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Jan Alber and Brian Richardson, eds. *Unnatural Narratology: Extensions, Revisions, and Challenges*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020. Pp 232. ISBN 9780814214190 (hardcover).

With explicit intentions “to expand, clarify, revise, and asses the current state of unnatural narratology” (2), this anthology bears close connections to earlier scholarly efforts of coagulating a field of literary research that looks into ‘unnatural’ dimensions of narratives. The editors’ individual volumes – Jan Alber’s *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016) and Brian Richardson’s *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century: Theorizing Unruly Narratives* (2019), *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (2015), and *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006), as well as an anthology they co-edited with Henrik Skov Nielsen, *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* (2013) are only some of the examples worth noting. As it is claimed in the fields’ synopsis from the “Introduction”, unnatural narratology “began as a set of concepts that were necessary to circumscribe the achievements of postmodern fiction” (1). However, its quick expansion, as well as its relevance and elasticity as a theoretical framework are visible through the large variety of contributions to this collection. Tackling a wide range of subjects and addressing narratives with various historical and cultural origins, across genres and media, and even with different degrees of narrativity, the authors also engage in interesting dialogues with other fields of research, among which feminist, postcolonial, reader-oriented, and empathy studies.

Above all, it is the editors’ hope that unnatural narratology would continue its rapid development and would, eventually, achieve a status of “a second, additional poetics” (6) to that of mimetic, ‘natural’ narratology – importantly, one from which any connotations of an opposing or “an alternative paradigm” (6) would be removed. Even though the definitions

of the unnatural as a narrative category are incongruous – for instance, to Alber it refers to the “physically, logically, or humanly impossible phenomena” (8), while to Richardson it consists of antimimetic and antirealist representations (3), there is unanimous agreement that it should be constructed as “a dual, interactive model of mimesis and antimimesis” (6). However, as compared to other emergent paradigms of narrative study (for example, the postcognitive narratology that they denounce), theoretical divergences appear to have a stronger hold here. In this sense, it is interesting that unnatural narratology presents itself not only as “a dynamic model that is still being created and refined” (2), but also as one striving to preserve its homogeneous state – “unnatural narratology never desired or attempted to be a rigorously unified approach” (2). Consequently, beginning with the “Introduction” and throughout all chapters, there is an echoed need to clarify one’s position, to clearly state the assumed definitions of the main concepts, and to specify the particularities arising from the branching, differing subframeworks. Moreover, the authors do not refrain from critiques, suggestions, or making revisions, in the same way that the editors do not hesitate to disagree either with the contributions or with each other. Another interesting consequence to the framework’s case for flexibility is its slightly unusual, ‘conversational’ structure. While the introduction provides a historical overview of the field, addresses common criticism, and explains the similarities and differences in the theoretical stances of the two editors, the summaries of the contributions are withheld for an “Afterword” section. Eventually, it becomes an opportunity for the editors to respond individually to each chapter and to engage in a sometimes contradictory dialogue with each other.

Thus, the core aims of the volume are to expand the scope of unnatural narrative theory and to secure its complementary, rather than alternative status within literary studies, to deconstruct the natural/unnatural binary, and to encourage ‘unnatural’ readings of texts across time, cultural spaces, media, or genres. These are probably most clearly identifiable throughout Richardson’s own contribution, “Transcending Humanistic and Cognitive Models: Unnatural Characters in Fiction, Drama, and Popular Culture.” In a tentatively exhaustive

account, he attempts to demonstrate that a one-sided mimetic theory of literary characters is incomplete and lacks the theoretical tools that can account for characters who are, to various degrees, more- or less-than-human.¹ Instead, he proposes a “multiform theory of character” (160) that would “include two very different components – one for characters and aspects of characters that resemble or imitate human beings, and another for aspects of characters who resist, defy, transgress, or reconstruct identities in ways that move far beyond realist or humanist models” (159). Then, he continues with an exploration of theatrical and filmic performances in an attempt to identify the processes through which mimetic characters can become unnatural and antimimetic during their being enactment and embodiment (152).

Richardson briefly overviews unnatural dimensions related to characters in graphic fiction, computer games and interactive fiction, or animated cartoons, but there are other authors who fully address these topics. Firstly, Raphaël Baroni is interested in the medium-specific affordances provided by comics in their “spatial representation of the flow of time” (166). He analyzes Marc-Antoine Mathieu’s *L’origine* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* in order to emphasize how the linear and fixed *sjuzhet* that is natural(ized) in novels is replaced by a variable and simultaneous one in graphic narratives (166). Subsequently, he critiques novel-centered presuppositions and brings into awareness the interdependence between medium and (un)natural characteristics – “it is not easy to define the naturalness of any narrative element if we put aside the context and fail to consider not only the semiotic properties of the medium but also its specific cultural tradition” (174). A pertinent question regarding interiorized hierarchies of media ‘naturalness’ is also raised (183-4). Secondly, Paul Wake sketches the history of the gamebook as a both digital and pre-digital genre in order to challenges “the stability of the ‘unnatural’ as a category” (190). He also addresses the problematic distinction between ‘conventionalizing’ and ‘naturalizing’ readings, thus concluding that a gamebook “is predicated on the dynamic relation that pertains between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ writing” – “as a genre [it] relies on the rapid habituation of readers to otherwise unnatural literary practices” (190). Thirdly, in “Empathy the Long Way ‘Round: Unnatural

