

# On the Queer Rhetoric of Metalepsis

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## Abstract

This article critically reviews the concept of metalepsis, introduced by Gérard Genette to designate the transgression of the border between distinct narrative levels, from the perspective of a postclassical, queer narratology. Emanating from the transmedial adaptation and application of the phenomenon, the article first suggests a complementary definition of metalepsis as displacement, before theorising metalepsis as a queer signifying practice. Looking at the relationship between metalepsis, mimesis and heteronormativity, the article proposes that metaleptic occurrences constitute an exceedance of the compulsory form of narrative, which is based on linearity and heteroreference, and thus questions, clashes with, if not undermines, normative conceptualizations of narrative.

**Keywords:** *metalepsis, queer narratology, metareference, mimesis, heteronormativity, transgression, displacement*

## Introduction

The Girl

*You must picture your image of Eastern Europe. In your mind's eye. Whatever image that is. However it came to you. Winter. That white . . .*

One winter night when she is no longer a child, the girl walks outside, her shoes against snow, her arms cradling a self, her back to a house not her own but some other.<sup>1</sup>

Lidia Yuknavitch's 2015 novel *The Small Backs of Children* – a palimpsestic exploration of love, violence and war across fragments of prose, poetry and drama – presents itself as a genuine piece of metafiction already in its opening passage. Metafiction, according to Patricia Waugh, 'is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.'<sup>2</sup> *The Small Backs of Children* follows a writer and her friends, including a filmmaker, a photographer, a poet, a playwright and a painter, on their journey to the core of the mystery behind the Eastern European girl addressed in the above quotation, whose photograph becomes a major inspiration for the writer's work at the centre of the text. Rather than figuring out what happened to the girl, the story focuses on questions of agency, subjectivity and perception as the writer processes the loss of her own daughter through writing: 'I write her and write her', the protagonist utters, adding that 'I've always been suspicious of narrators. And of characters, for that matter. Of the figures of speech we create to stand in for people. Or

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<sup>1</sup> Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Small Backs of Children* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), 2.

selves.’<sup>3</sup> The narrating voice in this instance, though taking the shape of a character within the story, speaks with authority from a seeming outsider’s perspective and poses inevitable questions about reality and fiction. *The Small Backs of Children* negotiates the processes through which works of fiction are *constructed* and through which reality is *construed* in fictional works, putting into critical focus the shortcomings of narrative presentation which can never ‘become real’, and remains firmly placed within the realm of the imaginary.

Linda Hutcheon reads such instances of metafiction allegorically as literary narcissism, a form of self-mirroring, and contends that ‘the novel from its beginnings has always nurtured a self-love, a tendency toward self-obsession. Unlike its oral forbears, it is both the storytelling and the story told.’<sup>4</sup> The novel engages in a literal process of self-mirroring in the form of what Lucien Dällenbach has termed *mise en abyme* in his seminal *Le récit spéculaire*,<sup>5</sup> a reiteration of the work in itself or, in other words, a projection of the same structure onto a logically higher level by means of exponentiation.<sup>6</sup> In the fourteenth chapter of Yuknavitch’s novel, ‘Filmmaker’, the eponymous filmmaker begins to read the writer’s novel, which, as the self-referential quotation of the first chapter, ‘The Girl’, reveals, turns out to be the very novel he is part of:

Quietly as a child he opens the book, looks at pages randomly. Flipping through. Her novel. The one she’s writing . . . was writing. Pieces of stories, little drawings and notes, and whole pages of narrative. He stops on a page and starts to read, with only the moon for light:

*The Girl*

*You must picture your image of Eastern Europe. In your mind’s eye.*<sup>7</sup>

This paradoxical linkage between the story-within-the-story and the story itself results in a collapse of the communicative frames of the text; the writing process of the novel – and with it the act of reading the text – is diegeticized, i.e. moved (at least implicitly) into the fictional world. As such, the text disregards the basic premise of narrative mediation that a story and the act of storytelling are never situated on the same level, and implies that the intratextual and extratextual realms cannot be separated anymore, that the distinction of narration and narrative, reality and fiction, fails.

The paradoxical transgression of the (onto)logical boundaries of the narrated world has long become a common trope in literature and was first conceptualized by Gérard Genette as *narrative metalepsis*. Genette proposes the term to delineate ‘any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse’.<sup>8</sup> While the study of metalepsis originates in classical narratology and the field of literary studies – with scholars repeatedly reverting to the same examples, including Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605/15), Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

<sup>3</sup> Yuknavitch, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), 10.

<sup>5</sup> The subtype of *mise en abyme* referred to here is based on simple duplication. See Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Harald Fricke, ‘Pop-Culture in History: Metalepsis and Metareference in German and Italian Music Theatre’, in *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*, ed. Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 253-4.

<sup>7</sup> Yuknavitch, 79-80.

<sup>8</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 234-5.

(1759), Julio Cortázar's 'Continuidad de los parques' (1964) or John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) –, the transgressive phenomenon has recently gained popularity in an array of other disciplines. Perhaps most notably, Werner Wolf's extensive research reflects the diversity of the concept, which, as he argues, constitutes a transgeneric occurrence in all representational media,<sup>9</sup> from film and television to painting, graphic narratives (e.g. comics and graphic novels), performance art, video games and other (digital) media.

According to Jan Alber and Per Krogh Hansen, who build on David Herman, this transmedial study of metalepsis speaks to one of the main tenets of postclassical narratology, namely the 'movement away from the predominant narratological interest in prose narratives [...] toward the investigation of new media and genres.'<sup>10</sup> While the prefix 'post' does not designate an abandonment of the structuralist framework of classical narratology, but simply implies a rethinking of earlier approaches through a new lens, the mere transmedial applicability of these concepts falls short when considering analyses of aspects other than the medium. In addition to transmediality, postclassical approaches need to look beyond classical narration by also including 'other disciplines or approaches such as discourse analysis, cognitive studies, feminism, postcolonialism, Marxism, queer theory, rhetoric, and so forth' in order to 'put the narratological toolbox to interpretive use.'<sup>11</sup> Looking, for example, at the feminist study of narrative, a shift toward more intersectional approaches to narrative theory can be discerned. While early feminist theories focus more specifically on women's writing and, as Hélène Cixous famously put it, on how '[w]oman must write her self'<sup>12</sup> (known as *écriture féminine*), recent scholarship works toward 'a gender-conscious poetics', as Robyn Warhol and Susan Lanser assert.<sup>13</sup> Such changes correspond with the more general tendency to not only consider textual structures, forms or patterns, but also the way scholars talk about or engage with these texts.

