Listen to what the body says : a new model of unnatural narratology

Kang Mengni

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SINGAPORE

**LISTEN TO WHAT THE BODY SAYS:
A NEW MODEL OF UNNATURAL NARRATOLOGY**

**KANG MENGNI
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2019**

**LISTEN TO WHAT THE BODY SAYS:
A NEW MODEL OF UNNATURAL NARRATOLOGY**

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School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological
University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2019

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Kang Mengni

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
SUMMARY	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: A REVIEW OF UNNATURAL NARRATIVE THEORY	13
1.1 WHAT IS UNNATURAL NARRATIVE THEORY?.....	14
1.2 RICHARDSON’S UNNATURAL NARRATIVE THEORY.....	19
1.3 AN EVALUATION OF RICHARDSON’S THEORY.....	23
1.4 ALBER’S COGNITIVE FRAMEWORK.....	30
1.5 AN EVALUATION OF ALBER’S FORMULATION.....	34
1.6 SUMMARY: INTRINSIC OR EXTRINSIC?.....	45
1.7 NIELSEN’S AND IVERSEN’S DISCUSSIONS.....	50
1.8 COGNITIVE TOOLKITS: WHAT IS MISSING?.....	56
1.9 UNNATURALIZING READING STRATEGIES.....	66
1.10 SUMMARY: AN EVALUATION OF UNNATURALIZING READINGS.....	80
1.11 THE NEXT STEP: A NEW MODEL.....	82
 CHAPTER TWO: A NEW MODEL OF UNNATURAL NARRATOLOGY.....	 87
2.1 WHY DO WE NEED A NEW MODEL?.....	89
2.2 A DISTINCTION OF AFFECT AND EMOTION.....	97
2.3 IS IT POSSIBLE TO PIN DOWN AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE?.....	114
2.4 FROM BODY TO MIND.....	115
2.5 UNNATURALIZING READINGS: THE GAP BETWEEN BODY AND MIND..	116
2.6 A REVISED UNNATURALIZING READING.....	126
2.7 COGNITIVE ACTIVITIES AND COGNITIVE READINGS.....	128
2.8 SECOND-GENERATION APPROACHES TO THE COGNTIIVE STUDY OF LITERATURE.....	130
2.9 INTERLUDE: FROM READER TO TEXT.....	145
2.10 SUMMARY: EMPATHY AND EMBODIMENT.....	147
2.11 A COLLABORATION OF THE TWO GENERATIONS.....	149
2.12 AN UPGRADED EMBODIED READING.....	150
2.13 THE CLASSIFICATION OF UNNATURAL ELEMENTS.....	154
2.14 WHAT’S NEXT?.....	155

CHAPTER THREE: CASE ANALYSES.....	157
3.1 A READING OF <i>THE INFERNAL DESIRE MACHINES OF DOCTOR HOFFMAN</i>	158
3.2 A READING OF <i>IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELLER</i>	183
3.3 A READING OF <i>TIMBUKTU</i>	212
3.4 SUMMARY.....	238
CONCLUSION.....	240
APPENDIX.....	245
CITATION.....	246

SUMMARY

In an effort to make sense of unnatural narratives, there has been an ongoing debate between the textual and the cognitive approaches. In practice, it seems that the adoption of either approach inevitably cancels the other out, and a cooperation between the two is difficult to achieve. While the unnatural is essentially a textual phenomenon, it is after all human creation and supposedly carries communicative ends. Therefore, it is the position of this thesis that both the ontological status and the cognitive implication of unnaturalness should be taken into account. But how to conceptualize a model by which the two approaches mutually complement rather than neutralize? I suggest to add a phenomenological dimension to the current discussion, and relate readers' affective reactions to the follow-up interpretation: I argue that the difference in the reader's phenomenological experience of unnatural narratives hints at different reading strategies. My model highlights the interpretation of unnatural works as a constant negotiation between the text and the reader's lived experience, which necessitates an ongoing dialogue between the two sense-making methods. With the reader's experiencing body under consideration, my model aims to offer a more contextualized and holistic interpretation of unnatural narratives.

In this thesis, I also put my model of unnatural narratology into practice, and demonstrate how it performs in three phenomenologically-divergent unnatural narratives—*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, and *Timbuktu*. My analysis shows that unnatural works may provoke different affective responses in readers; moreover, one's affective experience of a single unnatural text is never unified. Therefore, in the light of the mind-body continuum, the production of meaning should do justice to the phenomenological fact. This also means that the interpretive move should be localized: I examine the interaction between the

unnatural and other contextual factors, as well as the rivalry between the invented nature and the emotional baggage of the unnatural. In this way, the flexibility and contextuality of sense-making activities is underlined.

INTRODUCTION

The experiencing body has been unfairly marginalized in literary criticism. In spite of the prominence given to readers in reader-response criticism, and more recently, in the empirical study of literature, Arnold's sense of literature and the criticism of literature is still in force. As Denis Donoghue points out, "most critics read poems and novels to discover what is there" (38). For instance, for New Criticism, there is a crucial distinction between what it *is* and what it *does*, and that literature can induce in readers vivid images, intense feelings, or heightened consciousness, is not possible "for the objective critic to take into account", though it is a hard fact (Wimsatt and Beardsley 45; my emphasis). While emotion is real, and it exalts our view of poetry and novel, "it is no concern of criticism, no part of criteria" (48).

Yet the reader's experience does play a crucial role in reading literature. As Donoghue stresses, a literary text is not objective when it occurs in one's mind, and one's impression of it is not totally subjective as any provocation roots in this work of art (41). For an ideal concretization of this phenomenological way of reading, experience is privileged, and all that matters is the subject, and the sensibility evoked, as if "everything in the given world is incipiently and subjectively intelligible, available to the practice of divination" (52). The act of reading is therefore interactive, as Wolfgang Iser suggests, in the sense that the text only offers "schematized aspects" through which the subject matter of the work can be produced, "while the actual production takes place through an act of concretization" (*The Act of Reading* 21). This consideration of the reader is a positive advance from the Arnoldian tradition, yet the ideal compatibility "between my consciousness and its objects" seems hard to achieve in the age of modernity where the irreconcilability between lived experience and the intelligible, between the existential and the meaningful, is more than ever foregrounded (Poulet 55). As Fredric Jameson argues, experience,

particularly sensory experience, is contingent in modern times, and if it seems to have a meaning, we are at once “suspicious of its authenticity” (34).

Readers of literary texts increasingly find it hard to locate their feelings, and in the meantime, to ignore a heightened existence of the body; what replaces the traditional linear temporality—hence causality—is the enhanced spatiality. This representational crisis is especially reflected in narratives which violate mimetic expectations, break the mimetic illusion, and question the undifferentiated applicability of the mimetic paradigm. These narratives are unnatural, as they defy, flaunt, mock, play, and experiment with some or all of core assumptions about narrative (Alber et al., “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” 114). While these narrative practices are not new, they witness a concentration and radicalization in postmodernist texts that unmask the insufficiency of a realistic epistemology. An unnatural text can be hard to process, as it often strikes readers as unexpected, confusing, or unnerving—this is different from a harmonious identification with the story as when one reads realistic novels. It is just this refusal to be recuperated by mimetic explanations that motivates theorists to reflect on alternatives to the habitual projection of real-life knowledge into interpreting fictional—especially unnatural—narratives.

The crisis of the mimetic paradigm, however, in no way invalidates the interpretive move, nor does it indicate the impossibility of interpretation. What is challenged is the presupposition that the feelings provoked are always available to consciousness, and can be absorbed into subjectivity (Jameson 34). If, traditionally, we take for granted that the body and the mind always correspond with each other, unnatural narratives showcase that *what is felt* does not always tell *what it is about*. From my vantage point, the emergence of unnatural narratives cues at a shift of focus in the interpretive move: perhaps instead of looking for a perfect match between

consciousness and its objects, we should start to think how experience may challenge the cognitive capability, and how it bears on the production of knowledge. The notion of the reader should not be confined to an abstract existence whose subjective disposition is mobilized only to fulfill conditions that have already been structured in the text; the reader is to be regarded as a flesh-and-blood entity who has emotion, and whose emotion partakes in whatever work of literature he/she is dealing with.

Although unnatural narrative theorists often talk about the phenomenological fact of reading the unnatural, e.g. disconcerting, alienating, and defamiliarizing, few of them recognize the function of this experiential dimension in the production of meaning.¹ After all, the examination of readers' experience is fundamentally an empirical issue, since how readers process narrative can only be answered by systematic observation of actual readers reading actual texts (Bortolussi and Dixon 13). Yet insofar as the unnatural is essentially a textual phenomenon, the sense-making of it should not be totally reader-centered, if its artificiality is taken into account, and some guidance is necessary before any empirical research is carried out. The most insightful contribution that has been made in this aspect is Jan Alber's navigational tool "the Zen way of reading," which presupposes an attentive and stoic reader who takes in the feelings of discomfort, fear, worry, and panic that the unnatural might evoke in him or her (*Unnatural Narrative* 54). What I want to refrain from is Alber's proposed move from the Zen way of reading to other interpretive strategies—readers are advised to savor the fundamental unnaturalness of the represented phenomena before provisionally making sense of them (55). If the represented unnatural is too deviant from natural possibility, can we still create significance following the

¹ I want to clarify the distinction between "the unnatural" and "unnatural narratives." The unnatural is fundamentally local, and it is located in specific events, characters, settings, and frames; unnatural narratives are texts that contain significant unnatural elements as such (Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative* 3, 7).

human urge, even though it is only provisional? As I see it, if an unnatural narrative explicitly denies the efficacy of human knowledge, the account of our reading experience should “remain external to the thing itself”, and interpretation should accord with such a “language” from outside (Jameson 42).

This thesis will establish a new model of unnatural narratology. While the unnatural is in essence a textual phenomenon, it is after all human creation, and supposedly carries communicative ends; as a result, both *the continuity* and *the discontinuity* between real-life and fictional sense-making processes should be considered in the interpretation of unnatural narratives. In other words, both the ontological status and the cognitive implication of unnaturalness are to be duly discussed in my model. The new model therefore proposes a cooperation of the textual and the cognitive approaches in making sense of unnatural narratives, and argues that, as long as we recognize the continuum of readers’ bodily reactions and mind activities, the two methodologies are not mutually exclusive, and together they shed light on the significance of unnaturalness. Importantly, I emphasize that the body is not a passive reactor; rather, it constantly interacts with the mind, and acts upon the interpretive act—this fact is particularly crucial in the unnatural context because of the often heightened unrepresentability of the feeling body. Additionally, I highlight that instead of being onefold, the reader’s somatic experience is characterized by a constant oscillation between familiarity and unrecognizability; this also means that unnatural narratives can provoke in readers heterogeneous affective reactions. In view of the mind-body continuum, I suggest to relate readers’ affective reactions to the follow-up interpretation. My model underlines the interpretation of unnatural elements as a continual negotiation between the text and the reader’s lived experience, which necessitates an ongoing dialogue between the two sense-making methods.

With the affective reaction functioning as a bridge, I propose a mutual complementation, rather than a mutual exclusivity, of the two.

This project aims to stress three points in studying unnatural narratives. Firstly, enlightened by the philosophy of phenomenology, I emphasize the dynamic between the body and the mind, and contend that how the reader feels about an unnatural text partakes in his/her interpretation of it. While the participation of the body is backgrounded in reading natural narratives, it gets foregrounded in dealing with unnatural narratives, which often direct readers' attention to the autonomy of literary products, and induce the recognition of a spatial relationship to them. Secondly, it is argued that the difference in the bodily experience hints at different interpretive strategies. When the feelings provoked can be largely represented by consciousness, one may not give up mimetic readings; when the representational system noticeably loses its efficacy, one is cued to find a solution in "an external language"—the materiality of the text. This bifurcation also means that while the unnatural *per se* is alienating, an unnatural narrative is not necessarily so; subject to the context, some unnatural narratives impress readers with uncertainties, whereas others turn out accessible and engaging. By incorporating this phenomenological diversity, my research purports to bridge textual and cognitive readings of unnatural narratives. To me, the choice between these two approaches is contingent on which property of the unnatural text is more explicit—the invented nature, or the communicative function? It is my purpose to localize the interpretive move: not only the unnatural as a single textual phenomenon is duly recognized, but also the interaction between it and other contextual factors, and how the unnatural situates and functions in the overall narrative, are to be taken into account.

Literature Review

To get a comprehensive picture of unnatural narrative theory, I have read the four main proponents of the tradition extensively—Brian Richardson, Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, and Henrik Skov Nielsen. The textual approach, represented by Richardson, Iversen, and Nielsen, underlines the artificiality of unnatural elements, and the inadequacy of mimetic narrative theories in coming to terms with them. Richardson is particularly seminal in this camp. The book *Unnatural Narrative* (2015) provides a highly informative elucidation of unnatural texts of different times, and from different cultural backgrounds. Via detailed textual analyses, Richardson demonstrates how the unnatural lays bare the mimetic illusion and questions the efficacy of mimetic models of narrative. Significantly, Richardson argues that the unnatural should be read as it is, instead of as “in the service of any other larger cognitive, functional, or more obviously human concern” (*Unnatural Narrative* 20). On the basis of Richardson’s non-representational stance of interpretation, Nielsen argues for a necessary move from *what unnatural narratives are* to *how to deal with them*; he investigates rules different from natural, conversational stories, and how they prompt different interpretations (“Broken Narratives” 90, 93; original emphasis). However, is it practically possible to stop seeking for natural explanations when representational models are transgressed? Alber, representing the cognitive approach, refuses to “see the unnatural as something transcendental that we poor mortals cannot even begin to make sense of” (*Unnatural Narrative* 17). This cognitive perspective also underlines a non-negligible fact that the projection of real-life parameters into the reading process is an intuitive move on the reader’s part; as long as unnatural elements are created by human authors, they can be comprehended by human readers. Alber’s set of navigational tools sheds light on how to engage with unnatural narratives in view of either real-life knowledge, or literary knowledge, or a combination of the two.

At a very general level, the landscape of unnatural narrative theory is characterized by this debate between the textual and the cognitive approaches, and reading the theorists from both camps enables me to understand their respective pros and cons. Outside the unnatural tradition, it is necessary to mention Monika Fludernik, whose milestone book *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) demonstrates how readers' consciousness can naturalize even the most experimental narrative. While unnatural theorists never intend to build any binary relationship between natural and unnatural narratives, it is undoubted that unnatural narrative theory is a reaction against the cognitive attempt to normalize and familiarize contraventions—reading Fludernik enriches my understanding of the other side of the debate. In terms of the deficiency of applying cognitive toolkits to interpreting the unnatural, Iversen's literature is especially useful. Focusing on fictional minds, he pinpoints the limitation of Fludernik's concept of experientiality, and the fundamental mimetic basis of cognitive narratology—we approach fictional and actual minds according to the same logic. Another insightful figure is James Phelan, whose revised communicative model showcases the urgency of including *real authors* in narrative studies—a reflection of the challenge that existing narratological concepts are faced with; as a response, Nielsen's detailed examination of Phelan's rhetorical approach demonstrates the need for a *new* narratology instead of just patching the old one.

Building my model of unnatural narratology, I am greatly inspired by the phenomenological school of philosophy—the body can act as a bridge connecting textual and cognitive readings. To describe readers' somatic reactions to unnatural narratives, I draw on Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty: not everything can be explained by the language of consciousness, as the former points out, though the feedback loop between the subject and the world guides our daily sense-making activities, as the latter emphasizes. To further operationalize

this phenomenological input in narrative reading, I make a distinction between affect and emotion in the light of Patrick Colm Hogan's differentiation of affective theory and affective science. My discussion of affect benefits greatly from cultural studies and literary criticism, particularly Brian Massumi and Sianne Ngai. As for emotion, I draw inspirations from Keith Oatley and Patrick Hogan, and narrow it down to the notion of narrative empathy, about which Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) is of great help. Moving on to the mind part, i.e. how to come to terms with unnatural narratives, I find Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's philosophy and second-generation cognitive approaches to literature illuminating. Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* (2004) argues for a relation to the things of the world that oscillates between presence and meaning effects, and motivates me to conceptualize a way of interpretation based on a material relation to works of art. The second-generation foregrounds the bodily participation in interpretive activities, and proves productive in dealing with emotionally provocative unnatural narratives.

The chapter of case analyses is founded on my extensive reading of three writers—Angela Carter, Italo Calvino, and Paul Auster—and their scholarships. To offer a detailed and contextualized application of my model in phenomenologically different cases, more specific narrative techniques and features are discussed as needed to illustrate the interface between the text and the feelings evoked. Specifically, I am indebted to Richardson's investigation of "you" narration, Marie-Laure Ryan's possible-world theory in literary studies, Alber's examination of unnatural metalepses, and David Herman's most recent book *Narratology beyond the Human* (2018).

Thesis Overview

This thesis opens with a detailed review of unnatural narrative theory, which mainly focuses on Richardson, Alber, Iversen, and Nielsen. After a general sketch of the unnatural tradition, I minutely demonstrate pros and cons of Richardson's and Alber's formulations of unnatural narrative theory, primarily in aspects of definition and methodology. I then proceed with Iversen's evaluation of cognitive narratology and Nielsen's unnaturalizing reading strategies. In my discussion of Iversen's ideas, I mainly showcase his examination of the Exceptionality Thesis, and notions of mindreading and experientiality. As for Nielsen, I zoom in on his re-reading of Genette's theorization of mood and voice, the proposal of "the impersonal voice," and the discussion of Phelan's (revised) rhetorical approach to narrative. In the light of what has been laid out, I conclude that there should be a move from unnatural texts to unnatural narratology, and both the textual nature and the communicativeness of the unnatural should be duly concerned in sense-making processes. To bridge the gap between the textual reading and the cognitive reading, I re-examine Nielsen's definition of unnatural narratives, and argue that readers' affective reactions can act as an indicator and bear on the way of interpretation. This lays the foundation for my own model of unnatural narratology.

The second chapter presents the establishment of a new model of unnatural narratology. I first of all highlight the necessity of a new model—the reader's body should be put on a continuum with the interpretation of unnatural works. On the analysis of the mind-body problem, I draw on the phenomenological approach to philosophy, particularly Martin Heidegger's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories. In terms of the evoked feelings, I make a distinction between affect and emotion, which respectively account for the unrecognizable and the recognizable aspects of one's somatic experience of unnatural narratives, and clarify their functions in my thesis. Moving on to

the mind, namely, the production of meaning, I demonstrate the theoretical basis of the proposed two forking paths—textual and cognitive readings—and how they correlate with bodily sensations. Along the affect line, I draw inspirations from Gumbrecht’s notion of presence, and portray its affinity with unnaturalness; in the light of Gumbrecht’s discussion of presence and meaning effects, I suggest the choice of unnaturalizing readings, in accordance with the unrepresentable bodily reactions. Along the emotion line, I found my analysis on second-generation cognitive science, and highlight the participation of the reader’s body in meaning-production in reading activities; via the embodied reading, readers can make even the most unnatural scenarios accessible, and this is the cognitive approach that one is advised to turn to when what is felt is mentally describable. While illustrating the new model, I also clarify some practical issues such as how to pin down one’s affective experience, generalizing narrative features that tend to trigger emotional connections, and the necessity to streamline unnatural elements in practice. I also attach my sample readings following the two proposed ways of interpretation.

My third chapter is case analyses, and before the outline, I want to explain why I choose these three works—*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) by Angela Carter, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979) by Italo Calvino, and *Timbuktu* (1998) by Paul Auster. Because unnatural narratives may strike readers as affectively different, I intend my texts to be, in terms of the affective reactions provoked, as representative and typical as possible. Although my model is based on the distinction between affect and emotion, I also state clearly that the boundary of the two always remains fuzzy and fluid. By this token, the reader’s bodily experience of an unnatural narrative is heterogeneous—it can be largely unclassifiable, largely decodable, or a composite hard to essentialize. Accordingly, Carter’s novel represents unnatural narratives that are phenomenologically multi-layered and affectively turbulent, and in this case the reader’s body is

greatly mobilized, though what it feels can be inexplicable. Calvino's text is an example which foregrounds the sense of spatiality and materiality provoked in the reader; in this situation, bodily intensifications, which can't be described by the reader's cognitive system, are highlighted. Auster's novella is a typical unnatural narrative that turns out to be engaging and emotionally relatable to the reader, and the reading experience is highly immersive so that the represented unnaturalness might be overlooked. While it is not my intention to *classify* unnatural narratives, it is my purpose to show that unnatural narratives do not necessarily alienate readers, and we should bear that in mind when coming to terms with them. I want to mention that although the thesis mainly focuses on the three fictions, along the way of reviewing current theories and establishing a new model, I will also drop in commentary to authors such as Don DeLillo, Salman Rushdie, David Foster Wallace, and J.G. Ballard whose works, in different ways, violate narrative conventions.

Starting with Carter's novel, I firstly demonstrate why the narrative cannot be satisfyingly interpreted in mimetic or nonmimetic terms; I then analyze the relation between the represented unnatural and the provoked somatic experience, i.e. personal distress, affect, and sympathy, and how readers should make sense of the unnatural accordingly. It is concluded that as the narrative is phenomenologically manifold, the interpretation of it should be correspondingly contextualized and localized, and both textual and cognitive readings are to be put into use. Particularly, I point out that even in face of a totally unnatural mind, the room for emotional input should be recognized. Proceeding to Calvino's work, a more hard-core unnatural text (in terms of disconcerting readers), I focus on the unnatural "you" narration and the large-scale metalepsis, and contend that these two techniques effectively lay bare the artificiality of the narrative, and invalidate any mimetically-based interpretation. I complement my unnaturalizing reading with an examination of the potential emotional triggers, i.e. mind descriptions and the employment of

popular narrative forms, and why they fail to evoke emotions in readers—possibly attributable to Calvino’s writerly cosmology. The final case is an illustration of Auster’s tear-jerking novella. Firstly, I underline the fundamental unnaturalness of any representation of the canine consciousness; I then analyze in detail the antimimesis of the dog protagonist Mr. Bones—the destabilization of the conventional anthropocentric paradigm, and the transgression of cultural conceptions of interspecies hierarchy. Yet the represented unnatural is overshadowed by the projection of experientiality, I argue, which is given impetus by the mediating narrator, the juxtaposition of different narrative perspectives, and the naturalization of unnatural events. Overall, I propose a cognitive reading of Mr. Bones, in view of the foregrounded sentimentality of the story.

CHAPTER ONE: A REVIEW OF UNNATURAL NARRATIVE THEORY

This chapter will offer an evaluation of the emerging unnatural narrative theory, and demonstrate how the current landscape inspires my own model of unnatural narratology.² My discussion is mainly drawn on ideas of the four main proponents of the unnatural tradition: Brian Richardson, Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, and Henrik Skov Nielsen. The analysis on Richardson and Alber will be comprehensive, as I see them as seminal founders of the unnatural camp, and their formulations respectively represent two main stances regarding unnatural narratives—the intrinsic and the extrinsic. The part on Iversen will focus on his assessment of core notions of cognitive narratology, and why they are insufficient to justify the antimimesis of the unnatural. In the light of Iversen’s studies, I will elaborate on Nielsen’s unnaturalizing reading strategies, which to me capture an advantageous position of reading unnatural works. On one hand, in line with Richardson, Nielsen considers it reductive to read unnaturalness through real-life parameters; on the other hand, he underlines the importance of sense-making activities, and explores how the unnatural prompts different interpretations. Additionally, this part will include a dialogue with James Phelan’s rhetorical approach to narrative, which, within a communicative framework, also develops useful analytic tools to account for unnatural scenarios.

The chapter starts with a brief introduction of unnatural narrative theory—what the theory does and what it reacts against. It is followed by an in-depth evaluation of Richardson’s and Alber’s formulations. Having demonstrated their pros and cons, I point out the necessity of moving

² I am using “unnatural narrative theory” rather than “unnatural narratology” as the umbrella term, because I do not think Brian Richardson develops a narratology of unnatural narratives. This will be much clearer as my discussion goes on.

from unnatural narratives to unnatural narratology, and the inadequacy of the sole reliance on cognitive tools in the interpretive move. To comprehensively illustrate why it is inappropriate to undifferentiatedly apply cognitive toolkits to the unnatural context, I refer to Iversen's studies, and examine some underlying concepts of cognitive narratology. I then move on to Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings, and explain why they prove insightful in giving due concern to the invented nature of unnatural elements. Lastly, I summarize the current discussions, and display some reasons for a new model of unnatural narratology.

1.1 What is Unnatural Narrative Theory?

Before a detailed evaluation of the intrinsic and the extrinsic camps of unnatural narrative theory, I would like to sketch out, first, characteristics of unnatural narratives, and second, the insufficiency of mimetic narrative models in making sense of them. Additionally, I will briefly introduce the term "natural" as in Monika Fludernik's "natural narratology," against which unnatural theorists react. Proceeding to the heterogeneity of the unnatural tradition, I highlight two internal divergences: one regarding the definition of unnatural narratives, and the other regarding the interpretation of them. Such prior knowledge will lay the basis for the following discussion of the methodological issue.

Recent years have witnessed the development of the study of unnatural narrative into one of the most exciting new paradigms in narrative theory. A wide range of scholars have become increasingly interested in the analysis of unnatural texts, most of which have been consistently neglected or sidelined in existing narratological frameworks. The unnatural tradition starts from a critique of the widespread "mimetic reductionism." This is a bias that privileges ordinary realistic texts or "natural" narratives as prototypical manifestations of narrative, hence considering them to

be models for all narratives and assuming an identification of fictional minds with those of real people. This has been a default position for most of narrative theory since Aristotle, and has recently been given new impetus by cognitive theorists. Proponents of unnatural narrative theory argue that such a privileging of mimetic narratives overlooks the fact that many narratives actually defy, flaunt, play, and experiment with assumptions grounded upon real-world scripts or schemata. As a result, reading unnatural narratives in the light of a mimetic framework may lead to a neglect of the specific possibilities of them (Alber et al., “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” 113-15; “Introduction” 1-2).

Unnatural narrative theory therefore foregrounds two features of narrative: (1) the ways in which innovative or impossible narratives challenge mimetic understandings of narrative and (2) the consequences that the existence of such narratives may have for the general conception of what a narrative is and what it can do (Alber et al., “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” 115; “Introduction” 2-3). It should be emphasized that while the unnatural primarily makes appearance in postmodernist narrative, it is by no means restricted to it. In fact, medieval dream visions, playful Renaissance texts, science fiction, realistic texts, and so on, can all contain unnatural elements. Unnatural narrative analysis therefore seeks “to draw attention both to the unnatural in defiantly antimimetic texts as well as to the largely invisible unnatural elements cached within ostensibly mimetic works” (Alber et al., “Introduction” 3). In this sense, the study of the unnatural is diachronic, unbounded by temporal frames.

