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**Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, eds.** *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013. Hb. viii, 234pp. \$63.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1228-8.

In his obituary of Gabriel García Márquez in the *New York Times*, Salman Rushdie paid tribute to the realism of the Nobel laureate's work. "Magic in service of truth," read the title of Rushdie's piece, signalling his insistence on the verisimilitude of García Márquez's magic realism. Take (as Rushdie did) the example of José Arcadio in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: after Arcadio has shot himself, a trickle of blood seeping from his body follows a complicated itinerary through town to finally arrive in the kitchen of Úrsula Iguarán and inform her of her son's death. As Rushdie points out, the passage is impossible and truthful at the same time. For while blood is not known to take on a life of its own, it is just this magical metamorphosis which serves to convey the dramatic quality of the events depicted.

According to the editors of the book under review, the use of impossible or 'unnatural' events and scenarios has been as widespread in literary history as it is underrepresented in the study of narrative. Indeed, from Kafka's iconic man-turned-bug Gregor Samsa to the current vogue of fantasy fiction, improbable characters and outlandish settings are hardly alien to past and present readerships. If the corresponding project of an unnatural narratology has lagged behind, it is now fast gaining ground. The present book follows a quick succession of journal articles and other edited volumes of the past few years, with many authors and contributors of these previous publications joining in again.

The title of this latest addition to the debate suggests consolidation and a systematic expansion of the phenomena explored. Compiling a 'poetics' of unnatural narrative, the book assembles and spells out with regard to the unnatural a wide range of analytical categories, such as time, space, character narration, metalepsis, and hypertext. In the process, any association of unnatural narrative as a deviant special case is consistently challenged to redirect attention to the forgotten "other half of the history of literature," as Brian Richardson puts it in his contribution ("Unnatural Stories and Sequences" 29).

In launching this task of recovery, the present volume takes issue with what the editors identify as the "mimetic reductionism" of narrative theory ("Introduction" 1). This "claim that the basic aspects of narrative can be explained primarily

or exclusively by models based on realist parameters” (*ibid.*) is traced from as far back as Aristotle to the more recent and more immediate sparring partner of cognitive narratology. The latter position argues that readers process narrative texts by drawing on cognitive models from their real-world experience. Central here is the idea of conversational natural narrative, as a constant of human interaction and as a template which readers bring to even the most intricate written narratives. This is putting it simply, but cognitive approaches as developed by Monika Fludernik, for example, as well as the attendant concepts of naturalization and narrativization have been so influential as to permit paraphrase. For unnatural narrative theorists, now, the idea that readers cannot but naturalize, or that all texts lend themselves to this attempt, does not hold up to scrutiny. However, opinions are characteristically divided over the question of precisely how to define the group of texts concerned, and of how to analyze them.

For instance, Jan Alber limits his understanding of the term unnatural to “physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events” (“Introduction” 6). Similarly, he develops a number of reading strategies still informed by cognitive narratology in order to demonstrate how unnatural narratives tend to challenge conventionalized frames and scripts. By contrast, other contributors put forward much wider definitions of the unnatural. Some, like Maria Mäkelä, equate it with the defamiliarizing impulse of literature or art *per se* and call for restoring an unnatural dimension to techniques such as focalization and the omniscient narrator in 19th-century realism.

There is disagreement over definition and method, then, as well as an emphatically inductive approach, as the editors acknowledge. Proceeding from this diversity of interests, the individual contributions either revisit established categories or they extend and add to the narratological toolbox where unnatural phenomena have not yet been accounted for. Thus Brian Richardson takes up the Russian formalist dyad of *fabula* and *syuzhet* to discuss a wide range of antimimetic cases. He specifically stresses multiple or multilineal storylines (*fabulas*) as well as variable patterns of their telling (text/discourse or *syuzhet*), calling for these examples to be integrated at a conceptual level of narrative theory. In a similar vein, Rüdiger Heinze looks at unnatural configurations of time in terms of both story and discourse, which do not rule out a naturalizing act on the part of the reader, however. Contradictory or illogical though they are, unnatural temporalities are often paradoxically true to the human experience of time, Heinze argues. Moving on to representations of space, Jan Alber categorizes unnatural spaces according to their various functions and to certain interpretive strategies they trigger in the reading process. He places particular emphasis on the way unnatural spaces require the reader to reconsider (and frequently create new) cognitive frames.

While Alber's interpretive methods amount to naturalizing the unnatural, Henrik Skov Nielsen stresses that readers can and should also apply unnaturalizing reading strategies. In his wide-ranging article revisiting Genette's focalization theory and rhetorical models, Nielsen makes a powerful case for not measuring narrative communication against real-world parameters. Similarly, Stefan Iversen shows how (what he calls) unnatural minds tend to elude interpretation. In particular, he is sceptical about the conceptual import, currently influential in many other areas of narrative studies, of theories of mind from cognitive psychology.

In his contribution, Werner Wolf deals with different cases of metalepsis in the light of unnatural narratology. While metalepsis would seem to constitute an unnatural phenomenon by default, he provides a differentiated analysis detailing that under certain circumstances metalepsis is also compatible with the aesthetic illusionism of natural narrative. Maria Mäkelä traces the unnatural in classical realist novels of Flaubert, Tolstoy and Dickens. In so doing, she not only provides a diachronic dimension to the topic, but also questions the tacit distinction between realism and unnatural narrative that many of the other articles are based on. The unnatural often occurs within seemingly natural narratives, as James Phelan demonstrates, too. He looks at character (first-person) narrators in mimetic fiction, specifically at subtypes of character narration which go against mimetic conventions. The examples he singles out are the narrator knowing more than he can plausibly be expected to and simultaneous present-tense narration – as well as a third type (hitherto unnoticed according to Phelan) which he terms crossover narration.

The two concluding contributions extend the volume's scope by adding further genres and (new digital) media. Alice Bell analyzes two examples of hypertext fiction, which are unnatural not only taken by themselves because of their contradictory multilinear structure. As she points out, effects of the unnatural also emerge with the reader having to figure out and navigate the hypertext, underlining media-specific aspects of the production and reception of unnatural narratives. Whereas the majority of articles deal with prose fiction, Brian McHale finally turns to unnaturalness in narrative poetry. He is particularly interested in artificial segmentation and its relationship with narrative segmentation, in the gaps and interruptions that cause texts of narrative poetry to be read as unnatural.

Taken together, the articles provide an immensely multi-faceted and appropriately complex account of the unnatural. There is ample illustration of the unnatural as a gradable and context-dependent phenomenon: as becomes repeatedly clear, the question of what counts as unnatural is not only historically and culturally variable, but also a matter of genre and medium. Moreover,

rather than opposing the natural, the unnatural often exists alongside or within the natural, the borders between the two being paradoxically fluid.

While the volume more than justifies its *raison d'être*, it might also thwart expectations. Because of its internal contradictions and the extent of disagreement over definition and method it does not quite fit the bill of a reference work. The need to clarify and keep the various theoretical positionings apart also results in a more cross- and self-referential debate than usual and makes for jarring reading in places. However, given the state of unnatural narratology as a new approach and work in progress, the volume is bound to be eclectic and inductive rather than definitive and exhaustive. Perhaps unnatural narratology and the poetics of unnatural narrative will never allow for a more streamlined account, and nor should they. As much as a singular or self-contained approach, it seems that unnatural narratology also cuts across the plethora of older and new narratologies that have emerged over the past few decades. The present volume impressively covers a large number of points of contact while suggesting many others waiting to be explored (with intercultural narratology, for example).