

Recent Work in Unnatural Narrative Studies

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Abstract

This essay surveys several of the most notable monographs, collections, and articles that appeared in the field of unnatural narrative theory and analysis between 2013 and 2019; it also previews a volume that is forthcoming at the beginning of 2020.

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In this essay I will provide overviews of work done in unnatural narrative theory and analysis over the past seven years.¹ The most important studies that have recently appeared are found in monographs on the subject: my own *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (2015); Jan Alber's *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016); and Biwu Shang's *Unnatural Narrative across Borders: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (2019). These are the first monographs devoted to the subject and will no doubt be widely consulted, cited and debated. Alber's and Richardson's books both offer detailed definitions of unnatural narratives, separate chapters on different topics and aspects of narrative theory from an unnatural standpoint, and a sustained historical account of unnatural narratives in the history of literature. Alber focuses on Anglophone literature from the 12th to the 21st century; Richardson draws on much of the history of literature, including ancient Greek and Roman texts, classic Sanskrit works, late medieval and Renaissance narratives, and eighteenth century and Romantic texts, as well as modernist, postmodern and avant-garde fiction. Both explain the limitations of existing narrative theory and show how its categories and definitions can be enhanced and made more comprehensive and accurate. Alber has chapters devoted to unnatural narration, characters, temporalities and spaces. In addition to general theoretical and historical material, Richardson's book includes chapters on the elements of existing narrative theory, the fiction/nonfiction divide, unnatural feminist and minority works and the question of the appropriate methodology for narrative theory.

Shang's book begins with a theoretical chapter that explores and evaluates different positions on topics ranging from the definition of unnatural narrative to accounts of reading unnatural narratives. Among other discussions, it provides a careful and nuanced overview of the different formulations set forth by main theorists of the unnatural. Shang calls for a transnational and comparative study of unnatural narratives and his study importantly draws attention to a number of hitherto neglected groups of texts: Chinese ghost stories, recent Chinese time travel narratives, the Zhiguai tales of the Six Dynasties

¹ This is a convenient time frame for a number of reasons; readers wishing to look further back can consult my review in *Diegesis* of three earlier works on the subject published in 2011 and 2012.

period in China (220-589 CE) and recent powerful Iraqi fictions. His final chapter brings unnatural narratives into conversation with affect theory. Throughout, he demonstrates how to diminish, decentre, and decolonize Western hegemony in narrative studies. He identifies the underutilized resources offered by Chinese works of narratology and shows how Chinese and Iraqi works, though they may need to be interpreted differently from Western unnatural narratives, can challenge and add importantly to existing narratological concepts.

Another notable book is Zuzana Foniokova's *Kazuo Ishiguro and Max Frisch: Bending Facts in Unreliable and Unnatural Narration*, a volume which traces out a number of unnatural strategies in the work of these two authors with an emphasis on extreme acts of narration. She is particularly effective in showing how, in their later works, they 'leave the realm of realist representation in pursuit of an even more profound depiction of the psychological condition of their narrators',² one which cannot be contained by the mimetic concept of unreliability. Also significant is Richardson's new book, *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-first Century: Theorizing Unruly Narratives* (2019), which analyses and theorizes several categories of narrative from an unnatural perspective: narrativity, beginnings, plot, non-plot sequences, time, fabula and *sjuzet*, as well as endings. It explores quasi-narratives, which rest on the boundary of narrativity; non-probabilistic and other unnatural kinds of plots; unusual story generation and denarration; impossible kinds of temporality in the fabula, duration and frequency; and discusses several kinds of unnatural endings.³