The word “unnatural” recalls Monika Fludernik’s conceptualization of the “natural” in *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (1996), which follows the paradigm of conversational natural narratives to its limits. Fludernik’s “natural” is developed from three previous uses. The first is Labov’s *natural narrative*, designating spontaneous conversational narrative which is “naturally

occurring”. Labov’s concept is one that involves the dichotomy of spontaneous production versus culturally monitored recall, but does not reify the opposition in terms of nature versus culture (Fludernik, “How Natural is Unnatural Narratology” 360). The second inspiration is Jonathan Culler’s use of *naturalization*, which describes the resolving of inconsistencies in a text within an interpretative framework, often via turning to protagonists’ motivations.³ This is an attempt to “*motivate* deviance from the norm or from current templates by explaining the difference as signifying additional information that enhances or deepens our understanding of the text” (Fludernik, “How Natural is Unnatural Narratology” 361; original emphasis). The third source is cognitive linguistics in its Austrian manifestation of *Natürlichkeitstheorie*, which is based on prototype theory and stresses how our language operates in two opposite ways—by enhancing efficiency and by disrupting expectations through unexpected marked elements. Naturalness in this sense is “a term for the expected, the statistically most common, which is then assumed to mirror an inherent tendency of language” (Fludernik, “How Natural is Unnatural Narratology” 361). Unnatural narrative theory adopts “unnatural” as an antithesis to Labov’s sense and considers its work as a radical extension of and addition to Fludernik’s project. While the term “unnatural” carries a large amount of ideological baggage, unnatural narratologists restrict its use to the socio-linguistic sense. For them, the term “has no extranarrative connotations but is merely a narratological term derived from sociolinguistics” (Richardson, “Unnatural Narrative Theory” 393). As Alber et al. emphasize, “[t]he unnatural approach has no position on the nature/culture debate and does not designate any social practices or behavior as natural or unnatural” (“Introduction” 4). In spite of the potential confusion the term may incur, considering that it has

³ As Fludernik underscores, Culler’s concept of naturalization is grounded upon the belief that “readers try to erase or synthesize textual inconsistencies by establishing overarching interpretive patterns that neutralize the inconsistency and provide an explanation for it” (“Natural Narratology” 251). Differently, Fludernik uses the term “in the sense of ‘converting’ the non-natural into a basic cognitive category” (256).

been fairly well established, the unnatural camp is ready to live with its consequences, “including the occasional apparent paradox” (Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative* 6). Proponents of the unnatural approach also stress the looseness of the term as “it provides a kind of umbrella word that all can comfortably utilize, even as each individual occupies a slightly different space and offers adjacent yet overlapping definitions” (Alber et al., “Introduction” 3).

As I have mentioned, one thing that all unnatural narratologists share is an interest in narratives that are odd, strange or unusual, and “an emphasis on the various ways in which certain narratives deviate from real-world frames by being highly implausible, impossible, unreal, or insistently fictional” (Alber et al., “What Really is Unnatural Narratology?” 104).⁴ Rather than treating all narratives as real-world-based, unnatural narrative theory suggests that “a fictional narrative can foreground its own creative powers and resistance to real-world descriptions and real-world experiences” (112). Despite such common ground, however, the unnatural approach is far from homogeneous. The most important points of disagreement within the unnatural field concerns firstly, the definition of the term “unnatural,” and secondly, the choice of methodology and hence the question of interpretation. On the definition of “the unnatural”, narratologists have different answers. For Richardson, an unnatural text contains significant antimimetic events; Alber restricts the use of the term to physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events; Iversen states that unnatural narratives confront readers with clashes between the rules governing a storyworld and the scenarios defying such rules; Nielsen defines unnatural narratives as a subset

⁴ As my later discussion will show, this deviation can be alternatively understood as, in cognitive terms, a preference for nonstandard forms of cognitive functioning, “be they rare and marginal, deviant, or involving a failure, breakdown, or lack of standard patterns”. Such “standard patterns” are based on what cognitivists term “folk psychology,” a theory that explains human behavior in terms of beliefs, intentions, expectations, and so on (Margolin 287).

of fictional narratives that cue readers to adopt interpretational strategies different from the ones employed in conventional storytelling situations (102-104).⁵

Another issue under debate is how to deal with unnatural narratives—whether or not there should be a move from unnatural narratives to unnatural narratology. Should we make sense of unnaturalness, clearing away the ambiguous? If the answer is yes, what kind of toolbox can and should we turn to? Narratologists within the tradition respond differently to such questions. In *Unnatural Narrative*, Richardson divides unnatural narrative theorists into two camps—the intrinsic and the extrinsic. The intrinsic theorists, represented by Nielsen, Iversen and Richardson himself, stress “the primacy of the violation of mimetic conventions”; whereas the extrinsic approach, represented by Alber, “seeks instead to explain the cognitive function of unnatural events and determine their meaning” (19). Elsewhere, the divergence is described by Alber and Heinze as one between “the non-representational approach” and “the cognitive outlook” (11). As the two theorists summarize, the former let the unnatural speak for itself, arguing that readers simply have to accept the fact that “the unnatural transcends real-world situations” (9); the latter relies on our cognitive architecture, adopting the frames and scripts stored in our minds to help explain the unnatural (10). Regardless of the nuances in descriptions, the difference in methodology is obvious. What is at issue here is the question of whether all narratives are concerned with subjective experience and can be somehow approached via Fludernik’s notion of experientiality—the mimetic evocation of real-life experience. Put another way: Are all narratives in some way about human problems? Is it possible to explain unnatural narratives on the basis of other—non-human, non-representational, textual artificial, or synthetic—considerations (Alber

⁵ Storyworlds, to borrow David Herman’s words, designate mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate, or make a deictic shift, as they work to comprehend narrative (*Story Logic* 5).

and Heinze 11)? In a nutshell, while Richardson, Iversen and Nielsen by and large stick to the text, Alber explores extratextual significance via cognitive tools. As a corollary, the intrinsic approach aims to keep the unnatural as it is, denying any single totalizing interpretation, whereas the extrinsic approach proposes strategies to come to terms with projected impossibilities; in accordance with their different definitions, unnatural theorists put forward methods to deal with the unnatural.

This opposition between the non-representational and the cognitive outlooks is quintessential of the methodological debate concerning how to read fictional narrative, which gets more intense in the unnatural context. When it comes to unnatural narratives, does the continuity between fictional and real-life sense-making processes still hold water? Do mimetic models still have explanative power? Before giving the answer, I shall respectively zoom in on Richardson's and Alber's formulations of unnatural narrative theory; from definition to methodology, I hope to illustrate both their pros and cons.

1.2 Richardson's Unnatural Narrative Theory

For Brian Richardson, the unnatural is interchangeable with the antimimetic, which is defined as "representations that contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic expectations and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres". Richardson distinguishes between the antimimetic, the mimetic, and the nonmimetic. Mimetic narratives are works of fiction modelling themselves on or substantially resembling nonfictional works; they systematically attempt to "depict the world of our experience in a recognizable manner" (*Unnatural Narrative* 3). While antimimetic texts flaunt transgressiveness and writtenness, mimetic texts often endeavor to hide their artificiality and at most obliquely hint at their

fictionality (4). The nonmimetic refers to established genres that observe certain conventional deployments; nonmimetic texts, as a result, offer comparatively little unexpectedness to readers, and they can be easily assimilated (4-5). While in his usage, the unnatural is measured against the mimetic, Richardson does not propose any binary opposition between the two. It is averred that many narratives are entirely mimetic, yet almost no narrative is wholly antimimetic—“both aspects are present in different degrees in a large number of works” (4). A dialogue between mimetic and antimimetic elements is underlined in Richardson’s conceptualization: “unnatural elements function best in a literary context when framed by, combined with, or in a dialectical relation with other mimetic or conventional elements of narrative”, and “the *purely* unnatural is perhaps not especially interesting” (20-21; original emphasis).

We should take note of Richardson’s distinction between the nonmimetic and the antimimetic, which reveals a restricted notion of conventionality. For the theorist, the unnatural is closely associated with the unconventional, in the sense that it ignores, repudiates, transforms, or violates existing literary conventions (*Unnatural Narrative* 17). For such unconventionality or antimimesis to be fully conventionalized, a lot of repetition, and widespread knowledge of that repetition, is to be taken (18). Accordingly, only nonmimetic works like classical science fiction, supernatural fiction, and works of fantasy are considered properly conventional; correspondingly, the notion of the unconventional, i.e. the antimimetic, is loosely defined. As a corollary, whereas Richardson is only concerned with antimimetic *and* unconventionalized narratives, his corpus is in no way small. Moreover, as Richardson intends his poetics to gesture outward “to include difference, embracing unusual texts from other periods, cultures, and sensibilities” (169), alternative forms from other cultures are also under discussion. In this way, the cultural and the historical differences of the unnatural are highlighted.

Another point we should pay attention to is the scope of the unnatural: What is the relation of unnatural elements and unnatural narratives? How do we differentiate unnatural elements breaking the mimetic convention and ones laying bare the mimetic illusion? Richardson importantly argues that unnaturalness is essentially a local phenomenon (“Rejoinders” 495). In other words, individual units are the primary loci of the unnatural, and if there is an extensive presence of antimimesis, be it events, figures, settings, or frames, “one may legitimately speak of an unnatural narrative even though one technically means only the unnatural elements throughout the narrative” (494). To see the unnatural as fundamentally a local phenomenon offers a flexible perspective of studying it. Insightfully, this view recognizes the fact that while unnatural elements break mimetic conventions, they do not always break the mimetic illusion. For instance, as Dan Shen observes, although realistic fiction has certain licenses to break the mimetic illusion occasionally, often “these occasional elements are not significant enough to subvert the mimetic nature of the whole narrative” (485).⁶ In essence, the unnatural may be local, intermittent, predominant, or global: “if a text contains a large number of significant unnatural elements, we may refer to it as an unnatural narrative *tout court*” (Richardson, “Rejoinders” 494-95). From a diachronic perspective, this viewpoint highlights the constant negotiation between antimimetic and mimetic elements over the history of literature.

Crucially, Richardson insists on the distinction between fictional and nonfictional practices, and believes that “[f]ictionality is a central vantage point and touchstone of unnatural narrative theory (*Unnatural Narrative* 42). The theorist repudiates David Herman’s claim that there is no difference in kind between one’s experiences of fictional minds and those of everyday

⁶ To cover both unnatural narratives and unnatural elements, Dan Shen reformulates the definition as follows: Unnatural narrative theory is the theory of fictional narratives and fictional elements (in generally mimetic texts) that defy nonfictional and mimetic conventions (486).

minds, which denies the distinctiveness of fictional narratives in giving us direct and inside view of others' minds.⁷ Herman's application of cognitive science to fiction—without considering the ontological status of fictional practices—is to Richardson an unfortunate “retrogressive neo-mimeticism” (“Unnatural Narrative Theory” 388). Similarly, the doctrine of “panfictionality” is also under attack by Richardson, as it is a poststructuralist stance repudiating any fundamental difference between fiction and nonfiction (*Unnatural Narrative* 43). For the scholar, it is inappropriate to read fictional narratives, particularly unnatural narratives, as grounded on any reference to the actual world, as the fictional and the nonfictional are ontologically different.

The conceptualization of unnatural narrative theory is therefore a reaction against the ingrained mimetic bias that has resulted in partial and incomplete narrative theories, which give little theoretical space for transgressive elements permeating contemporary literature. Richardson invites people to imagine “how different narratology would have been had Genette used Beckett's trilogy rather than Proust's *Recherche* as his tutor text.” Apparently, he does not want to stick with a mimetic, or any prototypical, definition of narrative: If “the conceptual apparatuses developed to encompass modernist poetics were inadequate for postmodernism,” a more inclusive and comprehensive narrative theory encompassing antimimetic elements should downplay the notion of prototypicality (“Unnatural Narrative Theory” 388). Indeed, Richardson is quite content that the study of unnatural narratives is developing into a rather loosely connected and heterogeneous school: “It may well be that one of the unnatural approaches will emerge as preferable to the others; we are content to let other scholar-theorists determine which particular conception is the most useful” (“Rejoinders” 498).

⁷ See the introduction of *The Emergence of Mind* (2011) by David Herman.

In terms of interpretation, this fluid stance is reflected in the rejection of any “narratology” of unnatural narratives.⁸ According to Richardson, while we should keep in mind larger cognitive and functional implications when analyzing an unnatural work, we should not “reduce the unnatural elements to one or two of these other aspects in an effort to place the entire work safely within a single totalizing interpretation” (*Unnatural Narrative* 21). In accordance with the intrinsic camp of the unnatural tradition, given that unnatural elements highlight the resistance to real-world descriptions and foreground the creative power of fictional techniques, the study of them should identify deviations but respect the polysemy of literary innovations; theorists and readers are encouraged to appreciate the strangeness of the unnatural and the evoked feeling of disorientation.

1.3 An Evaluation of Richardson’s Theory

In 2016, the journal *Style* presents an issue discussing Richardson’s model of unnatural narrative theory. The response has been mixed. Although most scholars believe that Richardson’s formulation enriches and broadens narrative studies by duly drawing attention to experimental and unconventional fictional practices, much doubt remains. Cross-referring the issue, the upcoming section will demonstrate my evaluation of Richardson’s theory in two aspects—definition and methodology.

⁸ Narratology can be understood as a humanity discipline dedicated to the study of logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation; the most adequate description explains it as “the concept of discipline subsumes theory and method, acknowledging narratology’s dual nature as both a theoretical and an application-oriented academic approach to narrative” (Meister). In this sense, the relation between narrative theory and narratology is not symmetrical, but hierarchical and inclusive (Meister). It is however interesting to take note that Richardson later describes his approach to unnatural narratives as a “narratology” in the article “Fictional Minds: Coming to Terms with the Unnatural” (2018).

On the Definition of the Unnatural

As mentioned, Richardson has a very loose definition of the unnatural, and the vague use of the term reduces the terminological precision and conceptual clarity of his approach (Nünning and Bekhta 420). This is reflected in the following statement:

To reiterate, for myself *the unnatural consists of events, characters, settings, or acts of narration that are antimimetic*, that is, elements that defy the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, the practices of realism or other poetics that model themselves on nonfictional narratives, and that transcend the conventions of existing, established genres. (Richardson, “Unnatural Narrative Theory” 389; original emphasis)

Here, we notice that the unnatural is measured against nonfictional narratives, realistic fiction, *and* established genres. Is it problematic to lump together nonfiction, realism, and other forms resembling nonfiction, which are essentially different types of narrative, and take them as opposed to unnatural narratives? As Maria Mäkelä comments, natural or cognitive narratology, grounded on naturally occurring conversational narrative, hypothesizes on the reader’s dynamic narrative engagements with texts, and this is fundamentally different from the “natural”—the imitation of reality—in the realistic novel (“Narratology and Taxonomy” 463-64). In a similar vein, Marina Grishakova points out that heterogeneous phenomena fall under Richardson’s notion of the unnatural: two meanings of realism—realism of mimesis (as a matter of reference, imitation, verisimilitude), and realism of convention (a semiotic illusion projected by form, device, or genre)—are merged in the unnatural project (453).

Richardson might have a valid defense. He emphasizes that it is incorrect to assume that because antimimetic fiction violates the conventions of nonfiction, mimetic fiction and realism,

these three are coterminous (“Rejoinders” 504). Richardson further argues, while a novel is different from a natural narrative, “insofar as conversational natural narratives are nonfictional, and realistic novels attempt to follow mimetic constraints, both are equally opposed to the antimimetic.” Such statements indicate a natural-unnatural axis, though Richardson clarifies that the opposition is never between the natural and the unnatural, but between the mimetic and the antimimetic (510). It is for liberating the unnatural from a bias in favor of mimetic or realistic concepts that Richardson uses the term “antimimetic” to describe the unnatural (498). Nevertheless, as Porter Abbott points out, the fact that “unnatural” is wedded to “natural,” which in turn is wedded to “nature,” is hard to ignore (“Strange Creatures” 430). At the end of the day, while Richardson intends his definition of the unnatural to leave out any direct reference to natural narrative, his theory *has to* define itself through certain binary opposition between the two. As Mäkelä (“Narratology and Taxonomy” 463) and Grishakova (453) observe, Richardson provides a definition *ad negation*.

This natural-unnatural axis leads to another debatable point—the distinction between nonfiction and fiction. Richardson makes it clear that his conceptualization of the unnatural is established on this distinction: unlike realistic works imitating nonfictional accounts, “unnatural narratives can only exist in fiction, and are clearly intended to be fictional” (“Unnatural Narrative Theory” 395). Yet does the unnatural have to be tied with fiction? Not necessarily. As Nielsen remarks, the novel establishes itself by gradually conventionalizing inventions, “not as a revolt against mimeticism but as a genre convention also associated with realism” (“Inventing” 471). Therefore, we should not insist on a clear-cut boundary between fiction and nonfiction. Again, Richardson’s theory cannot avoid subscribing to a certain dichotomy, as the functionality of antimimesis counts on binary oppositions. As Iversen acutely points out: “The idea of the

antimimetic rests on an idea of the mimetic, which rests on an idea of nonfiction, which rests on an idea of fictional narratives as being different from nonfictional narratives” (“Permanent Defamiliarization” 457).

Richardson’s stance regarding the fiction-nonfiction distinction may be ascribed to his advocacy of the pragmatic theory of fictionality.⁹ The tricky part is that, while Richardson associates the unnatural—hence the fictional—closely with genre fiction, he does admit that numerous fictional practices are challenging the fiction-nonfiction boundary, though, most of the time, the border is not successfully breached (*Unnatural Narrative* 87). This seems to me inconsistent: On the one hand, Richardson builds his notion of the unnatural on an implied dichotomy between fiction and nonfiction; on the other hand, he also recognizes the boundary between the two as fluid. One way to avoid these questionable distinctions is to study the unnatural as a rhetorical device of fictionality, as suggested by Nielsen and Iversen, other than an affiliated feature of generic fiction.¹⁰ I will come back to this later in this chapter.

As previously discussed, Richardson does not want to inscribe the notion of prototypicality in his theory; as a result, his approach is inductive instead of deductive. The scholar opts for a method which involves no stipulation of what a narrative is; he investigates what are generally considered as narratives, and uses the hypotheses generated to tests against the examples (“Rejoinders” 500). For Richardson, prototypes suggest gradations of resemblance whereas

⁹ Pragmatic theories are set forth by John Searle and others. They believe that semantic differences are inadequate to establish fictionality. According to Searle, if a work presents itself as fiction, it adheres to a set of conventions “which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts and the world” (*Expression and Meaning* 67). For approaches based on semantics, however, it is affirmed that “there are distinctive aspects of language and content that demarcate a work’s fictional status, such as the presence of free indirect speech or an omniscient narrator” (Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative* 87).

¹⁰ In “Ten Theses about Fictionality” (2015), Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh differentiate fictionality, as a quality or fictive discourse as a mode, from fiction, as a set of conventional genres. Fictionality is conceptualized by them as a rhetorical device.

narrative itself should be an either/or feature; in other words, whether or not a text is a narrative is not determined by the presence of prototypical components, but by how all relevant elements are assembled (496).¹¹ However, can a theory of narrative function without a priori assumption? Because of the lack of typicality in Richardson's formulation, it is hard to determine if the unnatural texts examined by him are necessarily narratives at all (Sommer 408). Moreover, as Ryan contends, "narratology does not have to place the strangest creations of the postmodern imagination on the same footing as realistic novels, genre fiction, or fairy tales" ("Response" 482).¹² It is, therefore, highly doubtful that we should have a narrative theory built on Beckett's Trilogy. After all, when a narrative's narrativity is minimal and when it consistently refuses to be made sense of, the very object unnatural narratology claims to theorize is called into question (Caracciolo, "The Binder's Blunder" 448). Due to the denial of a master form, Richardson's model presents a scattered description of unnatural scenarios rather than a systematic integration of them into a whole. His generous and specific conception of the unnatural also bears on the issue of methodology, to which I am turning now.

A Lack of Methodology

We can adopt the term unnatural to describe antimimetic elements in the interpretive move, yet do we need to conceptualize narrative theory as a whole? As Sommer observes, "theorizing narrative entails distinguishing narrative from nonnarrative and antinarrative, and narratology is conceptually well equipped to do this" (408). Indeed, classical narrative theory offers navigational

¹¹ We should differentiate narrativity and narrativehood. Narrativehood is an either/or issue, and it has to do with "what readers and listeners deem stories to be stories"; narrativity is a scalar predicate—"a story can be more or less prototypically story-like" (Herman, *Story Logic* 90-91).

¹² Richardson does offer his definition of narrative—"narrative is most usefully considered as the representation of a casually related series of events" (*Unnatural Narrative* 52). To me, however, he obviously wants to downplay the prototypicality indicated in it.

tools to describe unnatural forms; not only so, postclassical narrative theory—cognitive narratology, for instance—also examines experimental texts.¹³ However, a more inclusive, comprehensive, and accurate narrative theory should leave place for unnatural techniques to be situated (Richardson, “Unnatural Narrative Theory” 390). Not proposing a total severance from classical narratology, Richardson argues that narrative theory needs to theorize the results of the existing criticism, instead of just employing unnatural concepts to deal with new phenomena (“Rejoinders” 493). I agree with Richardson on that a complementary narrative paradigm is in need, as mimetic models alone are incapable of comprehending antimimetic works which transgress mimetic conventions, yet can this additional poetics be built by just adding terms like the antimimetic and denarration to the existing system? As Richardson refuses totalizing readings which attribute unnatural elements to psychological, thematic, and other functions, the issue of methodology—in fact, sense-making processes in general—is absent from his formulation. It seems to me that he intends his theory to be loosely structured:

I believe we will be most effective as narrative theorists if we reject models that, based on categories derived from linguistics or natural narrative, insist on firm distinctions, binary oppositions, fixed hierarchies, or impermeable categories. (*Unnatural Voices* 139)

Hence, we are never told how to make sense of unnatural narratives. For Richardson, unnatural elements are “present in the text and intentionally placed there as such by the author”, and the goal of narrative theorists is to “describe what is there”, rather than adopting extra-textual rubrics to *explain* antimimetic moments (“Rejoinders” 497, 506). Probably because of this,

¹³ Gerald Prince points out that classical narrative theory offers applicable terms like “unending” and “antinomous fabulas” (475); he also stresses that Genette studies the unnatural “we” narration, and the alternation between first- and third-person narration (476). In terms of cognitive narratology, Monika Fludernik, David Herman, and Marie-Laure Ryan discuss experimental texts.

Richardson seldom uses the term “narratology”; rather, “poetics” or “theory” is employed to indicate a more flexible, non-representational stance.

This fluid view is problematic to me. Not to mention that readers always have the freedom to exercise their interpretive methodologies when reading texts, I do not see much practical significance in simply accumulating unnatural texts for a more complex, theoretically-rich, and comprehensive narrative theory. Although the application of mimetic tools to unnatural texts misses out their transgressive nature, it is counterintuitive to totally ignore this possibility on the reader’s part. If, as Richardson claims, unnatural narratives operate on the basis of rules different from those in mimetic narratives, we should investigate these rules and different interpretations they prompt. As Mäkelä argues, instead of just classifying literary texts as more or less unnatural, the focus should be on revolutionizing our “all-too-naturalized assumptions about the frames and dynamics of reading”—a move from unnatural narratives to unnatural narratology needs to be made (“Narratology and Taxonomy” 463). Likewise, Ryan (“Response” 482) and Caracciolo (“The Binder’s Blunder” 449) suggest that as most unnatural narratives are low in narrativity, it is theoretically untenable and practically trivial to just discuss their textural features; instead, a mind-oriented approach should be used to examine how readers adapt to marginal texts and come to terms with them. Richardson’s intrinsic approach is apparently inadequate in addressing how human minds cope with the represented unnatural.

I want to emphasize that Richardson is not totally against the application of cognitive toolkits. He is against some practitioners who are “narrowly mimetic in orientation” whereas he is inclined to others who are “supple and capacious and address the mind’s processing of unnatural figures and events” (“Rejoinders” 499). A restricted application of the cognitive approach is partial and narrow, often neglecting or denying characters that defy standard concepts of personhood, yet

second-generation cognitive studies to narrative, exploring the feedback loop between the reader's body and sense-making activities, can effectively bridge the current exclusivity of cognitive and unnatural positions, and should be appreciated. This more eclectic stance is voiced in a later article "Fictional Minds: Coming to Terms with the Unnatural" (2018) co-authored by Richardson and Lars Bernaerts.

This section offers an evaluation of Richardson's unnatural narrative theory. I sympathize with Richardson's conceptualization of antimimetic narratives, which does justice to narrative practices transgressing mimetic conventions, and enriches narrative studies. Besides, the proposed non-representational stance regarding interpretation respects the ontological status of unnatural elements, and highlights the limitation of mimetic readings. Nevertheless, I take issue with the absence of readers in Richardson's formulation, and as a result of which, the lack of the interpretive move. From my vantage point, no matter how alienating an unnatural scenario is, we want to know the reason for it to be so, and how to come to terms with it—the input of a cognitive outlook is called for. The following section will elaborate on Alber's cognitive approach to unnatural narratives; speaking for the extrinsic camp, Alber aims to determine the function and the meaning of the unnatural.

1.4 Alber's Cognitive Framework

Alber follows a more rational and empirical outlook, and uses the term unnatural to denote physically, logically, and humanly impossible scenarios and events. In other words, unnatural scenarios and events have to be impossible, "given the known laws governing the physical world, accepted principles of logic (such as the principle of noncontradiction), or standard

anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge and ability” (*Unnatural Narrative* 25).¹⁴ Compared with Richardson’s vague definition, Alber’s version is built on a more universal and historically constant criterion—real-world cognitive parameters derived from our bodily existence in the world. Actualization plays a crucial role in this definition. For Alber, real-world parameters are considered as hypotheses that have not been falsified: it might be possible to do time travel, yet as long as nobody has experienced it, time travel will still be deemed as impossible and *unactualizable*, hence unnatural (27; my emphasis).

For Alber, the unnatural is set against basic forms of knowledge about time, space, and other human beings (*Unnatural Narrative* 26). The implied naturalness in these forms can be found in literary realism as well as a narrative appearing to offer an accurate, objective, and confident description or authentic impression of reality (27).¹⁵ Alber examines narratives that are combinations of natural and unnatural elements, as he believes that even though purely unnatural narratives exist, no reader would be able to make sense of them (28-29). It is hereby clear that, like Richardson, Alber celebrates the dialogue between the natural and the unnatural, and has no intention to build any binary opposition of the two.

Because Alber assumes the position of “a contemporary and neurotypical reader” who has a rationalist-scientific and empirically minded worldview, and to whom transgressions of real-world knowledge make perfect sense, the fact that some cultures might not believe in natural laws, logical principles, or human limitations, is not under his consideration (*Unnatural Narrative* 38).

¹⁴ While scholars like Jan Erik Antonsen (128) and Umberto Eco (76-77) believe that the logically impossible can neither be imagined nor represented, Alber argues that “a narrative can contain logical impossibilities—if (and only if) a storyworld is represented in which two logically incompatible statements are true at the same time” (*Unnatural Narrative* 30).

