁷⁶ Like John Langshaw Austin, I am convinced that ordinary language does not obscure the debate but, on the contrary, clarifies it by testing it against the lived experience of language.

by contrast, *tension* and *resolution* (here “dénouement” seems like a stretch) can be defined simply in relation to a rhythm, tonality, arpeggio, ostinato, or timbre; if *story* plays any part at all in this sequence (as might be argued for Mingus’s *Pithecanthropus Erectus*), it can only be reconstructed based on paratextual information, or projected onto the piece by listeners conditioned by certain cultural schemata (such as the musical *topoi* discussed by Tarasti and by Grabócz). So why not speak of “musical proto-plots,” just as Nattiez speaks of “proto-narratives” when he addresses the question of musical narrativity? Analyzing such musical proto-plots would at the very least have the virtue of reciprocally clarifying the most paradigmatic cases of narrative musicality. It might also bring to light the underlying nature of their plots, since after all, as Barthes observed, plot is the melody of narrative.

Part 3

Mimetic Storyworlds

Thickness, Inscrutability, and Freedom of Characters*

In narrative theory, looking at the changing relationship between characters and plots is a good way to account for the evolution of the discipline over the years. While debates concerning other issues—such as narrativity, implied author, optional narrator, or focalization—at times appear to have frozen in some kind of Cold War, with front lines that have moved very little over the years, the way we look at the interconnection between fictional entities and plot has changed quite dramatically. This evolution is obvious if we examine a recent discussion between Thomas Pavel and Françoise Lavocat (2016). Asked why she chose to write a book on possible world theory and the difference between fact and fiction,⁷⁷

* This chapter is a substantially revised version of an article previously published and reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher. The original reference was: Baroni, Raphaël. 2021. "How Paradigm Shifts and our Taste for Immersive Stories Have Transformed our Understanding of Plots and Characters." In *Characters and Figures: Conceptual and Critical Approaches*, Carlos Reis & Sara Grünhagen (Eds.), Coimbra: Almedina, 77–97.

⁷⁷ See Lavocat (2016).

Françoise Lavocat recalls how she discovered, in the mid-1990s, the famous essay by Thomas Pavel, *Univers de la fiction*:

One evening in February 1996, which I can remember quite clearly, I began to read *Univers de la fiction*, recommended to me by an analytical philosopher. On the very first page—which mentions Mr. Pickwick—I read that we are allowed to love characters. With this authorization, ten years of structuralism suddenly collapsed. In preparatory school, I had learned that characters were made of paper and that it would be naive to picture them in any other way. In Thomas Pavel's book, I learnt that we are allowed to be naive.⁷⁸

Thomas Pavel replies by saying that, when he began working on possible world theory, in the seventies, he felt quite alone:

This reminds me of the 1970s when the few people who had begun to think about these questions felt somewhat like three or four friends on an excursion into the Rocky Mountains, spending nights in compact tents. Forty years later, studies on fiction seem to have reached the size of a vast metropolis, with enormous skyscrapers. The landscape has changed so much! At the time, we were told that what counted in *Madame Bovary* was the use of free indirect speech. That was certainly not false. Now, I read *Madame Bovary* to follow the life of the characters, to learn, for example, what will become of this foolish woman, who, among other things, buys dresses she cannot afford. We were told that it was silly to read novels simply to understand the plot.

⁷⁸ There is no pagination in this article published online. Our translation.

As expressed by Thomas Pavel and Françoise Lavocat, this evolution appears as a form of regression, or more exactly, a way of reevaluating narrative experiences that were once discarded because they were considered “naïve” or “foolish.” Lavocat argues that the ephemeral success of structuralism partly explains this lack of interest in the character’s mimetic depth and in the study of the emotional commitment of the audience to their destiny. Of course, new paradigms, like reception theory, possible world theory, functionalism, or cognitive sciences, have considerably enriched our understanding of the relation between plot and characters, passing from a desiccated description (to use the words of Wayne C. Booth) to a more vivid and embodied conceptualization (to use popular expressions in contemporary cognitivism). Nevertheless, beyond the constant need for epistemological novelty in academic research, this evolution does not fully explain why so many scholars have decided to change their perspective on fictional characters.

The rejection of referential readings and the marginalization of plot dynamics were also underpinned by ideological considerations. Paradoxically, many narratologists of the 1960s and 1970s harbored a certain mistrust of prototypical narratives, viewing them with political suspicion as inherently conservative forms of storytelling. As a result, immersive narratives, compelling characters, suspenseful scenarios, and captivating mysteries were relegated to the realm of popular culture and denounced as political and commercial instruments designed to alienate readers. In this context, Emma Bovary, for instance, was not regarded as a character with whom readers might identify, but rather as a cautionary figure exemplifying what a reader ought to avoid becoming.

Ultimately, the most striking contrast between a structuralist such as Roland Barthes and scholars like Françoise Lavocat and Thomas Pavel lies in their divergent attitudes toward fictional characters and engaging plots. Lavocat and

Pavel argue that immersion, identification, empathy, curiosity, suspense, and related phenomena are not inherently perilous; on the contrary, they can constitute pleasurable aesthetic experiences that may even yield cognitive or ethical benefits. Under the pressure of postmodernism, not only have the experimental literary works that dismantle plot structures or expose the artificial nature of characters lost their central position in the avant-garde, but also many literary scholars confronted with the desertion of students from their departments suddenly felt impelled to justify the value of literary fiction, as opposed to other kinds of discourse, such as argumentation or scientific explanation.

Yet, I do not claim that every narratologist has now completely lost his or her taste for experimental literary works. As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, the existence of a very vivid branch of contemporary narratology focusing on “unnatural narratives” illustrates this continuing interest in representations that “violate mimetic conventions and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres” (Richardson 2015, 3). Nevertheless, I don’t think that this present-day interest in “unnatural” narratives bears the same anti-mimetic ideology that motivated structuralists some fifty years ago. In the terms of Pierre Bourdieu (1991), even if the orientation seems similar, the posture has changed, because the field has been completely reconfigured.

From structure to mimetic functions and plot dynamics

Both characters and plot are interrelated notions that have evolved considerably, but while the object designated by the former is obvious, the referent of the latter remains subject to a somewhat discouraging polysemy.⁷⁹ I will not attempt

⁷⁹ I discuss this polysemy in Baroni (2017, 25–36).

to argue here that it would be better to adopt what James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz (2012, 57) have called a “maximalist” definition of plot. My aim is to underscore the mutability of a concept that has been variously defined: as a static representation of the story (or *fabula*); as the reconfiguration of the story by narrative discourse (or *syuzhet*); as a strategic interplay between these two sequences designed to generate narrative tension; or—within this same dynamic framework, but from the audience’s perspective—as an evolving story-world, a mental construct shaped by the reader’s progressive engagement.⁸⁰

I leave aside the definition of plot as an equivalent of *syuzhet*, which results from an unfortunate translation of Tomashevsky’s seminal essay, since this is a terminology that most narratologists have now ceased to use. I will rather focus on the opposition between plot as an equivalent of *fabula* and plot as a rhetorical device aimed at creating and resolving tensions in the reading experience, because these opposed definitions provide a good image of how narrative theory has evolved over the past fifty years. Whereas the structuralist tradition was primarily concerned with describing the internal logic of the *fabula*, postclassical narratology has shifted its focus toward readerly dynamics—some scholars emphasizing its rhetorical dimension, others its cognitive processes. Naturally, we will see that this shift has directly influenced the way characters are conceptualized, since it is virtually impossible to consider plot independently of characters, and vice versa.

In the first phase, one of the most influential models was the morphology of Russian folktales by Vladimir Propp (1968), followed by the logic of actions of Claude Bremond (1964; 1973; 1980), and the structural semiotics of Julien Algirdas Greimas

⁸⁰ See Sternberg (1993), Brooks (1984), Phelan (1989), Baroni (2007), Dannenberg (2008), and Kukkonen (2014).

(1980).⁸¹ In these conceptions, plot was understood as a fixed structure inherent to the *fabula*—a framework that could be unearthed in any narrative, like a skeleton concealed not only beneath the materiality of the discourse but also beneath the seemingly idiosyncratic nature of the events recounted. Using the same methodology, every character was supposed to embody an abstract function determined by his or her role in the plot. In this extremely disincarnated conception, the potential roles were very limited: Propp counted only seven spheres of actions in Russian fairy tales, while Greimas (1987) reduced these functions to six actantial structures, supposedly valid for all narratives: Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent.

Of course, none of these narrative theorists ever claimed that characters were reducible to mere actants or functional roles. For example, Philippe Hamon acknowledges the existence of numerous semantic axes that differentiate one character from another. However, as he explains, there is a hierarchy among these axes, and within this hierarchy, the role a character plays in the plot is considered more significant than any other attribute:

A recurrence should not necessarily be confused with narrative functionality or importance. First, because an axis like hair color is common to all characters in a novel, and secondly because these axes are unlikely to organize the main narrative transformations of novels. Such axes are therefore probably noted and summoned by the text, either to bring about a simple “reality effect,” or to highlight, accompany, underline, or indicate, a particular relationship situated at another level, or on a more “fundamental” axis. (Hamon 1998, 185)

⁸¹ For a presentation of this model in English, see Hébert (2006).

One might believe that Hamon is most likely right when he states that the actantial role of the character is more fundamental than the color of their hair. But fundamental for whom? And in what respect? Is hair color so trivial for the audience and for plot dynamics? Rhetorical or cognitive perspectives have helped us reevaluate what used to be considered trivial and to give a more dynamic account of the fundamental structures outlined by the structuralists.

Consider, for example, the blond hair of Iseult—or, even more illustratively, that of Daenerys Targaryen, a central character in the saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* and of its televisual adaptation *Game of Thrones*. Daenerys is initially presented as an object of desire for several characters and, arguably, for much of the television audience as well. Indeed, in her first appearance, she is shown naked in her bath, preparing for an arranged marriage intended to restore her brother's claim to the throne of the Seven Kingdoms. In this regard, the blondness of her hair is far from incidental: it evokes a topos common to many Western narratives and resonates intertextually with the figure of Iseult. Accordingly, her blond hair may be read as a signifier of Daenerys's purity—she is, after all, still a virgin when the story begins—but it also serves to heighten her erotic appeal, reinforcing her narrative function as an object of desire.

Yet this character underwent a remarkable transformation following the deaths of her brother and, subsequently, her husband, while the series as a whole adopted an increasingly feminist tone, as many commentators have noted. Reborn in the flames of her husband's funeral pyre, Daenerys emerged as the Mother of Dragons, the Queen of the South, and one of the few ambitious figures in Westeros guided by a discernible moral vision. She thus shifted from the position of a passive Object to that of an active Subject, without relinquishing her erotic appeal. In this new context, her blond hair has accrued additional symbolic resonances: it may be

linked to fire in opposition to ice, to the vitality of a passionate human being as opposed to the deathly threat posed by the White Walkers, and so forth.