Three important anthologies have appeared: *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, edited by Alber, Richardson, and Henrik Skov Nielsen (2013); *Pronouns in Literature*, edited by Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae (2018) and *Unnatural Narratology: Extensions, Revisions, and Critiques*, edited by Alber and Richardson (forthcoming 2020). *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, edited by Alber, Richardson and Henrik Skov Nielsen helped lay the foundations of unnatural narrative theory; each essay discussed a major element of narrative from an unnatural perspective. These include Richardson on story and plot, Rüdiger Heinze on time, Alber on space, Nielsen on focalization and interpretation, Stefan Iversen on fictional minds, Werner Woolf on metalepsis, Maria Mäkelä on unnatural elements in traditional realist fiction, James Phelan on impossible constructions in fiction that are rhetorically justified, Alice Bell on unnatural hyperfiction and Brian McHale on unnatural poetry. Contributors employed a number of differing though usually overlapping and complementary definitions of the unnatural, as is appropriate for such an early exploratory volume.

Pronouns in Literature centres on narration and includes a number of intriguing and compelling interventions on the subject. It features essays on unnatural aspects of brief second person passages (Joshua Parker), 'we' narration (Monika Fludernik), first- and second person narration in post-Apartheid fiction (Andrea Macrae); 'they' narration (Jan Alber), and first-, second- and third-person pronouns (Henrik Skov Nielsen). Alison Gibbons provides a fascinating analysis of the first-person voice in autofiction. Her study of Ben Lerner's narrative, *10:04*, refers to what she calls a 'metamodern' practice of writing autofiction where the central character may, or may not, have a different name than the author. She identifies and theorizes the multiple, shifting *I*'s of this increasingly

² Zuzana Foniokov, *Kazuo Ishiguro and Max Frisch: Bending Facts in Unreliable and Unnatural Narration* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015), 10-11.

³ Recent works on reflexivity and metalepsis, such as Karin Kukkonen's could also be added to this group, despite the fact that the term 'unnatural' may be absent.

popular kind of narration in the hands of Lerner, noting that ‘Lerner the author and Ben the character exist for readers as overlapping but ultimately irreconcilable phantoms of the authorial figure’.⁴ In the same volume, Katie Wales provides an insightful reading of *Hamlet*, wondering what it means to say ‘I’ when the pronoun is spoken by the actor Shakespeare on stage playing one of the characters he created. In addition to breaking new ground in the analysis of unnatural narration, several of these essays also point to an important though often overlooked aspect of innovative play with narration: the transformation of the unusual pronoun at the end of the work. There is the abandonment of the third-person plural at the end of D. H. Lawrence’s story ‘Things’; in the last chapter of Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* we see a controversial shift from one *we* to a different, partially opposed *we*. This transformation is found in many works that experiment with positions of narration. A sudden change in pronominal perspective can produce a highly dramatic effect.⁵

Our earlier collection, *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, is now being supplemented by a new anthology assembled by Alber and Richardson, *Unnatural Narratology: Extensions, Revisions, and Critiques*. It begins with three ideologically charged essays. Catherine Romagnolo writes on relations between feminism and unnatural narratives; she teases out and braids together the popular (‘deviant’ or ‘perverse’) and the technical (spontaneous oral) senses of the term. Dorothee Klein discusses the ideological implications of an unnatural novel by an Aboriginal Australian. Sylvie Patron offers a theoretically rich account of an unnatural Palestinian narrative; she makes the important observation that all unnatural elements cannot always be effectively naturalized by a framing device that would normally seem to be intended to do just that.

Christopher D. Kilgore’s ‘Empathy the Long Way Round: Unnatural Autographic Narration’ uses the theoretical framework of unnatural narration to show how nonfiction graphic narratives encourage readers to empathize with the ‘autographic’ authorial narrator. Daniel Punday’s article (‘Metalepsis and Emotion in Unnatural Stories’) examines cognitive theories of how stories evoke emotional responses and discusses how the unnatural phenomenon of metaleptic level-switching can contribute to those responses. Roy Sommer discusses apparent paradoxes in the way we read extreme unnatural narratives like Walter Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa*; Raphael Baroni analyses unnatural features that are conventions of comics, including nonlinear reading alignments; and Paul Wake discusses unnatural features of the popular genre of the game book.