¹⁵ We can also describe this naturalness as “mimetic evocation of reality”, to borrow Fludernik’s words (*Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* 37).

In terms of the historical variability, Alber follows a constant notion of the unnatural as contradicting real-life schemata of existence: unnatural scenarios like speaking animals and talking corpses were as impossible in the past as they are today (40).¹⁶ This is in line with Fludernik's view that "cognitive parameters by which author and readers cognize the world in terms of fundamental process of human being in the world" are relatively constant ("Natural Narratology" 258).¹⁷

While Richardson does not regard the conventionalized antimimetic as properly unnatural, Alber discusses conventionalized impossibilities at great length. The term unnatural for him comprises both impossible elements that *have not yet been conventionalized* and that *have already been conventionalized*. The former is particularly embodied in postmodernist writings which witness a radicalization and concentration of unnaturalness; the latter, no longer striking readers as estranging and defamiliarizing, can be easily recuperated by readjusting frames of reading, as such instances of unnaturalness have been "transformed into elements of the overall aesthetic illusion tied to a specific genre" (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 42-43). Studying the unnatural in

¹⁶ In Alber's theorization, a slight distinction between real-life schemata of existence and cognitive parameters or frames is implied. Real-life schemata of existence are about rules of reality—animals cannot speak, corpses cannot talk, temporality is consistent, and so on (*Unnatural Narrative* 40). By comparison, cognitive parameters or frames are more inclusive, referring to the pretextual real-life schemata of experience and intentionality, the macrotextual schemata of narrative mediation, and genetic criteria and narratological concepts (45). Fludernik relates cognitive frames to basic perspectives on human experience and its narrative mediation. She defines narrative in terms of five cognitive frames: Action, Telling, Experiencing, Viewing, and Reflecting ("Natural Narratology" 246).

¹⁷ Fludernik proposes that four levels of narrative transmission are located between the deep-structural level of cognitive parameters attaching to narrative and the reception level of the narrativization process: (1) basic-level schemata such as readers' real-world understanding of what an action or a trajectory consists in; (2) schemata that define the narrative material within a perspectival paradigm; (3) generic and historical frames such as the 'satire' or 'dramatic monologue' schemata; (4) the level of narrativization that utilizes elements from the first three levels in order to constitute narrativity ("Natural Narratology" 244). Fludernik believes that the media revolution will not affect our basic knowledge of what constitutes an event, intentional action, goal-directedness, etc. Even though certain types of human behavior have changed over the years, nothing much theoretically is threatened; influences from the technological revolution are much more likely to result in new cognitive frames on level 2 and level 3, where video-clips alongside the dramatic monologue or filmic montage may be added to a growing inventory of generic frames (258).

terms of the notion of impossibility, Alber offers a diachronic angle, as “impossibilities have always played a crucial role in literary history” (9). From a historical perspective, the unnatural is a driving force behind the development of literary genres, and what postmodernist narratives do is to “use conventionalized impossibilities from historical genres and make them strange again by blending with a realist context” (230).

In terms of interpretation, Alber refuses to see the unnatural as something transcendental that readers cannot make sense of, since represented impossibilities are created by human authors anyways, and they can be approached from the vantage point of the human world (*Unnatural Narrative* 17). Consequently, more efforts need be made on “what the unnatural does to us as recipients as well as about its potential purpose or point” (Alber, “Gaping” 438). Alber posits his interpretive model in the broader context of mind-oriented approaches and possible-world theory, and sees his project as a continuation of the examination of cognitive processes through which readers make sense of recalcitrant narratives, which has been undertaken by cognitive theorists like Fludernik and Herman (*Unnatural Narrative* 20). To make sense of unnatural elements, a two-step procedure is advocated: Firstly, to demonstrate how the unnatural urges us to create new cognitive frames transcending real-world knowledge; secondly, to address the question of what the unnatural says about us and our being in the world (Alber, et al., “Introduction” 8).

Alber accordingly develops an inventory of reading strategies: “the blending of frames,” “generification,” “subjectification,” “foregrounding the thematic,” “reading allegorically,” “satirization and parody,” “positing a transcendental realm,” “do it yourself,” and “the Zen way of

reading.”¹⁸ These reading strategies cut across Lubomír Doležel’s distinction between “world construction” and “meaning production”. Specifically, the first two are closer to the pole of world-making, denoting more or less automatic cognitive processes, whereas the others are closer to the pole of meaning-making, involving more conscious or reflexive moves (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 55).¹⁹ Borrowing ideas from cognitive narratology and possible worlds theory, Alber offers a perspective of naturalizing the unnatural from the reader’s perspective; the introduction of the cognitive outlook broadens the study of unnatural narratives by combining textual features with reading effects.

1.5 An Evaluation of Alber’s Formulation

In “Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem” (1981), Tamar Yacobi avers that whenever coming up against referential difficulties, incongruities or (self-) contradictions of these kinds, whether external or internal, “the reader has at his/her disposal a wide variety of reconciling and integrating measures” (113-14). The existential principle is one of them. This principle reveals itself whenever “the loose or divergent finds its place in an appropriate referential framework—

¹⁸ Specifically, “the blending of frames” suggests to blend preexisting frames and create impossible blends to reconstruct the unnatural elements of the storyworld; “generification” (evoking generic convention from literary history) suggests to identify the unnatural element as belonging to a particular literary genre; “subjectification” (reading as internal states) suggests to interpret impossible elements as parts of internal states like dreams, fantasies or hallucinations; “foregrounding the thematic” suggests to read the unnatural as exemplifications of themes rather than mimetically motivated occurrences; “reading allegorically” suggests to see impossible elements as parts of abstract allegories saying something about the human condition or the world in general; “satirization and parody” suggests to look at unnatural scenarios as a way of satirizing, mocking, or ridiculing certain psychological predispositions or state of affairs; “positing a transcendental realm” advises to account for certain impossibilities by treating them as parts of a transcendental setting such as heaven, purgatory, or hell; “do it yourself” advises to regard unnatural narratives as a construction kit or collage inviting free play with its elements; “the Zen way of reading” advises to presuppose an attentive and stoic reader who repudiates the earlier explanations and in the meantime accepts the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and uncomfortable feelings aroused (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 48-54).

¹⁹ According to Lubomír Doležel, the ontological status of fiction is embodied in authentication, or the performative force whereby the storyworld constructed is self-referential. He also argues that literature is a game of language, and therefore, the violation of norms and conventions is a productive process, a discovery of new ways of producing meaning (*Heterocosmica* 160).

generic or historical, institutionalized or individual, verisimilar or fantastic” (117). In accordance with it, Fludernik contends, one cannot say that Kafka’s novella “Metamorphosis” (1915) is “non-natural and *therefore* non-mimetic”, as the metamorphic scenario is only read as possible when the reader shuns pre-existent constraints or legitimations, and attributes a peculiar structure of reality to the work. In this way, she importantly highlights that ‘mimesis may be constitutive of non-naturalness not merely because the impossible is read against the backdrop of the “natural” and hence mimetic, but also because *as fiction*’ (“How Natural is ‘Unnatural Narratology’?” 366; original emphasis). By this token, Alber’s definition of the unnatural, which is measured against cognitive frames and scripts derived from our being in the world, overlooks the fact that many impossible or unnatural texts have to create aesthetic illusion and a sense of mimesis to achieve their effects of non-natural oddity. The query emerges: Is there anything missing in reading the unnatural against real-life schemata of existence? My assessment of Alber’s theory will start with his empirical notion of unnaturalness.

A Debate of Referentiality

We have to recognize that when some details in the storyworld cannot be explained away by our real-world knowledge or generic conventions, readers have the choice to turn to the very nature of fiction—self-referentiality. This fact underlines the role the ontological status of fiction plays in our reading of it, and it should be duly discussed in examining the unnatural in relation to reality.

Alber in fact talks about the issue of nonreferentiality, and he entertains the idea that fiction is basically independent of referential concerns: “In contrast to descriptive statements, fiction is nonreferential—it does not try to make statements about the actual world that can be verified or falsified” (*Unnatural Narrative* 33). This is in line with Dorrit Cohn’s view that “fictional narrative

is unique in its potential for crafting a self-enclosed universe ruled by formal patterns that are ruled out in all other orders of discourse” (*The Distinction of Fiction* vii). In this sense, fiction can move beyond real-world possibilities and involve the unnatural, and unnaturalness, highlighting the differential nature of fictional narrative, is an index of fictionality (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 34). As Alber remarks, “if a text contains unnatural scenarios or events, at least these scenarios and events will be fictional” (34), and the study of them will shed light on the distinctiveness of fiction (32). Yet my question is, even if impossibility can be a signpost differentiating fiction and nonfiction, is it a good enough criterion to separate the unnatural fictional from the natural fictional? If fiction is fundamentally nonreferential, then theoretically all fiction can present impossibilities; if this is the case, how do we identify the unnatural?²⁰

When demonstrating the application of possible worlds theory to his formulation, Alber seems to want to do justice to the nonreferentiality of fiction. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz dictates a restriction of possible worlds, arguing that “possible things are those which do not imply a contradiction” (513). This rule has influenced many theorists afterwards, heralding the view that “[e]very world that respects the principles of non-contradiction and the excluded middle is a PW” (Ryan, “Possible-Worlds Theory” 446).²¹ Accordingly, worlds that imply contradictions are unthinkable, and it is impossible to construct a world out of a system of propositions if a single contradiction enters it. Alber resists the rule, and refuses “to view logical impossibilities in

²⁰ Alber’s response to my doubt is that if the fictional situation is actualizable, then it is natural; otherwise, it is unnatural. I think it is a good way to address the issue, yet I still have my reservation. From my vantage point, defining the unnatural in terms of universal laws overlooks the ontological status of fiction.

²¹ Possible worlds theory is founded on propositional modal logic, primarily concerned with the relationship between the “actual world,” i.e. the world we belong to, and “possible worlds,” i.e. worlds that are constructed through imagination, hypothetical situations, dreams, wishes, and so on. It can be used in a narratological context because the world described by a fictional text represents a particular type of possible world: a textual actual world. To borrow Ryan’s words: “the semantic domain of fictional works does not merely comprise a singular possible world but encompasses an entire modal system, the textual universe, centered around its own actual world” (“Possible Worlds in Recent Literary Theory” 535).

fictional worlds as violations of possible-worlds semantics” (*Unnatural Narrative* 32). For him, logical contradictions or inconsistencies can be represented in fiction, and they will not stop readers from constructing a generally stable fictional world (31); moreover, they should be appreciated as an embodiment of creative powers (32). Alber’s view that readers can build a relatively complete fictional world by resorting to intra-textual evidence is in line with Doležel’s emphasis on the textual nature and the nonreferentiality of fictional worlds. Doležel avers that like a possible world, a fictional world cannot be falsified, and “[t]o exist fictionally means to exist as a textually authenticated possible”; additionally, this existence is determined and manipulated by the authenticating narrative act (“Mimesis and Possible Worlds” 490, 491). It is also argued that “[f]ictional worlds are possible worlds in that they are ensembles of nonactualized possible particulars” (Doležel, “Possible Worlds of Fiction and History” 787).

But inconsistency arises. From my vantage point, at least in terms of logical impossibilities, Alber measures the unnatural against the reality in a specific fictional world instead of the reality of this actual world, thus indicating a much narrower sense of unnaturalness. Of course, Alber can defend his position by arguing that most fictional narratives try to imitate or reproduce the world as we know it, though all fictional narratives are by definition ontologically distinct from our reality. In this sense, the notion of impossibility is still, most of the time, a valid criterion for identifying the unnatural. However, I would suggest to avoid this latent confusion by turning to a narrower notion. In this regard, Iversen’s definition is more practically applicable: “the unnatural is unnatural compared with the naturalness set forth by the specific narrative” (“Unnatural Minds” 98).

When it comes to the cultural and historical variability of the notion, the stance of a contemporary and neurotypical reader with a rationalist-scientific and empirically minded

worldview is also problematic. The view will inevitably overlook certain readership, though Alber insists that his approach is “more commonsensical,” as least given what counts as “common sense” in his general frame of reference (*Unnatural Narrative* 38). He also holds “a historically constant notion of the unnatural”, since our physical being, “which evoke all the parameters of a real-life schema of existence that has to be situated in a specific time and space frame,” has not changed fundamentally, though the cultural notion of our being has changed a lot (39-40). Consequently, unnatural scenarios were as impossible in the past as they are today, as the basic cognitive concepts and frames that we employ to explain everyday human reality remain stable (40-41). I agree with Alber regarding his take on cultural variability, as too much emphasis on cultural relativism will not help much on the theoretical level—after all, it is practically impossible to consider every cultural background. Nevertheless, I do believe that more efforts can be done on the interaction of the cultural and the physical notion of our being, and in what sense the dialogue between the two may affect our coming to grips with the unnatural.²²

The Creeping-in of Mimetic Readings

While the study of unnatural narratives is directed against mimetic reductionism, in some interpretations, “a mimetic focus creeps in by the backdoor” (Fludernik, “How Natural is ‘Unnatural Narratology’?” 365). Reading Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter” (1969) which presents numerous mutually exclusive event sequences, Alber et al. advise readers to engage in “a process of frame enrichment to conceptualize an impossible scenario in which internal processes such as dreams, wishes, and fantasies become as real as external reality”, and then to speculate about the purpose of this unnatural scenario. The unnatural theorists suggest that the short story

²² This is an interesting topic that might go beyond the scope of the current research.

employs incompatible storylines to highlight suppressed impossibilities, and to invite readers to exercise the freedom of choosing their own version (“Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” 118). As Fludernik points out, this is a mimetic interpretation, since the various scenarios are aligned with the characters’ internal activities; additionally, the authors seem to “place the story within a clearly postmodernist aesthetic” by saying that the text encourages the reader’s participation. By doing so, the unnatural tradition introduces “a familiarization of the unnatural within a well-known postmodernist framework on the lines of Yacobi’s generic principle” (“How Natural is ‘Unnatural Narratology’?” 365). Alber et al. do not deny that there is a mimetic focus in their postmodernist reading, but they defend that it is “appropriately responsive to the unnatural features of the narrative” and the approach is “working up from the unnatural rather than down from a view of what postmodernism is and does” (“What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?” 375).²³

It is true that, among the proponents of unnatural narrative theory, Alber is a “suspicious” one—because of his subscription to the cognitive methodology. His reading strategies are grounded on two assumptions. First, “no matter how odd the textual surface structure of a narrative, it is always part of a purposeful and meaningful communicative act”; second, “even the strangest text is somehow about humans and/or human concerns as well as the world we live in” (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 46). While Alber’s belief in the necessity of cognitive architecture is solid, his mind approach is different from that of other cognitive theorists like Fludernik and Herman, who argue that when making sense of narrative texts, people more or less use the same cognitive

²³ I need to highlight that the article “What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?” (2012) is co-authored by unnatural theorists from different camps, and the reading of Coover’s text downplays this diversity. Whereas the postmodernist interpretation of “The Babysitter” is acceptable for cognitive narratologists like Alber, it is inadequate for Richardson and others who propose textual approaches. From my communication with Alber, certain compromise was involved in co-writing the article.

parameters as when they deal with real-world situations. This stance, to Alber, is correct yet limited, as represented impossibilities often defy easy explanations through such parameters; his goal is thus to “enrich cognitive approaches to narrative by discussing extremely challenging cases and showing how tools from cognitive narratology help make them more readable” (*Unnatural Narrative* 20). Correspondingly, regarding interpretation, Alber stresses his difference from Culler’s “naturalization” and Fludernik’s “narrativization.” Culler’s naturalization designates a move to recuperate inexplicable elements of a text by taking recourse to familiar patterns—it is an attempt to erase the unnatural.²⁴ Along the same lines, Fludernik extends Culler’s notion and proposes to naturalize texts by turning to narrative schemata, using cognitive parameters to solve textual inconsistencies and oddities.²⁵ Alber’s method is different as he focuses particularly on impossible scenarios, and on how to “stretch preexisting cognitive frames and scripts beyond real-world possibilities to reconstruct impossible scenarios or events” (*Unnatural Narrative* 45).

As I see it, although unnatural narrative theory evades the issue of naturalization, it seems that there will always be some naturalization involved if an interpretive move is made.²⁶ As Fludernik remarks, naturalization is closely associated with conventionalization: the reduction of the strangeness of impossibility—the process of naturalizing—is bound to emerge from repeated use, and “it is repeated use that moreover congeals the scenario as a new genre, thereby completing

²⁴ See Culler *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), 134.

²⁵ According to Fludernik, there are at least three levels on which the naturalization of non-natural storytelling situations occurs. Primarily, “*habit* and frequency of encounter determine the acceptance, subsequent loss of saliency, and eventual naturalization of non-natural story forms”; secondly, the process of acceptance is significantly “enhanced *thematically* by fiction’s subject of the strange, the extraordinary or the exotic”; finally, no matter how strange the actual set-up, “narrativization takes care of focusing the *reading experience* on a protagonist” (Fludernik, “Natural Narratology” 256; original emphasis).

²⁶ I particularly refer to naturalization in the strong sense as in Culler’s use—the move to assimilate unnaturalness into a natural framework, and hence erase it; naturalization can also refer to the process of making the unnatural more familiar. Practically, I think the two are inseparable—any attempt to familiarize the unnatural runs the risk of erasing it.

the conventionalization” (“How Natural is ‘Unnatural Narratology’?” 367). By this token, naturalization partakes in unnatural narrative theory as long as the project is concerned with the conventionalization of unnaturalness. The boundary between the two is fuzzy, though Alber et al. contend that the inherent unnaturalness of conventional forms will not go away just because they have been conventionalized—what is unnatural is fundamental (“Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” 131). On this point, to assert his difference from “natural” narratologists, Alber has fine-tuned his terminology. Initially he referred to all his sense-making strategies in terms of naturalization; now he would only call his reading strategy 3—“subjectification”—an arguably naturalizing move, and all the other navigational tools are regarded as ways of “coming to terms with” the unnatural.²⁷

The Risk of Misinterpretation

Based on his own rationally informed ways of reading, Alber’s navigational tools are informative and insightful, but can we guarantee that every reader will adopt the same tool and come up with the same interpretation as Alber does? As Herman and Vervaeck observe, as he offers no “empirical testing of readerly reactions or of cognitive processing”, claims that seem to hold for all readers are actually restricted to the single, very well-informed reader that Alber is (523). In fact, the practice of the proposed reading strategies happens on a case by case basis, and a meaning-driven approach may lead to misinterpretation.

In “Unnatural Spaces and Narrative Worlds” (2013), Alber comes to terms with the unnatural space in Angela Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) with

²⁷ See Alber, “Impossible” (2009), 81, and Alber et al., “What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology” (2012), 381, endnote 5.

the aid of the strategy “reading allegorically.” Alber argues that the represented impossible spaces can be read “as parts of an allegorical (or mythical) confrontation between diametrically opposed ideas such as Apollo versus Dionysus, the Freudian reality principle versus the pleasure principle, order versus freedom, conformism versus individualism, mimeticism versus imagination, the natural versus the unnatural” (60). To me, however, all the binary oppositions Alber lists here are not what Carter attempts to deliver. I would read the work as a postmodernist feminist parody which at once uses and abuses, installs and destabilizes conventions in parodic ways. By this token, all the dichotomies established in the narrative—male and female, rationality and desire—are only to be deconstructed later. In the case of the brothel scene, what Alber notices is the physically impossible interior in which the furniture is actually alive (“Unnatural Spaces” 59):

The serviceable armchairs were brown bears who squatted on their haunches with the melancholy of all the Russias in their liquid eyes. When a girl sat on his shaggy lap, the bear grunted, leaned back and spread her legs out wide apart with his blunt forepaws.
(*Doctor Hoffman* 152)

An unnatural scenario emerges for sure, yet an adequate reading of this impossibility is not to be solely concerned with the space; rather, details contingent upon it should also be taken into account. A few passages later, the narrative offers more details as follow: “when I [Desiderio] examined them more closely, I saw that none of them were any longer, or might ever have been, woman”; one girl has “furred, golden shoulders,” one has “the striped face of a zebra and a cropped, stiff, black mane bristling down her spine” (154), and another has “clusters of roses growing in [her] armpits” (154-55). These metamorphosed objects implicate a deconstruction of the antithesis of the male body as torturing and evil, and the female body as victimized and good. Therefore, instead of highlighting any binary oppositions, what happens in this impossible space

is a dismantling of the rigidification of a polarized system, and an exploration of alternative discourse and knowledge (Costantini 15-6). In this regard, Alber's allegorical reading is too general and totalizing.

At the end of the novel, the protagonist Desiderio kills Doctor Hoffman and goes back to the Minister. Alber thus argues that Carter's work "is structured around a rather static dichotomy or binary opposition that does not allow its two poles to merge, interact, or reach a state equilibrium" ("Unnatural Spaces" 60). I agree that there is a direct confrontation between the Minister/Reason and the Doctor/Desire, and that the narrative indicates no reconciliation of the two, but I do not think that Desiderio "finally opts in favor of restoring reality" (60). While a choice is made between chaos and order, Desiderio is haunted by the "insatiable regret with which we acknowledge that the impossible is, *per se*, impossible" (*Doctor Hoffman* 264). Ultimately, desire destroys both its subject and its object. Desiderio fails to find any Master, since both the Minister and the Doctor emerge as the slaves of totalitarianism, or the object of his fantasies, and Albertina has to be killed to accomplish his mission and engender him as a hero (Robinson 172). The dramatized war between Desire and Reason is left unresolved, and all antitheses prove to be paradoxical interpenetrations. It turns out that no matter what choice Desiderio makes, it doesn't matter anymore.

It is also questionable that Alber's interpretation is in line with Carter's cosmology. The writer labels herself as "a demythologiser," as she considers all myths as extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree, and that they are "products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice" (Carter, "Notes from the Front Line" 25). As a result, Carter commits herself to disclosing myths as socially constructed, and this in *Doctor Hoffman* is

reflected in demonstrating the constructivism inherent in gender roles.²⁸ On a larger scale, Carter rejects any form of authenticity, and her refutation of Platonic idealism and disparagement of authenticity is conveyed in a structural tension in the novel which can hardly be resolved.²⁹ None of the literary traditions installed—surrealism, the fantastic, the Gothic—can fully account for the whole narrative, and their descriptive generic grammars never come to fruition. In the light of such a cosmology, it is hard to imagine that Carter would nod to any totalizing readings like the allegorical or the mythic—whereas their languages are inscribed in the narrative, these forms are the very targets Carter aims to disintegrate.

If I am to come to grips with the unnatural spaces in *Doctor Hoffman* in the light of Alber's toolbox, I think the strategy "satirization and parody" is a better choice. Following this navigational tool, the represented impossible can be comprehended as an exaggeration of the war between Desire and Reason, or a distortion of the depiction of women within the male chauvinist tradition, or a ridicule of all the established forms symbolizing authenticity. Instead of just imposing a generalized reading, as Alber does, to fully do justice to the unnaturalness of the novel, I would locate the interpretative move on a more local plane; we should pay attention to how the unnatural, an essentially local phenomenon, interacts with other contextual factors. Ideally, certain

²⁸ Particularly, the author inscribes pornographic discourses and in the meantime discloses their constructedness, thereby rejecting pornography as ideologically loaded. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a peak of the feminist debate on pornography. In the mid-1980s, the anti-pornography movement culminated with the introduction of anti-pornography ordinances treating pornography as a form of sex discrimination, thanks to radical feminists, among whom Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin are key figures. The two argue that pornography conveys the fantasy/reality dichotomy, and strengthens patriarchy. Radical feminism condemns not only the consumption of pornography, but also pornography itself as a sexual ideology embodied in the form of words or images. See my article "A Feminist Revolt from Within: Angela Carter's Excessiveness in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*" (2016), 147-48.

²⁹ For Angela Carter, "the emergence of the women's movement, and all that implies, is both symptom and product of the unravelling of the culture based on Judeo-Christianity, a bit of Greek transcendentalism via the father of lies, Plato, and all the other bits and pieces" ("Notes from the Front Line" 26-27).

coherence is to be built between a general interpretation and the idiosyncrasy of each unnatural scenario, hence content and form.

This section offers an assessment of Alber's cognitive approach to unnatural narratives. I appreciate Alber's empirical and rational conceptualization of the unnatural, which calls into play readers' real-life knowledge, and makes the identification of impossible scenarios easier. In terms of methodology, Alber concentrates on how human minds cope with the represented unnatural, and develops a variety of analytic tools, highlighting the communicative dimension of unnaturalness. However, measuring the unnatural against reality overlooks the ontological status of fiction; besides, the cognitive perspective downplays the transgressiveness of unnatural elements, and may lead to totalizing readings. As I see it, in spite of the human urge to grasp unnaturalness, reading it purely from the reader's perspective goes against its antimimetic nature.

1.6 Summary: Intrinsic or Extrinsic?

In theory, Richardson's definition of the unnatural is more restricted; the two identifiers—antimimesis and unconventionality—rule out the unnatural which has been conventionalized from the discussion. In practice, however, Richardson scrutinizes a much larger corpus than Alber does, as he examines texts from various cultural backgrounds and of different periods.³⁰ Moreover, because the unnatural is set against mimetic traditions instead of natural laws or logic principles, more dimensions of unnaturalness can be investigated under Richardson's designation—unnatural discourse, for instance. While sometimes Richardson talks about postmodernist fictions and unnatural narratives as interchangeable, he importantly emphasizes that the unnatural can be found

³⁰ While Richardson discusses extensively on unnatural narratives from different cultures, he does not draw any cultural pattern from them. In this sense, a more detailed analysis of the cultural variability of unnaturalness is still missing.

in many other periods and genres (“Unnatural Narrative Theory” 396). Richardson makes a case for “a long postmodernism” which begins at the end of the nineteenth century, and which is “fully in place at the very latest by the late teens and early twenties, and thrived throughout the 1930s” (*Unnatural Narrative* 135). On a more macroscopic level, Richardson proposes three strands of “modern” literature—realism, high modernism and unnatural narratives—which mutually interpenetrate and interact; as such, using the category of the unnatural, we can “uncouple the problematic fusion of period and poetics” (138). When it comes to interpretation, I embrace Richardson’s view that the antimimetic provides its own pleasures, and sympathize with his rejection of sense-making activities built upon readers’ lived experience. Postmodernism, which witnesses numerous unnatural texts, comes in various forms, yet regardless of the angle that it is defined from—historiographic metafiction, dismantling of master narratives, the exploration of ontological instability, and so on—there is a consistent tendency of rejecting totalizing interpretations, and of refusing to be fully grasped. Richardson’s flexible intrinsic approach, therefore, does have its points.