However, this does not exhaust the range of her possible functions, since the epic narrative is structured around the intertwined destinies of multiple heroes, raising the question of whether there is, in fact, a single core to the *fabula*. From the perspective of another potential hero—Jon Snow, for example—one might ask whether Daenerys should be regarded as a possible Opponent, Helper, or once again as an Object of desire.⁸² Naturally, this is far from straightforward, as it depends entirely on the particular phase of the story under consideration. Even before the long-anticipated encounter between Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow, revelations about Jon had already positioned him as a potential rival and possible relative. At this juncture in the plot, it was impossible to determine whether these two emerging central figures would become allies or adversaries, enemies, friends, or lovers. This indeterminacy was, of course, crucial for sustaining narrative tension midway through the seventh season, and the story's ultimate resolution demonstrated that Jon in fact occupied this entire range of possible roles.

If we are concerned with how narrative tension functions, rather than with narrative structures, then we ought to deal with unresolved stories, because their working power is more obvious. We see that, even when considered from a structuralist perspective, character attributes are an unstable matrix of virtualities evolving throughout the progression of the narrative. To use the words of Jonathan Culler, "characters are not heroes, villains, or helpers; they are simply subjects of a group of predicates which the reader adds up as he goes

⁸² From the opposite perspective, it is worth noting that Jon Snow's magnificent black hair helped him become an object of desire for the powerful Daenerys, as well as for a growing number of viewers.

along" (1975, 235). Undeniably, the narrative gains an additional layer of complexity when it is not apprehended as a finished whole but examined in its unfolding development. As such, the fixed functions delineated by Propp and Greimas can hardly be attributed to characters without ambiguities. As Eco explains:

We know [...] that a text has or should have a specific actantial structure, but we could hardly say at which phase of the cooperation the Model Reader is invited to identify it. (Eco 1985, 229)

Additionally, the new perspectives offered by reception theories, and by rhetorical and cognitive narratology, invite us to broaden our investigation beyond a "group of predicates" (to quote Culler), even if those predicates are described in their evolution. Along the psychoanalytical vein advanced by Michel Picard (1986), Vincent Jouve (1992, 110) insists in particular on the reader's affective and erotic investment, thus going far beyond the intellectual understanding of the narrative function played by a character. In this new stance, we must reevaluate the importance of these elements that serve to create what Jouve describes as an "illusion of person (object of sympathy or antipathy of the reader)" and "a phantasmatic alibi (support of unconscious investments)" (Jouve 1992, 111). James Phelan follows the same line when he proposes adding to the thematic and synthetic components of characters—namely those aspects reflecting their artificial nature or their role in the plot—a study of their mimetic dimension:

When the structuralist remains suspicious of the emotional involvement that comes from viewing the character as a possible person, the mimetic analyst regards that involvement as crucial to the effect of the work. In short,

where the structuralist seeks an objective view of the text, one which foregrounds the text as construct, the mimetic analyst takes a rhetorical view, one which foregrounds the text as communication between author and reader. (Phelan 1989, 8)

Returning to the previous examples, we can see that this perspective provides new insight on the significance of Daenerys Targaryen's blond hair or Jon Snow's luxuriant black hair. These features are not merely incidental but play an integral role in the plot: they signal the characters' synthetic or thematic functions while simultaneously enhancing their attractiveness and mimetic plausibility, thereby increasing their capacity to generate suspense. As Marie-Laure Ryan observes, emotional immersion fostered by believable and compelling characters helps the audience overlook the artificial and often predictable nature of the plot, ultimately heightening narrative engagement (Ryan 2001, 156).

When characters are defined in terms of their capacity to modulate narrative tension, three principal functional axes can be distinguished. Each of these axes encompasses a potentially infinite range of attributes, from their actantial roles to the color of their hair, or any minute detail capable of amplifying narrative tension until the story reaches its ultimate resolution. It is essential to emphasize that within this set of attributes, what is absent or subject to change over time is just as significant as what is explicitly defined.

Opacity: If characters are intended to generate curiosity, it is essential that certain aspects of their identity remain concealed. For instance, a hidden agenda, an undisclosed intention, or an ambiguous position within the actantial structure can all serve to confound the audience. In *Game of Thrones*, Petyr Baelish, aka Littlefinger, exemplifies this strategy: his shifting allegiances and opaque motives render his actions perpetually unpredictable. By contrast, Tyrion Lannister's

loyalty—though marked by several dramatic reversals—gradually becomes more transparent as the narrative progresses. Yet in the final episode of the sixth season, when Tyrion appears to capitulate to Daenerys's enemies at a moment when her cause seems hopeless, it is only in hindsight that we grasp he has orchestrated an elaborate ruse. Here, the concealed plan is deliberately crafted to sustain curiosity and deliver surprise.

Thickness: If characters are intended to generate suspense, the audience must care about the fate of at least some of them, which presupposes that these focal characters possess attributes that allow us to perceive them as plausible persons. This “reality effect” is typically achieved through a form of overdetermination: qualities that exceed the mere functional definition of the character's role—what Barthes (1968, 231) termed “insignificant notations.” In an abstract game, suspense may arise because we care about the players or because we are curious to see how they will resolve a complex problem. In narrative fiction, however, the audience's concern is not for those who move the pieces, but for the pieces themselves. If the author chooses to sacrifice a queen, the audience must care about her for the event to have emotional weight; for an author, the true loss is when the audience ceases to care about the figure on the board. Consequently, the piece must possess greater complexity than a chess piece and must be endowed with qualities that extend beyond its functional purpose. This overdetermination may include any number of idiosyncratic traits. Naturally, if the character is also physically or emotionally appealing, their affective impact may be heightened. This is clearly the case with Daenerys and Jon, while others, such as Tyrion, rely on their intelligence, vulnerabilities, wounds, humor, or tormented past to elicit compassion. Moreover, flawed characters may elicit even greater empathy than larger-than-life heroes, as they appear more relatable. Jon's impulsiveness (not to mention his occasional

lack of cunning) or Tyrion's alcoholism, for instance, help amplify their emotional resonance.

Freedom: Even when characters become so familiar that we know them almost as well as we do friends or relatives, they must nonetheless retain a degree of unpredictability. Their fates must remain open: they need to display freedom in their reactions and make surprising choices. This is essential not only for sustaining interest in the plot's potential developments but also for enhancing the mimetic depth of the storyworld. In some cases, this illusion of freedom may reach such an extent that characters appear to acquire a kind of autonomy. This is what Bakhtin (1981) described as "polyphony": the capacity of a character to speak in their own voice and act on their own initiative, rather than merely serving as a pawn on the chessboard or a mouthpiece for the author. Consequently, as characters evolve in unexpected ways, their synthetic or thematic functions—including their axiological dimensions—can become blurred, and, as many authors attest, the narrative often diverges from the writer's initial intentions in the process of creation.

This brief overview of the mimetic characterization of narrative agents shows how different types of attributes can come into conflict when an author seeks to sustain narrative tension: while we must know the characters intimately enough to be moved by their fate, they must also remain somewhat unpredictable and enigmatic to maintain their power to intrigue us. However, these qualities are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A well-established character can occasionally keep a secret or make an unexpected choice without undermining the depth of their mimetic portrayal or the coherence of their personality. That said, the most enigmatic characters—such as Littlefinger—are often relegated to secondary roles because their inscrutability makes it difficult to form an emotional connection with the audience. Highly unpredictable characters risk becoming mere

tricksters: figures who defy narrative conventions, embody chaos, or lack a stable personality. Thus, a focal hero is typically identifiable by a strong investment in mimetic consistency and, even when exhibiting some degree of autonomy, by maintaining relative coherence with their established personality.

Mimetic deepness and unnatural features

When George R. R. Martin began publishing *A Song of Ice and Fire*, his saga offered extensive detail regarding its characters. In the case of Daenerys Targaryen, she is depicted as a woman with violet-hued eyes and silver-gold or platinum-white hair—features emblematic of her Valyrian ancestry and indicative of her near-supernatural nature, which includes immunity to fire and the ability to command dragons. This raises important questions about the relationship between mimetic depth and the presence of seemingly unnatural attributes in characters.

As previously noted, unnatural narratology calls for an examination of those dimensions of characters that do not imitate real life or that transgress conventional narrative norms (Richardson 2015). However, it is crucial to clearly distinguish between mimetic depth and mere conformity to the rules governing the real world. The two cases must be carefully differentiated. In the first, although the character may exhibit some non-natural traits, they nonetheless possess fundamental attributes that enable us to perceive them as convincing persons; thus, the fictional entity should not necessarily be regarded as lacking mimetic depth. In the second case, the character may be deficient in these essential features, thereby undermining the coherence of the narrative itself. The key distinction between these cases lies in the behavior of the fictional entities: since narrative depends on plot, and plot requires characters who act as plausible

persons, this behavioral dimension is paramount. All other aspects, whether internal or external, may be considered superficial, even if they contribute to the assessment of the mimetic depth of the representation.

The saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* belongs to the corpus of prototypical mimetic narratives, at least in the sense that characters do not lack deepness and they act like typical human agents. Of course, in this highly mimetic narrative, many elements differ from reality, but these do not alter our immersion into the storyworld, or our interest in the plot development. Daenerys possesses unnatural qualities such as her eye color, her resistance to fire, and her bond with dragons. But what makes her a convincing person is more fundamental: the plausibility of her actions, the connection between her life-story and the building of her personality, and the human-like nature of her motives, intentions, virtues, and flaws.

Even a character such as Leto II Atreides, from Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga, may be regarded as mimetically compelling. As the God Emperor who reigns over the universe for 3,500 years in a hybrid form that merges human and sandworm, he is both eternal and omniscient. Yet the narrative grants us privileged access to his inner life, transforming his existence into a poignant destiny and a tragedy to which we can relate. Consequently, the character's mimetic depth stems less from the plausibility of his extraordinary circumstances or any overtly unnatural traits than from the believability of his human-like responses to these fictional—and at times utterly implausible—conditions.

Conversely, when characters behave absurdly or incomprehensibly—when their actions appear pointless and incapable of advancing the plot—they can more profoundly undermine the mimetic quality of the representation and disrupt the plot dynamics. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, for instance, may outwardly resemble ordinary tramps, and their futile wait for Godot might expose the absurdity of

the human condition. Yet their enigmatic behavior and the absence of narrative development diminish the mimetic depth of the portrayal. In such cases, mimetic narrative is supplanted by a defamiliarization of narrative conventions, and the characters are reduced to mere functions within a critical discourse that deliberately subverts mimetic illusion.