In his essay, Brian Richardson identifies unnatural characters as figures with antimimetic aspects that defy the realm of human possibilities and elude conventional types. He draws on a variety of genres including fiction, drama, films, hyperfiction, animated cartoons and popular movies as he analyses five types of distinctly unnatural characters: characters who lack enough consistent attributes to render themselves as human-like personages; characters who are a fusion of two or more individuals; parodic figures; clearly invented beings; and ‘metacharacters’ who know and thematise the fact that they are fictional beings. He then examines the ways in which performed

⁴ Alison Gibbons, ‘Autonarration, I, and Odd address in Ben Lerner’s Autofictional Novel, *10:04*’, in *Pronouns in Literature: Positions and Perspectives in Language*, ed. Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 85.

⁵ See also Brian Richardson, ‘Postscript: Unusual Voices and Multiple Identities’, in *Pronouns in Literature*, 235-44.

representations can turn an otherwise mimetic narrative into an unnatural one, utilizing examples from a variety of genres.

The volume concludes with Alber and Richardson responding to the comments, suggestions and critiques offered by the other contributors; this allows Alber and Richardson to clarify that for them, an unnatural narrative is not diametrically opposed to a natural narrative. The opposite of a natural (i.e., oral) narrative in the sense of Labov is a carefully composed and written story. The opposite of an unnatural narrative is a mimetic (or realistic) one (such as, say, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*). Richardson also notes that no longer insists that unnatural narrative elements must also defy the conventions and expectations of existing, established genres; such an effect is a feature of reception, not the storyworld. We may usefully compare this to the practice of parody: a parody does not cease to be a parody just because it is repeated, conventionalized, or even clichéd – it remains a parody, albeit a stale one. Unnatural elements are the same; thus, they do not lose their unnaturalness – antinomic temporal progressions in which a character moves forward into the past and causality is inverted will always be obviously impossible and therefore unnatural. Such events can even partially constitute their own conventions. Something like this has happened to theatre of the absurd and is happening with postmodernism. This revised position is another difference with Alber's conception of the unnatural and aligns itself instead with Stefan Iversen's call for an account of 'permanent defamiliarization'.

In 2016, the journal *Style* published a special issue (50.4) devoted to unnatural narrative theory. The target essay was written by Richardson, its positions were then discussed by seventeen theorists and at the end Richardson replied to the issues that were raised. This allowed a number of scholars to articulate their views on different aspects of unnatural narrative theory. Many had been part of or associated with unnatural narratology, such as Jan Alber, Marina Grishakova, Stefan Iversen, Maria Mäkelä and Henrik Skov Nielsen; they added a number of excellent comments and observations that helped the essence, goals and methods of the theory. The volume also included a few false statements and misunderstandings of the project; this led to important clarifications in the final reply. One result that became clear is that it is not appropriate to think of texts as belonging to a genre of 'unnaturalness'; it is rather individual events, characters, settings and frames that are unnatural. Also, that unnatural elements are present in the text, placed there by the author and not simply a construction that a reader may impose on a work.

Other important special issues of journals have also appeared, including a special section of *Storyworlds* on 'Feminism and Unnatural Narrative Theory' (8.2, Winter 2016) with a theoretical and historical essay by Ellen Peel and two studies of unnatural feminist texts by Catherine Romagnolo and Katherine Weese. There is a special issue of *Poetics Today* (39.3, Spring 2018) on 'Cognitive and Unnatural Perspectives on Narrative', a dialogical set of essays from both perspectives on a wide range of narratological topics, including mimesis, fictionality, focalization, fictional minds, events, immersion, interpretation and narrative media. Also important are the two special issues of *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* (3.2 2017 and 4.1 2018). The first, on experimental literature and narrative theory, includes Annjeanette Wiese's account of unnatural aspects of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*; it includes other essays whose subjects border on the unnatural. The second volume is devoted to unnatural narratives and their theories and includes Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenander's essay on unnatural narratives in applied narratology, Eva S. Wagner's discussion of a contemporary French unnatural narrative, Shawn Edrei's examination of the ontologies of unnatural video games and Tamás Csöngé's analysis of

an unnatural film – one of the first such accounts after Jan Alber’s piece on cinematic narration.