Autographic Narration,” Christopher D. Kilgore looks into readers’ empathetic response to graphic non-fictional narratives (in particular, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*). He showcases how “a literal ‘drawing of the self’” (72) makes use “‘unnatural’ narrative techniques” (94) and thus leave “traces of unnatural discomfort” (76), even without their “becom[ing] wholly unnatural texts” (94). In order to account for them, he proposes an “unusual type of empathy between reader and autographic narrator” (69), one that is mediated and non-visceral. A counterpart to Suzanne Keen’s understanding of “‘fast tracks’ to empathy” (qtd. in Kilgore 94), “empathy the long way ‘round carries a much heavier interpretive and cognitive load, making it perhaps less easy to reach” (80).

Similar interests regarding affective engagement through reading are echoed in Daniel Punday’s “Metalepsis and Emotion in Unnatural Stories.” Deconstructing the generally accepted understanding of metalepsis as inherently defamiliarizing and unnatural (99), he argues that it does not have an “estranging effect on our emotional engagement with the story” (100). Instead, it can interestingly “work to deepen our emotional attachment to the story” (100). Punday’s demonstration continues to support that a shifted understanding of metalepsis as immersive can in fact “[make] possible the emotional context of the story” (110) in the first place. Moving on, the chapter of Sylvie Patron approaches reader-oriented theory from a slightly different side. Analyzing Wajdi Mouawad’s *Anima*, she brings into perspective the debates of unnatural narratologists as a means to maintain that the unnatural elements of this particular novel are subverted neither through intra-, nor through extra-diegetic naturalizing reading strategies. Consequently, the author calls for a reassessment of “the concept of the unnatural itself” in the light of a need “to distinguishing between the unnatural elements that properly belong to the fiction and elements that are only the result of certain narrative techniques, or even certain habits of language created to account for these techniques” (49).

There are also chapters that investigate relations between the narratological and “the ideologically unnatural” (Romagnolo 15). On the one hand, in “(Un)Natural Connections: Feminist Experimentation and

Unnatural Narration in *Nights at the Circus*,” Catherine Romagnolo reads Angela Carter’s novel as evidence for an existing, inherent theoretical agreement between feminist literature and unnatural narratology – “the connection between antimimetic, experimental, that is, *unnatural* narrative forms, and the narrative representation of alternative, so-called *unnatural*, gendered subjectivity, is not incidental” (17). The latter also becomes a resource for overcoming “the problematic relationship between feminist thought and postmodern philosophical positions” (13). On the other hand, Dorothee Klein draws on postcolonial theory in order to find the place of Kim Scott’s *Benang* – and Aboriginal Australian literature in general, within the paradigm of the unnatural. Proposing the concept of “cultural encyclopedia” (55), she stresses the necessity of redefining unnatural narratological categories from a position of cultural relativity. She also emphasizes the resourcefulness of unnatural narratives as didactic tools, being “an effective means to incite readers to adopt a reading stance of deference and respect” (65).

One of the most disputed chapters is Roy Sommer’s “The (Un)Natural Response: Reading Walter Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa*.” His larger critique of unnatural narratology, as well as his choice to understand it as the study of the non- and anti-natural, the non- and anti-narrative (131) give Alber and Richardson an opportunity to refine their personal theoretical positions. While Sommer maintains that there are no considerable differences between understanding – and “naturalizing,” mimetic fiction as compared to the antimimetic one (116) and that the scope of unnatural narratology “programmatically transcends the paradigm of narrative” (166), the “Afterword” provides clarifications regarding possible definitions of narratives, degrees of narrativity, delimitations of (un)natural elements, and the cognitive processes entailed in reading.

While Sommer’s chapter is a suitable example that even critical approaches to unnatural narratology are not dismissed, but offered a place in the volume instead, it is once again confirmed that the boundaries of this emerging framework are flexible and permeable. Both scholars of unnatural narratives and the concepts they construct are open to being questioned, expanded, and permanently reconsidered. Indeed, it seems

that unnatural narratology has momentarily found a perfect equilibrium between plasticity, coherence, and consistency, one that makes possible the most diverse applications of its theories. A possibly interesting case for a meta-theoretical analysis, the future of this narrative theory could be of interest even to those not particularly fond of the interpretative frameworks it provides.

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Notes:

¹ He identifies five such categories: imperfectly human characters – “having too few consistent attributes to render themselves as humanlike personages, or they have too many contradictory features to plausibly form a single character, or they may be a fusion of two or more individuals. Still others may have many of the right traits but in the wrong combination” (137), multiple or multiplied individuals (143), parodic characters (143), fabricated entities “that are not found in the real world or in established genres” (144), and metafictional characters, “those who know that they are fictional beings” (146).

Works Cited

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