In a certain sense, a character like Bugs Bunny can be perceived as a “person” by the audience insofar as he behaves like a rational, articulate individual, complete with a phlegmatic demeanor and an unflinching sense of humor. Yet, in another sense, he lacks crucial mimetic attributes—not because he resembles a rabbit, which is merely a superficial trait, but because he functions as an unpredictable trickster within a highly metaleptic world. In this world, transgressions do not merely defy the physical laws of reality; they satirically expose the constructed nature of representation itself. Looney Tunes—slapstick comedies rooted in early cinema—operate more as attractions than as fully developed narratives. Based on the distinction introduced by E. M. Forster (1927), we can refer to this as a flat character, as opposed to round characters. If there is immersion in this type of narrative, it is based on spatial or temporal vectors, and is not what Ryan (2001) calls “emotional immersion,” which relies on the qualities of the characters.

Genuine narratives require narrative immersion, mimetic depth, and at least a minimal investment in the unfolding of the plot. For this reason, unnatural narratology can only address marginal narrative forms; its value lies in illuminating the essence of narrativity by highlighting what subverts its fundamental premises. In doing so, it compels us to distinguish between essential and superficial traits when defining mimetic depth, which cannot be reduced to a mere imitation of empirical reality. Meanwhile, Daenerys’ hair continues to float in a narrative world we are invited to imagine she inhabits.

Virtualities: A Forking Path for Narrative Progression*

Recent developments in narrative theory have made it nearly impossible to address core concepts like narrative sequence, plot, narrative interest, tellability, or even narrativity without considering how the story is embedded in a complex network of virtualities. This growing focus on what remains virtual within the narrated world represents a significant shift from the approaches of early formalist and structuralist theories. As stated by David Herman: “[Propp’s] approach gave an overly deterministic coloration to narrative sequences” (2002, 94). Along the same line, Hilary Dannenberg adds: “An analysis of narrative’s story tells us very little about the true dynamics of plot and about the fascination of fictional worlds for the reader; this stems from the fact that narrative does not simply

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tell one story, but weaves a rich, ontologically multidimensional fabric of alternate possible worlds" (2004, 160).

Reviewing the various ways narrative virtualities have been discussed in narratological models offers a good opportunity to describe the current state of narrative theory as well as extending the tools for narrative studies. Regardless of how we approach narrative virtualities, we will see that places of indeterminacy within the storyworld play a central role in our interest in stories.

Ts'ui Pên's and Borges's "Garden of Forking Paths"

To illustrate the different ways in which the virtual aspects of narrative can be approached, we will examine Borges's short story "The Garden of Forking Paths." This fiction can be considered both a metanarrative and a spy story, and each of these dimensions will serve a purpose in the discussion that follows. From a metanarrative perspective, Borges alludes to the work of Ts'ui Pên, a Chinese ancestor of the protagonist, who is said to have authored a book titled *The Garden of Forking Paths*—a text portrayed as both a "maze" and a "labyrinth of time." One character, Professor Stephen Albert, explains that "in all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible to disentangle Ts'ui Pên, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates, thereby, 'several futures', several times, which themselves proliferate and fork*" (Borges 1999, 125).

Ts'ui Pên's book has often been associated with interactive storytelling, especially hypertext fictions and digital media.⁸³ Indeed, in these kinds of narratives, all alternatives have been programmed or written and fully belong to

⁸³ See, for example, Moulthrop (1991) and Ryan (2006a).

the structure of the work itself, even though the reader (or the player) actualizes only one path, leaving the other paths unexplored. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Ts'ui Pên's book—strange as this fiction may be—is explicitly defined as a “novel.” Borges further emphasizes that “alternatives” are inherent to “all fictions.” Even when these alternatives are not made explicit in the text, they can be imagined—both by the character, who is contemplating his next move, and by the reader, who anticipates how the narrative might unfold. More broadly, one could argue that all narratives, insofar as they represent actions performed by characters and addressed to an audience, are intrinsically interactive and contain potential alternative “paths.”

On the spy-story side of the narrative, the tale recounts a fictional episode set during the First World War. The story is a first-person narration, purportedly the fragment of a deposition, “dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English in the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao” (119). At the same time, Yu Tsun is a Chinese spy working for the Germans, and when the story begins, he is about to be arrested by Captain Richard Madden, an Irishman working for the British Government. After discovering that the identity of his accomplice, Viktor Runeberg, has been exposed, Yu Tsun loses all hope of saving his life. Nevertheless, he decides to accomplish a final mission. He succeeds in communicating the name of a place where the English artillery is located, a city called Albert. In the course of carrying out his mission, Yu Tsun kills a man whose name is Dr. Stephen Albert. The assassination is reported by the newspapers and comes to the attention of the German authorities. Unfortunately for Yu Tsun, his victim turns out to have been a good man and a sinologist doing research on the work of Ts'ui Pên, one of his ancestors. The Chinese spy concludes his confession by stressing that he has “abhorrently triumphed” (127) and expressing his “endless contrition” and “weariness” (128).

Possible world(s) asserted by the author

Borges's story sheds lights on the various types of virtual worlds that narrative can encompass. Our exploration begins with the kind of virtualities highlighted by Thomas Pavel (1975) in his work on possible worlds and modal logic. At this point, we can consider the narrative world in its entirety, rather than in its step-by-step unfolding. Umberto Eco (1984, 235) emphasizes that, although possible worlds are gradually actualized through different stages, all of these moments ultimately belong to a single possible world as conceived by the author—a possible world in the assertive mode, which must be distinguished from other possible worlds imagined by the characters or inferred by the readers.

In this context, modal logic offers valuable tools for understanding how fictional worlds are constructed, drawing on the information we hold about the real world. From the standpoint of a phenomenology of reading, the “possible” must therefore be seen as a “parasite” of the “actual.” As Ryan observes:

When readers construct fictional worlds, they fill in the gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own experiential reality. This model can only be overruled by the text itself; thus if a text mentions a blue deer, the reader will imagine an animal that resembles her idea of real deer in all respects other than the colour. (2005a, 447)

We understand that the fictional characters in Borges's story are human beings, possessing default attributes that need not be explicitly stated—such as the fact that people typically have two arms and two legs. At the same time, the narrative provides us with relevant information about them. For example, we learn that the antagonists are Chinese and

Irish, suggesting that they are adversaries aligned with opposing forces—namely, the Germans and the English. Additional details can be inferred from the story's opening lines:

On page 242 of *The History of the World War*, Liddell Hart tells us that an Allied offensive against the Serre-Montauban line (to be mounted by thirteen British divisions backed by one thousand four hundred artillery pieces) had been planned for July 24, 1916, but had to be put off until the morning of the twenty-ninth. Torrential rains (notes Capt. Liddell Hart) were the cause of that delay—a delay that entailed no great consequences, as it turned out. The statement which follows—dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English in the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao—throws unsuspected light on the case. (119)

There is no need to question whether Liddell Hart's book actually exists or to verify what is written on page 242. What matters is what the reference to a historical work invites us to infer, based on our knowledge of the real world. By invoking a familiar historical context, the incipit provides crucial cues for reconstructing the storyworld. For instance, we understand that the narrative begins during a war that erupted in Europe in 1914, and that Captain Liddell Hart's book—a controversial text that does, in fact, exist—reflects the perspective of the victors. We also know that wartime narratives are frequently shaped by unreliable narrators or drawn from questionable sources, such as propaganda. All of this background knowledge plays a key role in helping us grasp the fictional text, infer its implicit dimensions, and interpret it in a meaningful and informed way.

It is noteworthy that Borges invites us to question Captain Liddell Hart's account by implying that historical narratives can never be entirely exhaustive, fully reliable, or definitively

authoritative. Although Yu Tsun's statement is a fictional document, Borges underscores a broader truth: our understanding of history is always evolving. He further complicates matters by introducing two competing versions of the same event, highlighting the instability and multiplicity of historical interpretation. In his deposition, Yu Tsun states that "Runeberg had been arrested, or murdered" (119). However, an editor's note comments on this hypothesis as follows:

A bizarre and despicable supposition. The Prussian spy Hans Rabener, alias Viktor Runeberg, had turned an automatic pistol on his arresting officer, Capt. Richard Madden. Madden, in self-defense, inflicted the wounds on Rabener that caused his subsequent death. (119)

In this instance, the fictional editor appears to have access to more information than the narrator, as evidenced by his disclosure of the real name of the accomplice. This detail suggests that Runeberg was likely killed rather than merely arrested. However, the exact circumstances of his death remain ambiguous for the reader. While Yu Tsun's speculative account is admittedly incomplete, the editor's version is equally open to doubt, as it may have been shaped by official narratives designed to justify the agent's actions as self-defense.

The *fabula*, in this case, offers room for the reader to weigh both possibilities—self-defense or murder—leading to a situation in which no version can be accepted as definitively true, even if some interpretations appear more plausible than others. This point highlights a key aspect of possible worlds semantics: in certain instances, it is possible to establish a clear hierarchy between conflicting statements about the *fabula*, whereas in other cases, we must acknowledge the coexistence of multiple alternative worlds that cannot be reduced to mutually exclusive versions.

In other words, possible world theory usually opposes the actual world to many possible but non-actual ones. Fictional narratives are treated as constructing a possible world, but, as several theorists have stressed (Eco, Vaina, Ryan), the contrast actual-possible is repeated within these worlds. The actual domain is that part of the fabula that consists of facts asserted by the text, the possible ones are either the false statement related to an unreliable narrator, mental constructs of the characters, virtualities hinted at by the narrator, etc. Yet, a trend in contemporary fiction consists of voiding the actual domain and replacing it with competing possibilities, leaving it indeterminate whether any of them corresponds to facts.

This multiplicity of worlds also connects to the broader history of narrative forms. As stated by Françoise Lavocat: “If the work stipulates the existence of many possible worlds, their modalities of engendering and configuration differ according to historical periods” (2010, 8). Dannenberg also suggests that

an analysis of the historical development of plot shows how, with the rise of the novel, more sophisticated plots develop involving the *temporal orchestration* of alternate world versions: more than one version of the past or future is suggested as a possibility by the text.⁸⁴ (2004, 161)

Dannenberg adds that “fictional genres across the board, whether realist, semi-realist (fantasy, science fiction) or anti-realist (metafictional), all use alternate possible worlds, but with differing forms of ontological hierarchy” (2004, 161). In this case, we could state that the indeterminate elements

⁸⁴ This statement invites us to historicize what Brian Richardson defines as “representations that contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic conventions and the practices of realism” (2015, 3).

in Borges's story partly result from the fact that it was written in the middle of the twentieth century and that it is a parody of the paranoid genre of spy stories.