In her essay 'Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology', Lanser calls for critical inquiries into the intersectionality of narrative and identity 'to scrutinize narrative concepts so as to promote those with a broad applicability and resonance, and then to scrutinize and re-evaluate the terms we associate with those concepts.'<sup>14</sup> In the context of queer studies, a field informed by earlier feminist interventions, this becomes most apparent in the ways in which texts themselves are regarded as expressive of gender and sexuality. While Judith Roof, in her landmark contribution *Come As You Are*, centres her inquiry around the inherent heteronormativity of narrative, based on an 'ideological

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<sup>9</sup> Werner Wolf, 'Metaisierung als transgenerisches und transmediales Phänomen: Ein Systematisierungsversuch metareferentieller Formen und Begriffe in Literatur und anderen Medien', in *Metaisierung in Literatur und anderen Medien: Theoretische Grundlagen, Historische Perspektiven, Metagattungen, Fiktionen*, ed. Janine Hauthal, Julijana Nadj, Ansgar Nünning and Henning Peters (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 59-61. All references to works in languages other than English follow my paraphrasing.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Alber and Per Krogh Hansen, 'Introduction: Transmedial and Unnatural Narratology', in *Beyond Classical Narration: Transmedial and Unnatural Challenges*, ed. Jan Alber and Per Krogh Hansen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Alber and Hansen, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875.

<sup>13</sup> Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser, 'Introduction', in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Susan S. Lanser, 'Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology', in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, 39.

connection of narrative and sexuality’,<sup>15</sup> a growing number of studies is dedicated to specific narrative phenomena that present themselves as queer and/or position themselves against normative categorizations of narrative. One of the most prominent examples here is the depiction of time in fiction. Elizabeth Freeman, for instance, explores queer temporalities, the divergence from chrononormativity in queer texts.<sup>16</sup> The notion of queer temporalities thus promotes temporality in narrative by re-interpreting it, albeit without giving in to notions of linearity readily associated with heterosexuality/straightness. Examples such as this one illustrate that, while the concept (in this case: temporality) might not be naturally ‘straight’, it becomes straight once scholarly discourse positions it as such through the employment of a rhetoric that perpetuates heteronormative values and, accordingly, establishes intersecting norms of gender and sexuality through a restrictive perception of narrative.

This article argues that a very similar observation can be made when it comes to the study of metalepsis. The structural description of metalepsis heavily depends on duality and, as such, dips into a rhetoric expressive of the asymmetrical distribution of power, agency and viability in heteronormative society that values one (heterosexuality/man) over the other (queerness/woman). I suggest that, by (re)viewing metalepsis through the postclassical lens of queer narratology, these reductive ascriptions of (hetero)normativity to the study of metalepsis not only become blatantly visible, they are also exposed as the logical fallacies of the structuralist framework of classical narratology. In fact, the rhetoric used to talk about metalepsis – focused mostly on transgressiveness or unnaturalness – possesses a proximity to queer expression. Rather than subscribing to the strong focus on duality of previous conceptualizations of metalepsis, I read the de-hierarchization of narrative levels or syntactic units of a text as a rejection of the binarisms at the centre of structuralist criticism, a move away from Western conventions of storytelling and their inherent straightness/linearity and as an indicator of an intersectional and genuinely queer approach to the study of narrative. For this purpose, I will first provide an overview of the concept of metalepsis and its transmedial adaptation and propose an expansion to it, framing it as *displacement*. Secondly, I will illustrate how queer narratology helps metalepsis come out of the closet of structuralist criticism. If classical narratology limits queer expression by imposing a sacrosanct heteronorm on the text under scrutiny because of its straight(forward) rhetoric, then queer narratology – as postclassical narratology – critically reassesses this rhetoric and its ideological implications to enable queer signification.

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Roof, *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>16</sup> See Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

## From Transgression to Displacement: The Concept of Narrative Metalepsis

Though originating in the field of rhetoric alongside of metaphor and metonymy as tropes drawing on substitution,<sup>17</sup> in the context of narratology, metalepsis is almost exclusively used in Genettian terms as the transgression of (onto)logical boundaries within or of a narrated world, meaning the interference of the narrator with the diegesis or of a diegetic character with the metadiegesis, in cases where a narrative cosmos is embedded in the storyworld, and vice versa. Genette's notion of metalepsis thus heavily depends on the prior establishment of logically hierarchized narrative levels,<sup>18</sup> either in the simple form of the level of narration and the narrated world, or in the form of more complex, iterative structures and embedded narratives. For Julian Hanebeck, this 'diegetic geometry is modelled on the representational logic of the relation of lived experience, which presupposes a non-linguistic *conceptualization* of a spatiotemporal frame of reference distinct from the "unmediated" spatiotemporal conditions of the "world" in which that experience is represented.'<sup>19</sup> Based on a mimetic understanding of fiction, he stresses the naturalized status of the internal hierarchization of narrative levels in fiction which, to Hanebeck and Genette alike, accordingly becomes the prerequisite of metalepsis.

When this threshold is crossed, however, the logical rules and narrative mechanics of mimesis are disregarded. Wolf subsequently reads metalepsis as a means to disrupt aesthetic illusion<sup>20</sup> and argues that the 'paradoxical "impossibility" of metaleptic transgressions seems to lay bare the fictionality of the work in which they occur'.<sup>21</sup> By putting on display their constructedness, texts using metalepsis eventually also comment on the very notions of mimesis, fictionality and the act of representation. According to Michael Scheffel, the resulting amalgamation of narration and the narrated – and, by implication, reality and fiction – poses as a means of self-reflection, not only in the sense that these texts mirror themselves, as has been shown in my discussion of metafiction, but also in that they are invested in questions of poetology.<sup>22</sup> Besides these abstract descriptions of the fictionality-based implications and ramifications of metaleptic transgressions, Genette initially argues that metalepsis 'produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical [...] or fantastic',<sup>23</sup> an assertion which also follows a mimetic conception of narrative fiction. As such, metalepsis arises as an 'unnatural phenomenon'<sup>24</sup> because of its paradoxicality, even though fiction is, at least theoretically, limitless and does not have to follow mimetic principles of representation. That antimimetic practices are classified as unnatural, comical or fantastic simply reveals the

<sup>17</sup> For an overview, see chapter 2.1 in Julian Hanebeck, *Understanding Metalepsis: The Hermeneutics of Narrative Transgression* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Genette, 228.