The issue also contains three essays on unnatural narration in feminist and minority narratives. Daniel Aureliano Newman explores the nature and effects of uncommon kinds of second person narration in Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* and Jennifer Egan’s ‘Black Box’. The latter is a futuristic spy thriller featuring a cyborg-woman; the story was first released on Twitter. He argues that the disorienting effects of second-person narration have seemed peculiarly well suited to representing the experiential confusions and political contradictions of inhabiting a female body in times of national crisis. Delphine Munos investigates two recent Asian American texts written in the first-person plural, Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) and Chang-Rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea* (2014). She argues these texts challenge the orthodox narratological account of ‘we’ narration and that the ambiguities and tensions generated by *we* narration prove especially appropriate for calling into question essentialist views concerning minority communities, offering instead an alternative ‘we’. Steve Beaulieu investigates the ‘narrating-I’ in African American fiction and re-examines its significance for narratological and sociopolitical conceptualizations of literature. First-person narratives are normally autodiegetic, in which the narrators present their experiences from their own perspectives at the expense of access to the viewpoints of other characters. However, African American narratives sometimes present their readers with first-person narrators who are seemingly more omniscient. Able to slip across the boundaries that demarcate their experience from that of others, these narrators can adopt the subject positions of other characters, shifting narrative focalization in ways that would normally be impossible. These works pluralize an otherwise singular narrator into a collective multiplicity.

A number of impressive individual articles have also appeared; these include Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin’s account of digital fiction and unnatural narrative. Ideologically inflected studies of U. S. ethnic and postcolonial works include Katherine Weese’s study of unnatural narration and gender constructs in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*, Christian Schmidt’s study of Postblack Unnatural Narrative in Percival Everett’s novel, *I am Not Sidney Poitier*; and Laura Buchholz’s reading of unnatural postcolonial elements in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (see also Richardson in Herman, et al.). Lindsay Holmgren discusses metalepsis in the film, *Stranger than Fiction* and Eva von Contzen takes Alber’s definition of ‘unnatural narrative’, that is, scenarios or events that are ‘physically, logically, or humanely impossible’⁶ and applies it to Medieval narratives with surprising results. Biwu Shang breaks important new ground by joining unnatural narrative theory with ecocriticism. Also extending the range of unnatural narrative analysis into the 19th century are Jessica Allen Hanssen’s study of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Mitchell C. Lilly’s reading of Poe’s *The Narrative of Gordon Arthur Pym*, and Francesca Arnavas’s analysis of unnatural elements in *Alice in Wonderland*. Marie-Laure Ryan, though she does not use the term, nevertheless provides an impressive account of unnatural worlds in her essay on the subject. Dávid Szolláth has written on unnatural elements in four Hungarian novelists and several Chinese essays on unnatural narratives appear in recent issues of *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature*.

⁶ Eva von Contzen, ‘Unnatural Narratology and Premodern Narratives: Historicizing a Form’, *Journal of Literary Semantics* 146 (2017): 3.

Taken together, these works suggest their own narrative trajectory: the starting point of unnatural narrative theory and analysis – postmodern fiction – continues to be a rich source of important material. Work in fiction and drama is being extended and new material is being added on the subjects of film, graphic fiction and digital narratives. We find the range of periods analysed greatly expanding. In addition to Richardson's brief survey of unnatural narratives throughout the history of literature in chapter five of *Unnatural Narrative*, we note that von Contzen identifies many unusual Medieval narratives, Shang identifies a rich tradition of the unnatural in *Zhiguai* tales of the Six Dynasties period in China,⁷ Alber traces out the history of unnatural texts in British literature since the 12th century and several scholars are applying this kind of analysis to 19th century fiction.