Once again, it is important to emphasize that at this level we are dealing with the "possible worlds" presented by the fiction: worlds that may be multiple or singular, indeterminate or finite, ambiguous or structured hierarchically. We may either compare the fiction to an external referent—characterized by infinite possibilities yet bounded by the numerous constraints of the real world—or seek to contrast different versions of the same event within the fiction's possible world. Throughout this process, we may either identify a clear hierarchy among the alternatives or find that no such hierarchy exists.

Virtualities expressed by the discourse

Now, I will attempt to be more precise about the nature of other types of virtualities that can be actualized—whether implicitly or explicitly—within the possible world of narrative fiction. The first type I will address, and likely the most apparent from a formalist standpoint, is the narrative's explicit depiction of events that fall outside the fabula. In 1988, Gerald Prince coined the term "disnarrated" to describe a narrative mode that goes beyond straightforward assertions. He defined it as follows: "the category of the disnarrated covers all the events that did not happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text" (1988, 2).

Here, we observe virtualities that are entirely integral to the text, with the key criterion being the explicit presence of the virtuality combined with the discourse's non-assertive tone. The disnarrated can be either: (a) an unrealized

possibility imagined by a character; (b) a forking path in the realm of the possible outlined by the narrator; or (c) a narrative possibility not actualized in the storyworld but which is mentioned by an authorial voice. In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” there are examples of disnarration presented by a character who also serves as the narrator, thereby blurring the boundary between categories (a) and (b). The first example conveys a mistaken assumption made by the protagonist about his opponent, while the second expresses a hope for the future.

For one instant, I feared that Richard Madden had somehow seen through my desperate plan, but I soon realized that that was impossible. (122)

I told myself that my duel had begun, and that in dodging my adversary’s thrust—even by forty minutes, even thanks to the slightest smile from fate—the first round had gone to me. *I argued that this small win prefigured total victory. I argued that the win was not really even so small, since without the precious hour that the trains had given me, I’d be in goal, or dead. I argued (no less sophisticatedly) that my cowardly cheerfulness proved that I was a man capable of following this adventure to its successful end.* (121)

In the second case, we see a sharp discrepancy between the hope of the character (a) and the knowledge expressed by the narrator, since the latter knows retrospectively that things will finish tragically. But the narrator (b) can also express his opinion about alternatives in the past, as in the following statement: “Madden’s presence in Viktor Runeberg’s flat meant the end of our efforts and (*though this seemed to me quite secondary, or should have seemed*) our lives as well” (119).

Virtualities shaped by the characters and belonging to the *fabula*

Marie-Laure Ryan has proposed a different way of dealing with virtualities. She is not concerned with the problem of describing all kinds of virtualities expressed by narrative discourse, but rather with analyzing the links between the “tellability” of the *fabula* and its logical complexity:

Tellability is rooted in conceptual and logical complexity, and [...] the complexity of a plot depends on an underlying system of purely virtual embedded narratives. Embedded narratives [...] are the story-like constructs contained in the private worlds of characters. (Ryan 1991, 156)

As summarized by Dannenberg, Ryan (in contrast to Prince) “admits counterfactual worlds into this category only if they are a product of the speculative activity of a character” (Dannenberg 2004, 172). Ryan contends that “the disnarrated could be removed from the text without affecting the logical coherence of the narrative events” (1991, 169), since her focus is on both explicit and implicit virtualities that the reader can infer—such as when a character’s intentions remain unspecified. In the example already mentioned, Yu Tsun makes a supposition concerning the past based on information that he has just received: “Madden’s presence in Viktor Runeberg’s flat [...] meant that Runeberg had been arrested, or murdered” (119). These suppositions (even though some of them are proven to be false) are extremely important in order to understand the course of the narration, since the future actions of the protagonist are based on this diagnosis concerning the past. The second example shows an explicit intention of the protagonist, the narrator explaining that it won’t be followed by action:

Something—perhaps the mere show of proving that my resources were non-existent—made me look through my pockets. I found what I knew I would find: the American watch, the nickel-plated chain and the quadrangular coin, the key ring with the compromising and useless keys to Runeberg's flat, the notebook, *a letter which I resolved to destroy at once (and never did)*. (120)

The final example refers to a “plan” that is implied but not directly disclosed, as revealing how the goal will be achieved would diminish the reader's curiosity.

If only my throat, before a bullet crushed it, could cry out that name so that it might be heard in Germany. But my human voice was terribly inadequate. [...] I vaguely reflected that a pistol shot can be heard at a considerable distance. In ten minutes my plan was ripe. The telephone book gave me the name of the only person able to communicate the information: he lived in a suburb of Fenton, less than a half hour away by train. (120)

By distinguishing between “tellability” and “strategic point,” Ryan emphasizes the contrast between narrative interest generated by the complexity of a character's plan and that which arises from discourse strategies—such as temporarily withholding the plan's details to arouse the reader's curiosity.

Narrative suspense derives, for instance, from the confrontation of characters of limited foresight and a reader who anticipates—correctly or not—the situations into which they should run. The reverse strategy is also an efficient way to capture the reader's interest: delaying the reader's understanding of a sequence of actions by preventing access to the set of embedded narratives that

motivate the agent. While the plot sets up a field of possibilities, the strategies of narrative discourse may guide the reader along certain paths. (Ryan 1991, 174)

Ryan emphasizes the distinction between virtualities constructed by the characters and those constructed by the reader. The next section will then focus on narrative gaps that invite the interpreter's active engagement, prompting inferential explorations through the labyrinth of the fictional world.

Virtualities shaped by the reader and their aesthetic effects

Several narratologists have distinguished between two types of narrative interest according to the temporal orientation of the virtual scenarios shaped by the readers. Tzvetan Todorov was among the first to introduce this distinction with regard to detective fiction. Whereas curiosity is supposed to move "from effect to cause" (in a plot typical of stories based on the "whodunnit" dynamic), the movement of suspense is described as moving "from cause to effect," leading to a more adventurous type of story (1977, 229). This distinction extends well beyond the realm of detective fiction or popular literature. As Dannenberg observes, "complex novels involve the interweaving of possible versions of both past and future world" (2004, 160). Along the same lines, authors such as Meir Sternberg (1978), Peter Brooks (1984), and James Phelan (1989) have investigated the links between the affective engagements of the reader and progression in the text, including analysis of the strategies used to "generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interests in narratives" (Phelan 1989, 15).

Without delving into the differences between these authors,⁸⁵ their theories converge in recognizing a connection between certain narrative techniques and the two primary interpretive processes they prompt during reading: prospection and retrospection.

Other approaches have taken a more exploratory route by attempting to describe how prospection and retrospection are translated into concrete hypothetical scenarios within the reader's mind. Eco (1984) pioneered this line of inquiry by connecting readers' inferential pathways to modal logic, possible worlds semantics, Peircean semiotics, and the broader concept of the encyclopedia. Building on this foundation, scholars such as Bertrand Gervais (1990) or David Herman (1997) have drawn on cognitive models from artificial intelligence research to explain how our understanding of action logic informs narrative interpretation. These models notably include concepts such as "scripts"⁸⁶ and the schematization of planification. In other models, authors have instead stressed the intertextual knowledge that orients the inferential walks of the readers. Among them, John Pier has shown that "intertextual frames" (2004, 240) contribute to narrative configurations on the basis of abductions concerning

⁸⁵ For instance, among these strategies, Sternberg (1993) focuses on expositional modes and temporal ordering that can be linked to suspense, curiosity, and surprise, considered as universal functions of narratives. Kafalenos (2006) has also used an abstract model, inspired by Propp's functions, in order to define the causal configurations that readers gradually construct as they progress through the text. Building on Sternberg's model, Kafalenos highlights, in particular, the effect of deferred or suppressed information on this ever-changing reconstruction of the story logic.

⁸⁶ For my use of the notion of "script," see Baroni (2002c). For a synthesis of the connection between intertextual and actional frames, see Baroni (2005).

the past, present, and future of the *fabula*. More recently, Karin Kukkonen (2014; 2020b) has described the cognitive activity of a reader progressing through a narrative as a cascade of cognition taking the shape of “probability designs.” According to these studies, narrative interest arises from the disruption of a stereotypical situation, and its progression typically involves the uncertain execution of a more or less complex sequence of planned actions aimed at achieving a specific, yet challenging, goal. In my own modelization of “narrative tension,” I have combined the rhetorical investigation of textual devices arousing narrative interest together with a description of the anticipations of the interpreters based on their narrative competences, including the full range of “endo-narrative skills” (semantics of action) and “transtextual knowledge” (Baroni 2007, Ch. 3–4).

Despite their complexity and approximate nature, it is easy to demonstrate the operability of these approaches aimed at describing plot dynamics and the inferential walks of the readers. From the perspective of Yu Tsun, his spying activity is a routine regulated by scripts. The revelation of his identity opens a less predictable development and thus increases the interest of the narrative progression. From this point, the story revolves around two parallel goals, which involve the planning of a series of actions: the first—seemingly impossible—is to escape the chase by Captain Richard Madden; the second—that will be successful—is to convey some secret information to a distant recipient.⁸⁷ The combination of a challenging task and a life-threatening risk generates suspense as the narrative unfolds chronologically. As previously noted, the intentional delay in revealing the protagonist’s plan intensifies narrative tension by sparking curiosity and prompting the reader to generate hypotheses

⁸⁷ It can be noted that the “quest” of the hero is both successful and unsuccessful, adding coextensive virtualities to the story.

about how the objective might be achieved. The spy fiction genre further supports this dynamic by offering recognizable narrative patterns that help the reader navigate the story's virtual possibilities. Elements such as the "transmission of a secret" or the "chase" function as genre-specific stereotypes, allowing readers to draw on their familiarity with similar narratives to anticipate how the conflict might unfold or be resolved. At the same time, the genre introduces a layer of uncertainty into the reader's hypothetical scenarios, since spy stories often rely on a paranoid logic in which no one can be trusted and the resolution is expected to defy prediction.

Ryan mentions yet another important aspect concerning the virtualities shaped by readers: namely, their resistance to reiteration.

Even after the possible has been exhausted by the actualization of a certain course of action, the interpreter revisits mentally the paths that have fallen into the domain of the counterfactual, so as to assess the ethical or strategic decisions of the character, as well as the aesthetic decisions of the author. (2005b, 628)

In an involuntarily ironical statement, Doctor Albert says: "Time forks, perpetually, into countless futures. In one of them, I am your enemy" (127). And Yu Tsun replies, just before killing his interlocutor: "But I am your friend" (127). I think that the reader will have to admit that in the possible worlds of the fiction, Stephen Albert and his guest are both friends and enemies at the same time; and also that, even if the future is already written, Yu Tsun could or should have spared his friend. It is precisely this alternative that makes the crime of Yu Tsun an "abhorrent" triumph, causing "endless contrition" and "weariness." So, an ethical judgment is always involved in the comparison between what happened in the *fabula* and whatever else could have happened.