Nevertheless, as Richardson adopts an inductive approach and eschews the notion of typicality, his formulation is loosely structured. In fact, though the scholar himself denies dichotomy and underlines the interaction between mimetic and antimimetic elements, his theory suspiciously hinges upon binary oppositions: fiction and nonfiction, the unnatural and realism ... This inconsistency may arise from the fact that, on the one hand, Richardson respects the elusiveness of the unnatural, and the ability of fictional narratives to represent it; on the other hand, he also recognizes that our reading of unnatural narratives cannot be completely independent of the prior knowledge of mimetic traditions—deep inside, there is still a sense of prototypicality inscribed in his argumentation. What’s more, I cannot help but ask, while Richardson rejects the

attempt to interpret, and thus to conventionalize, the unnatural, isn't his own theorization of unnatural narratives a move against this stance? For me, his detailed analysis of unnatural voices and temporalities is a very act of conventionalizing.

While acknowledging that Richardson's non-representational gesture regarding interpretation chimes with the ethos of postmodernism, I have to admit that it goes against the fact that every reading process involves certain sense-making activity, and that readers intuitively evaluate the unnatural against real-life parameters. Should we approach unnatural elements in narrative, we should conclude that the unnaturalness of storyworlds or plotlines is only "a textural surface under which the reader is tempted to find the psychologically, motivationally, or thematically verisimilar" (Mäkelä, "Realism and the Unnatural" 164). After all, we read literature in relation to a personal stance; it might not be appropriate to impose mimetic interpretations upon the unnatural, yet it is also counter-intuitive not to make sense of it at all. Consequently, there should be a move from unnatural narratives to unnatural narratology. As I have pointed out previously, just piling up unnatural narratives is of limited value; rather, more efforts are needed in exploring how they affect our normal way of interpretation, or how they cue readers to comprehend differently.

Set against real-life schemata of existence, Alber's definition of the unnatural is more practically applicable; in addition, the inclusion of conventionalized unnatural narratives enables him to examine the unnatural from a diachronic perspective, and, in terms of reading effects, to investigate the dynamics between conventionalization and estrangement. Alber claims that the unnatural is a driving force behind the creation of new genres, and because of so, postmodernism is hardly a *completely innovative* and *unprecedented* explosion of antimimesis. For him, postmodernist texts can be reconceptualized as texts that consistently project unnatural scenarios

and events; besides, they are part of an intertextual endeavor which radicalizes physical, logical, or human impossibilities that have already been conventionalized in other genres, and which defamiliarizes these improbabilities again by transferring them to realist contexts (*Unnatural Narrative* 83-84). In terms of interpretation, a narratology contingent upon cognitive studies underlines the humane dimension, and thus the communicativeness of literature—after all, even the most unnatural narrative should say something about human beings. Notwithstanding an artefact, a fictional narrative should, to varying degrees, convey certain interaction, in the sense that its represented scenarios deliver messages expected to be decoded by the reader. From unnatural narratives to unnatural narratology, from the conventionalized unnatural to the unnatural still unconventional, Alber develops a rather complete framework, and his inventory of navigational tools greatly illuminates on how to come to terms with represented impossibilities.

But I do not regard Alber's formulation as perfect. As mentioned, defining the unnatural in reference to real-life principles overlooks the nonreferentiality of fiction. The empirical criterion of impossibility can detect the deviance from natural laws, yet it is unable to differentiate the conventionalized unnatural and the unconventional unnatural, and it cannot tell us why certain manifestations of unnaturalness still strike readers as odd, whereas others can easily be assimilated. In a way, art is always already unnatural, in the sense of being artificial, as Mäkelä underlines (qtd. in Alber et al., "Introduction" 7). In my view, it should not be ignored that the reader always carries certain presumption before proceeding to reading; confronted with a fictional product, most readers will not be that naïve to take everything represented seriously. Insofar as readers project their own experience upon narrative, the belief in a strict implementation of physical laws will be undermined. Additionally, while Alber's rational and empirical stance brings him a more

operationalizable corpus, the cultural variability of the unnatural is sidelined. In this regard, Alber's unnatural narratology can only speak to readers from certain cultural backgrounds.

In a sense, the recourse to cognitive tools is a double-edged sword. To what extent can the unnaturalness of unnatural elements be retained in the light of a meaning-driven methodology? As Fludernik contends, the fact that non-natural storytelling frames emerge from the blending of previously familiar storytelling scenarios makes the resultant blend cognitively readable; such a new blend will eventually be naturalized as a new prototype once the new form has been reused sufficiently often to become a recognizable frame—"a frame to which the reader then resorts subconsciously when encountering a new text or narrative" ("Naturalizing the Unnatural" 15). This process is similar to what Alber calls conventionalization, though the scholar insists on its difference from naturalization. Apart from that the uncanniness of the unnatural is considerably diluted in sense-making activities, Alber's approach also potentially leads to misinterpretation. My analysis of Angela Carter's novel shows that, rather than rushing to any totalizing reading, for a holistic reading of this unnatural work, the text, the author, and the reader should be examined in relation to each other. Crucially, the interpretation of a specific unnatural scenario is subject to constant modification so that it can fit in with the logic of the narrative as a whole.

It should be clear by now that the two camps of the unnatural tradition—the intrinsic and the extrinsic—approach unnatural narratives differently, and each one has its advantages and disadvantages. The intrinsic approach is grounded in the text, and pays respect to the creativity of fictional narrative, whereas the extrinsic approach is based on real-life parameters, and ties unnatural elements to our actual world. Consequently, the former focuses on unnatural texts *per se* while the latter focuses on readers' dealing with them. I draw two conclusions from the above discussion. First, we need not only an inclusive description of unnatural features, but also

navigational tools informing us of their significance and functions; namely, we need to move from unnatural narratives to unnatural narratology. Second, in terms of methodology, the cognitive toolbox alone is incapable of accomplishing the task of reading the unnatural *as both communicative and invented*, owing to its mimetic basis. Thus, comes the question: is it possible to have a methodology which is *not mimetic*?

Before giving the answer, I want to turn to another two important scholars in the unnatural camp—Stefan Iversen and Henrik Skov Nielsen. Iversen's research is particularly insightful in revealing the limit of the cognitive approach to unnatural texts, especially in the aspect of unnatural minds. As the theorist proposes a total engagement with the unnatural, his discussion in many ways echoes and strengthens Richardson's non-representational stance. Nielsen, notwithstanding being critical of cognitive tools, stresses the necessity to develop reading strategies; as I see it, his approach draws on both Richardson's and Alber's advantages. As my analysis will show, Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings demonstrate that meaning-production does not have to be mimetically-based, and this greatly inspires my own model of unnatural narratology.

1.7 Nielsen's and Iversen's Discussions

Now I will briefly introduce Nielsen's and Iversen's discussions of unnatural narratives. Nielsen and Iversen also represent the intrinsic camp; yet, the shared non-representational stance comes in different forms. Nielsen measures the notion unnatural against natural narrative, and foregrounds its reliance on the reader's participation in realizing antimimetic effects. Iversen conceives the unnatural as violating the logic of a specific narrative, and refuses to see unnaturalness as universal or global. Both theorists propose to study the unnatural as a rhetorical device not confined to generic fiction. In terms of how to make sense of unnatural narratives, Nielsen proposes to

investigate how the invented nature of the unnatural prompts different interpretations, and Iversen rejects a full-fledged subscription to cognitive tools. Regarding methodology, I will elaborate on Iversen's evaluation of cognitive narratology and Nielsen's unnaturalizing reading strategies.

The Notion of the Unnatural

Nielsen defines unnatural narratives in relation to what they are not: natural narratives. He conceptualizes unnatural narratives as follows:

They are a subset of fictional narratives that—unlike many realistic and mimetic narratives—cue the reader to employ interpretational strategies that are different from those she employs in nonfictionalized, conversational, storytelling situations. More specifically, such narrative may have temporalities, storyworlds, mind representations, or acts of narration that would have to be construed as physically, logically, mnemonically, or psychologically impossible or implausible in real-world storytelling situations, but that allow the reader to interpret them instead as reliable, possible, and/or authoritative by cueing her to change her interpretational strategies. (“Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing” 72)

Simply put, “fictional discourse becomes unnatural when it transgresses the limits naturally associated with nonfictional discourse”. Nielsen insists on the distinction between reading fictional and nonfictional narratives, arguing that “we should not unduly assume that the same limits and restrictions apply to all narratives”. He appeals to examine unnatural narratives in the way in which they exploit the full potential of fictional narrative without being constrained by the limitations restricting non-invented stories (“Inventing” 474). Recognizing and respecting the invented-ness of fictional narrative is, therefore, important for Nielsen.

In my view, Nielsen's version avoids much theoretical confusion and is easier to follow. In the first place, it is clear that unnatural narratives are defined in terms of what they are not—natural narratives.³¹ Secondly, the definition is based on neither a static conception of impossibility, nor the loosely-defined and heterogeneous antimimesis, but an interaction between the text and the reader—whether or not the unnatural cues the reader to interpret differently. Nielsen does mention that unnatural narratives represent scenarios impossible or highly implausible in real-world storytelling situations, yet this is not a sufficient condition for a new reading experience—the crucial part is whether such representations encourage readers to interpret them as reliable and authoritative by changing interpretational tactics. In this way, his definition gets around the issues—the nonreferentiality of fiction, the cultural or historical variability of the unnatural, conventionalization and naturalization—which occur in Alber's and Richardson's versions. From my vantage point, Nielsen's "unnatural" is a more flexible concept, as apart from the textual evidence, the reader's participation is needed for unnaturalness to realize its full effects as he/she is supposed to adjust the way of interpretation accordingly.

Iversen ties the notion unnatural to narratives "that present the reader with clashes between the rules governing a storyworld and scenarios or events producing or taking place inside this storyworld—clashes that defy easy explanations" (qtd. in Alber et al., "What Really is Unnatural Narratology?" 103). He particularly highlights one type of unnatural phenomena—the "unnatural mind," which is defined as "a presented consciousness that in its functions or realizations violates the rules governing the possible world it is part of in a way that resists naturalization or conventionalization" ("Unnatural Mind" 97). Iversen's version indicates a looser "violation" rather

³¹ I do not think it is Nielsen's intention to build any binary opposition, as he also argues to consider the unnatural as a rhetorical device that can be applied to other sorts of narrative.

than a strong “impossibility”: “the unnatural is unnatural compared with the naturalness set forth by the specific narrative, not compared with some sort of global naturalness, whatever that might be” (98). In this way, the unnatural for Iversen is more contextualized.

The theorist further suggests that instead of treating unnatural narratives as a specific type of fictional narrative, it is more significant to read the unnatural as a rhetorical device, “defined in relation to existing processes of sense-making, rather than in relation to existing texts or poetics” (Iversen, “Permanent Defamiliarization” 465). He revives Viktor Shklovsky’s “defamiliarization” and conceives of the unnatural in terms of permanent defamiliarization. It is pointed out that while in the realistic tradition, defamiliarization functions by stretching the duration of the act of perception, unnatural narratives present readers with unsolvable riddles constantly resisting recognition, “with perpetual unrecognizability” (460). This pragmatic approach is applicable not only to prototypical unnatural narratives, but also to more traditional narratives where unnaturalness occurs locally. In addition, poetry, daily communication, and rhetorical discourse such as advertisements can all be studied through this lens (456). This viewpoint is echoed by Nielsen. Nielsen extends the application of the unnatural by first differentiating fiction and fictionality. As Nielsen and others argue, fiction denotes a set of conventional genres like the novel, the short story, the graphic novel, the fictional film, and so on, whereas fictionality is a quality of fictive discourse as a mode. By this token, no formal technique or textual features are in themselves a necessary and sufficient ground for identifying fictive discourse, and it is therefore wiser to talk about degrees of fictionality rather than the distinction of fiction (62, 66-67). Consequently, there can be fictionality without fiction and narration without communication (Nielsen, “Natural Authors” 282). As a result, we can examine the unnatural without limiting it to generic fiction,

insofar as unnatural features of narrative—for instance, some narration being non-communicative—are features of fictionality (299).

Interpretation: Refusal of Cognitive Readings

While Richardson upholds the multiplicity of interpretation, Nielsen shows great interest in “naturalization”—unnatural elements can be read as reliable and authoritative in spite of the deviance from norms of natural storytelling situations. This is different from naturalizing readings, which are grounded upon real-life limitations. Nielsen conceives unnatural narratology, first of all, as a reading strategy, and “[i]t takes as its point of departure that we should not restrict our interpretations to what would be possible or plausible in real-world narration” (“Broken Narrative” 91). Unnaturalizing reading strategies, as a result, “resist the application of real-world limitations to all narratives and refrain from limiting interpretations to what is possible in literal communicative acts and representational models” (Alber et al., “Introduction” 8). Nielsen also avers that imposing real-world frameworks is untenable not only when it comes to antimimetic works but also to a large percentage of fictional works, as “invented-ness” needs to be taken into consideration in making sense of any fictional constructs (“Inventing” 469).

But how does the invented nature of unnaturalness bear on the interpretive move? How does the cooperation between the text and the reader exactly work? I want to give a brief illustration by reading Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance* (1990). It might be debatable to label Auster’s work as unnatural: the narrative is hardly estranging (the storytelling is traditional and engaging), nor does it present impossible scenarios (what happens is highly improbable, yet not impossible). The text is however unnatural, in the light of Nielsen’s definition, and its unnaturalness is particularly reflected in causality. Initially, the narrative seems to be driven by

contingency, because of a series of chance events: Nashe's unexpected inheritance from his father; Nashe's encounter with the battered Pozzi who happens to need money ... As the story proceeds, this causal law is however gradually replaced by a sense of determinism. For instance, for Stone and Flower, winning the lottery might be pure luck, yet the fact that they succeed in whatever they do can only be explained by fate; in another case, before Nashe and Pozzi propose to extend the work, the new contract has already been, foresightedly, drafted. The sense of predestination is pushed to the limit when Pozzi reappears nearly dead on the meadow after the attempted escape, and the hole dug for escape is magically filled up. At this moment, readers might wonder if the author is tampering with the storyworld. All these incidents are highly unimaginable in real-world situations, and what aggravates their alienating effects is that the narrative never provides explanations for them. In the beginning, readers still try to draw certain causal pattern; in the end, they might just give up and accept the fact that this is how the narrative works—not everything in a fictional world can be explained away by real-life knowledge. In this way, the narrative underlines its artificial nature, and cues readers to accept its elusiveness. When readers realize that these highly unusual events make total sense in *a fiction*, they will regard them as reliable, and hence take them seriously. This is how unnaturalizing reading strategies work for Nielsen.

Iversen claims to accept cognitive tools on the level of methodology but not on the level of interpretation. For him, a full-blown cognitive approach to narrative runs the risk of reducing the affective power and resonance of some narratives, owing to an insistence on fully naturalizing or recognizing the haunting and wondrous otherworldly visions of minds, events, and scenarios which such narratives manage to capture ("Unnatural Minds" 96). Because the unnatural is expected to present readers with unsolvable riddles and perpetual unrecognizability, Iversen dismisses the efforts to make sense of the unreadable, favoring non-naturalizing readings which

respect that unnatural elements may not be easily explained or resolved with reference to everyday knowledge or to the rules of the represented storyworld (qtd. in Alber et al., “Introduction” 8). To a great extent, Iversen’s study of unnatural narratives chimes with Nielsen’s, as they both refute an unquestioning subscription to the cognitive approach, and highlight how the nature of a text, be it fictional or nonfictional, affects the way of interpretation.

Strictly speaking, Iversen never develops *a narratology*; like Richardson, he does not tell us how to interpret unnatural narratives. Despite so, Iversen’s detailed scrutiny of the mind approach undoubtedly acts in cooperation with the formulation of unnaturalizing readings. With the critique of cognitive toolkits in sight, Nielsen offers an interpretive methodology *not based* on mimetic norms. This unnaturalizing and antimimetic perspective will play a crucial part in the theorization of my own model.

1.8 Cognitive Toolkits: What Is Missing?

Before my elaboration on unnaturalizing readings, I want to take some space to discuss the cognitive branch of narrative studies, largely drawing on Iversen’s literature. Not confined to Alber’s model, I would like to examine some underlying mechanisms that cognitive narratology borrows from cognitive science, and evaluate how these analytic tools perform in dealing with unnatural narratives. I need to reiterate that cognitive tools do help, and they have proved extremely insightful in revealing how recipients process and cope with experimental narratives. The approach should not be excluded from unnatural narrative theory, but we have to be aware of the caveat of applying it to the unnatural context. In the following section, I will zoom in on some basic notions: “mindreading,” the “Exceptionality Thesis,” and “experientiality.” They have been more or less implied in the previous part, but have not been investigated sufficiently. Via a detailed

investigation of these concepts, I aim to showcase why the application of cognitive toolkits may miss out the antimimesis of the unnatural, even though the use of the default mode of consciousness-attribution is inevitable in practice.

Mindreading

The cognitive approach, as Alan Palmer contends, “is the *basis* of *all* the other approaches” and it is the means by which “critics gather the evidence that allows them to make their various generalizations” (“Attribution of Madness” 292; original emphasis). One main concern of cognitive narratology is the relationship between consciousness and narrative, which is examined via the notion of mindreading, or, Theory of Mind. It describes our awareness of the existence of other minds, our knowledge of how to access others’ thought processes, and our mindreading ability in the real world (293). The execution of mindreading hinges on what Palmer calls the continuing-consciousness of frame—“the ability to take a reference to a character in the text and attach it to a presumed consciousness that exists continuously within the storyworld between the various, more or less intermittent references to that character” (*Social Minds in the Novel* 10). This is consequently a teleological method, which presumes that that represented minds in narrative fiction form a conceptual framework within which particular examples of access to characters’ minds contribute to the presentation of the plot-forming process; more importantly, it believes that readers can read characters’ minds by taking advantage of all the available evidence (Palmer, “The Construction of Fictional Minds” 42).³² In the light of mindreading, “texts can be interrogated to

³² In line with Palmer, Lisa Zunshine in *Why We Read Fiction* (2006) describes mindreading as the “ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires”; moreover, the attribution of states of mind is “the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment, incorrect though our attributions frequently are” (6). For Zunshine, practicing the ability of mindreading is crucial in the study of fiction: ‘The very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call “characters” with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires and then to look for the “cues” that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions’ (10).

find out how narrators and readers link together presentations of immediate mental events such as explicitly labelled or implicitly suggested emotions, dispositions, and descriptions of physical behavior into causal chains by means of such concepts as motives, intentions, and reason for action” (38).

Underlying this concept of mindreading is the belief that engagements with fictional and nonfictional narratives operate according to the similar logic. While this psychological concept sheds light on decoding the represented consciousness in fictional narratives, taking cognitive science as the theoretical paradigm indicates a tendency of consolidating narratology through a unified theory of narrative (Iversen and Nielsen 122). In fact, in terms of consciousness-attribution, we usually ascribe different statuses to fictive and non-fictive consciousness, and these ascriptions often lead to different interpretational strategies in sense-making activities. Especially in reading unnatural narratives, which invalidate mimetic notions of narrative, positing conversational narratives as the prototypical will sideline their transgressiveness. It is important to recognize that the ontological status of fictional minds should bear on the interpretation of them.

It is interesting to see that, within the cognitive tradition, Theory of Mind is also under debate, and scholars have been discussing if fictional and actual minds really have no difference in kind. The notion of mindreading, in real-life scenarios, has three implications. First, others’ minds are hidden and inaccessible; second, we approach others in a third-person way, via detached observation; third, we always employ mindreading to understand others (Gallagher, “Inference and Interaction” 164). The fact is, however, that mental states or minds are only rarely hidden and inaccessible, and we often rely on embodied, situated ways of perceiving others (Iversen, “Broken or Unnatural” 146). If this is the case, i.e. we often have access to minds outside of fiction and we seldom have problems in understanding others, then maybe we approach fictional and everyday

minds differently, because in fictional readings, we have no choice but to read characters' minds (147).

The Exceptionality Thesis

When it comes to the distinction between fictional and actual minds, we have to look at the “Exceptionality Thesis,” coined by David Herman. This thesis designates that “readers’ experiences of fictional minds are different in kind from their experiences of the minds they encounter outside the domain of narrative fiction” (Herman, “Introduction” 8). The idea may date back to Käte Hamburger and Dorrit Cohn. In *Transparent Minds* (1978), Cohn characterizes narrative fiction as *sui generis* because of its power to reveal the contents of minds: “narrative fiction is the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed” (7-8). This echoes Hamburger’s view that “the representation of characters’ inner lives is simultaneously the touchstone that sets fiction apart from reality and builds the semblance (*Schein*) of another, non-real reality” (qtd. in Cohn, *Transparent Minds* 7). This underlined difference has been endorsed by unnatural theorists, who claim that minds in fiction formally and hence ontologically differ from minds outside of fiction.

Herman yet disputes that “only fictional narratives can give us direct, ‘inside’ views of characters’ minds, and that fictional minds are therefore *sui generis*, or different in kind from everyday minds” (“Introduction” 9). For him, both the Cartesian and the Post-Cartesian stances support a unified approach to minds of all sorts.³³ According to what Herman terms the “Mediation

³³ The Cartesian stance is reflected in the notion of mindreading. It assumes that other minds are hidden away and inaccessible, and that fictional minds are the only kind of mind that we have access to. The Post-Cartesian stance highlights minds as embodied—we seldom employ mindreading in everyday life, and we have few problems in

Argument,” which contends that encounters with fictional minds are mediated by the same heuristics used to interpret everyday minds, fictional minds are accessible but not transparent(11). In the light of the “Accessibility Argument,” which argues that people experience others’ minds in everyday life and encounter the I-originality of others as that in fictional narratives, everyday minds are not transparent, but accessible (11). Herman in this way refutes a binary relationship of fictional and actual minds; he argues for a scalar model according to which “minds of all sorts can be more or less directly encountered or experienced—depending on the circumstances” (9). Employing the two arguments to argue against the Exceptionality Thesis, Herman particularly targets the unbridgeable gap between fictional and nonfictional minds advocated by unnatural narratology; he avers that “acknowledging (the cognitive benefits of) the ontological divide between fiction and nonfiction is consistent with hypothesizing that the same protocols for engaging with minds cut across this divide” (12). Importantly, Herman highlights that a unified picture of mind representations of all sorts does not mean the erasure of the difference between fictional and other kinds of mind representations (12).

While I appreciate Herman’s recognition of continuities in understanding fictional and real minds, some incommensurable differences between the two cannot be overlooked. For example, as Iversen points out, the fictional mind is invented and the real mind is not, and this fact bears on our interpretive activities (“Broken or Unnatural” 146). According to Iversen, “saying that fictional minds are not the only kind of mind to which we have access through attribution is not the same as saying that our understandings of fictional and real minds are completely similar” (146). Furthermore, even though we read minds in real life as well as when dealing with fictional texts,

understanding others. “Cartesian cognitive science” is Mark Rowlands’s coinage in *The New Science of the Mind* (2010).

a literal understanding of “reading” as an act of making sense of words on a page is different from a metaphorical understanding of “reading” as making sense of any type of sign (for example bodily gestures) (147). As Iversen underlines, we should recognize the phenomenological difference, and not confuse these two conceptual meanings of “reading”: “Real life offers persons but metaphorical readings, while written texts offer literal readings but no actual persons” (147).

In some cases, the Mediation Argument is not in line with how we actually deal with the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. In fact, many non-conventional narratives—both fictional and nonfictional—hinder the process of consciousness-attribution. Taking Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* (2006) as example, Iversen avers that many elements in the narrative “obstruct a one-to-one conversion of its consciousness-like elements into something restlessly similar to a real human”, and we will miss out the singularity of the work if we insist on this conversion (“Broken or Unnatural” 154). Yet, if we read the novel as a narrative that employs techniques of unnatural narration, the deficiency—unreadable consciousness—can be characterized as a strategy (156). As for nonfiction, Iversen refers to concentration camp testimonies. He demonstrates that while testimonies confront us with “mutually exclusive states of consciousness” and incoherent narration, they invite listeners to reach beyond incoherence in an effort to accept the narrative as reliable, real, and communicative (159). It is concluded that when dealing with broken or unnatural elements in narratives, depending on the type of invitation the narrative offers, we often act in different ways (160).

Experientiality

From another perspective, cognitive narratology is built upon the belief that the reconstruction of represented human experiences is always reliable with the aid of the acquired experience, and a

typical embodiment is Fludernik's reconceptualization of narrative in terms of consciousness. In her formulation, the traditional term "narrativity" is redefined in terms of "experientiality." Experientiality refers to "the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience,'" and it "reflects a cognitive schema of embodiedness that relates to human existence and human concerns" (Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* 12-13). Put simply, "experientiality" is considered as a necessary and sufficient constituent of narrative. Accordingly, in the process of "narrativization," i.e. a reading strategy that naturalizes texts by turning recourse to narrative schemata, readers "attempt to re-cognize what they find in the text in terms of the natural telling or experiencing or viewing parameters, or they try to recuperate the inconsistencies in terms of actions and event structures at the most minimal level" (34). By this token, "inconsistencies of strange and incomprehensible texts cease to be worrisome", when they are read as a series of events, a story, or when they can be explained as the skewed vision of a ruling consciousness, that of a teller, or that of a reflective or "registering" mind (Alber, "The 'Moreness' or 'Lessness'" 55). Fludernik's reconceptualization of narrativity allows including many experimental texts into the discussion, and the foregrounding of experientiality and readers' active projection of consciousness highlights the active mobilization of cognitive skillset in dealing with recalcitrant narratives.

Yet the definition of narrative in terms of experientiality is too vague. As Alber argues, the emphasis on consciousness weakens other crucial aspects of narrative such as plot and character, and blurs the boundary between narrative and other genres like lyric. Not only so, the concept seems empty, in the sense that it rules out the possibility that different types of embodiment might exist—the historical and cultural variability of the notion are not fully considered ("The

‘Moreness’ or ‘Lessness’” 69-70). Moreover, for unnatural theorists, the notion designates naturalizing readings which overlook the otherness of unnatural texts.

To a great extent, Fludernik’s reconceptualization implies that the reconstruction of experientiality is an either-or process: either readers succeed in reconstructing experientiality, and then they have a narrative, or readers fail to do so. To borrow Iversen’s words, this is the underlying idea that “the abilities of narratives to encode human experiences and the abilities of readers to decode represented experiences are absolute and that they operate according to natural or prototypical parameters” (“In Flaming Flames” 90).

In our reading experiences, however, the notion of experientiality encounters a lot of hindrance. In many cases, while still presented in narratives, experiences can be beyond the scope of narrative comprehension and refuse to be recuperated by mimetic notions of minds.

A typical case is Holocaust testimonies. As Lawrence Langer observes, Holocaust testimonies reflect a foregrounded clash between common and deep memory, which respectively refers to the cognitive tools that render normal life normal and parts of memory that were deeply imprinted during the stay in the camp (6, 9). Langer avers that there is always a certain tension between these two types of memory, and they often compete with each other for primacy, hence leading to incoherent narratives (3, 16). According to Iversen, Holocaust narratives often have following characteristics: full of inconsistencies without a unifying voice, the blurring of different levels—reality and remembrance, time and space—as a result of the conflict of the two memories, the clash between the interviewer’s need to assimilate the narrative into a comprehensible and recognizable testimony, and the survivor’s desire to bring up the deep memory full of gaps and

inexplicabilities (“In Flaming Flames” 96-100). These antimimetic features actually invalidate the conditions of experientiality.³⁴

As Iversen describes, the crisis of experientiality manifests in two types of divergence: “demediated experientiality” and “unmediated experientiality.” The former refers to narratives with too many signs but too little life that invite and obstruct the reconstruction of consciousness in the meantime, invoking mutually exclusive frames of experientiality; the latter points at narratives with too much life and too few signs in which the mediating consciousness is unable to capture the recounted event (“In Flaming Flames” 102). In these cases, the dynamic between consciousness and experience deviates from the normal track, and cognitive concepts cannot save us from the unknown on the interpretive level (Iversen, “Unnatural Minds” 110).