New areas of critical theory are being brought into conversation with unnatural narrative theory. Work connecting the unnatural with feminism and gender studies is being done by Peel, Romagnolo, Weese and Newman; postcolonial and subaltern analyses are provided by Buchholz, Macrae, Klein and Patron; U. S. ethnic authors are examined from an unnatural perspective by Beaulieu, Munos and Schmidt; and Richardson discusses many of these oppositional poetics together in the seventh chapter of *Unnatural Narrative*. Kilgore takes up the question of fictionality and nonfictionality; Punday, Kilgore and Shang⁸ provide analyses of emotion and affect studies and several scholars have written on reading and reception – more of which can be expected soon. Dialogues and debates with cognitive narratology are increasing. Lastly, unnatural studies have also provided a new way of looking at more familiar narratives, including realist narratives.

Differences and internal debates remain. One involves which definition of unnatural narrative will emerge as the definitive one: Alber's, Richardson's, or one of the other contenders. Alber's claim that omniscient narration is unnatural has been disputed, most recently by Sylvie Patron.⁹ Richardson by contrast sees omniscience as simply a familiar convention that does not need any particular special treatment; for him, the unnatural elements enter once an omniscient narrator claims to lose his or her omniscience.¹⁰ The key question of how the reader engages with unnatural texts remains a widely debated topic; very different approaches on the reading of unnatural texts have been offered by Alber,¹¹ Mäkelä,¹² Nielsen,¹³ Richardson¹⁴ and Patron.¹⁵ Alber explains how we

⁷ Biwu Shang, *Unnatural Narrative across Borders: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge/ Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, 2019), 54-66.

⁸ Shang, *Unnatural Narrative across Borders*, 82-93.

⁹ Sylvie Patron, 'Récits non naturel, narratologie non naturelle: apports, problèmes et perspectives', *Pratiques* 2019: 181-2 ; <https://journals.openedition> [accessed 20 September 2019].

¹⁰ Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), 35-36 and 39-42.

¹¹ Jan Alber, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 43-57.

¹² Maria Mäkelä, 'Navigating – Making Sense – Interpreting (The Reader behind *La Jalousie*)', in *Narrative Interrupted: The Plotless, the Disturbing and the Trivial in Literature*, ed. Markku Lahtimäki, Laura Kartunen and Maria Mäkelä (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 139-52.

¹³ Henrik Skov Nielsen, 'Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing Reading Strategies: Focalization Revisited,' in *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, ed. Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 67-93.

¹⁴ Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative*, 44-7.

¹⁵ Sylvie Patron, '*Anima* by Wajdi Mouawad: Unnatural or Naturalized?', in *Unnatural Narratology*:

comprehend or interpret unnatural scenarios; Nielsen and Patron argue for ‘unnaturalizing’ reading strategies that resist the application of real world limitations to narratives; Mäkelä follows out the implications of reading Robbe-Grillet; and I argue for reading with a dual perception, one that observes the genre or poetics that is being violated, the other that seeks out any new patterns being created.

The question of whether the unnatural changes over time or across cultures keeps being raised, despite Alber’s and Richardson’s arguments to the contrary. As Richardson notes in the introduction to our latest anthology, when he refers to an event as impossible, he means that it is ‘impossible according to the laws of physics or the axioms of logic. The fundamental laws of physics do not change over time and they are the same all over the world. That’s why they are laws of physics. The axioms of logic are similarly universal: the law of the exclude middle similarly does not – and cannot – change over time or across cultures’.¹⁶ These debates, internal and external, continue to animate and invigorate the theory and application of unnatural concepts and analysis and suggest a very interesting and substantial (if unpredictable) future of the field. They also reveal how far beyond the classical paradigm this most postclassical of approaches extends.

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¹⁶ Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative*, 9.

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Studii actuale privind naratologia nenaturală

Rezumat

Acest articol recenzează cele mai importante monografii, colecții de volume și articole care au apărut în domeniul teoriei și analizei narative nenaturale între anii 2013 și 2019 și, de asemenea, se referă la un volum care urmează să apară în anul 2020.