<sup>19</sup> Julian Hanebeck, 40.

<sup>20</sup> See Werner Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst: Theorie und Geschichte mit Schwerpunkt auf englischem illusionsstörendem Erzählen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Werner Wolf, 'Metareference across Media: The Concept, Its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions', in *Metareference Across Media: Theory and Case Studies*, ed. Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 50.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Scheffel, *Formen selbstreflexiven Erzählens: Eine Typologie und sechs exemplarische Analysen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997), 68.

<sup>23</sup> Genette, 235.

<sup>24</sup> Jan Alber, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 203.

*normalization* of mimetic discourse in literary production (and reception) against which all other, *deviant* representations are pitted and evaluated.

Focusing on the aspects of fictionality and representationality, scholars such as Werner Wolf, Jan-Noël Thon, Markus Kuhn, Erwin Feyersinger, Jan Alber, and Marie-Laure Ryan have shown that metalepsis is not confined to narrative literature. The transmedial and transgeneric extension of the concept comes with several challenges to Genette's original definition. Besides the question of narrativity (for Genette, metaleptic transgressions 'can in principle be achieved only by the narrating [act]'<sup>25</sup>), the notion of internally hierarchized narrative levels has to be reconsidered. In his essay on metalepsis in film, Thon contends that, instead of focusing on narrative levels, the distinction of ontologically separate (sub)worlds – including, for instance, dreams, memories, imaginations – offers a productive terminology to frame metalepsis.<sup>26</sup> Metalepsis thus depends on *mise en abyme* structures, in a broad sense sequences wherein one element contains the other (which also indicates a logical hierarchy), rather than the distinction between the levels of storytelling and the story told.<sup>27</sup> According to Wolf,

the prototypical case of metalepsis can be defined as a salient phenomenon occurring exclusively in representations, namely as a usually non-accidental and paradoxical transgression of the border between levels or (sub)worlds that are ontologically (in particular concerning the opposition reality vs. fiction) or logically differentiated (logically in a wide, not only formal sense, including, e. g., temporal or spatial differences).<sup>28</sup>

Working with this inclusive, transmedial definition of metalepsis allows for an approximation of the various types of metalepsis, which constitutes one of the main focal points of current research, namely the establishment of an exhaustive taxonomy of metalepsis. Sonja Klimek, for example, distinguishes between ascending and descending metalepsis,<sup>29</sup> based on the direction of the transgression from a logically lower to higher structure and vice versa. Ascending and descending are two of the most widely disseminated terms associated with metalepsis, together with the categorization of rhetorical metalepsis, i.e. those that do not effectively transgress the boundaries of the (sub)world but merely hint at it, and ontological metalepsis. Ryan explains their difference as follows: 'Whereas rhetorical metalepsis maintains the levels of the stack distinct from each other, ontological metalepsis opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination.'<sup>30</sup> Combining these terms, it appears as though rhetorical metalepsis, in the singular act of "transgression", are always unidirectional, meaning that they are either ascending or descending metalepsis. In instances of ontological metalepsis, this is not always the case. Of course, the initiation of transgression is always achieved by means of unidirectionality. However, once the passage between distinct (sub)worlds is opened, to use Ryan's words, the paradoxical amalgamation of these realms does not necessarily allow to gauge the hierarchical relationship of these (sub)worlds anymore. Klimek calls this complex metalepsis, which

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<sup>25</sup> Genette, 234.

<sup>26</sup> Jan-Noël Thon, 'Zur Metalepse im Film', in *Probleme filmischen Erzählens*, ed. Hanna Birr, Maike S. Reinerth, and Jan-Noël Thon (Münster: LIT, 2009), 88.

<sup>27</sup> Markus Kuhn, *Filmnarratologie: Ein erzähltheoretisches Analysemodell* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 365-6.

<sup>28</sup> Wolf 'Metareference', 50.

<sup>29</sup> Sonja Klimek, 'Metalepsis in Fantasy Fiction', in *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*, ed. Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 27-33.

<sup>30</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 207.

‘completely destroys the hierarchical relationships’<sup>31</sup> of formerly separate (sub)worlds, and Wolf elucidates their inseparability with the image of the Möbius strip.<sup>32</sup>

The rhetoric used to discuss metalepsis in scholarly discourse is thus characterized by the paradoxicality of the phenomenon, the logical consequence of a *transgression* of internally hierarchized structures of exponentiation (e.g., a form of *mise en abyme*), which is accordingly perceived as *unnatural*. Both transgressiveness and unnaturalness need to be looked at in their relation to mimesis: Karin Kukkonen argues that transgression ‘seems to be something subversive, a kind of rupture, and indeed metalepsis is generally considered as such.’<sup>33</sup> Metalepsis – as transgression – is only subversive because it constitutes an antimimetic practice, which is also why, in some genres like fantasy fiction, metalepsis is not necessarily perceived as a disruption of aesthetic illusion but as a major contributor to its substantiation and the immersion of recipients. Alber accordingly suggests that ‘only ontological metalepses involve unnatural transgressions of storyworld boundaries. Ontological metalepses are physically impossible because in the actual world, entities from two different ontological domains cannot interact’.<sup>34</sup> At this point, I want to stress that rhetorical metalepses, while perhaps only hinting at said boundaries, can also be employed to evoke an unnatural effect because they often foster an ironic awareness of the constructedness of the text, which resonates with Wolf’s assertion that metalepsis depends on and is conducive to the meta-awareness of the recipient.<sup>35</sup> Yet, whether metalepsis is indeed perceived as unnatural ultimately also depends on the respective conception of fiction. In texts that present themselves as antimimetic from the beginning, for instance, metalepsis would not be perceived as unnatural but as part of that fictional world, in which metaleptic transgressions can occur naturally. Since most of narrative fiction is of mimetic nature, however, the unnaturalness implied in metalepsis ‘urges us to create new mental models through blends [...] because storyworlds that contain impossibilities cannot be reconstructed on the basis of real-world parameters only’.<sup>36</sup>