At a more fundamental level, I don’t think it is appropriate to simply borrow notions from science, and apply them to reading literature. After all, cognitive science is a branch of science, and any science inevitably dictates rigid structure and hierarchy; therefore, a mechanical transfer of scientific knowledge to fictional narrative is bound to have limits. Imaginably, such limits are more foregrounded in dealing with unnatural narratives, which highlight the idiosyncrasy and innovativeness of literary creation. For instance, narrative studies have drawn on evolutionary psychology, according to which the human mind can be conceptualized as an inference-based

34 In “Letters and Chronicles” (2004), Fludernik proposes four conditions of experientiality: “the centrality of consciousness,” “specificity,” “tellability and point,” and “a fictional or non-fictional human (ized) protagonist.” Iversen contends that Holocaust narratives violate the first three. If “narrativity” is understood in terms of “experientiality,” Iversen argues, testimonies are typically “natural” as they are about somebody’s personal experience (“In Flaming Flames” 94). Non-fictive, testimonial narratives also embody unnatural narrative situations because they evoke “permanent defamiliarization,” and their antimimetic traits risk disappearing in a naturalizing approach (101).

computational system.³⁵ Transported to narrative analysis, this view implies that, first, fiction is an epistemological training ground which can be used to reset or test the ways we process others' mental activities, and second, the boundary between the fictive possible world and the world of the real author is absolute, and "*every narrated word emanates from a source, from the narrator*" (Iversen, "States" 136; my emphasis). The fact is that, however, fiction always functions dynamically instead of fixedly, and there are many narratives contravening hierarchical levels and questioning sources of information.³⁶ As I see it, even though fiction reading inevitably involves mindreading, it should not be *the purpose* of why we read fiction; to say fiction is an epistemological training ground is definitely at odds with its essence—a full play of creativity. These cognitive descriptions are, therefore, unable to grasp unnatural texts contravening the structuralistic understanding of narrative.

So far, I have delineated some crucial notions of cognitive narratology, and demonstrated the limitations of applying them to interpreting recalcitrant narratives. To summarize, the cognitive camp is grounded upon the suspicious assumption that readers approach fictional and real minds similarly. While the notion of experientiality significantly enlarges our research corpus by incorporating traditionally sidelined and marginalized texts into the discussion, imposing consciousness on narrative is essentially a naturalizing move. The cognitive toolkit, while facilitating sense-making activities by stressing the continuity between fiction and reality, is unable

³⁵ Evolutionary psychology aims to address what makes humans capable of using "contingent information for the regulation of improvised behaviour that is successfully tailored to local conditions" (Cosmides and Tooby 53). It regards the human brain as "a highly sophisticated piece of information-processing equipment whose unique combination of hardware and software makes it capable of constantly improvising by using local and contingent features of the immediate environment" (Iversen, "States" 130).

³⁶ Taking *The Suicide Mission* (2005) as an example, Iversen argues that the work presents readers with two mutually exclusive voices—one factual, one fictitious—whose relationship is impossible to untangle. It is pointed out that the interpenetration of the two voices frustrates any endeavor to locate the source of narrating. What complicates the case further is that the difficulty of making clear the multi-sourced information goes beyond the text itself, as the confusion is never explained by the actual author ("States" 143).

to, by nature, do justice to the alterity of unnaturalness, as it is rooted in cognitive science, and built upon inflexible boundaries and hierarchies.

On the one hand, we should understand why the mind approach is in essence insufficient to account for the unnatural, though the application of it is intuitive, hence inevitable, on the reader's part; on the other hand, we need to acknowledge the continuity between fiction and nonfiction, which needs to be duly concerned even in unnatural situations. As I see it, cognitive tools are indispensable in dealing with unnatural narratives; what remains to be examined is the *situation* where they are explicitly needed. I will come back to this point later.

Now, let us turn to the other side of the coin. As I have shown previously, a comprehensive unnatural narratology should take both the communicativeness and artificiality of unnatural narratives into account, and the cognitive approach alone cannot do the job. I also have examined some underlying notions of cognitive narratology and tested their explanative power in reading unnatural minds. The task now, hence, is to find a methodology which is not mimetic, and which recognizes as well as respects the represented discontinuities from mimetic conventions in unnatural works. In this aspect, Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings are illuminating.

1.9 Unnaturalizing Reading Strategies

For Nielsen, the naturalizing reading always remains a choice instead of a necessity: "it is *sometimes* necessary, *often* profitable, and *nearly always* possible to use different interpretive protocols when the mind-content of characters (other than of a character narrator herself/himself) is rendered" ("Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing" 70; original emphasis). This is a refutation of Fludernik's assumption that readers always project real-life knowledge into the reading process, and treat the text as a real-life instance of narrating ("New Wine" 623). Nielsen contends that

though most readers tend to do so, it is questionable to say they always do it successfully; besides, one does not have to “repeat the projection at a methodological level” (“Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing” 71). Proposing the unnaturalizing reading, which invites the reader to interpret the unnatural and real-life storytelling situations differently, Nielsen comes up with some useful tactics. My demonstration will start with Nielsen’s deconstruction of Genette’s relational theory of voice and mood, which lays the foundation for his later proposal of “the impersonal voice.”

Disconnection of Mood and Voice

Initially, Genette’s conceptualization of focalization aims to clear the confusion of mood and voice, which are relational yet differential. For him, while it is legitimate to envisage a typology of narrative situation which takes into account the data of both mood and voice, it is not appropriate to present such a classification under the single category of “point of view,” or to draw up a list where the two determinations compete with each other (*Narrative Discourse* 188). Primarily, we need to make a distinction between *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective*, and *who is the narrator, or, who speaks* (186). According to Genette, focalization refers to a restriction of field—a selection of narrative information with respect to what is traditionally called omniscience—and the instrument of this possible selection is “a *situated focus*” (original emphasis). This situated focus is “a sort of information-conveying pipe that allows passage only of information that is authorized by the situation” (Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 74).³⁷

³⁷ The choice of focalization is not a choice of knowledge, and the narrator cannot choose to know more or less than he does; focalization is about the choice of restriction, or nonrestriction, of access to point of view (Nielsen, “Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing” 75).

Yet the revelation of information is sometimes not authorized by the situation. The relational theory between the character who leads the narrator in the diegetic world, and the narrator who speaks at discourse level, however, becomes tenuous in the case of homodiegetic narration with zero focalization. As the narrator has restricted access to others' minds, it is epistemologically impossible that he/she reports more than what he/she is able to know. The reason that such an irreconcilability frequently appears in first-person narration yet seldom strikes readers as estranging is that "the question of the narrator as enunciator of the story and the narrator as responsible for the choice of focalization are never really brought to bear upon each other" (Nielsen, "Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing" 77). In fact, Genette's system signifies a disconnection of mood and voice—the relationship between "who speaks" and "who perceives" has been tenuous from the very beginning, and the relational theory between narrators and characters is actually one between *authors* and *characters*.³⁸ In other words, "the author can represent the experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of someone else whether or not this someone is referred to in the first or the third person" (77).³⁹ As Nielsen points out, if mood and voice are disconnected, "the possibility of transgressing the limits of personal voice regarding knowledge, vocabulary, memory, and so forth, is present" (79).

Like Nielsen, Fludernik observes that Genette's framework makes way for some odd combinations of mood and voice, and a typical example is "the non-natural schema of a 'speaker'

³⁸ This can be detected from Genette's own discussions. In *Narrative Discourse* (1980), it is mentioned that "[t]he narrator almost always "knows" more than the hero, even if he himself is the hero, and therefore for the narrator focalization through the hero is a restriction of field just as artificial in the first person as in the third" (194). In *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988), it is noted that "if *focalizer* applied to anyone, it could only be the person who *focalizes the narrative*—that is, the narrator, or, if one wanted to go outside the conventions of fiction, the *author himself*" (73; original emphasis).

³⁹ In Nielsen's view, Genette categorizes the narratives of the world "on the basis of the different ways in which they do or do not give us access to minds"; Genette's approach includes both unconventional and conventional unnatural options, and even leaves a box empty for the possible yet not fully actualized homodiegetic narrative with external focalization ("Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing" 77).

who has the ability to describe the world through his characters' consciousness" ("New Wine" 627). Different from the traditional authorial narrative, which presents a contrast between the narratorial style and the characters' language, the contemporary and a more experimental version is "of the narrator's narrating the thoughts of the protagonist in his own language but as if the character had become the narrator" (629). As a result, the narrator voice and the character voice are intertwined. Even though extensive illustrations of a character's internal world point to him as being focalized, the source of the voice is elusive. The situation is further complicated by the presence of present-tense narration, as a present-tense narrating voice is even harder to identify, when juxtaposed with a figural portrayal of the character's consciousness. Fludernik believes that this interpenetration of voice and mood arises from the fact that the linguistic clues for determining focalization are the same clues as those used to determine voice: "Interpretations of 'who sees' and 'who speaks' are therefore more or less based on the same type of linguistic evidence" (633). Therefore, the distinction between mood and voice does not make much theoretical sense, as both interpretive strategies are based on illusionistic presuppositions, and attempt to extrapolate a consistent real-world schema (635).⁴⁰ In many cases, Fludernik argues, we do not need to evoke the concepts of voice or focalization—the readerly privilege to read a character's consciousness may help to extend the range of real-world experience (626).

"The Impersonal Voice"

Nielsen will not endorse Fludernik's mind approach; focusing on narrative *per se*, he suggests an overhaul of the assumption that the fundamental narrating voice is a narrator's voice. As Nielsen

⁴⁰ For Fludernik, both categories are established by ways of an interpretive move. In the case of voice, such a move projects a communicative schema on the narrative; in the case of focalization, it uses a visual metaphor for determining the source of fictional knowledge ("New Wine" 635).

observes, many narrative theorists take for granted that “in first-person narrative the narrator is the person referred to in the grammatical first person”, whereas transgressions of this are not uncommon even in traditional literature (“The Impersonal Voice” 135). In fact, many first-person narrators showcase “mnemonic overkill” or “redundant telling,” yet these violations are often overlooked as they seldom hinder readers’ engagements with narrative (136).⁴¹ An unnatural dual voice exists in many first-person narratives, and it is anticipated in the conventional free indirect speech, as Nielsen remarks: “the words and thoughts of the experiencing self, who does not narrate the narrative, may nevertheless appear and, in a sense, interfere in the presentation of narrative” (137). This duality can be further read as “the voice of the narrating-I and a voice that does not belong to any character”, and a typical case is the paralective first-person narrator, who narrates more than he/she can, or wants to, or needs to (138).

How can we explain this unnaturalness, when there is no sufficient textual evidence to read such a narrator as insane or unreliable? Nielsen proposes the concept of “the impersonal voice,” which neither belongs to the narrating-I nor to the narrated-I, suggesting that “there need not always be an existential indexical continuity between the character referred to in the first person and the referring voice in first-person narration” (“The Impersonal Voice” 139). The impersonal voice functions both when it says what it can say and when it says what is beyond its accessibility as a first-person narrator; by this token, the concept dissolves the boundary between first-person and third-person narrative, as both can be read as not having a narrator speaking about something, “but rather *an impersonal voice that creates the world to which it refers*” (146; my emphasis). Nielsen in this way avoids the mimetic judgment that it is either the narrator’s fallibility or the

⁴¹ “Mnemonic overkill” refers to ideally inscribing long series of monologues, dialogues and descriptions, and “redundant telling” is the textual phenomenon that reports unnecessary information without specific motivation (Nielsen, “The Impersonal Voice” 136).

author's mistake when a first-person narrator proves paralecttic; instead, readers are advised to turn to the invented-ness of narrative fiction, as the author has the freedom to choose the pronoun and the restriction of access to thoughts. This unnaturalizing tool, therefore, underlines the inventing author, and the artificiality of fiction.

Nielsen's notion is motivated by the severance of the character function and the narrator function, which is teeming in contemporary narratives, especially unnatural narratives. The theorist suggests that, when the two functions work independently, there is no need to maintain the link between the character and the narrating voice ("The Impersonal Voice" 144). This also means that the textual world is self-referential, and it does not have to follow real-life restrictions. Nielsen's argument here is in line with the rhetorical approach. In *Narrative as Rhetoric* (1996), James Phelan draws the same distinction to justify the narrator's unexpected knowledge: "When the narratorial functions are operating independently of the character functions, then the narration will be reliable and authoritative" (112). Despite this, we have to take note that Nielsen and Phelan come from different standpoints: Phelan's rhetorical approach, based on a communicative framework, assumes the presence of the narrator, whereas Nielsen foregrounds the role of the author. As Nielsen argues: "we do not need the concept of narrators as something distinct from authors and characters to explain or understand focalized narration", as in many fictional narratives where real-life parameters are transgressed, so-called "narrators" do not transmit the narrative to a narratee or a reader ("Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing" 86). Put simply, to read a fictional narrative as a narrator reporting an event assumes a pre-existent nonfictional narrating situation,

and it is mimetic; by comparison, to read a fictional narrative as an authorial invention which comes into existence by the author's hands is antimimetic.⁴²

The notion of the impersonal voice calls into question an ingrained yet misleading tendency of equating "narrator" with "human being," as reflected in the term "first-person." Proclamations about the death of the narrator have argued that "the 'I' of first-person narrative is merely a signifier, a semiotic sign to which readers during the reading process attribute certain propositions and descriptions that also occur in the narrative" (Heinze 281). Actually, if we extract humanness from the concept first-person, *paralepsis* does not seem to be an issue at all. As Heinze comments, "apart from denoting a number of different phenomena such as unusual knowledge and spatial and temporal independence of the narrative agency, *paralepsis* cannot be satisfyingly defined if the frame of reference is exclusively extrinsic or intrinsic to a fictional narrative" (282). In other words, without the reference of knowledge of basic cognitive and phenomenological aspects of the actual world, breaks in the mimetic epistemology in first-person narrative will not strike readers as odd (283). By this token, *paralepsis* is an issue only "if we still think of the first person as narrator" (Nielsen, "Unnatural Narratology" 75). When an impersonal voice, instead of a human narrator, is narrating, "it is inventing and creating a world including the first person and his knowledge and lack of knowledge" (75).

However, it is also true that first-person narrative fiction often projects a consciousness (Heinze 281). *Paralepsis*, as I see it, cannot be fully accounted for by just abandoning the inhabited consciousness. As Heinze observes, Nielsen's concept fails to give due concern to the often

⁴² Nielsen avers that underlining inventing authors does not imply the erasure of unreliable or suspicious character narration: "The author is still authoritatively inventing a world in which the reader should trust—including trusting that these mistaken beliefs exist in the world" ("Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing" 87).

recognizable idiolects, idiosyncrasies, or prejudices of the first-person narrator—to limit sometimes quite personalized comments as belonging only to an impersonal voice misrepresents the style of the first-person narrator (288). While ascribing the idiosyncrasy of first-person narration to an impersonal voice affirms its ability to present and create all characters along with their respective styles, it seems to me a too totalizing stance which has limited significance in interpretive activities.

In the light of Nielsen's discussion, we need not to presume a one-to-one relationship between the narrating pronoun and its enunciation, or to restrict our interpretations to what would be possible if mood and voice were connected. In this way, the knowledge or information provided by the narrator would not be judged as non-authoritative or unreliable just because it is beyond his/her accessibility. In fact, besides unnatural narration, the notion of the impersonal voice can be extended to other unnatural scenarios, if they are read as authorial creations: Regarding unnatural narration, it is the author instead of the narrator acting as the telling agent; regarding unnatural storyworld, it is the author creating all antimimetic events. When it comes to unnatural narratives which ostensibly deviate from real-life parameters, only the introduction of the inventing author will maximum our interpretation and understanding (Nielsen, "Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing" 84). The inventing author, hence, is the core of Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings.

Phelan's Rhetorical Approach

Before going further, I want to take a diversion to demonstrate how the rhetorical approach contributes to our interpretation of unnatural narratives. As aforementioned, first-person narration contravening real-life parameters has been discussed extensively by Phelan, and his recognition that a narrating act can be independent of the humanly limitation of its enunciator echoes Nielsen's

unnaturalizing approach. In *Living to Tell about It* (2005), Phelan further differentiates narrator and disclosure functions. On the premise that “character narration is an art of indirection, one in which the same text simultaneously communicates two different purposes to two different audiences”, he proposes to classify the communication in character narration along two tracks—the narrator-narratee track and the narrator-authorial audience track (7). The former is called narrator functions—“the narrator acts as a reporter, interpreter and evaluator of the narrated for the narratee, and those actions are constrained by the narrative situation”; the latter is called disclosure functions—“the narrator unwittingly reports information of all kinds to the authorial audience” (12). This distinction can effectively account for narratives in which something that the character-narrator need not, will not, or cannot tell, is narrated. From another perspective, Phelan’s rhetorical model addresses scenarios of unnatural narration through the component of the *synthetic*. Phelan classifies three narrative components that provoke interests and responses in rhetorical readers: mimetic, thematic, and synthetic. Depending on the nature of narrative genre and its progression, the relationship among readers’ relative interests in the three components varies: reacting to the synthetic component, readers pay attention “to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs” (Phelan, “Somebody Telling Somebody Else” 11). Accordingly, in the light of the rhetorical approach, readers can attribute unnatural narrating situations to the synthetic nature of narrative.

This is all very insightful, yet the fundamental basis of the rhetorical tradition is the notion of prototypicality—the belief that all narratives can be described as communicative and rhetorical acts. According to Phelan, narrative itself can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (*Living to Tell about It* 18). This definition does not discriminate between fictional and

nonfictional, natural and unnatural, experimental and traditional narratives, hence indicating a universal applicability of the communicative model (Nielsen, "Theory and Interpretation" 75). The fact is however that "there can be narration without communication in the sense that there can be narratives without a sender and a receiver" (76). It is necessary, Nielsen believes, to identify specific narrative scenarios which do not follow the dominant "natural" rules (Nielsen, "Fictional Voices?" 57).⁴³ Despite the mimetic definition of narrative, it should be noted that in practice and close reading, unlike most cognitive narratologists, Phelan does not have this mimetic bias, and his discussion of unnatural narration greatly enlightens our understanding of the communicativeness of unnatural elements.⁴⁴

Phelan later suggests the addition of another dimension to the existing framework: "in unnatural narration, the disclosure functions proceed not along the narrator-authorial audience track but the author-authorial audience track as the author, in the interest of disclosure, violates the limits of narratorial communication" (qtd. in Nielsen, "Fictional Voices?" 77). This stance can find support in Phelan's discussion of the ethical issues of literary works. In "Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative Communication" (2011), the scholar introduces the communicative channel of narrative structure itself. For this new channel, "the author skips over both the narrator and the characters in order to communicate to the audience through that structure, including through such devices as the juxtaposition of scenes and the placement of gaps in the temporal sequence, and so on" (Phelan,

43 In "Fictional Voices? Several Voices? Unnatural Voices" (2011), several narrative phenomena, challenging not only the rhetorical but also the overarching mimetic tradition, are discussed by Nielsen. Firstly, the experiencing first-person, present tense narration. It transgresses the ontological boundary of story and discourse, flaunting an incongruity between doing and telling. Secondly, the peculiar "you" narration, in which "[t]he protagonist is referred to and designated, but not addressed by the second person pronoun"—"nothing except the very use of the second person pronoun suggests that he is being addressed" (66). Hereby the idiosyncrasy of fictional narrative comes to the fore as in daily life "you" is always part of the addressee and is not created by the pronoun (66-67). The third one is the aforementioned unnatural first-person narration, which exhibits a mismatch between the narrator and his knowledge (68-69).

44 See Nielsen, "Response to James Phelan's" (2018), 97.

“Rhetoric” 66). The revised communication model, starting with the implied author and ending with the actual audience, designates not only that the same actual author can employ various versions of himself in different narrative situations, but also that the implied author can deploy available resources for significant communicative effects (69). More bluntly, Phelan contends that “the implied author is the grand conductor of narrative communication, the agent who seeks to make all the resources work together”, and the success of this communication channel depends on the collusion between implied author and actual audience (71-72). The unnatural tradition definitely welcomes Phelan’s modification, as it reveals that there are no such thing as indispensable elements in a narrative communication model—all resources are at the author’s disposal (Nielsen, “The Unnatural” 247-48). Nielsen comments on this as follows: “I much prefer the description that the author violates the limits of narratorial communication over the description that the narrator unwittingly reports information since I believe that there is no report at the local level and at the level of the character-narrator” (“Natural Authors” 298). I will draw upon Phelan’s insightful discussion of the interaction between the implied author (the authorial intention) and the authorial audience in the chapter of case studies, especially in the aspect of understanding unnatural texts at the thematic, communicative level.

The implied author is positioned outside the narrative text and conceptualized as a streamlined version of the actual author (Phelan, “Rhetoric” 69). This is different from Nielsen’s notion of the inventing author, which stresses the artificiality of fiction and the possibility to violate real-life storytelling limitations. Dealing with unnatural narratives, Phelan’s approach sheds light on the communicativeness of unnatural elements—how they are employed to deliver authorial communications to actual readers; Nielsen’s concept foregrounds the ontological status of the

antimimetic and its essential fictive nature. Utilized together, both concepts are conducive to a holistic description of unnatural works.

Notwithstanding the appreciation of Phelan's modification of the rhetorical approach, Nielsen goes further and proposes "non-reporter" thesis.⁴⁵ As Nielsen observes, traditionally, the author is excluded from the communicative model—in fact narratological interest in general—because of the need for a reporter, as the author is apparently not a reporter in the sense that he/she is inventing, rather than telling that something happened; yet as soon as the narrator is not reporting, or reporting something beyond his accessibility, the need for the author returns ("Theory and Interpretation" 84-85). This circular argument might be attributed to the general logic of all narratological conceptions that equates communication with narration—"if the author is not reporting, the narrator is, and conversely, if the narrator is not reporting, the author is" (85). In accordance with Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings, as long as the inventing author is in the picture, there is no need to assume the presence of a reporter in the first place.

A Recognition of Real Authors

In essence, Nielsen aims to acknowledge the full potential of authors, and emphasize their ability of going beyond mimetic communicative models—real authors are narrating agents who can invent what no one knows and narrate what no one else communicates. He insightfully argues that there is a part of narration that is not communication; for unnatural narration, which deviates from the paradigm of oral narratives, it is the author delivering rather than the narrator narrating. Therefore, it is problematic to regard the two—narration and communication—as interchangeable

⁴⁵ Nielsen points out that the idea that narratives are always about something that happened comes with a strong bias towards noninvented narratives, compared to a tentative definition like "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose about *something invented, imagined, or actually happened*" ("Response to James Phelan's" 94; my emphasis).

(Nielsen, “Natural Authors” 279). The necessity of this introduction of the author is also confirmed in borderline cases where fictionalized elements are embedded in largely nonfictional contexts. In such situations, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, which is traditionally grounded upon the relationship between narrator and author, runs into crisis, as the presence of fictive elements does not turn a narrative into a pure fiction, and the fictionalization cannot be fully explained by assuming the existence of a narrator (296).⁴⁶ How do we deal with this entanglement of nonfiction and fiction, communication and creation? Who is the agent of narrating? Again, the “non-narrator/reporter” thesis is proposed. If we read such borderline cases as nonfiction, we have the right to question the possibility of narration in reference to real-life parameters, and in this situation the communication is from the author to the reader; if we read them as fiction, on the other hand, we need to bear in mind that the story world is an entity of its own, created by the author, and insofar as transgressions of mimetic restrictions can occur in fictional narrative and they can be read as reliable, the communication—if there is any—is still from the author to the reader (Nielsen, “Theory and Interpretation” 89). To conclude: in either of the two cases, we do not need the concept of the narrator.

It is hereby clear that if we don’t assume all narration to be communication and report, we don’t assume the existence of a narrator, and then we can start to recognize that some narration is actually fictionalized by the author, and such “non-communication is a resource of fictionality

⁴⁶ Nielsen observes that the classical structuralist narratology centers on the relationship between author and narrator to distinguish fictional and nonfictional narratives: “In fictional narratives there is a narrator who is not the same person as the author. In nonfictional narratives like autobiographies, on the other hand, there is no narrator other than the author” (“Natural Authors” 276). By this token, “in nonfictional written narratives the communication is taken to proceed from author to reader, in fictional ones (also) from a narrator to a narratee” (277). A typical borderline case is James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) which is labelled as a nonfictional autobiography. The work however occasionally presents the use of the present tense in first-person narration, which is typically unnatural. As Nielsen sees it, the unnatural narration can only be from the author rather than the narrator, and hence this is an example where “non-communication” happens in a communicative framework. On this work Nielsen’s “Natural Authors, Unnatural Narration” has more detailed discussion.

available to the real author” (Nielsen, “Natural Authors” 296). By this token, instead of trying to decide the narrative’s fictional status, the reader is encouraged to zoom in on the fictionalized scenario in it; it is also of more practical significance to do so, as more and more texts experiment with the boundary of fiction and nonfiction.⁴⁷ Fictionality, in Nielsen’s understanding, can be local as well as global, and cannot be determined by text-internal evidence (281).⁴⁸ In this manner, the unnatural, as a device of fictionality, is at the author’s disposal, and can occur in both fictional and nonfictional contexts. Invention and non-report, are specific embodiments of unnaturalness; although these unnatural features of non-communication are “neither necessary nor sufficient features ontologically or generically in fiction”, they are features of fictionality, which is fundamentally local (299). In the light of Nielsen’s analysis, not only unnatural narratives, but also unnatural aspects of narrative of all sorts, which are largely backgrounded or sidelined in a unified framework established upon typicality and dichotomous classification, are taken into account. This perspective extends the applicability of unnaturalness; as a rhetorical device, the unnatural signposts the role of the flesh-and-blood author in choosing techniques of transcending conventional communicative frameworks.

⁴⁷ In *The Nature of Narrative* (2006), Phelan points out four “unresolved instabilities” in narrative theory, and one of them is the issue of fiction and nonfiction: “In my rhetorical view, preserving the borders [between fiction and nonfiction] has the major advantage of helping us account for the differences in the ways we respond to particular narratives, *even as the debate calls attention to various kinds of border-crossing—of technique, of character, of place, and so on*” (355; my emphasis).