The theory of possible texts

A study of all forms of narrative virtualities would be incomplete if we only considered virtual paths intentionally shaped by the author, either in explicit or implicit forms. Drawing on the works of Pierre Bayard (a scholar who wrote academic bestsellers such as *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of the Hound of the Baskervilles*, and *How to Improve Failed Literary Works*), Marc Escola sees the possibility for a new kind of approach, which he calls “critique interventionniste”:

The contributors to this *Theory of Possible Texts* have learned from P. Bayard that a reader is under no obligation to adopt the conclusions which the author claims are final, that literary criticism can be a continuation of the creation by other means, and that ultimately there is not a big gap between the reading of a work and its reinvention or its refecction. (Escola 2012, 10)

We can apply this “theory of possible texts” to Borges’s story in various ways. For example, when we read that the first two pages of Yu Tsun’s deposition are missing, we can make the supposition that this hidden part of the story might shed unexpected light on the events. Some imaginative readers may even attempt to write or comment on the missing pages themselves, thereby constructing an alternative version of events. Attention might also be drawn to apparent—though perhaps deliberate—inconsistencies within the story. For instance, one could question the credibility of Yu Tsun’s confession by highlighting the improbable coincidence that a randomly selected victim from a telephone book turns out to have a deeply personal connection to his killer. This would suggest the need to reconstruct the narrative according to a more plausible scenario. Indeed, it is possible that the narrator’s entire deposition is a fabrication—an elaborate cover

designed to conceal more troubling truths. Perhaps Doctor Albert was not an innocent victim, but an accomplice who needed to be eliminated for reasons left unsaid.

At this point, we are still dealing with the virtualities of the narrative, but the initiative shifts from the text itself (and the presumed intentions of an implied author) to the empirical reader, who may engage with the story's gaps or inconsistencies, exploiting them to reinterpret or redirect the narrative in unforeseen ways. Nevertheless, we must note that while some readers may engage in imagining alternatives to the text, there are limits to this activity. For instance, with Borges "Garden of Forking Paths" it would be unproductive to imagine that Stephen Albert never existed and that Yu Tsu is a patient in a mental institution hallucinating the whole story.

What is and what could be

As I have suggested, the study of narrative virtualities unfolds like a garden of forking paths. What seemed at first to be a simple problem has led to the development of several distinct theoretical approaches, whose compatibility remains open to question. In any case, Thomas Pavel captures a common principle, with which all contemporary narratologists would probably agree, no matter their differences:

To fully account for our relationship with fiction, it is not enough to identify what *is*, but it is also particularly important to consider the inferences caused by fiction. These inferences, like those of everyday life, unfold in a space of values, norms, and possible actions. (2010, 312)

Mimetic narratives—and, it should be added, even factual ones—certainly differ from informative narratives in that they emphasize the realm of virtualities rather than attempt

to explain what happened, as if the development of the plot were based on an underlying necessity. The sphere of the possible thus brings us back to the level of experience, in a world where what has already been written matters less than what could happen to those involved in the events. Contingency therefore plays a central role in a narrative aesthetics that places experience and evaluation before knowledge and predictability.

Knowing but Hoping: The Dynamics of Rereading*

As illustrated in the previous chapter, by linking the dynamics of plot with the inferential walks of a reader progressing tentatively through an unknown text, new conceptualizations of narrative sequence have helped to highlight a dimension of mimetic narratives that was previously left out of account in older paradigms.⁸⁸ However, these new perspectives on narrative dynamics seem to imply that there is a limitation to the “textual force” of a plot. If considered not as a textual structure but rather as an evolving representation of the storyworld, the interest of the story might be altered on

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⁸⁸ Some elements of this chapter, especially the analysis of the Gospel of Mark, were developed in an article written with Claire Clivaz (Baroni and Clivaz, “Résistance du *pathos* dans les récits de la Passion”). I am also thankful to Emma Kafalenos, Gerald Prince, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and John Pier for their useful comments.

a later reading, a situation that will be called here *repetition*.⁸⁹ Basing my reflections on an analysis of an episode of the Gospel according to Mark, a narrative whose outcome is well-known by most readers, my aim is to show that it is possible to describe the existence of a lasting narrative tension based on explicit virtualities associated with value-laden hypotheses formulated by characters such as unfulfilled promises or impossible hopes.

From formal to dynamic conceptions of plot

The links between the virtualities of the *fabula* and the dynamics of reading were generally neglected in formalist and structuralist theories, because in these models, the objective description of immanent features of the *fabula* overlooked the alternative possible worlds that readers project while they progress through the narrative. Yet, as early as 1973, Claude Bremond criticized Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folk tale and drew attention to the risk of missing the true interest of stories when focusing exclusively on the actual course of events:

Even if the hero always wins, and even if the listener knows this outcome in advance and demands it, this victory has dramatic interest only to the degree that the chances of failure, in competition with the strong finality of the story, manage to keep the listener holding his breath until the end of the fight (1973, 21).

However, instead of exploring the many ways narratives articulate virtualities in the actual course of the *fabula*,

⁸⁹ By "repetition," I mean the reiterated experience of an already known story, or, more generally, a narrative experience related to a predictable story.

structuralists and formalists mostly retained from this model the idea that every well-formed story is supposed to follow a three-step development: a complication followed by a development that leads toward a resolution. Nevertheless, since the mid-1970s, the virtualities of the fabula have again been coming under scrutiny, along with the rise of reception theories and the introduction of “possible worlds theory” imported from modal logic.⁹⁰ In 1979, Eco distinguished between three kinds of “possible worlds” that can be related to narratives: (1) the possible world(s) asserted by the fiction; (2) the possible worlds shaped in the mind of characters; (3) the possible worlds inferred by readers while they progress through the text. While Eco was mainly concerned with the cognitive dimension of the reader’s “inferential walks,” Peter Brooks, adopting a psychoanalytic framework inspired by Freud’s theory, explored the “desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text” (1984, 37), thus incorporating the emotional dimension of narrative experience that was previously occulted in formalist paradigms:

I think we do well to recognize the existence of textual force, and that we can use such a concept to move beyond the static models of much formalism, toward a dynamics of reading and writing. (1984, 47)

The dynamics of reading is also a central issue in rhetorical models, especially in the works of Meir Sternberg and James Phelan. The latter made a decisive move by exploring the links between “progression” and “narrative interest”:

Progression, as I use the term, refers to a narrative as a dynamic event, one that must move, in both its telling and its reception, through time. In examining progression,

⁹⁰ For precursors of this evolution, see Pavel (1975) and Vaina (1977).

then, we are concerned with how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve reader's interests in narrative. (1989, 15)

More recently, within the framework of narratological models informed by cognitive science, David Herman emphasizes that "the interest and complexity of narrative depends on the merely probabilistic, not deterministic, links between some actions and events" (2002, 94), and Hilary Dannenberg observes that "the spice of the tale lies in the emergence of one actual story version which in the course of the narrative has to vie for supremacy over other alternatives" (2004, 160). Thus, while underlining the polysemy of the notion, Dannenberg insists on the interaction between "plot in its still unresolved aspect," and the progression of a reader driven by the "cognitive desire to be in possession of the second aspect of plot—the final configuration achieved at narrative closure when (the reader hopes) a coherent and definitive constellation of events will have been achieved" (2008, 13).

In my own work (Baroni 2007; 2017), I have defined narrative tension as the dynamic dimension of plot, encompassing the effects of curiosity and suspense as differentiated by Todorov (1971) and Sternberg (2001). More specifically, I conceive narrative tension as the uncertain anticipation of a potential resolution—whether in the form of a prognosis or a diagnosis—each hypothesis drawing on co-textual cues as well as intertextual and/or actional schemas stored in the reader's memory. The reader's engagement in this anticipatory process is driven by what I refer to as "textual reluctance"—the deliberate postponement of narrative information regarding the nature of the action or its future outcome. Furthermore, I link the cataphoric function of the *nœud* to the generation of narrative tension, and the anaphoric function of the *dénouement* to its resolution. In this

respect, I align with Dannenberg's view of plot as an "ontologically unstable matrix of possibilities" (2008, 13), shaped by the reader's progression through the text. The final configuration of the *fabula* represents only one possible outcome within this dynamic process.

In this rapid overview, we see that in new models oriented towards the dynamics of plot, this notion is no longer considered a fixed attribute of representation but rather a constantly evolving configuration of events which determines the interest of the story and which, in return, is determined by the progression of the reader through the narrative representation. Emma Kafalenos, in her reinterpretation of the Proppian sequence, insists on this important shift:

By assigning the construction of fabula to perceivers (including readers), I open the possibility not only of comparing individual perceivers' fabulas but of directly addressing the instability of a fabula as it grows and changes during individual perceivers' process of perception. (1999, 37)

The different models I have mentioned also suggest that the "textual force" of a plot—its narrative tension—is influenced by the number of virtualities, their predictability, and/or their relative importance that can be sketched at different stages of the story, turning the narrative highway into a labyrinth. The importance of virtualities and contingencies led Johanne Villeneuve to renew the repertoire of metaphors that can be used to refer to the notion of plot (or "intrigue" in the original version of this book):

To address the paradigm of plot, we should turn not to the metaphor of the room, but to that of the forest as it appears to those who become lost in it: a labyrinth with paths intertwined, a prison open on an infinite sky, riddled

with branches and multiple paths. In the middle of the forest, the story is no longer an object the researcher contemplates from a distance or the celebrated triumph of Aristotelian concordance over Augustinian discordance. In the midst of the plot, something in the story is still going: breath, wind, rumor. The meaning of plot determines these circuits on which narrative imagination runs. (2004, 53)

The paradox of suspense and the enduring virtualities of the plot

As we have seen, in theoretical approaches that move away from strict formalism, the dynamics of plot rely on the reader's temporal immersion, wherein possible developments are inferred through a process of trial and error. In this view, the emphasis is placed on "plot in its still unresolved aspect" (to borrow Dannenberg's phrase), implying an ideally fresh engagement with the narrative—such as a first reading of a literary text. Naturally, this progression is shaped by intertextual knowledge and the surrounding co-text, which together establish a horizon of expectations and mark key points within a landscape of countless narrative possibilities.⁹¹ Yet this reading process is also marked by hesitation at narrative crossroads, as each story is singular, and we often suspect that seemingly promising paths may be misleading, while improbable options might unexpectedly materialize. As a result, the uncertainty surrounding "what is to come" is fleeting: narrative tension—the story's power to

⁹¹ As stated by Michael Toolan: "There are, one must recognize, broad extratextual forms of textual guidance beside the guidance 'in' the text" (2008, 109).

captivate—is destined to diminish over time. Eventually, the narrative journey is no longer undertaken by an adventurer, but rather revisited by a leisurely Sunday stroller or charted methodically by a professional topographer.