Recipients, be it consciously or not, make ascriptions to narrative by, for example, establishing connections to the extratextual (“real”) world and thus judging whether fiction is coded as real/realistic or whether the diegesis does not mimetically reflect the world producing it. Once narrative cannot be decoded or processed by these means, it appears as unnatural and other mechanisms have to be introduced to make sense of it, such as, to come back to Alber, blends between known and unknown parameters, modes and shapes of narrative representation. Due to the implicit duality inherent to metalepsis – the duality of the (sub)world from which a metaleptic transgression is enacted and the penetrated one –, at least two levels need to be distinguished here: semantic ascriptions are not made to the text as a whole but the (sub)worlds that compose the overall narrative. Drawing on Jurij Lotman’s structuralist model,<sup>37</sup> Jan-Oliver Decker reconceptualises the level of narrative discourse as a semantic field that integrates subsets of opposing

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<sup>31</sup> Klimek, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Wolf *Ästhetische*, 359; 370-2.

<sup>33</sup> Karin Kukkonen, ‘Metalepsis in Popular Culture: An Introduction’, in *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*, ed. Karin Kukkonen and Sonja Klimek (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Alber, 203-4.

<sup>35</sup> Wolf ‘Metareference’, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Alber, 212.

<sup>37</sup> See Jurij M. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977).

qualities.<sup>38</sup> These subsets are congruent with the (sub)worlds described before; the transgression of the border between these subsets, following this reading, becomes eventful and is only possible because of their diametrically opposed semantics which figure as a means of establishing an internal hierarchy.<sup>39</sup> What Alber describes in relation to extratextual reality and the (anti)mimetic quality of the text can thus be transposed onto the fictional universe itself, with metalepsis designating the ‘blend between two conflicting inputs’,<sup>40</sup> between what Decker identifies as the opposing subsets of a semantic field. According to Erwin Feyersinger, this conflict ‘is not fully resolved in the blend and perceived as a paradox’,<sup>41</sup> attesting to the importance of reception in determining the subversive effect or unnaturalness of metalepsis discussed earlier.

In summarizing the previous remarks on some of the more recent approaches to metalepsis, I want to suggest an alternative way of framing metaleptic transgressions, namely through the notion of *displacement*. In his seminal *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha asserts that displacement ‘creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition’.<sup>42</sup> Even though Bhabha situates this statement within postcolonial theory, I argue that his deliberations, and most specifically his terminology, can be used to rethink metalepsis in more general terms: The “concept of authority” in fiction is the notion of natural narrative, of mimesis, which is based on the recognition of familiar features. Textual elements appear as familiar because of repetition,<sup>43</sup> meaning that their naturalness inscribes itself into the narrative because of the reiteration and imitation of the extratextual world. To use Alber’s and Feyersinger’s words, one input of the blend that will eventually take place during metalepsis is already known because it follows the rules of mimesis. During metalepsis, another input is added to the blend, and this input might be unfamiliar or otherwise deviate from the mimetic principles upon which narrative is based, because of the ontological differences between the subsets the two inputs belong to. Accordingly, that which is (perceived as) natural and that which is (perceived as) unnatural merge, blend into one another, and intermingle – both are *displaced* from their designated subsets, and this displacement calls into question the very authority of the concept of mimesis because it cannot be used to explain the paradox at the core of metalepsis anymore. It then becomes apparent that “natural” and “unnatural” are but semantic ascriptions to narrative and nothing that is self-evident. Considering Decker’s reformulation, it is noteworthy that different structural elements of a text receive different (diametrically opposed) semantic qualities. Borrowing from Rick Altman’s generic model,<sup>44</sup> I will proceed by calling these structural elements – narrative levels, (sub)worlds, subsets – the syntactic units of a text, in reference to the way in which textual forms are arranged rather than the semantic qualities they are ascribed. Metalepsis can

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<sup>38</sup> Jan-Oliver Decker, ‘Selbstreferenz und Selbstreflexion in der Literatur aus narratologischer Perspektive: Eine Einführung in den Band und ein Vorschlag zur Analyse und Funktion der Metalepse’, *Kodikas/Code* 39.3-4 (2016): 214-5.

<sup>39</sup> Decker’s reformulation of metalepsis speaks to Hanebeck’s assertion that ‘the semantic characteristics of the worlds that are the prerequisite of this geometry can likewise prove beneficial in analyses of metaleptic artefacts’ [Hanebeck, 40].

<sup>40</sup> Erwin Feyersinger, *Metalepsis in Animation: Paradoxical Transgressions of Ontological Levels* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2017), 142.

<sup>41</sup> Feyersinger, 146.

<sup>42</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 162.

<sup>43</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 82.

<sup>44</sup> Rick Altman, ‘A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre’, *Cinema Journal* 23.3 (1984): 10.



therefore be defined as a *semantic displacement of elements originally belonging to (onto)logically discriminative syntactic units of a text, which results in a distortion of previously ascribed notions of naturalness, normalcy and normativity employed to fix narrative in place.*

### **Closeted Narratology: Metalepsis as Queer Signifying Practice**

In instances of metalepsis, following this new definition, texts exceed their compulsory form as heteroreferential signifiers because ‘a semiotic relation is projected back’<sup>45</sup> to the text itself, violating the type-theorem that the signifier and signified constitute logically distinct entities. As such, metalepsis calls the apparent naturalization of heteroreferential representation into question by divorcing representation from mimetic principles. This shift to self-reference (or, more specifically, metareference<sup>46</sup>) already expresses queer sensibilities because narrative no longer depends on an other (*hetero*) to which it refers, but rather becomes meaningful in and by itself. Even though my reformulation of metalepsis as displacement deliberately possesses a queer impetus, in this section I want to show that the conceptualizations of metalepsis I initially outlined are also expressive of queerness and that the practice of transgression or displacement can serve as the basis of queer signification. It is imperative for such an undertaking to look at the ideological connotations of rhetoric, i.e. how it relates to and perpetuates heteronormative assumptions about narrative, first. I understand the structuralist framework of classical narratology as an analytical corset rather than a productive tool, because it contains the text and separates it from its contexts, thus functioning as a closet-like institution that impedes queer signification (and identification) through the binary distinction of in/out and other dualisms imposed on narrative. I accordingly employ the intersectional approach of a postclassical queer narratology as a means of helping narratology in general and metalepsis in particular to come out of their structuralist closet.