⁴⁸ Nielsen’s view of fictionality is developed from Richard Walsh. Walsh regards fictionality as a pragmatic concept in the sense that “its criteria are not ultimately inherent in the narrative itself, but are contextual” (“Fictionality and Mimesis” 115). In other words, fictionality has no determinate relation to features of the text itself, and it is “the product of a narrative’s frame of presentation, of the various possible elements of what Gérard Genette has described as the paratext” (*The Rhetoric of Fictionality* 44-45). Nielsen further adds that fictionality does not have to be global, and it is possible to have fictionality in nonfiction.

1.10 Summary: An Evaluation of Unnaturalizing Readings

In a nutshell, central to Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings is the foregrounding of inventing authors, and the narrator is only one of many resources at the author's disposal to carry out the establishment of a fictional world. In this way, when confronted with unnatural narration, the reader is advised to interpret it as invented, and turn recourse to authorial creation, without evoking a narrator figure. The proposal that the narrating voice is from the author rather than the narrator not only applies to unnatural narratives but also to fictional narratives in general. Maximizing the usage of this interpretive tool, Nielsen also examines borderline cases where the fictional and the nonfictional are intertwined. If the unnatural is essentially authors' creation, a sign of fictionality, then theoretically it can also occur in nonfictional contexts. In the light of Nielsen's discussion, insofar as the unnatural is regarded as a rhetorical device of fictionality, rather than as a type of narrative aligned with fiction, its applicability will be largely extended.

There is no doubt that Nielsen's unnaturalizing reading strategies shed light on how to come to terms with unnatural texts. The emphasis of inventing authors brings the artificiality of unnaturalness to the fore, highlighting how the ontological status of unnatural narratives, and fiction in general, impacts our sense-making activities. Additionally, discussing the unnatural as a rhetorical device affiliated with fictionality extends its applicability to broader contexts. This is of great practical significance, as nowadays more and more narratives play with the boundary between nonfiction and fiction; instead of dwelling upon the genre issue, it is more feasible to focus on local phenomena and see how they relate to larger contexts. Compared with Richardson's and Alber's models, Nielsen's is more eclectic in that it recognizes interpretation as a necessary move, respecting it as an indispensable part in our reading of literature; in the meantime, it eschews a mechanical employment of cognitive tools, and gives concern to the invented author. Nielsen's

tactics also echo Iversen's critique of a unified approach to fictional and actual minds, proposing a more flexible viewpoint in dealing with the unnatural—cognitive tools always remain as optional, if not necessary. Thus, from my vantage point, Nielsen overall captures a preferable position in theorizing unnatural narratives and developing unnatural narratology.

But I do find some drawbacks in Nielsen's approach. Firstly, I agree with Heinze's point that the concept of the impersonal voice may weaken the personal dimension of first-person narratives. What if the transgression of real-life restrictions only occurs locally? Is it appropriate to downplay the general immersiveness of a fictional narrative just because of a local unnatural phenomenon? I believe there are many first-person narratives that turn out engaging to readers, notwithstanding the employment of unnatural techniques. Foregrounding inventing authors undoubtedly brings to light unnatural narration in all sorts of narrative, yet doesn't it also downplay the affective baggage carried by unnaturalness? The issue becomes particularly urgent when we think of the receiving end of narration—the reader. If we examine antimimetic accounts only in terms of the author's flexible employment of techniques of fictionalization, and simply attribute them to the writer's creation, the sentimental impact of unnatural texts on the reader is unduly ignored. Moreover, while I believe that it is illuminating to investigate fictionality in nonfiction, I wonder to what extent it is of value to talk about fictionality in fiction. Even the most naïve reader knows that fiction is fictive, and that anything can happen in it; from my vantage point, the creator-author is already there even without any unnatural narration, and simply a highlight of this fact does not have much explanative power. In this sense, Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings are too totalizing.

This naturally leads to another problem—the heterogeneity of unnatural narration is overlooked. Unnatural narration may come in various forms. The narrator can be unnatural—

he/she can be an animal; the narrator's narration can be unnatural—he/she may have knowledge beyond his/her accessibility; the narrating pronoun can be unnatural, as in the case of “you” and “we” narration; the identity of the narrating agent can be unnatural—it can be individual, collective, as well as an interpenetration of the two. Subsuming all these embodiments of unnaturalness under inventing authors seems to lose sight of their peculiarities. In fact, in the light of Nielsen's tools, all aspects of the unnatural—narration, minds, storyworlds—can be ascribed to the written-ness of texts. At the end of the day, apart from that the unnatural is artificial, we also want to know the context and purpose of such invention—why it has various forms and how it is accepted by readers. To further operationalize Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings, my own model highlights the specificity of unnaturalness, as the next chapter will show.⁴⁹

Nielsen's unnaturalizing perspective is inspiring, as it offers an interpretive methodology which is not mimetically-based. Since reality and fiction are ontologically distinct, the inclusion of inventing authors into the interpretive move, at a very basic level, invalidates naturalizing explanations, and this is in essence with Richardson's non-representational stance. For a new unnatural narratology that embraces both the mimetic and the antimimetic inputs, Nielsen's textual approach proves an ideal candidate for the latter.

1.11 The Next Step: A New Model

After the above illustration of the current models of unnatural narrative theory, it is time to think about the takeaway from them for my own model. To reiterate what I have concluded previously, the comparison of Richardson's and Alber's formulations shows that it is essential to move from

⁴⁹ Nielsen himself also acknowledges that “there is valuable work to be done by specifically investigating fictionality as a choice, a resource, and a rhetorical strategy, and by asking why an author employs or refrains from employing fictionality” (“Response to James Phelan's” 98).

unnatural narratives to unnatural narratology. But what is the ideal methodology to make sense of unnatural narratives? While cognitive readings shed light on meaning-production from a humanistic perspective, they downplay the fact that the unnatural is fundamentally a textual phenomenon; additionally, this meaning-driven approach may lead to misinterpretation or totalizing readings. Nielsen's unnaturalizing readings on this matter turn out to be an eclectic approach. For one thing, Nielsen recognizes the importance of interpretation, and contends that unnatural narratology should aim at the investigation of interpretational strategies and their consequences. In addition, although he highlights the unnatural as a technique of fictionality by inventing authors, and hence holds some skepticism of employing cognitive tools in this context, he does not totally negate the value of narrativization—it still remains a choice. As I see it, the mind approach still proves helpful in dealing with unnatural scenarios, especially when we turn attention to readers' processing of antimimetic elements.⁵⁰

We hence conclude that a narratology is needed, and both the artificiality and the communicativeness of the unnatural—its textual nature and its cognization by readers—are to be duly concerned. The problem is how unnaturalizing and cognitive readings cooperate with each other. In practice, the two approaches always mutually exclude, and building meaning-production on either of them will cancel the other out; consequently, we cannot just incorporate them into a framework and let readers make the choice—this is of limited value. It is more significant to envision a model by which the two approaches are mutually *complementary* instead of *offsetting*. Following this train of thought, I propose to introduce a mediating factor to bridge the two

⁵⁰ Nielsen also discusses unnatural narration in nonfictional contexts; my research will only focus on the unnatural in fictional contexts, and the boundary of fiction and nonfiction is assumed clear-cut.

methods; *contingent on this factor*, the reader chooses the more appropriate strategy of interpretation. Imaginably, this intermediary can connect the text and readership. What can it be?

Let's go back to Nielsen's definition of unnatural narratives. According to him, "such narratives may have temporalities, storyworlds, mind representations, or acts of narration that would have to be construed as physically, logically, mnemonically, or psychologically impossible or implausible in real-world storytelling situations, but that allow *the reader* to interpret them instead as reliable, possible, and/or authoritative *by cueing her to change* her interpretational strategies" ("Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing" 72; my emphasis). While I appreciate Nielsen's incorporation of the reader into the definition, there is a potential mismatch between the textual part, i.e. unnatural scenarios, and the receiving part, i.e. readers' reaction to these scenarios. How can we guarantee that the reader will be successfully cued to adjust interpretational tactics? Can this change be simply caused by unnatural elements *per se*? As I see it, when the reader reacts to unnatural narratives, he/she is reacting to the whole package instead of unnatural elements alone: the unnatural might be already conventionalized, or it is overshadowed by sentimentality evoked by the text, or it is too local to catch the reader's attention ... As there are so many contextual factors impacting one's reading experience, even a narrative deemed typically unnatural by narratologists may fail to cue the recipient to revise interpretational strategies. Therefore, I do not regard it appropriate to take "the change of interpretational strategies" as defining of unnatural narratives.⁵¹

⁵¹ I personally opt for an inclusive definition of the unnatural. The unnatural is essentially a local and textual phenomenon; unnatural narratives, the unnaturalness of which breaks the mimetic-illusion, deviate from mimetic, natural narratives grounded upon real-life storytelling situations, and cannot be adequately explained by mimetic rules.

So, when reading unnatural narratives, readers *may change or not change* their habitual ways of interpretation, which are based on real-life storytelling situations—here I seem to see a possible co-existence of cognitive and unnaturalizing readings. One thing Nielsen mentions yet does not fully explore is the participation of the reader. Intuitively, I believe that the reader will not change his/her accustomed way of sense-making unless the narrative in question is alienating and disconcerting enough to cue an inspection of it: it starts with some adjustment within a paradigm, and when further encouraged by the text, develops into an either-or choice between, say, unnaturalizing and cognitive readings. This also means that some unnatural narratives may not trigger altering interpretive tactics, probably because they do not strike readers as that antimimetic to call for a different reading. At this stage, I think it is requisite to introduce an affective dimension to the discussion. Speaking from my own experience, although unnatural narratives more often than not confuse and unnerve readers, it does not mean that it is impossible to build any emotional bond between readership and texts. In my view, it is the rivalry among readers' different affective responses that determines the way of interpretation: an overall engaging unnatural narrative hints at cognitive readings, whereas a largely affectively distant one leads to the physicality of the text.

This chapter evaluates the current formulations of unnatural narrative theory, and points out the need for a new model of unnatural narratology. The examination of Richardson's and Alber's theories shows that, while the unnatural is essentially a textual phenomenon which cannot be mimetically explained, its communicativeness should not be ruled out—we still want to know its function and significance. I therefore conclude that it is imperative to move from unnatural narratives to unnatural narratology; additionally, both the continuity and the discontinuity between fictional and real-life sense-making processes should be duly discussed in this narratology. The

cognitive toolkit illuminates on the meaning of the unnatural, though its mimetic basis inevitably flattens out the transgressive nature of unnaturalness; in this aspect, I draw on Iversen's intensive discussions, and lay out the strength and weakness of the mind approach. I particularly endorse Nielsen's unnaturalizing reading strategies, which, underlining the inventing author, offer an antimimetic perspective of making sense of the unnatural. A full-fledged model of unnatural narratology, I argue, should not only take both the cognitive and the unnaturalizing insights into account, but also enable them to complement each other, rather than neutralize each other. Hence, I propose to bring in the affective dimension, namely, the feelings evoked by unnatural narratives in readers. My next chapter will demonstrate how I build a new mode of unnatural narratology on readers' affective reactions, and how this model possibly presents a joint effort of the two discussed interpretative approaches.

CHAPTER TWO: A NEW MODEL OF UNNATURAL NARRATOLOGY

In this chapter, I will build my own model of unnatural narratology. The new model adds a phenomenological dimension to the current discussion, and on this premise, argues for a necessary cooperation between the textual approach and the cognitive toolkit in dealing with unnatural narratives.⁵² To account for both the objective, elusive aspect, and the subjective, recognizable aspect of one's phenomenological experience, my theoretical layout is divided into two parts—one on affect, and the other on emotion. Relating this phenomenological factor to follow-up interpretations, I will elaborate on how the difference in readers' affective reactions leads to different reading strategies. My model highlights the interpretation of unnatural narratives as a constant negotiation between the text and the reader's feeling body, and the ongoing dialogue between the two sense-making methods—unnaturalizing and cognitive readings—in interpretive moves. To further operationalize my model, I propose possible relations between affective reactions and textual features; additionally, while experientiality is of high fluidity, I will try my best to concretize it on the theoretical level. By introducing the phenomenological dimension into the picture, I intend to do justice to two facets of unnaturalness—the unnatural as essentially a textual phenomenon, and the sense-making of it as a reader-leading, cognitive activity.

⁵² The textual approach is based on a text-oriented theory, according to which characters' thoughts and feelings are first and foremost linguistic and narrative constructs; it focuses on the way consciousness is textually shaped and tends to sideline the potential coherence ensuing from psychological models (Bernaerts and Richardson 534). This stance is in line with what Brian McHale calls "a conventionalist approach to fictional minds" which hypothesizes that representations of consciousness in fiction depend upon literary conventions, and these conventions must be learned through exposure to texts as they are not part of our natural endowment or everyday experience ("Transparent Minds Revisited" 120). What the non-representational approach to unnatural narratives does is the flip side of the same textualist coin: "It consistently discusses the narrative devices that break with such conventions, in particular with mimetic conventions" (Bernaerts and Richardson 534). In this thesis, "the text-oriented," "the textual," and "the conventionalist" are used analogously to highlight the artificiality of unnatural elements, and the unnaturalizing reading is a specific interpretive move following the approach.

Accordingly, not only the invented nature, but also the communicative function of the unnatural, are to be examined. With the phenomenological experience working as a bridge, my model proposes a mutual complementation, rather than a mutual exclusivity, of the two.

Firstly I want to apologize in advance for the overload of information in the upcoming discussion; in demonstrating the theoretical basis of my model of unnatural narratology, I feel it necessary to explain clearly the notions I borrow from philosophy and cognitive science, and their affordances in the current context, and the concomitant excess of terms is an unintended consequence.⁵³ To help readers follow my train of thought, I sketch out the chapter structure as follows (see Appendix). First of all, as a continuation of the last chapter, I talk about the necessity of including the reader's body in dealing with unnatural narratives, and hence the input of the mind-body debate. In order to know how the body and the mind interact with each other, I draw on the phenomenological tradition, and specifically, Martin Heidegger's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas—the former highlights the materiality of our relation to the world, and the situatedness of sense-making activities, while the latter underlines the embodied nature of consciousness, and the importance of the bodily participation in the production of meaning. Transferring the philosophical discussion to the study of unnatural narratives, I emphasize that not only the reader's body should be taken into account, but also the variety of the bodily experience, and its impact on the interpretive move, are to be duly concerned. How to theoretically describe the heterogeneity of one's bodily reactions in reading unnatural works? I differentiate emotion from affect: emotion accounts for bodily reactions that are mentally representable and cognitively

⁵³ The term "affordance" refers to "inherent (but not necessarily realized) potential as well as to being endowed with or allowed to have or display possibilities or functions" (McHale, "Affordances of Form" 50, note 1). The term has been used in the discussion of the impact of medium in narrative studies. For instance, in terms of digital narratives, we need to consider that an interface actually makes the reader an indispensable contributor of the story, and this is different from the reading of material texts, during which the reader is faced with finished products.

explainable, and affect refers to bodily sensations that are beyond recognition. To narrow down the analysis of emotion, I specifically expound on the notion of narrative empathy, which illustrates the emotional communication between the reader and the text. Next, moving on from feeling to meaning, I explain in detail how the phenomenological indicator informs us of the choice of interpretive toolkits. On the continuity of the body and the mind, I find inspirations in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's discussion of presence and meaning effects, and the second-generation approach to cognitive studies. Gumbrecht's philosophy foregrounds the omnipresence of affect—the spatiality of mind activities—and recognizes the gap between the body and the interpretation of it; the second generation illuminates on how to make sense of daily engagements in the light of the experiencing body, and stresses the indispensability of the participant's body in any interpretive process. Accordingly, in terms of unnatural narratives, I propose two forking paths: When what is felt is largely unrecognizable, readers turn to unnaturalizing readings; when what is felt is familiar and representable, readers turn to cognitive readings. During the layout of my model, I will also spare space for some practical concerns: the contextuality of readers' affective reactions, possible relations between textual features and affective experience, and the classification of unnatural elements.

2.1 Why Do We Need a New Model?

So far, the proponents of unnatural narrative theory have highlighted that narratives can be full of unnatural elements defying, flaunting, mocking, playing, and experimenting with core assumptions of narrative, thus taking readers “to the most remote territories of conceptual possibilities” (Alber et al. “Unnatural Narrative, Unnatural Narratology” 114). The discussion about the impact such transgressiveness might have on readers largely concentrates on interpretative moves—what reading strategies readers should adopt. What is sidelined here is the

phenomenological dimension of readerly reactions, and how it interacts with interpretation. At most, unnatural narratologists touch upon the experiential aspect of unnatural scenarios and events. According to Alber, impossible elements which have not been conventionalized strike us as *odd* and *disconcerting* (*Unnatural Narrative* 42; my emphasis). Richardson likewise points out that narratologists have always been trying to assimilate *unexpected*, *confusing*, and *unnerving* aspects of unnatural works into more familiar frameworks (*Unnatural Narrative* 18; my emphasis). If unnaturalness evokes feelings in readers, these feelings should be given due concern, as they also contribute to our overall reading experience. Additionally, as I will demonstrate later on, one's phenomenological experience is also an effective indicator cuing the direction of interpretation, bridging the seemingly dichotomous textual and cognitive approaches.

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, the sheer presence of an unnatural element, be it an antimimetic phenomenon or a contravention of natural laws, does not necessarily strike us as odd or lead to interpretive difficulties, as the overall narrative context and the readerly cooperation also play roles. In this regard, it seems to me that the current models of unnatural narratology pay much attention to the unnatural *per se* yet hardly consider the dynamic between readership and narrative, whereas how one feels about an unnatural narrative may impact the way one interprets it.⁵⁴ On a personal level, I find that sense-making activities often go hand in hand with emotional responses—one's reactions, be it anger, confusion, or happiness, often shape the

⁵⁴ Nielsen does propose that readers always have different interpretive choices at their disposal, yet I do not see much consideration of readers' subjective responses in his unnaturalizing interpretations ("Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing" 71-72). It is definitely necessary to acknowledge that readers always have different interpretive toolkits at their disposal; yet more importantly, it should be recognized that prior to, as well as throughout the interpretive move, the reader's phenomenological experience of the text is part of his/her initiative that should be duly discussed.

overall reading experience. My own model hence takes into consideration this aspect and regards it as the basis of follow-up reading strategies.⁵⁵

The discussion of the continuum of the body and the mind is not new, and to illustrate the theoretical basis of this correlation, I want to draw on the philosophical discipline of phenomenology. Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, “thus the meaning things have in our experience” (Smith).⁵⁶ Phenomenology is clearly different from the Cartesian approach of analysis which sees the world as objects, and upholds the mind as distinct from the physical world. The fact that “phenomenology leads from conscious experience into conditions that help to give experience its intentionality” bridges one’s experience and one’s understanding of the world, and it is this interaction that I aim to highlight in coming to grips with unnatural narratives (Smith). Phenomenology, however, is not a unitary discipline, and I want to particularly mention Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose divergent views on the mind-body relation lead to different ways of sense-making. Their discussions shed light on how to do justice to various types of unnatural narratives, in the light of one’s subjective feelings towards them.

⁵⁵ The affective reaction symptomizes one’s phenomenological experience of the world.

⁵⁶ More specifically, phenomenology as a philosophical discipline studies “structures of conscious experience as experienced from the first-person point of view, along with relevant conditions of experience”. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, “the way it is directed through its content or meaning toward a certain object in the world”. My use of the term carries its most general emphasis on “experientiality,” as it is the lived character of experience that allows a first-person perspective on the object of study, namely, experience, and “that perspective is characteristic of the methodology of phenomenology” (Smith). My use of “phenomenology” is also different from Wolfgang Iser’s usage in his discussion of “the implied reader.” In Iser’s context, the phenomenological theory of art stresses on the idea that in considering a literary work, both the actual text and the actions involved in responding to that text should be taken into account (*The Implied Reader* 274). By this token, the text simply offers schematized aspects through which the subject matter of the work can be produced, whereas the actual production takes place through *an act of concretization* (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 20-21; my emphasis). While Iser employs the notion to underline the indispensability of the reader’s input in literary reading, and the interaction between text and reader (his reception theory remains purely speculative as it is rooted firmly in the structure of the text), I use it to highlight actual readers’ first-hand, subjective feelings.

Our everyday existence is permeated by a multitude of affective experience: emotions, moods, and feelings are present to us both proximally and forcefully (Elpidorou and Freeman 661). The etymology of the term “affect” points to the idea of being “struck” and “influenced”—“disposition, mood, state of mind or body produced by some external influence” (“Affect”). For Heidegger, more than revealing features of situations in which we find ourselves, affective experiences importantly disclose fundamental features of our own existence (qtd. in Elpidorou and Freeman 661). This understanding is grounded upon the philosopher’s rejection of a subject-object model of worldly existence and his evasion from the language of consciousness, and to a large extent, intentionality. Instead of relating to the world primarily by being conscious of it, by representing it, or by intentionally “reaching out” to it, Heidegger believes that “we relate to and are engaged with the world directly and pre-theoretically and on a more primordial level” (qtd. in Elpidorou and Freeman 662). In this way, he “disbands affectivity from notions of psychological interiority, inner states, or other individualist allegiances, construing affect instead as a form of being open to the world in a radical sense” (qtd. in Slaby 7). By this token, not limited to a narrow sense of emotions as mental states, affect is “expanded into the whole of individual and collective world-relatedness” (Slaby 10). Because of such “being in the world,” we are always in some situation which “provides the content or material for our sense-making and in doing so limits or constrains it”, and sense-making therefore “must be situated and so materially finite” (Withy 63, 65).

Merleau-Ponty likewise insists on the impossibility of separating lived experiences from the consensual background of cultural beliefs and practices. Different from Heidegger’s consideration of phenomenology as a true method of ontology, i.e. a pure theoretical inquiry into human existence, the French philosopher further introduces the mind-body correlation into the

practical domain (Varela et al. 19). At the heart of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a feedback loop between the subject and the world: "The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 430). Particularly emphasizing the experience of the body and its significance in our activities, the philosopher points out the embodied nature of consciousness, and the importance of the bodily participation in sense-making (qtd. in Smith). The highlighted dialogue between experience and knowledge later greatly inspires the second-generation approach to cognitive studies which aims at grasping the immediacy of our unreflective experience and give voice to it in conscious reflection (Varela et al. 19).⁵⁷

It is clear by now that a joint perspective needs to be adopted—both the body and the mind should be taken into account in examining our relation to the world. As Furtak observes, "the cognitive and the corporeal are integrated in the unified experience of a particular living person who is meaningfully engaged in the world", and "affective feelings therefore constitute modes of experiencing and responding to significant features of the world" (585, 585-86). However, within phenomenological experiences, the specific relationship between the body and the mind, and to what extent we can describe our feeling bodies, remain debatable. Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's different understandings of the nature of "being" apparently direct at distinct ways of sense-making: the former indicates that as we are always "situated," we can never fully grasp our existence, whereas the latter contends that consciousness is embodied, and the bodily experience carries meaning. As I see it, *to give a full description of one's interaction with the world, not only*

⁵⁷ Both Merleau-Ponty, and Varela and his colleagues admit that the richness of experience cannot be recaptured by any theoretical activity—it could only be a discourse about that experience (Varela et al. 19).

the somatic and the mental are under consideration; but also the recognizable and the unrecognizable aspects of one's corporeal experiences are to be duly discussed. As for the mind activity, it depends on how we react to the corporeal experience. Imaginably, we have more confidence in sense-making when bodily feelings can be adequately explained by our cognition; we tend to accept the experience as it is when the feelings go beyond the cognitive capacity.

This forking-path classification echoes the encounter with fictional narrative in general, and unnatural narrative in particular. True, reading always evokes feelings in one, yet the fact that all corporeal reactions can be subjectively experienced does not mean that they can all be subjectively described. In terms of the effect on readers, the encounter with unnatural narratives is similar to the reading of fantastic works. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic genre lasts only as long as a certain hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous, or, in other words, between the laws of reality and new laws of nature (41). This hesitation echoes our response to the unnatural—an oscillation between fasciation and the urge to comprehend, or, between affect and emotional responses. Just as Alber contends, when confronted with the unnatural, readers have to, on one hand, accept that something unexplainable is happening, and on the other hand, try to use their real-life knowledge to make sense of the unnatural (*Unnatural Narrative* 56). Most of the time we can locate the source of our emotions, yet in some cases we can find no available mental patterns to match our reactions. This might be the situation where a work of art delivers something beyond the cognitive system of beholders. Theodor W. Adorno's discussion of the autonomy of art may be a helpful frame of reference. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno talks about art's paradoxical relationship with reality: "Art negates the categorical determinations stamped on the

empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance” (5).⁵⁸ By this token, the double character of artworks resides in the fact that, on one hand, they integrate thematic strata and details into their immanent laws of form, and on the other hand, they maintain what resists this integration, and the fissures that occur in the process of integration (7). Therefore, there can be no true art if “successful sublimation and integration are made the end-all and be-all of the artwork” (12). In this sense, the autonomy of artworks renders them as something existing “as they do in themselves and not for the sake of the observer” (13). Instead of taking the artefact as property that can be possessed, it is better for beholders to disappear into the material (13). Adorno’s view that an art work wants both its *truth* and *untruth* to be grasped proves illuminating in my reading of unnatural works. If literature carries something that cannot be fully grasped, then unnatural texts undoubtedly flaunt this elusive nature. How to describe this elusiveness? Adorno’s suggestion to “disappear into the material” directs us to look for a solution in the autonomy of artefacts.

The autonomy of art directs us to the “materiality,” or, the “substantiality” of artefacts. Adorno’s discussion is in this aspect in line with Heidegger’s argument that affectivity is the radical situatedness of an agent in factual surroundings.⁵⁹ As there is always more going on with and around us than we can cognitively get hold of, our existence is “*always* and *necessarily* affectively attuned to and constellated into what we do not fully grasp” (Slaby 17; original emphasis). Affectivity, therefore, is the *status quo*, and insofar as affect is not available to consciousness, or cannot be absorbed into subjectivity, it is inconspicuous and indistinguishable.

⁵⁸ With respect to aesthetic effect, Iser also argues that it cannot be pinned to something existing like referential language, as the word aesthetic designates “a gap in the defining qualities of language rather than a definition”. Aesthetic effect cannot be identical to anything already existing in the world (*The Act of Reading* 22).

⁵⁹ The argument can be understood in two ways. First, affectivity outruns what can be consciously registered, and it is more than one can presently be aware of; second, the situatedness of affectivity encompasses temporality, as the past prevails within the texture of the present—a highlight of spatiality (Slaby 8).

The representation of our relation to the world is always contextual, as Heidegger and Adorno point out, and in the encounter with art, such a limitation is reflected in the ungraspable autonomy of artefacts. By this token, it is a ground rule that fictional narrative is a textual phenomenon, and most of the time, we take its invented-ness for granted; we are yet cued to notice this physical nature when a narrative strikes us as recalcitrant to conventional notions of narrative—this is when the mimetic illusion is broken. For the “truth” part, when specific embodiments of affectivity are available to mental representations, we may borrow Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and give credit to the essential role of the body in perception. In this tradition, a conception of the body as merely a sensorimotor system is inadequate, and emotions and moods “can be complex experiences and as such deserve to be addressed with adequate descriptive and analytical tools” (Colombetti xv). Both cognition and emotion prove to be “instances of the relentless *sense-making* activity of the precarious living organism” as it maintains itself via a continuous exchange with the external world (xvii; original emphasis). For unnatural texts whose substantiality is not salient enough to outweigh their recognizable, and graspable emotional aspect, we may turn to this embodied approach of meaning-production.