Yet, while narrative tension seems fundamentally linked to uncertainty, many critics acknowledge a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon: readers may experience suspense even after multiple readings of a narrative. This phenomenon can be observed not only in children who are moved over and again by the fate of the Valiant Little Tailor, even after hearing his adventures for the hundredth time, but also in adults who compulsively reread (or view again) their favorite stories with unabated passion. Robert Yanal summarizes the paradox of suspense as follows:

1. repeaters experience suspense regarding a certain narrative's outcome;
2. repeaters are certain of what that outcome is;
3. suspense requires uncertainty. (Yanal 1996, 148)

Several conflicting proposals have been put forth to explain this paradox.⁹² For Walton (1990), resistance to suspense is due primarily to the immersion process that causes us to forget on a fictional plane what we know on a factual plane. Gerrig (1989) claims that, when immersed in the story, the repeater expects that the fictional world will operate according to the same laws as the real world in which no event is repeated twice. Yanal, in contrast, thinks that true repeaters are very rare and that suspense in repetition is primarily due to some details being forgotten or to a confusion between real suspense and another kind of narrative interest.

⁹² See also Carroll (1996).

I believe this paradox can be further illuminated by considering two hypotheses:

1. Suspense tends to persist longer when it is tied to specific value-laden virtualities—for instance, when there is a tension between the reader's knowledge of the plot's actual course and what they perceive as a more desirable outcome for the protagonist;
2. Unactualized virtualities retain their narrative force particularly when they are explicitly articulated by characters within the *fabula*, thereby taking the form of what Prince has termed disnarrated events.

Emotional immersion and value-laden hypothesis

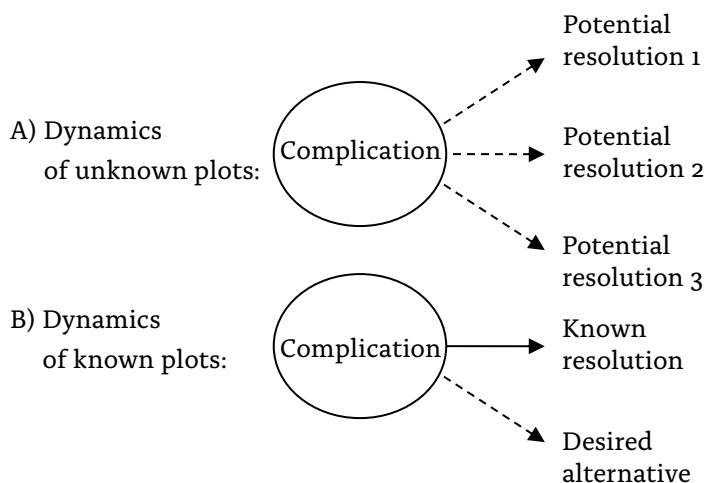
I think that we can agree with Yanal on at least one point: even though some suspenseful situations prove to be surprisingly enduring, narrative tension may change over time in intensity and even in nature. For example, many narratologists agree on the fact that *curiosity*—or what Ryan (2001) describes as a “who” suspense—is less resilient than *suspense*. For example, in a *whodunit* story, we might no longer suspect an innocent since we know who the culprit is. Other virtualities, however, remain readable and continue to produce their effects: for example, we can always hope for an alternative when an innocent character dies after being unjustly suspected.

On the other hand, Gerrig and Walton are probably right when they insist on the importance of immersion. For Ryan, “temporal immersion is the reader's involvement in the process by which the progression of narrative time distills the field of the potential, selecting one branch as the actual, confining the others to the realm of the forever virtual, or counterfactual, and as a result of this selection, continually

generates new ranges of virtualities" (2001, 141). While experience in temporal immersion must be affected by repetition, Ryan argues that "emotional immersion" makes situations present in the mind; therefore, "it does not matter whether the envisioned state of affairs is true or false, and its development known or unknown, because simulation makes it temporarily true and present, and from the point of view of the present, the future has not happened" (2001, 156). Emotional immersion, associated with feelings of empathy or sympathy for the fate the characters, therefore becomes an essential ingredient in order for suspense to endure. Based on this hypothesis, William Brewer, who conducted empirical studies on this phenomenon, comes to the conclusion that if suspense "is assumed to be based on reader uncertainty, then it should be eliminated on a second reading because the reader will no longer be uncertain about the underlying event sequence. However, if suspense is based on the reader's concern for the plight of the character, then it should show little or no reduction during a rereading" (1996, 123). Along the same line, José Prieto-Pablos explains that a spectator plunged into the course of a tragedy continues to articulate desired alternatives despite the predictability of the events:

So, for example, in our response to the suspense situation prior to a tragic *dénouement* (e.g., in Hamlet's fight with Laertes), we know that the protagonist will die, also that he *must* die, in application of the principles both of tragic resolution and poetic justice, as he has committed at least one crime for which he must pay with his life. We are probably familiar with these principles, and yet *we do not want him to die*. Suspense is held as long as we can build up hypotheses which feature him succeeding against the final obstacles—as long, therefore, as the author keeps placing obstacles for him to overcome and postponing the fatal moment. (1998, 106)

Nevertheless, in connection with the irreversible nature of temporal immersion, we can make the assumption that the number and nature of virtualities can change over time. For example, we may no longer contemplate all the ways the protagonist might have triumphed, since we know *how* he or she lost, but we can still dream of a more happy ending:



In addition, while the nature of our engagement may change over time, when hope or fear of several possibilities is replaced by the exploration of a single counterfactual alternative, this does not necessarily result in a decrease in the intensity of the plot, since, as Ryan argues, the *climax* of many stories is reached when we are confronted with the “imminent resolution of a binary alternative” (2001, 143). In short, suspense can persist through repetition because, even though the range of virtualities becomes narrower and their nature shifts, our emotional investment in the character’s fate continues to prompt us to imagine preferred alternatives—ones that conflict with the already known outcome of the story.

The opposition between *knowledge* and *desired alternative* highlights an important aspect of enduring suspense that must be associated with a modal analysis of value-laden virtualities. This question has emerged in reflections on possible worlds semantics, especially in the works of Doležel (1998) and Ryan (2006), and it has been discussed lately by Daniel Candel Bormann, who advocates a “model that allows us to move from neutrality to value” (2013, 180). Candel Bormann identifies three main modalities: *alethic*, *deontic*, and *axiological*:

It is certainly possible to subject the world of a text to a full modal analysis in which every operator is taken into account. In the case of the alethic modality, this would include the operators “necessity,” “possibility,” and “impossibility”; in that of the deontic modality, there will figure “obligation,” “permission,” and “prohibition”; and in applying the axiological modality, the terms “positive,” “indifferent,” and “negative” will play their roles. (2013, 187)

In this context, the alethic modality of a desired alternative underscores the impossibility of our projection, as we are aware that the events depicted in the story—already known to us—cannot be altered. However, deontic and axiological modalities remain key sources for sustaining the “cognitive desire” for an impossible subworld. This desire is rooted in social norms and in the perception that certain virtualities embody better or worse versions of reality. For instance, moments of transgression invite a deontic exploration of what might have occurred had the character fulfilled their obligations. Likewise, the axiological modality allows us to assess whether an alternative subworld would offer a morally or emotionally preferable version of the fictional reality—one potentially more desirable for the character.

Explicit alternatives sketched by characters

If we accept that lasting suspense hinges on value-laden alternatives that stand in contrast to the known course of events, and if we acknowledge that readers do not engage in the same “inferential walks” when navigating familiar versus unfamiliar narratives, a new question arises: what are those enduringly readable alternatives whose emotional and cognitive impact persists over time? One significant factor might be the explicitness of the alternatives presented within the narrative. As discussed in the previous chapter, Gerald Prince has suggested expanding the terminology used to describe narrative temporal structures to account for such alternatives, which he terms the “disnarrated.”⁹³

Some textual factors [...] relate to different *moods* that the text brings into play and, especially, to the *alternarrated* or *disnarrated* (as well as its questioning or its denial), in other words to the virtualities explicitly designated by the text, to the opportunities that have remained or will probably remain unfulfilled and whose ordinary model is: “This could have happened, but in the end it never did”; or “This might (or might not) happen instead of that”; or even “If only x could happen instead of y.” [...] In the words of Claude Bremond, criticizing the teleological orientation of the Proppian system, it is difficult to tell the story of Hercules at the crossroads without letting him explore, in his imagination, one or the other direction. (2010, 15)

⁹³ In his first essay on the subject (in 1988), Prince distinguishes three categories of negation in narrative. In two of them (the “unnarratable” and the “unnarrated”), elements of the fictional world are not included in the narration. The “disnarrated,” by contrast, includes narrated elements that are not actualized in the fictional world.

As Ryan has pointed out, these alternatives can at times be linked to the characters' mental projections, which take the form of "embedded narratives."

These constructs include not only the dreams, fictions, and fantasies conceived or told by characters, but any kind of representation concerning past or future states or events: plans, passive projections, desires, beliefs [...]. Among these embedded narratives, some reflect the events of the factual domain, while others delineate unactualized possibilities. (1991, 156)

Thus, "embedded narratives" in Ryan's sense are integral to the storyworld and can be more or less objectively reconstructed by readers with each rereading, drawing on their understanding of the semantic properties of actions within both real and fictional worlds.

Disnarrations and *embedded narratives* represent two useful heuristic tools, especially when they are combined, because they can be considered as always readable manifestations of meaningful tensions between the actual storyline and the multiple alternatives in the *fabula*. Ultimately, narrative tension proves to be a lasting effect of plot because reaching the resolution requires traversing the entire narrative path, encountering the same crossroads each time. While the initial experience of this journey differs from subsequent ones, familiar disnarrated events are still encountered, and characters continue to dream, hope, and formulate plans in precisely the same manner. These objective virtualities—despite being known dead ends—persist in captivating the reader's imagination and *intrigue* them.