According to Michael Brown, the closet ‘is an important term in queer theory and parlance because it conveys so simply and efficiently the specificity of oppression based on intersecting norms of gender/sexuality.’<sup>47</sup> The structuralist framework of classical narratology constitutes a complex system of oppression based on normativity. The central premises of structuralist theory, such as the grouping and analysis of texts according to their commonalities, illustrate the indispensability of normativity in classical narratology. As a consequence, texts that do not feature these commonalities or follow the asserted structures break out of the structuralist column and are either not covered in scholarly discourse or markedly positioned as a deviation. Such a reductive understanding of narrative eventually results in instability because, as Roof points out, structuralist or formalist approaches ‘tend to rely upon the assumption of some evanescent proto- or “primitive” narrative we all know, the unarticulated “model” or “logic” upon which

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<sup>45</sup> Fricke, 257.

<sup>46</sup> Metareference is a more specific term because it explains the function and scope of the kind of self-reference I am referring to here: Metareference is a form of self-reference ‘produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a “meta-level” [...]; this self-reference, which can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level’. [Wolf ‘Metareference’, 31].

<sup>47</sup> Michael P. Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

discussions of narrative rely.’<sup>48</sup> This protonarrative almost appears as an empty referent, a construct used to mask the inevitable confrontation with the unnaturalness and constructedness of narrative that comes with mediacy of any kind: representations are simply not real. It then shows that the notion of normativity in structuralism is guided by dominant ideologies in scholarship and society rather than narrative itself. Roof accordingly criticizes structuralism for the ‘illogic’ of this originary argument because it evades the very question of what narrative is actually defined by.<sup>49</sup>

In the study of metalepsis, normativity is most prominent in the preconditions of metalepsis since the act of transgression or displacement itself is largely considered to be non-normative. These notions of normativity are paired with binarized terms, evident first and foremost in the prior establishment of mutually exclusive and impenetrable syntactic units like the levels of narration and the narrated world. This binary division is based on asymmetry because of the necessary internal hierarchization of syntactic units: following the principles of representation, the signified has to logically precede the act of signification. Even in cases where storytelling is not enacted retrospectively, as the prefix *re-* might indicate, the simultaneity of the act of (re)presentation and that which it (re)presents<sup>50</sup> does not alter this logic because signifier and signified are differential categories and the act of representation substantiates the hierarchy between them. If metalepsis designates the paradoxicality of the reciprocal containment of signifier and signified, then it challenges the binaries allowing metaleptic transgressions to happen in the first place. Considering these binaries as expressive of mechanisms of oppression and the asymmetrical distribution of power in society shows how the reductive either-or logic afforded by the structuralist study of metalepsis attests to the ‘paranoid insistence with which the definitional barriers between “the homosexual” (minority) and “the heterosexual” (majority) are fortified’.<sup>51</sup> Metalepsis, accordingly, challenges dominant cultural scripts relying on the division of minority and majority in fiction, questions seemingly naturalized (or natural) modes of storytelling and exposes the fallacies of structuralist criticism and their proposed protonarrative by laying bare the constructedness of the text in which metalepsis occurs.

In this article, I am particularly interested in how the normativity implied in the study of narrative and narrative itself figures as the embodiment of a naturalized heteronorm. If narrative mimetically reproduces the world of which it is a representation, then narrative mirrors heteronormativity in at least two ways: (1) Structuralist criticism has established that narrative is organized in binary terms which, following the above quotation by Eve Sedgwick, can be seen as a parallel to the dichotomy of heteronormative and non-heteronormative epistemologies. It is not the fact that texts can be understood through their binary oppositions that allows to draw this connection; rather, it is the ‘insistent presence of binaries in these minimal definitions of narrative’<sup>52</sup> proposed in structuralist criticism that perpetuates heteronormative assumptions about narrative and solidifies heteronormative practices of othering within and exclusion beyond the asserted binary. As a consequence, narrative reproduces binary structures of society such as, for

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<sup>48</sup> Roof, 46.

<sup>49</sup> Roof, 46.

<sup>50</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology’, in *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity*, ed. Jan Christoph Meister (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 83-4.

<sup>52</sup> Roof, 47.

example, minority/majority, woman/man, homosexual/heterosexual. (2) This act of reproduction in itself substantiates heteronormativity because of the perpetuation of heteronormative modes of being which dictate that society is only sustainable through reproduction, both in the sense of the propagation of the implied heteroideology and procreation. In a similar vein, the individual is only perceived as valuable and viable, if they can partake in the continuous reproduction of heteronormative society, which implies their subordination to a binary view on gender and, by extension, procreative heterosexuality.<sup>53</sup> The study of narrative is affected by this inasmuch as phenomena like metalepsis, which do not reproduce binary structures but disrupt them, are accordingly perceived as a deviation and as unnatural because of the naturalization binary structures possess in the frameworks of cis- and heteronormativity. In sum, narrative appears as heteronormative because of the adoption of a binary syntax through mimesis, which mirrors the power structures of society on a formal level, and the semanticization and evaluation of binarized terms in reception – or, in other words, in terms of both the reproduced ideology and the mechanisms of this reproduction.

By promoting binaries, the structuralist study of narrative arises as a closet-like institution rendering queer signification impossible because queer expression does not necessarily fit into the categories employed by structuralists to make sense of narrative. This is hardly surprising, given that such a binary understanding implies that heterosexuality functions as the ‘compulsory orientation’.<sup>54</sup> Instead of drawing on binaries such as heterosexual/homosexual, I am using the term “queer” in the following to describe any deviation from, or objection to, heteronormativity, meaning that queer does not only have one referent but rather signifies a cluster of ideas that oppose heteronormative practices. According to Sara Ahmed, ‘queer unfolds from specific points, from the lifeworld of those who do not or cannot inhabit the contours of heterosexual space’.<sup>55</sup> Applying this notion to narratology, narrative phenomena that do not follow the compulsory form of narrative (or, in Roof’s words, structuralism’s protonarrative) arise as potential queer signifiers. The case of metalepsis is very interesting in this regard because the transgression of the border between distinct syntactic units or metaleptic displacement constitutes a exceedance of the compulsory form of narrative: metalepsis cannot be contained within the binary structure used to describe narrative. While a transgression implies a (proactive) violation of rules, displacement more specifically resonates with Ahmed’s assertion that queer sometimes simply *cannot* inhabit hegemonic straight space.