So far, I have shown that somatic reactions and cognition are elements of a unified lived experience, and *what the body feels* is intrinsically related to *what the feeling is about*; besides, I have highlighted that bodily responses can be beyond our cognitive grasp, and this phenomenological fact may impact the production of meaning. In terms of interpreting unnatural narratives, I propose to keep in mind that the reader’s subjective feelings and sense-making processes speak to each other, and the bodily experience can be a signpost of the selection of interpretive strategies. As unnatural elements contravene realistic parameters of narrative, our somatic responses to them are usually hard to pin down, and the intellectual struggle between

recognizability and unrecognizability necessitates the distinction of emotion and affect. In the next section, I will elaborate on these two notions, and illustrate how these two sides of bodily feelings enlighten our experience with unnatural works.

2.2 A Distinction of Affect and Emotion

Affect

Borrowing from Patrick Colm Hogan's insightful analysis, I want to firstly point out two general directions in the study of affect. According to Hogan, affect study mainly consists of *affective science*, which derives from cognitive science, along with the influence of social psychology, and *affect theory*, which develops very much in dialogue with cultural studies, and is hence concerned with political issues ("Affect Studies and Literary Criticism"; my emphasis). Affective science articulates a more naturalistic, brain-based account of affect, on the basis of empirical study and detailed analyses of cognitive and affective processes, whereas affect theory draws upon psychoanalytic models—usually by way of the critique of orthodox psychoanalysis—and their fluid metaphors, actively engaging with a politically oriented critique of social discourses and practices (Hogan, "Affect Studies and Literary Criticism"). As a consequence of this difference, the term "affect" has two distinct semantic backgrounds. Affect in affective science refers to "a class or category of mental states that includes emotions, moods, attitudes, interpersonal stances, and affect dispositions" (Frijda and Scherer 10). By contrast, affect in affect theory is defined as "an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities" (Gregg and Seigworth 1; original emphasis). In relation to the preceding discussion, the affect in affective science chimes with Merleau-Ponty's idea, i.e. the feedback loop between experience and knowledge, and the

affect in affect theory is analogous to Heidegger's "radical situatedness," i.e. the understanding of our existence is always conditioned and incomplete. As my model of unnatural narratology is grounded upon the distinction between affect and emotion, to avoid confusion, when specifically talking about the affect in the scientific domain, I will hereafter use "emotion." Unless otherwise noted, *affect* is adopted to highlight the substantial, indescribable aspect of ones' feelings of reading unnatural narratives.⁶⁰

The study of affect is a highly contested field, and the topic has fascinated scholars working in the humanities and social sciences. Psychologists Silvan S. Tomkins and Paul Ekman, the two leading scholars in emotion studies, regard affect and emotion as synonymous, and establish the dominant paradigm that emotional/affective processes occur independently of intention or meaning, and concomitantly our basic emotions do not involve cognitions or beliefs about the objects in our world. Accordingly, emotions/affects operate blindly because they have no strict relation to the objects that trigger them (Leys 437).⁶¹ New affect theories, under the influence of post-structuralism, highlight biology in dynamic, energetic, and nondeterministic terms (441). It is a reaction against Tomkins and Ekman's view that emotions are noncognitive, corporeal processes independent of intention and meaning. Scholars like Brian Massumi underline the unpredictability and potentiality of emotions, and advocate a necessary distinction between affect and emotion. According to them, affect as a nonsignifying, nonconscious "intensity" differs from

⁶⁰ We can understand affect as the hyperonym and emotion as the hyponym. This dovetails with the previous point that affectivity is the fundamental truth of our existence. As Colombetti observes, affect is broader and deeper than emotions and moods, as it grounds them or makes them possible—"without the primordial capacity to be affected, no specific emotions and moods would appear" (2). By this token, affective experience/reactions/responses are used to imply an inclusive sense. While both bodily feelings and cognitive activities are composed of a unified affective experience, I employ affective experience/responses/reactions to particularly underline the "feeling" part; for the more "cognitive" part, I use expressions like sense-making and interpretation.

⁶¹ This view goes hand in hand with a biological conception of emotion as subserved by neural circuits in the brain "which operate automatically and more quickly than the higher, more slowly acting cognitive systems" (Leys 438-39).

the subjective, signifying system to which emotion belongs (qtd. in Leys 441). In other words, “affect is a formless, unstructured, nonsignifying force or ‘intensity’ that escapes the categories of the psychologists” (Leys 442).⁶² As Massumi argues, affect is disconnected from meaningful sequencing and narratively de-localized, “spreading over the generalized body surface”; it is filled with motion which cannot be directed towards practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims (“The Autonomy of Affect” 85, 86). By contrast, emotion is a qualified intensity which carries function and meaning; it is “a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (88). To further illustrate how the distinction proves necessary and insightful in literary studies, and more specifically, in narrative studies of literature, I want to refer to Sianne Ngai’s discussion in the field of aesthetics.

In the aesthetic domain, Sianne Ngai examines the politically ambiguous work of negative emotions. The feelings Ngai looks at are “*amoral* and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfaction of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release” (6). Most of the time these feelings have an affinity with irony. That “the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status” of negative emotions usually produce “an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling” parallels the double-ness of irony which hinges upon a relationship between the said and the unsaid (Ngai 10; original emphasis). Consequently, these unlikeable feelings often strike people as unsettling or confusing “in *the affective sense of bewilderment*, rather than *the epistemological sense of indeterminacy*” (14; my emphasis). Generally, such negativity is embodied in two ways: an

⁶² It should be noted that although this nonlinguistic definition of affect is incompatible with the Tomkins-Ekman paradigm, what binds the new affect theorists and the traditional neuroscientists together is a shared anti-intentionalism—“affect is independent of signification and meaning,” and it is “a matter of autonomic responses that are held to occur below the threshold of consciousness and cognition and to be rooted in the body” (Leys 443).

alternation between the subjective and the objective, hence the uncertainty about what one is feeling; a lack of intentionality or clearly defined objects in feelings (17, 21).

Ngai takes the difference between affect and emotion “as a model difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind” (27).⁶³ Her view highlights a transition from one pole to the other:

My assumption is that affects are *less* formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; *less* “sociolinguistically fixed,” but by no means code-free or meaningless; *less* “organized in response to our interpretations of situations,” but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers. (Ngai 27; original emphasis)

Ngai’s separation of affect and emotion is instructive. Her discussion diverts our attention from canonically major forms and genres like Homeric epic and Shakespearean tragedy to more marginalized forms which “foreground the absence of a strong emotion where we are led to expect one, or turn entirely on the interpretive problems by an emotional illegibility” (Ngai 10). In fact, in our contemporary culture, this sense of illegibility plays a considerable role and symptomizes what many cultural critics call postmodernity, which is characterized by paradox, ambiguity, irony, indeterminacy, and contingency (Natoli and Hutcheon ix). One typical representation of this cultural phenomenon is the absence of emotional discharge. The disconnection of the signifier and the signified has made signs free-floating, and the widespread distrust in closure, unity, and the absolute gives impetus to exploring the flexibility and intangibility of literary products. Confronted with postmodernist narratives, readers often find it hard to locate their feelings; more often what

⁶³ By comparison, Massumi argues for a stronger distinction. He contends that not just that emotion requires a subject while affect does not, but that the former designates feeling given “function and meaning” while the latter remains “unformed and unstructured” (*Parables for the Virtual* 260, note 3).

they have is something like “meta-responses”—a reflection on the evoked feelings—and concomitantly a distance from the narrative being read. This representational crisis is also familiar to readers of unnatural narratives, because of their affinity with postmodernist texts.⁶⁴

My Use of Affect

Apparently, the notion of affect varies from one field to another, yet certain commonalities can be extracted, particularly in the field of literary studies. It should be clear that my use of affect in reading unnatural narratives shares with affect theory in that affect, as an impingement of intensities foregrounded as bodily sensations, is different from the cognitive and signifying emotion. I also need to stress that I prefer Ngai’s scalar system over the strong claim by Massumi. If, as Fredric Jameson indicates, emotions are forms of affect that have been incorporated into human language, and affects are open to be subtracted by named emotions, the boundary between the two should stay fuzzy instead of clear-cut (29).⁶⁵ Imaginably, when affects constantly occur, they will be gradually assimilated into human cognition, and become cognitively graspable. From a diachronic perspective, human intelligence constantly wrestles with the unidentifiable and tries to get hold of it, though this process can be very long.⁶⁶ As I see it, affect is not completely devoid of formality and organization, otherwise it would be impossible to recognize; therefore, emotion and affect are relatively different instead of diametrically opposed. Affect can be described as

⁶⁴ Richardson regards unnatural narrative theory as mainly designed to examine and comprehend postmodern narrative practices, as they contain significant antimimetic events, characters, settings or frames (*Unnatural Narrative* 3). Alber foregrounds the central role of representation of the impossible in postmodernism, and defines the postmodernist project in terms of the systematic undermining of our conventional cognition of the world (*Unnatural Narrative* 7-8).

⁶⁵ In Jameson’s view, affect somehow eludes language and its naming of things, whereas emotion is preeminently a phenomenon sorted out into an array of names. Additionally, the named system is “a historical one which varies from culture to culture and from period to period” (29).

⁶⁶ In *Affect and Emotion* (2012), Margaret Wetherell argues that “affective machines” emerge in social and personal life over time. By “machines” she means a conventional socio-emotional pattern of feelings, thoughts, positions and desires that comes into shape and continues to change and refigures as it flows on (14-15).

oscillating between the familiar and the unfamiliar, as a sensation both recognizable and elusive; after all, the indescribable bodily intensity that affect provokes in readers will not reveal itself unless their subjectivity is mobilized to engage with narrative in the first place. In essence, the notion is to be understood as alternating between the objective and the subjective, and it should be placed on a continuum with the cognizing process.

Another important point is the political connotation of affect. According to the cited scholars, the discussion of affect necessitates the move to effects which have not entered our cognitive system, and the bodily and substantial dimensions of our relation to the world. Extending this stance, we might consider the ways established presentations of reality contribute to an implicit yet prescriptive paradigm of human lives, which is saturated in the practices of mainstream media and dominant political discourse. In this sense, in the social-political domain, affect research may proceed by way of a critical investigation, confronting what is consciously felt and recognized, with “what likely remains unfelt as it has no place in discourse and public representations” (Slaby 23). By disclosing unacknowledged dimensions of historical being, affect study calls into question the viability of “currently prevalent forms of life and their affective textures” (24). Ideally, it may help to rectify “ignorant formations of officially instituted social and political reality” (24). However, in this thesis, I am not inscribing a natural association between affect and political engagements, as it is obvious at least to me that there are many cultural artefacts, while carrying no ideological intention, still strike recipients as confusing or unidentifiable.⁶⁷ Introducing the political dimension into the discussion of unnatural works might be problematic, as owing to their

⁶⁷ Flann O’ Brien’s *The Third Policeman* (1967), for example, conveys no explicit political messages yet still induces intangible responses in readers. Of course, one can argue that all cultural products are to different degrees politically loaded, but this is not the stance I subscribe to in this thesis. I ground my analysis of the unnatural fundamentally on the text, as I believe it is essentially a textual phenomenon; the political factor may come into play at the stage of meaning-production—when a writer has a strong political claim and this claim gets reflected in the text.

large overlap with postmodernist texts, many unnatural narratives avoid being strongly politically engaged—to refrain from establishing new master narratives. My reservation also comes from the personal experience that politically engaging narratives are usually emotionally provocative—Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), for instance—and encourage an identification between readers and fictional characters. On the reader’s part, this connection assumes the efficacy of mindreading and the input of real-life knowledge. In the light of the above, I do not use affect completely in the metaphoric and fluid way as affect theorists do; rather, I confine the notion to describing readers’ indescribable bodily reactions to artefacts—it is this material and asignifying nature of affect that I want to emphasize. Having said this, however, I do think the consideration of the socio-political domain can aid readers in grasping unnatural narratives on the thematic level. Angela Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is a case in point: ideologically charged yet emotionally aloof, the novel delivers feminist messages without failing to create extremely disturbing and alienating effects on readers.

Incorporating the nonrepresentational affect into my theorization of unnatural narratology is crucial, as the notion corresponds with the essence of the unnatural tradition. As Richardson contends, while mimetic narratives attempt to depict the world of our experience in a recognizable manner, striving for realism or verisimilitude, unnatural narratives in many ways deconstruct this illusion of the representable (*Unnatural Narrative* 3). One drive of developing unnatural narrative theory is therefore to offer a complementary paradigm, so that we can move beyond the mimetic framework to “a much more comprehensive one that can embrace both mimetic and antimimetic narrative practices” (5). The unnatural challenges the convention of narrative representation, and it can go beyond the general cognitive schema of human existence—this is the key value of unnatural texts that Richardson constantly stresses (20). Richardson’s intrinsic stance hereby

foregrounds a hermeneutic gap—unnatural narratives cannot be fully grasped by a real-life based cognitive system. But how to account for this gap on the theoretical level? From my vantage point, one may turn to the concept of affect—it directs the attention to the more material and spatial aspect of our interaction with unnatural texts.

Emotion

Having talked so much about affect, now let us turn to the other important concept—emotion. Emotion, as I have mentioned, is inseparable from cognition, and there is a feedback loop between the two. As Alan Palmer remarks, “a character’s anger might be caused by a cognition of some sort that in turn results in further emotions and then other cognitions” (*Fictional Minds* 19). He thus argues that the two are interlinked in that emotion arises from a rational and appropriate vision or recognition of a situation; additionally, the directive and cognitive role of attention is indispensable in our discussion of emotion (116). Lisa Zunshine also believes that emotion and mindreading are hard to disentangle—how we feel often impacts our analysis of others’ minds and our judgment of the overall situation (163-64). Because from the neurocognitive perspective, there is no difference in kind between one’s imagination of characters and one’s imagination of real people, and between the psychology of fictional figures and real-life human psychology, emotions in narrative fiction are simulated rather than constructed (Aldama and Hogan 115).⁶⁸ Accordingly,

⁶⁸ In *Conversations on Cognitive Cultural Studies* (2014), Fredrick Luis Aldama and Patrick Hogan have a discussion on emotions in narrative fiction. Aldama argues that real-life human psychology has nothing to do with narrative fiction psychology, and that emotions in fiction are fictional, whereas Hogan claims that everything in fiction is about simulation, and that the study of emotions in narrative fiction should be a part of affective science (99-115). This debate can be seen as a reflection of the ongoing tension between the text-oriented approach and the mind-oriented approach, particularly concerning the nature of emotions in narrative fiction. To me, Aldama’s stance here is in line with the non-representational approach to unnatural narratives proposed by Richardson.

human readers' emotions lead to the revelation of fictional figures' mentalities, and further the grasp of the plot.

What can trigger emotions in narrative reading? According to the developmental psychologist Keith Oatley, there are three distinct psychological processes that enable the reader to experience emotions in fiction: "identification," the situation where the reader identifies with the protagonist, and outcomes of actions are evaluated in relation to the protagonist's goals; "sympathy," the case in which the reader attributes emotions to characters and experiences sympathetic emotions toward them; "autobiographical memory," the process during which emotional memories from the autobiographical past are revived ("Why Fiction May be Twice as True as Fact" 114). From a neurobiological standpoint, Patrick Hogan also proposes three sets of triggers. The first is innate—human beings are endowed with a set of sensitivities to other people's emotion expression which do not require special environmental conditions to result from ordinary genetic development ("On Being Moved" 243-44). The second is also genetically organized, yet not fully specified—developmental triggers that recur across cultures, but do not have the same universal uniformity of the directly innate triggers. The third set comes from emotional memories—implicit memories that affect our emotional responses to current situations (244). Though coming from different perspectives, both Oatley's and Hogan's discussions illuminate on how we can approach emotions in fiction. My summary is as such: through the lens of the readerly engagement with the textual world, as in "identification" and "sympathy"; from the angle of innate, universally shared emotional mechanisms; in terms of the reader's personal experience. For the current project, since it is beyond the research scope to specify on actual readers' affective experiences, I should avoid an in-depth discussion about emotion-triggering at a personal level;

rather, I will focus on the emotional transaction between readers and narrative, and how emotion as an innate mechanism helps readers engage with storyworlds.

In the light of the affect/emotion distinction, emotions carry intentional content and they are capable of conveying significant information. If affect highlights the sense of “situatedness,” i.e. the substantial nature of our existence, emotion underlines what we can acknowledge from it, and it is thus more concrete and tangible. To further theoretically concretize the felt emotions in reading activities, I want to draw on the notion of narrative empathy, which effectively describes the emotional transaction between the reader and the text. Before moving on, I need to clarify a potential misunderstanding. In my upcoming discussion, when I say “emotionally provocative” or “affectively engaging,” I am not implying readers’ necessary fondness for the evoked affective experience. Negative emotions are still named emotions, and they are cognitively graspable—it is not about whether the reader feels positive about what he/she feels, but about whether he/she can cognitively recognize what is felt. Accordingly, when I argue that emotionally engaging unnatural narratives shorten the distance between the reader and the text, I am talking about a decrease of the cognitive gap. By this token, if the reader feels disgusted by a character, this reaction remains within the emotion domain rather than the affect domain.

Narrative Empathy

Empathy refers to a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of an appropriate feeling. It can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, hearing about another’s condition, or reading.⁶⁹ Not

⁶⁹ Empathy is regarded as precursor to its semantic close relative—sympathy. Suzanne Keen distinguishes the spontaneous, responsive sharing of an appropriate feeling as empathy, and the more complex, differentiated feeling for another as sympathy, or empathic concern in psychology (*Empathy and the Novel* 4). From a psychological perspective, on the basis of recent research on brain imagining, empathy has been described as involving: “(a) having an emotion, that (b) is in some way similar to that of another person, that (c) is elicited by observation or imagination

necessarily a conscious response, empathy is based on what neuroscientists call a “shared manifold for intersubjectivity” (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 4).⁷⁰ Just like any emotional reaction, empathy is composed of both sensory reactions and the cognitive processing: not only memory, experience, and the capacity to take another’s perspective play roles in empathy, but also emotions and sensations in the body evoked in the feeling subject (27).

What is the role of novel-reading in bringing out empathy? Suzanne Keen argues that while readers’ affective reactions do not inevitably lead to empathy, “fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhabit empathy in the real world” (“A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 213). It is believed that the very fictionality of the novel predisposes readers to empathize with characters, as fiction is something “made-up” and it does not activate suspicion and wariness, as an apparently “real” appeal for assistance may do. Fictional worlds, therefore, “provide safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world function”. This exemption from obligations opens up the channel for both empathy and related moral affects (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 4).⁷¹ Paradoxically, this freedom

of the other’s emotion, and that involves (d) knowing that the other is the source of one’s own emotion” (Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams* 113).

⁷⁰ Empathy is not necessarily conscious. For instance, what is sometimes called “primitive empathy” provides “a first, fast, feeling response to seeing or learning about another’s emotional state, before cognitive evaluation through deliberate role taking occurs”. This capacity for primitive empathy, “or the phenomenon of spontaneously matching feelings”, shows that human beings are basically similar to one another (Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 212). According to behavioral scientist Thomas Scheff, a state of intersubjectivity is pictured as “each person knowing what the other person is thinking and knowing what the other person thinks he is thinking, and so on”. In terms of interactionist social psychology, intersubjective states are reached via the process of role-taking (505). It is believed that intersubjectivity has its basis in the expression and recognition of emotions (506). Role-taking refers to the ability associated with empathy that may be involved in character identification (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 4).

⁷¹ The thesis that fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers is however debatable. The empirical research conducted by Caspar J. van Lissa and his colleagues shows that it is not tenable to say that simply fictionality can release readers from the normal state of alert suspicion of others’ motives, which may hinder empathy. Their study reveals that participants’ self-reported dispositional empathy is in line with their situational empathy for the character, and the role of fictionality in this case is insignificant. It is demonstrated that “real-world intersubjectivity and readers’ response to characters build on the same background of predispositions and assumptions” (Lissa et al. 55). Here is the highlight of the importance of contextual factors in framing readers’ encounters with fictional texts (and beings).

from real action also weakens the link between narrative empathy and altruism: a reader may experience empathy, yet there can be no expectancy of reciprocation involved in the aesthetic response. According to Keen, “[t]he very nature of fictionality renders social contracts between people and person-like characters null and void” (“A Theory of Narrative Empathy” 212).

At the heart of readers’ empathy is character identification, and it usually requires certain traits yet dispenses with other requirements associated with realistic representation (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 26).⁷² In many cases, a character does not have to be a human to incite feelings from the reader (68). Readers’ initiative is in this way underlined: the novel they are reading does not have to be explicitly emotionally coded; their empathetic responses to a particular figure may not correspond with what the author or the text implies (74-75). Among many factors that influence readers’ empathetic responses, I would like to particularly stress “identity” and “situation.” Categorical empathy is built on “identity category,” which refers to a self-concept feature that serves to define what group one may belong to. This group identification undergirds categorical empathy (Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories* 141). The situational type is concerned with a perspectival structure. In this scenario, “a triggering of autobiographical memories may involve a shift in the structuring perspective that leads us to put ourselves in the place of someone else and thus results in empathy, associating our own feelings with those of the other person” (142).

Dispositional empathy refers to participants’ self-reported predispositions to empathize with other individuals in the real world (Lissa et al. 55). According to Keen, situational empathy responds primarily to aspects of plot and circumstance, involving less self-extension in imaginative role-taking and more recognition of prior (or current) experience (*Empathy and the Novel* 80).

⁷² According to Keith Oatley, psychologically, empathetic identification occurs “when we insert the character’s goals, plans, or actions, into our own planning processor, and we come to feel in ourselves the emotions that occur with the results of actions that we perform mentally as if in the place of character” (*Such Stuff as Dreams* 116). But Oatley also points out that taking on the goals of a character can occur even with a character we detest, and this is different from Keen’s understanding of empathy as prosocial and altruistic.

Importantly, Hogan stresses that empathy is in no way a transfer of feeling across identical experience; rather, all empathy is to some degree analogical (143).

Although empathy can be egocentric, it is not purely subjective. According to Hogan, empathy is likely to be blocked if the self/other opposition is distinct: “the empathic adoption of someone else’s perspective involves, among other things, a shift from what one might call ‘objective mind’ to ‘subjective mind’” (*The Mind and Its Stories* 145). In other words, the more subjective the illustration of a character is, the more likely that we feel empathetic towards him/her, and take his/her perspective. It therefore comes naturally that an internal perspective—the focus on thoughts and feelings—contributes to character identification, as an inside view should shorten the distance between the reader and the character. By this token, narrated monologue is regarded as an effective technique allowing “smooth transitions between the narrator’s generalizations about characters’ mental states and transcriptions of their inner thoughts”; quoted monologue, directly presenting characters’ thoughts in the person and tense of their speech, is a more authentic and direct move into the first-person perspective; another technique, psycho-narration, can also powerfully evoke character identification as it offers access to the inner life of characters (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 96). In this regard, compared to third-person narration, first-person narration, enabling the narrator to narrate his/her own experiences and perceptions, is more likely to evoke mutual understanding (97). Having said so, however, we should be cautious of building causal connections between narrative devices and ethical effects. As Keen underlines, the view that a particular technique necessarily results in certain political, ethical, or emotional effects in readers is untenable (98-99).

I want to remind readers of the distinction between emotion and narrative empathy, as the apprehension of one’s feelings does not always lead to positive reactions. A case in point is

personal distress. Different from empathy, which is other-directed and associated with the prosocial or altruistic action, personal distress focuses on the self and leads to avoidance.⁷³ This negative response causes a turning-away from the provocative condition of the other. In terms of narrative reading, it may cause readers to stop reading, or to disengage full attention by skipping and skimming (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 4-5). While negative emotional responses like personal distress have no place in literary theories of empathy, they often occur in our reading of unnatural narratives.

In what way does narrative empathy contribute to the reading of unnatural narratives? I am prompted to think about it while reading Keen's discussion of unconventional literary representations and empathy. Keen observes that in literature, defamiliarization can be a companion to empathy: foregrounding can be used as a means to slow down the reader's pace, gain his/her attention, and hence invite the input of emotion as well as other insights into the reading process. She therefore concludes that "*unusual or striking representations in the literary text promote foregrounding and open the way to empathetic reading*" (original emphasis). This thesis, however, does not dictate that difficult and discontinuous texts necessarily more effectively promote empathy than their simpler relatives (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 87). Indeed, some unnatural narratives, because of their salient antimimetic elements, incur cognitive confusion and thus disengage readers from the text. Although it is important to recognize that defamiliarizing scenarios invite further contemplation and exploration, and thus more input from the reader, I regard the relation between estrangement and empathy as contextual—the conveying of empathy

⁷³ Empathy that leads to sympathy is by definition other-oriented, whereas an over-aroused empathetic response causes aversion, and it is thus not a morally improving experience (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 4-5).

is subject to the assembling of different facets of narrative, one among which is the way of representation.

It is hard to offer an exhaustive description of factors affecting the above correlation. Speaking from my experience, if the character is too distant from my own world, it is unlikely I will take his/her perspective. I can barely finish J.G. Ballard's notorious novel *Crash* (1973), as the protagonist's symphorophilia is so unbearable that it is dreadful to put myself in his shoes, though his car-crash sexual fetishism is delivered by overwhelming pornographic discourses and through extremely mechanical and emotionless language, and I have to make a herculean effort to figure out what is going on.⁷⁴ In this situation, I am hardly able, nor do I desire, to feel what the character feels, and my affective experience with the narrative is personal distress rather than empathy, though it is possible that some readers still identify with the character.⁷⁵ Here, the individuality of empathy is underlined: for certain readers, Ballard's narrative, in a rather disturbing way, gives rise to empathy, while for most readers what the text presents is morally problematic.

Another factor influencing the realization of empathy is what comes as the priority in the reading process. As Keen underlines, the necessity to understand cause and effect may precede role-taking, and it is suggested that a grasp of relatively basic aspects of narrative—a coherent plot, for instance—should be satisfied for empathy to occur (*Empathy and the Novel* 87). My personal experience also dovetails with this point. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) is

⁷⁴ To consider *Crash* as an unnatural narrative may be debatable. To me, the unnaturalness of the narrative lies in its detailed and detached descriptions of sexual practices by a first-person narrator, which are highly improbable in real-life storytelling situations.

⁷⁵ As previously mentioned, readers have certain initiative for empathy. For those readers who empathize with Ballard's protagonist, they do not have to have the same psychiatric experience; they may just enjoy getting themselves into the scenario that is impossible for them in reality.

an encyclopedic novel featuring numerous characters. While I want to know what these characters feel and why they feel what they feel, the plethora of storylines and the jumbled narrative structure impede my emotional input. How can I empathize with characters if I have no idea of what is happening in the storyworld in the first place? While what “basic aspects of narrative” means varies from case to case, it does demonstrate the necessity to further contextualize the relation between unusual representations and empathy.