Alternatives in the Passion according to Mark

We have now reached the threshold of what could be an analysis of narrative dynamics resistant to reiteration and

for which biblical stories seem to provide exemplary forms. Among them, there are few stories whose outcome is as familiar as the episode of the Passion of Christ. The periodic return of Easter celebrations leads Christians to a collective reiteration of the story, inscribing the linear time of the narrative (extending from the betrayal of Christ to his death and resurrection) into the circular temporality of the liturgical calendar. One might conclude that we no longer need to read, listen to, or watch the story for the quality of its plot, for interest has necessarily shifted toward other non-emotional values such as the symbolic meaning of the event. Nevertheless, studies on the historical reception of this narrative confirm that the story manages to do more than simply evoke the suffering of a character. As stated by Claire Clivaz:

An ancient account of the fourth century, written by a woman traveler named Egeria, underscores the strength of this narrative immersion collectively reiterated each year. She describes the Easter celebrations in Jerusalem in the year 380. Reading, listening, participating in the reenactment of the Passion narrative arouses a catharsis of emotions in listeners. On Holy Wednesday, Egeria recounts that “[a priest] takes the Gospel and reads the passage where Judas Iscariot went to the Jews and fixed the price they would give for handing over the Lord. When we read this passage, there were so many cries and shouts that no one could resist being moved to tears.”⁹⁴ (Clivaz and Baroni 2012, 154–55)

Jesus himself appears as a character who, although aware of the fate awaiting him (his martyrdom, but also his resurrection and glory), is not fatalistic and resigned. He is both

⁹⁴ I am grateful to Claire Clivaz for having found this quotation and for allowing me to reproduce it here. For an extensive analysis of the episode of Gethsemane and its reception, see Clivaz, *L'ange et la sueur de sang*.

prescient and suffering, he passively accepts his fate but continues to desire an alternative. In the episode of the Passion told by Mark, a number of elements of disnarration and embedded narratives can be found, all of them coinciding with the most pathetic moments of the story.

It is notable that Jesus manifests his knowledge of the outcome of the story and thus shows a form of epistemic homology with the reader, while the chief priests and the scribes are still “seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him” (Mark 14, 1). For example, at the anointment at Bethany, after a woman has broken a flask of expensive ointment, Jesus declares: “She has anointed my body beforehand for burial” (Mark 14, 8). Later, while Judas is still seeking “an opportunity to betray him” (Mark 14, 11), Jesus announces to his disciples: “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me” (Mark 14, 8). On this occasion, Jesus’s omniscience contrasts with the ignorance of the disciples, who are “sorrowful” and ask “Is it I?” (Mark 14, 19). During his last meal, Jesus formulates a morbid prediction: “Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14, 25). Despite the threats against him, Jesus does not try to escape his enemies, nor does he fight adversity. Rather, he submits to the foreordained: “For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him” (Mark 14, 21).

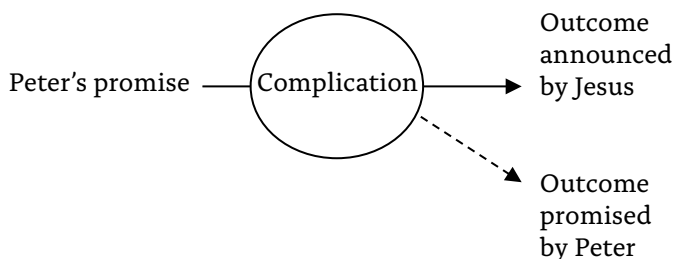
At this point, plot seems to depart from the usual dynamic of conflict and suspense, structured by aggressive and defensive actions influencing an unknown and unforeseeable resolution.⁹⁵ Despite the lack of conflict, several alternatives

⁹⁵ We can imagine a naive reader who, reading this story for the first time, might wonder whether, at this crucial moment in the story, the disciples will try to stop Judas. It is surprising—and can be considered a “plot hole” (Ryan 2009)—that none of them reacts when Jesus explicitly designates the disciple who will betray him. Still, I think it unlikely that the virtuality of a counteraction may survive after frequent reiteration of the narrative, since it is a counterfactual event that remains completely implicit.

continue to unfold through hypothetical or impossible predictions formulated by the characters, contrasting with the prophetic discourse and the actual course of the story. The first of these explicit alternatives is expressed by the disciples, including Peter, in the form of a promise that will not be kept:

“You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” But he said emphatically, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same. (Mark 14, 27–31)

Peter’s denial appears to be symptomatic of a tension between a deontic virtuality (a promise that creates the obligation to undertake a future action: “If I must die with you, I will not deny you”) and an alternative (“you will deny me three times”) expected by Jesus and by the reader.

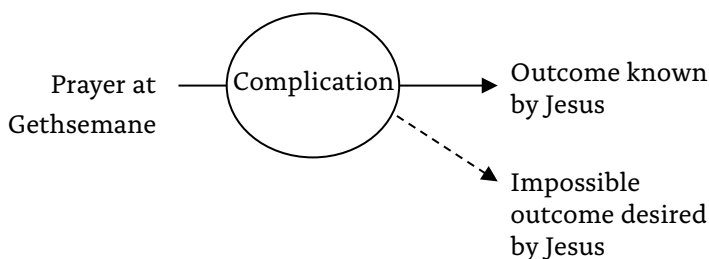


By recounting the events announced by Jesus, the end of the chapter emphasizes the pathos (“he broke down and wept”) of the situation, with Peter becoming aware of the discrepancy between his conduct and his initial promise:

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean." And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." *And he broke down and wept.* (Mark 14, 66–72)

Here, the actual world asserted by the narrative leads to a situation that is both prohibited and negative for the character. And while this necessary situation cannot be changed, it contrasts with the alternative that was explicitly promised. Through emotional immersion, the succession of the three denials appears as three missed opportunities to act differently, thus intensifying the dramatic tension between the actual outcome and a more desirable alternative.

Another well-known explicit virtuality in the Passion, and probably one of the most commented on, is set in the garden of Gethsemane. There, even knowing exactly how the story will end, Jesus falls on the ground and prays that "if possible, the hour might pass from him" (Mark 14, 35), continuing: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14, 35–36)



This moment in the story is particularly revealing because, once again, the alternative is clearly linked to *pathos*: the hope of an alternative coincides with the evocation of the pain endured by Jesus, of whom it is said that he “began to be greatly distressed and troubled,” adding that his “soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Mark 14, 33–34). While it is impossible to change one line of a book written by somebody else, Jesus asks desperately for a different ending to the one for whom “all things are possible.” But as he fully respects his deontic commitment to do “as it is written of him,” Jesus does not really consider a possible action that could change his fate. Rather, he expresses his sadness based on the desire for a better version of the story where the alethic, the deontic, and the axiological modalities would not enter into conflict. This being the case, Jesus’s prayer is not exactly the “disnaration” of an alternative course of events, but the explicit wish for it, thus entailing an implicit “embedded narrative” that highlights the difficulty experienced by the character in meeting his destiny.

In value-laden terms, this episode shares with Peter’s broken promise the axiological desire for a better alternative. However, from a deontic perspective, the two episodes can be opposed: while Jesus respects his commitment to do “as it is written of him,” Peter transgresses his word. Also, in connection with the alethic modality, we can observe that the pathetic moments do not share the same temporal

orientation: hope expressed by Jesus is oriented toward a still possible future, while Peter, in his regret, expresses his desire for an impossible alternative situated in an unchangeable past. On the moral side, the retrospective comparison between the two developments highlights the importance of keeping one's word, even if it is followed by death, because transgression and survival do not seem to constitute a better alternative. Even so, the path followed by Jesus does not appear to be easier than the one chosen by Peter, and the story, even though we know how it ends, retains the power to inspire, at least in some readers, the desire for a different alternative.

Even after the prophecy is accomplished and the story is over, some complications remain unsolved. This is not because their resolution is a mystery, but because different pathways of reading are still possible and open for imaginative exploration, such as Peter in his eternal regret and Jesus in his impossible desires. It should be added that the apocryphal tradition, as well as literary works inspired by the biblical narrative, did not fail to exploit the potentialities left open by the Gospel. Nor does *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis, which explores the possibility that Jesus escaped his fate, at least in a dream world, or *Ponce Pilate* by Roger Caillois, in which the Roman administrator saves Jesus's life,⁹⁶ allowing him to live to an old age and relegating Christianity to a mere virtuality of history. Thus, the theory of "possible texts," developed in a collection of essays edited by Marc Escola, represents an interesting extension to the investigation of the enduring virtual worlds of fiction. It illustrates that the ending of a narration never corresponds to a complete reduction of contingency: even though, retrospectively, the story seems to mold itself into a poetic, moral,

⁹⁶ Here again, the episode with Pontius Pilate involves a disnarration with clear deontic and axiological implications.

or causal necessity, its aesthetic interest, its lasting emotional impact, and its ethical value depend more directly on the many other ways the story could or should have unfolded. Thus, every story is a matrix for an infinite range of alternative stories.

It is not the claim of this commentary on the Passion that suspense is impossible when it is mostly based on a process of immersion that brackets our knowledge concerning the unfolding of an already known *fabula*. In line with the conceptions advocated by Walton, Gerrig, Carroll, and Ryan, I subscribe to the enduring pathos of implicit virtualities concerning the risks threatening the protagonist, even when we know (at least in some parts of our mind) that they will remain mere virtualities. But I think that those implicit virtualities are not necessarily permanent, and I have sought to highlight additional factors that have the power to increase narrative tension without ever being altered by repetition. Through disnarration, some alternatives belong explicitly to the world of the characters, and sad stories will always inspire in the reader the desire for a better fate. This may be one way to explain why tragic stories seem to have a more enduring narrative tension than adventures with a happy ending.

Conclusion

Powers and Limits of Mimetic Narratives

To account for recent developments in narratology and to understand the tensions observable in this field of research, it is interesting to look at the themes chosen for major international conferences aimed at specialists in the discipline. In 2025, the 40th conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative (ISSN), held at Florida International University, focused on “stories of climate transformation.” In the general argument, we could read:

Leveraging transdisciplinarity approaches, one prominent thread among the conference’s plenaries, panels, exhibits, and excursions will address the global impact of climate variability, and the multimodal affordances of narrative that empower us to galvanize global action. Stories are uniquely positioned to unite and mobilize us in the face of what’s ahead.⁹⁷

In October of the same year, the European Narratology Network (ENN) held its eighth biannual meeting at the University of Wuppertal on the theme, “Limits of Narrative.” The argument was as follows:

In view of the rampant use of the term “narrative,” which often enough lacks a precise meaning, it is time to take

⁹⁷ *Stories of Climate Transformation*. Argument consulted on February 13, 2025. URL: <https://www.scienceandfiction.fiu.edu/news/narrative-conference-miami-25>

a critical look at its limits. [...] The 8th ENN conference in Wuppertal (Germany) is dedicated to this reflection on the concept of narrative in order to sharpen it by defining its boundaries: Which phenomena cannot be appropriately labeled as “narrative”? What are the boundaries and transitions between narrative and non-narrative formats? What are legitimate and illegitimate uses of narrative?⁹⁸

Although they differ in many respects, the two arguments intersect on a key point: never before has anything connected to narrative seemed so pervasive in academic research and, more broadly, in public discourse. Thus, as Peter Brooks claims in the opening of his latest book—in a chapter entitled “Stories Abounding: The World Overtaken by Narrative”—narrative appears today to be as ubiquitous as it is omnipotent:

“There’s nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it.” Thus spake Thyron in the final episode of the television series *Game of Thrones*, claiming the throne for Bran the Broken. Many viewers liked neither the choice of king nor its rationale. But the claim that story brings you to world dominance seems by now so banal that it’s common wisdom. Narrative seems to have become accepted as the only form of knowledge and speech that regulates human affairs. (2022, 3)

What is most striking in this evolution is not so much the proliferation of narratives as the explosion of *discourse* about narratives, and the actual awareness of their social

⁹⁸ *Limits of Narrative*. Argument consulted on February 13, 2025. URL: <https://enn8.uni-wuppertal.de/en/call-for-papers/>

importance (Mäkelä & Meretoja 2022). From the emergence of *Homo sapiens* to the advent of artificial intelligence, narrative has consistently occupied a pivotal role within human societies. However, it is important to note that narratives are not merely the starting point of humanity; they also serve as a resource that could play a decisive role in what may be the final act of a story written by a storytelling animal whose excessive power threatens both its environment and its own survival. Whilst narrative is often considered to be of paramount importance in contemporary representations of humanity, the Wuppertal symposium highlights the crucial issue of the dilution of a concept whose scope has become so extensive that it risks losing its original significance.