Put differently, metalepsis becomes a queer signifying practice because it disregards or eludes established, or normative, modes of storytelling influenced by the ideology of heteronormativity. This can be illustrated by deploying Louis Althusser’s notion of interpellation, which Judith Butler connects to the ways in which gendered subjects come into being within heteronormativity. Althusser understands interpellation as the ‘hailing’ through which ideology ‘recruits’ or ‘transforms’ an individual into a subject.<sup>56</sup> In the context of heteronormativity, according to Butler, this has several

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<sup>53</sup> See also Judith Butler’s notion of the heterosexual matrix in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>54</sup> Ahmed, 161.

<sup>55</sup> Ahmed, 172.

<sup>56</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation’, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, intr. Fredric Jameson and trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 117-8.

implications, one of the most important ones being that this ‘call is formative, if not performative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject.’<sup>57</sup> In other words, once individuals (metaphorically) answer to the call of heteronormativity, they subject to the norms of this ideology and engage in its reproduction through the reiteration of said norms. Considering my previous deliberations on the relationship between narrative and heteronormativity, it shows that mimesis, the reproduction of the extratextual world, represents a text’s answer to this call; the prerequisite of metalepsis then is a text’s subscription to heteronormativity through the establishment of a binary syntax whose diametrically opposed semantics is expressive of the clear hierarchy between the agents of heteronormativity that considers one (heterosexuality/man) to be of higher value than the other (homosexuality/woman).

As an antimimetic narrative technique, metalepsis does not subject to these norms. However, it becomes apparent that metalepsis can only ever take place within normative frameworks of narrative because the paradoxicality constitutive of metalepsis would otherwise not take effect. Terming metalepsis antimimetic thus implies that its occurrence relies on the prior dominance of a mimetic mode of presentation, one whose principles can be subverted through instances of metalepsis: the norms by which narrative (a subject) is performatively constituted necessarily precede the subject. Butler accordingly argues that these norms or laws ‘might not only be refused, but [they] might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of [their] own unilateral operation.’<sup>58</sup> If metalepsis is antimimetic, then it does not answer to the “call” of heteronormativity and instead positions itself against mimesis and, more generally speaking, normative categorizations of narrative. The act of transgression or displacement needs to be understood as more than a mere rejection or deconstruction of binaries, however. Metalepsis questions the concept of mimesis by blending reality and fiction (as notions posited by the text), by establishing connections between that which is usually considered to be mutually exclusive and by making the unnatural the primary narrative strategy that generates meaning.

An emergent phenomenon, metalepsis thus signifies on the act of transgression or displacement and elicits a statement about processes and properties of representation rather than the represented. It becomes clear at this point that queer signification is the result of the failure of interpellation because it disregards narrative’s insistence on and association with normativity through displacement, creating a crisis, to adopt Bhabha’s terms, for heteronormativity. If heteronormativity inscribes itself into natural narrative through the repetition of familiar features and structures, of the norms which compose heteronormativity as a system based on recognition, metalepsis queers the contested binary of naturalness and unnaturalness by not following straight lines but, rather, by cutting across them, intervening in the self-citation of heteronormativity in and through narrative. Metalepsis, accordingly, arises as a distinctly queer signifying practice because it destabilizes narrative through its very existence and promotes a rearticulation of narrative beyond the binaries of heteronormativity, suggesting that narrative as a conceptual category remains fluid.

Having investigated how metalepsis relates to normative – and, more specifically, heteronormative – categorizations of narrative and having established metalepsis as a queer signifying practice on the basis of its inherent deviance, the following will focus

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<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 2011), 82.

<sup>58</sup> Butler *Bodies That Matter*, 82.

on the types of metalepsis presented in the earlier section and outline how the rhetoric used to define metalepsis undermines heteronormative assumptions about narrative. The general distinction of ascending and descending metalepses heavily depends on unidirectionality or unilaterality. While the term “transgression” in this instance can already be used to argue for an inherent queerness, the implied unidirectionality only carries out a limited queer potential. By violating the border between (onto)logically disparate syntactic units, to use Ahmed’s imagery, ascending and descending metalepses ‘support the proximity between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet.*’<sup>59</sup> If, according to Ahmed, queer objects make contact possible,<sup>60</sup> then metalepsis, by means of displacement, enables contact by establishing cross-connections between that which should not be connected. Metalepsis simply does not stay in line and the syntactic units it disrupts no longer represent parallels; rather, metalepsis shows that straight lines – as the pillars of narrative erected by heteronormativity – are unnatural and constructed by challenging binary divisions in narrative discourse. However, the subversive effect of these types of metalepsis is questionable, especially when looking at configurations of *heteronormativity* in narrative. Despite their efforts in facilitating queer contact, ascending and descending metalepses signify on a system based on asymmetry, i.e., they require and keep up a logical hierarchy between the penetrating and penetrated units. In this sense, one needs to carefully emphasize the term *challenge* here, since binary divisions are disrupted but not dissolved, and heteronormativity is kept in place as the dominant determiner of narrative form. In other words, ascending and descending metalepses possess a queer potential because they prompt movement between distinct syntactic units, but this potential does not necessarily subvert or otherwise rearrange these syntactic units, so that, in the end, normativity prevails. The queer impetus of ascension and descension cannot be disregarded, but neither can the fact that the singular act of unidirectional transgression within an asymmetrical construction complicates the relationship between such simple forms of metalepsis and queer signification.

In contrast, complex metalepses not only signal queerness as a form of disruption of or momentary resistance to normative modes of storytelling, but as an alternative form of narrative based on queerness, i.e., based on non-linearity and conceptual fluidity. While ascending and descending metalepses maintain a binary syntax, complex metalepses result in a complete de-hierarchization because of *interpenetration*, itself a symbolic move away from heteronormative practices of procreation based on penetration, and the resulting ambiguity or paradoxicality implied in the reciprocal containment of the formerly separate units. Metalepsis is thus a distinctly queer signifier in at least two ways: on the one hand, metalepsis challenges heteronormativity as the primary principle ordering narrative (this is what all types of metalepsis have in common). Special cases of metalepsis (such as complex metalepsis or a chain of metaleptic enactments), on the other hand, queer these principles and subsequent ascriptions to narrative by turning the established hierarchy on its head or by completely dissolving it, which results in a vertiginous entanglement of syntactic units by which narrative loses its fixity and stability. In either way, the preconceived form of narrative is exposed as nothing that is self-evident or otherwise natural; instead of *subjecting to* a heteronormative protonarrative, metalepsis *objects to* the naturalization of heteronormativity in narrative.

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<sup>59</sup> Ahmed, 169.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmed, 169.

A word is due at this point on the distinction between rhetorical and ontological metalepses. Both can be understood as queer signifiers because of their objection to normative modes of storytelling. Whether the system is effectively overcome, is a different question. However, looking at my use of the term “queer” once again, it can be asserted that, by voicing marginalized ideas or modes of storytelling, rhetorical metalepsis exudes queerness in ways similar to ontological metalepsis. Even though normative or seemingly natural structures of narrative prevail, the queer impact of rhetorical metalepsis does not die. On the contrary, considering the inherent non-normativity of both types of metalepsis and the fact that both, by becoming the primary generators of meaning as marked events, are moved to the centre of the text, a shift in the relationship between natural narrative and metalepsis as an unnatural occurrence can be discerned. Rather than being stagnant in their position as narrative techniques that are not granted the privilege of becoming normal or natural, rhetorical as well as ontological metalepses figure as means of mobilization by promoting queer movement, by claiming the implied deviation as constitutive of metalepsis and by critically reassessing queerness not in terms of strangeness (other) but as a meaning-making strategy in its own right (self).

This significant shift is only possible if metalepsis is allowed to be queer and if queer is accepted as valuable and meaningful in the first place. Classical narratology does not make room for queer signification because of its very limiting structuralist framework which all too often puts chains on and pigeonholes narrative, establishing a clear (binary) distinction between norm and antithesis. Despite the argument for an already queer rhetoric of metalepsis I made – and the inherent queerness of terms such as ‘unnaturalness’ and ‘subversiveness’ as well as ‘transgression’ and ‘displacement’, all of which find common use in queer studies –, this potential of positively reframing deviating or antimimetic narrative techniques is usually overshadowed by the heteronormative bias of scholarship (and society at large) or by the conviction that texts can be analysed in isolation, without considering the contexts from which they emerge. Contexts are important, however, because one cannot and should not disregard the intricate connection between gendered notions of sexuality and narrative and the ways narratives convey ideology or how scholarship promotes ideology through its rhetoric. Even though it is, of course, possible to describe just formal features, by not addressing the ramifications of binary divisions or the implications of such an exclusionary rhetoric, classical narratology endorses the naturalization of *heterosexual* and *cisgender*, consents to heteronormative politics of representation and contributes to the sustainability of heteronormativity as an ideology through narrative (and vice versa). In this sense, then, classical narratology and the structuralist study of narrative mirror the closet as a cultural institution impeding queer visibility. The previous remarks show that a more intersectional approach to narratology can help metalepsis come out of this closet by repositioning it in a framework that has words for processes of queer signification and that is intent on working against the heteronormative bias of previous conceptualizations, in turn rendering queer existence visible.

## **Queer Narratology as Postclassical Narratology**

The queerness of metaleptic occurrences identified in this paper manifests itself in two basal ways, namely on the level of narrative discourse as the queerness inherent to an antimimetic and thus non-normative storytelling device, on the one hand, and on the level of story, which receives conceptual queerness through the way in which it is brought forth,

on the other. If the act of narration is queer, that which it narrates can be conceived of as queer as well. The identification of metalepsis as “meta” or “queer” thereby strongly depends on the act of reception. Alexander Doty calls out mass culture texts and their recipients for a heterocentrist bias. He identifies the problem of mass culture representations as not necessarily a matter of coding but of *decoding*, i.e., an issue of erasure emanating from attitudes of recipients.<sup>61</sup> By saying that, to him, queerness is not sub-textual or sub-cultural but a part of the text that is not any less “real” than the attributed straightness of narrative, Doty’s assertion resonates with my critique of classical/structuralist narratology and its (hetero)normative rhetoric. That is to say, just because classical narratology erases queerness based on such a heterocentrist bias, does not mean that queerness is simply not there. I am convinced that studies like Doty’s or my case study of metalepsis help to clear up a common misconception about queer studies: queer readings do not really read texts queerly for this implies that texts would need to be changed to fit a queer interpretation; “queerly” should rather be understood as the adverb it is, namely as modifying the reading activity. Queer readings, then, are readings whose gaze is guided by an interest in queer representation and the willingness to see queerness. The emphasis on (hetero)normativity in classical narratology may obscure the queerness of a text through a lacking contextualization of narrative and an excessive use of straight (e.g. binary) rhetoric, which not only makes queerness seemingly disappear; the corset of this structuralist framework also does not make sufficient room for queer expression. Postclassical approaches, such as queer narratology, have been developed to counter the shortcomings of classical narratology by offering an updated toolbox enriched with the insights of transmediality and intersectionality to help scholarship cast queerer looks at narrative and ‘move the “behind” to the “front”’.<sup>62</sup>

As indicated in the beginning, Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Small Backs of Children* symbolically refrains from normative conceptualizations of narrative because of its open and experimental form. Besides fragmentarization and hybridization, this openness arises as a secondary effect of metalepsis: resulting from the self-referential foregrounding of the communicative frames constituting the narrative (a character reads a book within the diegesis; this book turns out to be the story – as an extratextual entity – he is part of), the instance of metalepsis described at the beginning of this article redirects notions of heteroreference and linearity to the text itself, which, by referring back to its beginning, approximates the juncture of a loop, a circular logic evoked by breaking with the ‘straight lines’ integral to heteroreferential representation or narrative teleology. Instead of a progression from A to B, *The Small Backs of Children* at this point views B as a transitory event, while A becomes its beginning and end; the function of metalepsis as a form of metareference is thus not limited to a collapse of aesthetic illusion, it also encompasses an aberration of the path dictated by normative categorizations and conceptualizations of narrative. In this sense, *The Small Backs of Children* figures as a prime example of how queer narratology can be used to make sense of perceived non-normativity in narrative discourse. Queer narratology is a truly postclassical narratology because of its origin in queer studies and queer theory, which, besides focusing on queerness as a critical category, ‘also describes how specific forms of knowing, being, belonging, and embodying are prevented from emerging in the first place’,<sup>63</sup> as Freeman postulates. The

<sup>61</sup> Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xii.