The objective of this book was to identify the characteristics of a particular class of representational artifacts: mimetic narratives. These are stories whose function is to immerse their audience in a storyworld, allowing them to empathize with the experiences of characters dealing with complex situations. Our definition is therefore arguably the most precise in cognitive terms, yet also the most restrictive with respect to its referential scope. This conception entails several elements that must be present for a narrative to be considered authentic. Firstly, the narrative must possess a concrete existence as a communicative artifact. Secondly, it must recount an engaging story that involves agents with intentions, goals, or emotions. Thirdly, these characters must be confronted with extraordinary events. Finally, the narrative must possess the capacity to evoke an imaginary experience, thereby facilitating a degree of immersion into the storyworld. This immersion enables the sharing of a simulated existential perspective.

Building on this narrow definition, contemporary narratology has made a significant contribution to the debate on the supposed omnipresence and omnipotence of narratives in society by emphasizing the unique nature and social role

of experiential forms of narrativity. As Matti Hyvärinen and Samuli Björninen explain, this aspect is of particular interest to the recent field of research devoted to the dynamics between master and counter-narratives:

The often-repeated idiom “master and counter-narratives” may suggest the existence of two, formally similar categories of narratives with opposing political orientations. This seems to be rarely the case, since what we call “master narratives” only occasionally present themselves as prototypical, explicit narratives (Hyvärinen, 2021, pp. 27–28). Instead of being formed and occasioned as narratives, they seem usually to exist as abstractions of recurrent previous narrations, cultural scripts, ideological claims, or mere allusions to such ideological “truths.” Who is even entitled to tell the explicit, authoritative versions of master narratives, and in which contexts? Counter-narratives, in contrast, are typically explicit and prototypical narratives (*ibid.*; see also Mäkelä 2021, 389–390). The effectiveness of counter-narratives seems to depend on the particularized events, characters and experientiality in these stories. Furthermore, in taking the stance of counter-narrative, the tellers seem to name and identify the master narrative they are resisting. (Hyvärinen & Björninen 2024, 6–7)

Exploring the characteristics of experiential narratives sheds light on the specific power of stories often evoked by those (from Plato and Aristotle to Bruner and Brooks) who see them as a powerful emotional lever capable of transforming individuals and societies. Stories are not effective simply because they are sequential, or because they refer to agents involved in a series of events, nor is their power limited to conferring meaning and form to what happens. The distinctive power of mimetic narratives lies in their ability to offer

a form of embodied cognition, immersing the recipient in imaginary worlds that broaden the range of sensory experiences that can nourish or reconfigure our value systems. Identification, compassion, sympathy, fear, hope, surprise, curiosity, or suspense then become symptoms that translate onto an aesthetic level the fact that, in mimetic narratives only, characters whose adventures are told can affect us as if we were in their place or as if they were our close relatives, friends, foes, rivals, or lovers. This type of narrative is referred to, for example, in this quote from Alain Damasio, cited by Alice Canabate in her book *Ecology and the Narrative of the Worst*:

In my opinion, this imagination is never better conveyed than through stories. Because a story has the ability to bring to life characters with whom we identify and who become emotional vectors that engage us [...]. What you experience with these characters will remain with you in the same way as what you have experienced with your friends or family. It creates a familiarity with certain extraordinary situations: disaster, war, revolution. When these unexpected events occur, your behavior will be based on everything that has fed this memory.⁹⁹ (Canabate 2021, 25)

In this case, the transformative power of narrative is maximized, but its form is tightly constrained by the specificity of mimetic representation. What can be narrated is restricted by the need to anchor events in an immersive scene, located within a particular space-time, and by the focus on the destinies of highly individualized characters, to whom events must occur that lie outside the routines of everyday life. Put differently, gains in rhetorical effectiveness come at the cost

⁹⁹ Interview with Alain Damasio, *Reporterre*, April 28, 2020.

of flexibility in representational modes, with significant consequences for the narrativization of ecological issues. For instance, events that fall under what Rob Nixon (2011) terms “slow violence”—a planetary drama that is diffuse, difficult to pinpoint, and virtually imperceptible at the scale of individual experience—pose a serious challenge for experiential narratives (Caracciolo 2024).

As a field that has consistently sought to theorize narrative in all its forms, narratology is well positioned to inform critical reflection on how stories shape our representations and orient our actions in a world constrained by planetary limits. In the face of a proliferation of terms related to narrativity and the sometimes inflated powers ascribed to this diffuse concept in transforming individuals and redirecting humanity’s ecocidal course, a primary task is to establish a shared understanding of what is meant by the term “narrative.” On this basis, as Erin James’s work indicates, it is not clear that mimetic narratives are the most suitable means for engaging with Anthropocene-related concerns. She argues that, to apprehend the evolution of a storyworld on a planetary scale, we would need the capacity to read narratives in geological strata, tree rings, or ice cores.

Such an exploration of the connection between narrative and the Anthropocene poses the following questions: how does narrative help us think differently about the Anthropocene? How do narratives provide us with safe contexts in which to explore how humans make and inhabit worlds in their own image? How does the reading of geological strata, tree rings, and ice cores, which are themselves material representations of sequences of events, challenge our most basic definitions of narrative and narration? How do the new conceptions of time and space associated with the Anthropocene diversify models of narrative chronologies and spatializations? How

does the awareness of collective agency associated with the Anthropocene shed new light on types of narration? Indeed, how does the Anthropocene help us think differently about narrative? How does it inspire new structures that push against traditional narrative forms? (James 2020, 185)

To move in this direction, narrative theory must cultivate a stronger awareness of the wide range of narrative forms, many of which differ radically from the mimetic prototype discussed here. This limitation likely reveals a deeper constraint of the imagination itself, which remains fundamentally anchored in individual experience. Nevertheless, mimetic narratives may still contribute to reshaping our sensitivity to ecological concerns, even if the most pressing issues tend to remain in the background of such experiential modes of representation. For instance, a distinction should be made between *world-driven* and *plot-driven* narratives. This could serve to underscore the difference in scale between the global world in which the story takes place and the local scene on which the events unfold, with the narrative economy emphasizing one or the other aspect alternately. This difference becomes paramount to cognitive approaches and econarratology, insofar as fiction is as much a place for imagining alternative worlds as it is for emotionally connecting with the characters inhabiting these worlds.

In terms of ecological themes, it is also important to highlight the specificity of stories that focus on the exploration and description of alternative worlds—such as Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, which belongs to the genre of extraordinary journeys and utopian tales—and stories that focus more on the fate of individuals, with the world being subordinate to an immersive setting that constitutes the true heart of the fiction—such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or Hugh Howey's *Silo* saga. In prototypical mimetic narratives, the world may

recede into the background, yet it still provides a framework that naturalizes certain projections of the future—whether techno-solutionist scenarios, as in solar-punk fiction, or apocalyptic visions, as in survivalist narratives. Notably, most utopias tend to morph into dystopias once they function as the setting for a mimetic story, since foregrounding their totalizing and oppressive features becomes a key narrative device for heightening dramatic tension around the characters' experiences. Conversely, the appeal of collapse-based worlds arises from the fact that catastrophe offers an exceptionally productive matrix for mimetic storytelling, furnishing rich conditions for plot development, especially through survivalist scenarios that resonate with the conventions of adventure fiction. Within plot-driven narratives, it is also worth emphasizing the significance of works of fiction that foreground nonhuman protagonists, such as Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, Felix Salten's *Bambi*, or Chris Noonan's *Babe*. In such stories, affective cues can powerfully reshape how audiences perceive relationships between species. As David Herman observes, narratives "about animals and human-animal relationships" can help "foster new ways of imagining and responding to transspecies relationships within the larger biosphere" (2014, 141).

This book aimed to show that, in recent decades, the tools for analyzing the specificities of mimetic narratives have greatly expanded. By foregrounding fundamental aspects of mimetic narrativity, these approaches shed much clearer light on the shaping power of stories over individuals and societies. The compelling force of mimetic narratives rests primarily on their capacity to dramatize the representation of time, endowing it with a depth and intensity that draws audiences into a labyrinth of imaginary possibilities. By inviting readers or viewers to decenter themselves from their own immediate reality and share the existential perspective of credible characters, narratives broaden and enrich the audience's field

of lived experience. Finally, through their distinctive mode of storytelling, mimetic narratives attain a particular salience among communicative artifacts: the efficiency of information exchange gives way to the aesthetic quality of the narrative experience and its power to affect the recipient. By emphasizing these features, one gains a clearer understanding of the distinctive persuasive power intrinsic to the art of storytelling, of how mimetic stories can move or persuade an audience, script behaviors, or shift existing representations.

This also shows that this power depends on a demanding art of storytelling, which is not found in all the representations that the inflationary use of the term “narrative” refers to nowadays. Perhaps we need to become more aware of other narrative forms? Perhaps the most effective narratives are not those that guide us toward an emancipatory and desirable future, but those that chain us to alienating representations? Whether the immersive power of mimetic narratives is harnessed for commercial or political ends, employed to subjugate audiences through ideological influence, or conversely, leveraged to expand experience and foster individual emancipation through counter-narratives, such concerns extend beyond the remit of narratology and pertain more broadly to narrative studies. My ambition is accordingly more modest yet foundational: to facilitate the dissemination of innovative conceptual tools that will enable future researchers to undertake the crucial task of examining how narrative forms shape, for better or worse, the world we inhabit.

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