<sup>62</sup> Ahmed, 166.

<sup>63</sup> Freeman, 11.

‘post’ in queer narratology thus designates an openly articulated critique of classical narratology and a move beyond its restrictive rhetoric and the ascription of notions of naturalness, normalcy and normativity to narrative.

Instead of positioning metalepsis as a challenge to representational realism or aesthetic illusion, Yuknavitch’s text illustrates the productivity of queer narratology in the study of metalepsis. In general, postclassical narratology displays a tendency toward the “unnatural”, meaning that, while classical narratology dominantly focuses on mimetic narratives that are perceived as natural, postclassical approaches ‘develop new analytical tools and modeling systems that help describe the fact that many narratives deviate from real-world frames in a wide variety of ways’.<sup>64</sup> The queer study of metalepsis follows this in two ways: (1) Metalepsis constitutes an antimimetic practice that disrupts aesthetic illusion through the paradoxical linkage of (onto)logically distinct syntactic units of a text by means of transgression or displacement. As such, metalepsis is usually classified as unnatural and has become a major interest in postclassical narratology. (2) Following Roof, who suggests that narrative’s ‘apparent rendition of life experience [...] is already an ideological version of (re)production produced by the figurative cooperation of a naturalized capitalism and heterosexuality’,<sup>65</sup> queer signification also figures as unnatural because of its deviation from the ubiquitous heteronorm. The term “unnatural” itself expresses the naturalization of this heteronorm because antimimetic phenomena and queerness cannot be made sense of in the context of what in this discussion is commonly referred to as natural narrative, i.e., narrative that performatively reproduces (and thus stabilizes) heteronormativity through mimesis. Following this reasoning, *The Small Backs of Children* does not undermine its realism but rather intervenes in the self-citation of heteronormativity through narrative because it disrupts the straight lines organizing narrative. Metalepsis emerges as a symbolic manifestation of queerness in the text, a distinct signifier of a *poietic queerness* elicited by the level of narrative mediation.

In addition to looking at how the level of narration marks the narrative as queer, one should also consider the reflexes of this poietic queerness on the level of the story told. In *The Small Backs of Children*, heteronormative modes of being are unsustainable, not only because of explicitly queer characters, such as the poet, but also because the writer lost her daughter, disrupting the model of a heteronormative core-family. The queerness of this constellation does not primarily lie in the fact that the text represents alternative (as in non-normative) kinship relations or relationships; it is the way in which the text interweaves *being* and *writing* that reverberates with queerness. The writer fills the void created by the loss of her daughter with artistic creation: ‘Inside everything I have ever written, there is a girl. Sometimes she is dead, and haunts the story like a ghost. Sometimes she is an orphan of war. Sometimes she is just wandering. Maybe the girl is a metaphor, or maybe she is me, or maybe a character who keeps coming.’<sup>66</sup> The relationship between the girl, the writer and her daughter is of almost cyclical nature and they appear as interchangeable entities that cannot possibly take concrete shape in any form but their entangled description. As such, the ways in which the writer constructs the narrative – and with it her identity – become queer in the sense that they move away from heteronormativity, rely on self-reference as opposed to heteroreference and are characterized by conceptual fluidity. *The Small Backs of Children*, in summary, links aesthetics and queerness through a correlation of narrative form and its non-

<sup>64</sup> Alber and Hansen, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Roof, xvii.

<sup>66</sup> Yuknavitch, 8.



heteronormative representations. Metalepsis, then, becomes a queer signifying practice because it annihilates the difference between the act of storytelling and the story told by means of displacement: when the filmmaker starts reading the novel he is part of, he logically assumes the status of readers of the novel, which, in turn, amalgamates the ontologically disparate extra- and intratextual communicative levels of the text. If the text correlates form and content throughout, their bipolarity is resolved through metalepsis, and this metareferential collapse is expressive of queerness.

If, according to Roman Jakobson, there is a poetic function inherent to language that is self-referential,<sup>67</sup> then cultural artefacts, which are based on language, may make room for queerness. Metalepsis lends itself perfectly for discussing queer signification and the use of queer narratology precisely because it is directed toward the text itself. As a consequence, metalepsis *qua essence* interrogates notions of textuality, narrativity and representation, and the study of metalepsis cannot but address its transgressive or subversive effect. Queer narratology additionally asks *why* metalepsis is perceived as transgressive and/or subversive and answers this question by examining the intersections between narrative and gendered notions of sexuality. As such, and by moving beyond mere structural(ist) descriptions of narrative, queer narratology constitutes a very productive strand of postclassical narratology. Especially since the popularity of metalepsis continues to grow in an array of very diverse media, much work needs to be done in the field of narratology. I have demonstrated that substantial work *can* be done when shifting the focus and giving voice to underrepresented perspectives within and on narrative theory by laying the theoretical foundations for metalepsis as a queer signifying practice.

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<sup>67</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960), 356.

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## Despre „retorica queer” a metalepsei

### Rezumat

Acest articol rediscută în mod critic conceptul de metalepsă al lui Gérard Genette pentru a desemna transgresarea granițelor dintre nivelurile narative distincte, din perspectiva naratologiei postclasice de tip „queer”. Emanând din adaptarea transmedială și aplicarea acestui fenomen, articolul sugerează în primul rând definirea complementară a metalepsei ca deplasare înainte de a teoretiza metalepsa ca practică „queer” semnificativă. Analizând relația dintre metalepsă, mimesis și heteronormativitate, articolul susține că ocurențele metaleptice constituie un excedent al formei narative obligatorii care se bazează pe linearitate și pe heteroreferințe și, astfel, problematizează, intră în contradicție, dacă nu subminează, conceptualizările normative ale narațiunii.