My Use of Emotion and Narrative Empathy

Named emotions as psychological properties are mentally representable; in this context, not only bodily feelings are brought forth, as in affects, but also the trigger of these reactions is traceable—what the reader is agitated about or moved by, and why it happens. By introducing the notion of emotion, and more specifically, empathy, I aim to describe the cognizable side of our phenomenological experience with unnatural narratives, and stress their communicative function—bonds between readers and narrative can be so strong that it cannot be satisfyingly explained away by the materiality, or, the autonomy, of art. Reading Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), while puzzled by incoherent conversations, I identify with the characters’ paranoia under capitalism. Reading Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* (1983), though constantly stuck by the authorial intervention, I have sympathy for the protagonist’s experiences and the fate of the country ... To conclude, the reader’s emotional input needs to be examined, and I believe the concept of empathy can enlighten us on this communicative fact.

If emotion says something universal, as previously mentioned, then empathy, as a form of emotional transactions, is also on some level innate and inevitable. The reader’s pulsation with the fictional world concerns not only the sharing of character thoughts and feelings, but also the

readerly simulation of character perceptions and actions (White 534). That the character's consciousness can be simulated and performed via narrative empathy shows that we operate with the shared neural mechanisms to empathize with fictional characters as we do with real people (538). As Keen observes, the understanding of empathy as somewhat "genetic inheritance" forms the basis of readers' engagement with fictional minds (*Empathy and the Novel* 15).

Again, we should be careful with this assumed correspondence between fictional and actual minds. In spite of the inclusion of narrative empathy into my model, like Iversen, I regard it useful to engage with the cognitive knowledge about how actual minds function, yet object to the insistence on fully renaturalizing or recognizing antimimetic elements. On one hand, my model builds on the affective reaction to unnatural works; on the other hand, it acknowledges that a full-blown cognitive approach to unnatural minds runs the risk of reducing their affective power and resonance, and turning what is meant to be haunting and wondrous into something mundane. It is crucial that we are aware of the limitation of employing empathy in reading unnatural narratives.

Besides, a communicative act undoubtedly involves various participants, and a full account of narrative empathy needs a thorough examination of the intricate interaction between the author, the text, and the reader. As it is beyond the research scope to examine actual readers' fluid feelings, I shift the focus to the text: the unnatural is essentially a textual phenomenon, and the evoked empathy should also find textual support. I ground my stance upon Richardson's contention that meaning exists primarily in the text, and unnatural elements are to be understood as "present in the text and intentionally placed there as such by the author" ("Rejoinders" 497). However, I don't imply that the author and the reader are completely out of the picture; in my case studies, to make the discussion more holistic, I will speak about my own affective experience and also take the authors' backgrounds into account.

Having respectively talked about the notions of affect and emotion, and their theoretical affordances in my study of readers' affective reactions to unnatural texts, I now want to turn to the stage of interpretation. How do we move from the somatic experience to the production of meaning? How does the phenomenological difference impact the choice of interpretive tools? Before further discussion, I want to clarify some potential doubt, and in a way, restate my arguments.

2.3 Is It Possible to Pin Down Affective Experience?

Readers' affective reactions to a text are by no means unanimous, and this "individuality" is reflected in two aspects. Firstly, as I have demonstrated, affects differ from emotions mainly in that they have not yet entered our cognitive system, and that they are beyond socio-cultural construction; in turn, the cognizing of our phenomenological experience is bounded by what we already know. Accordingly, because of the diversity of readership, one's affective experience of a specific unnatural narrative is contextually dependent: a text appearing emotionally-provoking to the reader from a western country may turn out alienating to the reader from China. On a more personal level, one's life experience also impacts one's reception of narrative—it is more likely for readers with analogous experiences to certain fictional scenarios to establish bonds with them. Secondly, whether or not the reader acts on his/her affective experience is uncertain. A narrative can strike him/her as disconcerting and uncategorizable, yet he/she may misinterpret this intangibility and habitually impose mimetic explanations, or he/she may just ignore his/her feelings and go directly to the production of meaning. In this case, the reader's affective experience is very much minimalized. Of course, we can do some empirical research, testing unnatural samples on flesh and blood readers to get first-hand data on their phenomenological experience, but this is beyond the scope of my project; not only so, I am not as much interested in what the

affective reaction actually is as how readers are supposed to react if the experiential dimension of reading the unnatural is given due concern. Ideally, I want to describe the principles that actual readers can refer to when they encounter unnatural narratives, so to enjoy the full taste of them. For the current discussion, since the reader's affective experience is bound to be discussed, on this part I will speak from my own experience.

2.4 From Body to Mind

At the end of the previous chapter, I have shown that both unnaturalizing readings and cognitive tools are at hand for readers to come to terms with unnatural narratives, yet what are cues that lead readers to select one over the other? I have argued that the choice depends on the reader's affective reactions, and this phenomenological indicator determines what reading strategies he/she should adopt. The primary issue is whether the text is affectively engaging. If the reader finds it hard to build connections with the text, and feels overwhelmed by its materiality, the invented nature of the narrative is foregrounded, and it is suggested that the unnaturalizing reading should be put into use. Alternatively, if the reader is emotionally attached to the narrative and he/she identifies with the protagonist, the artificiality of the text is backgrounded, and it is unlikely the reader will give up on cognitive tools—this is the situation where emotional engagements outweigh the ontological gap between fiction and reality.

That said, however, I want to highlight interpretation as an ongoing process. The choice of reading strategies cannot be settled once for all, as readers might need to timely adjust their tools while proceeding with the narrative. This means that the negotiation between unnaturalizing readings and the cognitive toolkit runs throughout the reading activity—again I have no intention to build any dichotomy between the two. Another clarification is that although I regard the

affective dimension as the principal signpost, the relationship between it and reading strategies should be understood as reciprocal rather than causal. Causality indicates a temporal logic, yet even the most remote affective experience involves certain cognitive processing—how do we know if a narrative is engaging unless we read it? We have to recognize this feedback loop between reading tactics and readers’ phenomenological experience, and it is on this premise that my research calls attention to the contributing role of the latter in this back-and-forth process.

So my proposal is that in the light of the affect/emotion distinction, the interpretive move follows different paths—unnaturalizing and cognitive readings. The next section will lay out the theoretical basis of the two suggested directions, namely, how the transition from the body to the mind works, and the logic behind it. Corresponding to the unrepresentable affect, I borrow Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s discussion of meaning and presence effects; echoing the recognizable emotion, I draw on second-generation cognitive studies.

2.5 Unnaturalizing Readings: The Gap between Body and Mind

In *Production of Presence* (2004), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht attempts to develop concepts that could allow people to relate to the world in a way that is more complex than interpretation alone, and that is more complex than meaning-attribution. He accordingly argues for a relation to the things of the world that oscillates between “presence effects” and “meaning effects.” Meaning effects are founded upon the tradition of “metaphysics,” which refers to “an attitude, both an everyday attitude and an academic perspective, that gives a higher value to the meaning of phenomena than to their material presence” (xiv). As a gesture against it, the concept of “presence” refers to a spatial relationship to the world and its objects: “Something that is ‘present’ is supposed to be tangible for human hands, which implies that, conversely, it can have an immediate impact on human

bodies” (xiii). Different from “metaphysics,” the concept of “presence” should be comprehended as “the point of convergence between different contemporary reflections that try to go beyond a metaphysical epistemology and an exclusively meaning-based relationship to the world” (77).

Just like Heidegger, Gumbrecht highlights the situatedness of our existence; in addition, the philosopher shows how to build sense-making activities on this substantial relation to the world.⁷⁶ Presence effects, as nonrepresentational and nonhermeneutic, are very akin to affects, but if they are recalcitrant to be represented, how can we properly describe them and engender them an effective input in facilitating understanding human existence? How to fit the elusive bodily fact into an interpretive framework? Gumbrecht importantly points out that the purpose to develop a repertoire of noninterpretation or nonhermeneutics is not to negate the meaning-based relationship to the world, but to challenge the idea that it is the exclusive core practice of humanities (*Production* 52). Therefore, he is advocating an exploration of “the other of mimesis” (“Epiphany of Form” 354), and the proposed foregrounding of presence effects in no way means the abandonment of interpretation “as an elementary and probably inevitable intellectual practice” (*Production* 52). Presence cultures, as Gumbrecht envisions, would add something to meaning cultures, and the two together contribute to a more complex and sophisticated way of relating to the world. By the same token, although interpretation is an unavoidable move, we cannot talk about the sense-making of unnatural narratives without talking about our affective responses to them; as much as such bodily experiences can be hard to read or decipher, the very attempt of giving them due concern is to be recognized.

⁷⁶ Gumbrecht shows indebtedness to Heidegger in his conceptualization of presence effects. For him, a decisive move in Heidegger’s phenomenology is the characterization of human existence as “being-in-the-world,” that is, an existence always already in a substantial and therefore in a spatial contract with the things of the world (*Production* 66).

Additionally, Gumbrecht makes the seemingly abstract concept of presence effects more applicable by recognizing the role that language plays in presence culture. Although the central position of meaning-attribution is supported by the value of language and the belief in its ability to go beyond surfaces, language can also be the “medium through which the separation of humans and the (physical) things of their environment may be overcome” (Gumbrecht, “Presence Achieved in Language” 317).⁷⁷ In the latter situation, language enables us to be “in sync with the things of the world” (Gumbrecht, *Production* 117). That language is an effective tool connecting human beings and the physical world is best reflected in its ability to bring out *aesthetic experiences* and create *epiphanies*. Hence, literature, as a product of language, becomes a possible trigger of presence effects. In what way do unnatural narratives embody aesthetic experience, which captures the priority in Gumbrecht’s prospect of a disciplinary future based on the new epistemology (*Production* 94)?⁷⁸ In the light of the similarity between affects and presence effects, my upcoming demonstration supposedly offers heuristic ways of describing the unrecognizable aspect of readers’ somatic interaction with unnatural narratives, which is in essence unrepresentable.

⁷⁷ Gumbrecht proposes seven types of amalgamation between language and presence: language as a physical reality; basic practices of philology; language that can trigger aesthetic experience; mystical experience and the language of mysticism; language being open toward the world of things; the ability of literature to create epiphany; language can make the past tangibly present (“Presence Achieved in Language” 320-23).

⁷⁸ Gumbrecht envisions possible future practices in the humanities and arts as reliant upon a tripartition of aesthetics, history, and pedagogy. The three can be read respectively in terms of epiphany, presentification, and deixis, which hinge upon, independently, the presence element in aesthetic experience, the potential aestheticization of history, and the liberation of teaching from providing ethical orientation. Epiphany, presentification, and deixis are the three key concepts in the blueprint (*Production* 93-96).

The Affinity between Unnaturalness and Presence Effects

According to Gumbrecht, aesthetic experience comes in various layers of meaning and can be dealt with from different perspectives.⁷⁹ The most notable feature that aesthetic experience and unnatural scenarios share is *the distance from everyday life*. Aesthetic experience always provides people with feelings of intensity that we cannot find in the historically and culturally specific everyday worlds. As a consequence of the distance, aesthetic experience designates a situational framework, at the center of which is the double isolation inherent in all moments of aesthetic intensity—no guarantee of leading people toward aesthetic experience, and no predictable yield that it can add something to our everyday lives (Gumbrecht, *Production* 101). This “double isolation” can be better described by Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “insularity,” following which the most important upshot is “the incommensurability between aesthetic experience and the institutional propagation of ethical norms” (102). Insofar as a reconciliation of aesthetics and ethics is improbable, aesthetic experience offers something that cannot be fully accounted for by norms. But this incompatibility does not designate a mutual exclusiveness. Gumbrecht argues for a possible intertwinedness between the two, and the more modest claim that we all can feel the permeation of multiple modalities of aesthetic experience into our everyday worlds is a gesture

⁷⁹ Gumbrecht summarizes eight characteristics of aesthetic experience: 1. *Moments of intensity*. It is the feeling of a specifically high level in the functioning of some of general cognitive, emotional, and physical faculties. There is no guarantee of the production of such a combination of the quantitative concept “intensity” and the temporal concept “moments.” 2. *The specific appeal of such moments*. Aesthetic experience offers people feelings of intensity which cannot be found in the historically and culturally specific everyday worlds. 3. *The situational framework of aesthetic experience*. As such experience keeps certain distance from everyday life, it is incommensurable with the institutional propagation of ethical norms. 4. *A specific disposition*. The sudden appearance of certain objects of perception diverts our attention from everyday routines and temporarily separates us from them. 5. *What about the objects of aesthetic experience that fascinates us?* Phenomena and impressions of presence. An oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects. The noncomplementarity between the two. 6. *Epiphany*. There are three factors that shape the way the tension between presence and meaning presents itself: the tension between the two comes out of nothing; the emergence of this tension has a spatial articulation; its temporality can be described as an “event.” 7. *An element of violence*. There is no aesthetic experience without the event of substance occupying space. 8. *The feeling of losing control*. Aesthetic experience can prevent us from completely losing a feeling or a remembrance of the physical dimension of our lives (*Production* 96-117).

against the blind belief in aesthetic autonomy (Gumbrecht, “Aesthetic Experience” 301). It is further observed that “moments of aesthetic experience happen as ‘crises’ in the literal sense of the word, as interruptions of everyday experience” (302). This is different from “a fusion of art and life,” which indicates the two as somewhat identical. The proposed “intertwinedness” expresses a more dialectical and heterogeneous relationship between aesthetics and everydayness.

The deviance from the norm is likewise foregrounded in the unnatural. Despite their different definitions of the term, all the proponents of the unnatural tradition agree that the unnatural defies, flaunts, mocks, plays, and experiments with core assumptions of narrative, which are usually unanimously observed in mimetic narratives. Therefore, as it is inappropriate to project ethical norms onto the potential objects of aesthetic experience, employing a unified theory to explain all sorts of narrative overlooks the subversive nature of unnatural texts. Yet, despite the intention of contravening mimetic presuppositions, “it goes without saying that the unnatural can only be recognized and felt in relation to the natural”. In other words, the relationship between the natural and the unnatural is never binary, as most narratives present a permanent dialogue between the two. In the light of this, “a gradual spectrum of narrative possibilities rather than a system of binary oppositions” is proposed (Alber et al., “What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?” 374). Just as the moments of aesthetic experience inhabit in daily life, the antimimetic effect of the unnatural works best when it is posited in a mimetic context.

What happens when we are confronted with objects of aesthetic experience? What is it that fascinates us in these objects? Gumbrecht avers that while meaning and presence effects always come together, there is no way to bring them together in one “well-balanced” phenomenal structure (*Production* 105). Consequently, objects of aesthetic experience are characterized by “an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects” (107). In spite of being of simultaneity,

the relation between the two is by no means of *complementarity*. The tension between the two “endows the objects of aesthetic experience with a component of provocative instability and unrest” (108). As the two dimensions will never grow into a stable structure, it is untenable to develop a combination of the semiotic and the nonsemiotic definitions of the sign (110). Furthermore, the transitory nature of presence effects echoes that “epiphany within aesthetic experience is an event undoes itself while it emerges” (113). That is to say, no single meaning structure and no single impression of a rhythm pattern is ever present for more than a moment in aesthetic experience. Hence, the temporality under which a work of art hits us will always be “the temporality of a moment” (113).

A similar irreconcilability is reflected in the debate on how to deal with unnatural narratives. On one end, there is Richardson, who opts for the appreciation of the transgressiveness of the unnatural *per se*; on the other end, there is Alber, who believes that it is always possible and necessary to make sense of unnatural texts. On the one hand, unnatural elements reject easy corporation into existing cognitive frameworks; on the other hand, as artefacts, unnatural narratives are supposed to carry communicative ends. In practice, it is impossible to fully respect unnaturalness as it is if we want to have a narratology of unnatural narratives, as any sense-making activity familiarizes the strange. As making sense of the unnatural is inevitable in the long term, at most we can consciously prolong the stage of embracing its material dimension before coming to grips with it. We should be aware that the moment unnatural elements hit the reader with their materiality is the moment presence effects start to fade away, as meaning-production gradually takes the upper hand.

Meaning Effects in Reading Unnatural Narratives

The negotiation between presence and meaning effects is constant. As Gumbrecht argues, there are always specific distributions between the meaning-component and the presence-component, depending on the materiality of each object of aesthetic experience (*Production* 109). For instance, the experience of reading a text and that of listening to music are different—the former is dominated by the production of meaning, whereas the latter often foregrounds a spatial and physical relation. While in appreciating music, presence effects can be independent from the interpretive process, the material relation provoked in reading is difficult to be separated from the human cognition. After all, there has to be some trigger of our sensory reactions—confusion or disconcertedness only emerge in our encounter with aesthetic objects; consequently, aesthetic experience will always confront us with “the tension, or oscillation, between presence and meaning” (110).

There are extreme cases where literary texts foreground the presence dimension via typography, the rhythm of language, and even the smell of paper (Gumbrecht, *Production* 109). In terms of unnatural narratives, what I think is most akin to Gumbrecht’s pole of presence effects is the so-called “unnatural construction.” The term is defined by Richardson as “texts constructed to be processed in surprising and unexpected ways, particularly those that invert or defy conventional reading practices”. Under this label, some narratives present readers with blank and marbled pages, and some come in randomly arranged, unbound segments ... In the end, the events themselves might be totally natural, yet the reader is forced to determine how to process the book, and it is the unnatural manner of presentation that transforms the reading experience (“Unnatural Narrative Theory” 391). In this context, it is the materiality of these works that first impresses readers and enables them to feel being in actual contact with what they are reading, and the cognitive

processing is not yet involved at this stage. Richardson's "unnatural construction" is an extreme case; most of the time, presence effects go concomitantly with the hermeneutic move. As Alber et al. claim, while capturing pre-interpretive effects of "bodily presence" is crucial, it should be placed on a continuum with interpretive strategies, since "these effects are likely to coexist in readers' engagement with literary narrative" ("Mimesis" 463).

I want to remind readers that I am not the only one who seeks to show respect for presence effects and incorporate them into unnatural narratology. Alber's navigational strategy "the Zen way of reading" is, for example, "a way of ensuring that attempts to make sense of the unnatural do not destroy more than they create". This tactic presupposes "an attentive and stoic reader who repudiates the earlier explanations and simultaneously accepts both the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, worry, and panic that they might evoke in her or him". It envisions a reaction which "does not entail any kind of cognitive discomfort but rather sheer joy at the freedom from natural possibility" (*Unnatural Narrative* 54). In the light of the oscillation between fascination and comprehension, this Zen way of reading is obviously close to the pole of acceptance—"something impossible and thus unexplainable is happening in the narrative" (56). Alber's strategy is a good way of accounting for presence effects on the theoretical level, and my model in this aspect overlaps with his. But I should highlight that I am not working under the guidance of cognitive tools—I regard one's affective experience as the core of my model, and the basis of all follow-up reading strategies.

Hopefully I have demonstrated that unnatural narratives, as works of art, are a medium through which presence effects can be achieved, and like any aesthetic experience, the encounter with the unnatural brings out the tension between presence and meaning effects. Now, it is time to consider what the ideal way of interpretation is, if presence effects are taken into account. With

“presence” understood as a spatial relationship to the world and its objects, and “production” as an act of “bringing forth,” I deem it insightful to transport Gumbrecht’s “production of presence” into my study: we should respect “all kinds of events and processes in which the impact that ‘present’ objects have on human bodies is being initiated or intensified” (*Production* xiii). While it is true that in reading activities, the presence-dimension is rarely the dominant one, the point I want to emphasize is not so much specific distributions between the meaning- and the presence-components of each object of aesthetic experience as that a Cartesian view is inadequate to cover the full complexity of our relations to the world. What Gumbrecht calls a “desire for presence and thingness” is in no way equivalent to a desire to “possess” or “hold on” to things. In fact, this desire can be fulfilled by just reconnecting with the things of the world, like being sensitive to the ways the body relates to the landscape or to the presence of other bodies (*Production* 144).

Susan Sontag’s warning against reductive interpretation still remains relevant: “Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all” (23). Dealing with unnatural narratives, Richardson’s non-representational perspective follows the idea: “we should never *reduce* unnatural techniques to mere allegories, themes, or similar functions, even as we integrate an unnatural reading into other useful perspectives” (“Rejoinders” 507; original emphasis). Taking a step back, even if eventually we need to take the interpretative move, our strategy should be built upon the recognition that there is a gap between aesthetic experience and everyday life, and that the presence- and the meaning-components can never be reconciled. In terms of unnatural narratives, Nielsen recognizes this irreconcilability, and his unnaturalizing reading strategies observe the ontological distinction between fiction and reality.

I want to take some time to sum up the two terms—affect and presence effects. Both affect and presence effects effectively describe the objective aspect of our phenomenological experience with unnatural narratives. Affect, in my use of it, is typically bodily incarnated and beyond our language system; it rejects stereotypical meanings, and alternates between the subjective and the objective domains. Presence effects likewise appeal to senses, and get mostly foregrounded at the pre-interpretive stage of our encounter with things of the world. Affect and presence effects are unrepresentable in slightly different ways. Affect is so because it cannot be cognitively grasped by the existing representational framework; presence effects, by comparison, indicate a chronological order—ideally, it is a purely physical and spatial encounter before the production of meaning, before the input of intellectual efforts. Despite this fact, in the long term, both of them are subject to recipients’ intellectual control.

The elusive aspect of our affective responses, as crystallized in affect and presence effects, in fact saturates our interface with the world. Introducing these two notions, I aim to highlight the importance of a long-underprivileged, object-oriented, spatial relationship to the external, and paradoxically, the inevitability of the production of meaning. Extending this stance to making sense of antimimetic works, we need to be cautious of picking up mimetic tools and rushing to interpretation. Primarily, we need to do justice to the materiality of the unnatural and its impact on the body; secondly, the interpretive move should recognize and respect the indecipherability of unnatural texts—their autonomy as artefacts. The discussed unnaturalizing readings dovetail with the two steps, as they underline the artificiality and materiality of literary products; accordingly, transgressions of mimetic conventions are valued in their own terms as reflecting the creative power of narrative fiction. What is missing is the consideration of the reader’s affective experience, which is crucial in my model.

2.6 A Revised Unnaturalizing Reading

How do we upgrade unnaturalizing readings in view of the evoked intangible somatic experience? I will offer a brief illustration by referring to Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979). The novel starts like this: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade" (3). A few paragraphs later, the narrative goes on as follows:

It's not that you expect anything in particular from this particular book. You're the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything. There are plenty, younger than you or less young, who live in the expectation of extraordinary experiences. . . . But not you. You know that the best you can expect is to avoid the worst. (4)

I suppose that most readers will be as perplexed as I am while reading these passages. Who is the "you" referring to? The beginning lines seem to show that the narrating agent is talking to every reader, yet later the addressee is specified, as the voice knows "the best you can expect is to avoid the worst." "You" in the narrative is hence multi-directional: it may refer to a general reader, a particular reader, or a readership. The ambiguity of the pronoun is saturated throughout the text, and one upshot is that the reader finds it hard to position himself/herself: should he/she feel being addressed or be aware of his/her distance from the addressee? Confusion also arises when the names of the author and the novel appear in the narrative: how is it possible that the narrator and the author are located on the same plane? From my vantage point, all these facts challenge our conventional knowledge of narrative, and contribute to the disengagement from the text. From another perspective, as the reader is overwhelmed by such defamiliarizing passages, the materiality of the narrative gets foregrounded, as well as the spatiality of the reading activity. Now, having

fully savored the presence effects evoked, the reader is expectedly led to the production of meaning. In the light of the initial elusive effect, it is inappropriate if he/she turns to cognitive tools. As the invented-ness of the narrative, as well as the ontological gap between the reader and the fictional world, is highlighted, the motivation to identify with the protagonist and to explain his/her behavior in mimetic terms is diminished. *Ideally*, the reader resorts to the fictional status of the narrative. In Calvino's case, as Richardson comments, the narrative's flaunting of written-ness is to voice the interanimation of literature and theory, and the fusion of presentation and representation (*Unnatural Voices* 32).

Yet as my model is not meant to be prescriptive, nor is it built upon any binary relationship, I do not rule out the applicability of cognitive tools even in the extreme case where the substantiality of an unnatural narrative captures the dominant role. The room for the cognitive toolkit is given at least by two facts. Firstly, as aforementioned, the reader's affective experience cannot be a black/white issue—even confronted with the most experimental text, the reader can find details to relate to, project real-life knowledge, and thus exert intellectual control. As a result, the selection of navigational tools really depends on which of the two aspects—the representable and the unrepresentable—is more foregrounded *at the moment*. Secondly, like Nielsen, I respect that the reader always has the freedom to choose his/her way of dealing with unnatural works. As the scholar remarks, “[n]aturalization is a choice, and whether the choice is conscious or automatic, it remains a choice and not a necessity” (“Broken Narratives” 91). This is why, in Calvino's case, I say it would be “ideal” that readers turn to the fictional nature of the narrative; more importantly, I use “ideal” to show my sincere wish that readers reflect on their primary purpose of reading narrative fiction—to simply get meaning from it or appreciate its aesthetic “feel”? I think both are important, and in the case of unnatural narratives, the aesthetic side—the artistic experimentation

with narrative conventions—particularly deserves our attention. It is time to pause the urge to mobilize the acquired presumption of avant-garde narrative practices—something experienced readers like me tend to do—and to attentively prolong and immerse ourselves in these moments of uncertainty. If this in any sense means being “prescriptive,” I do not feel guilty about it.

2.7 Cognitive Activities and Cognitive Readings

So far, I have elaborated on the situation where unnatural narratives are affectively alienating, and the correlation of this phenomenological fact with unnaturalizing readings. Now let us turn to the other part of the discussion—when the reader knows his/her feelings, and feels emotionally connected with the narrative. As aforementioned, although unnatural works usually strike readers as unexpected, confusing, and unnerving, they may also invite emotional bonds. It is not rare that, notwithstanding breaks in the mimetic illusion, some unnatural narratives manage to engage the reader—this is the situation where named emotions rather than undefined affects dominate his/her phenomenological experience. Having familiarized ourselves with the nature of emotion in fiction, we need to consider how this sensory dimension speaks to our interpretive activities, and what an embodied reading capturing both the body and the mind will be like. In this aspect, we can benefit from second-generation cognitive studies.

Some doubt may emerge: isn't our mental functioning always in operation? If, as I have claimed, affective experience and cognition are inseparable, and even at a moment where presence effects are foregrounded, the cognitive processing cannot be ruled out, how do we differentiate the cognitive activity going on here and the one happening in “cognitive reading”? From my experience, certain differences do exist. In *On the Origin of Stories* (2009), Brian Boyd argues that, in evolutionary terms, human beings have self-enclosed and modular systems which are

impervious to introspection—“[w]e need not be aware how minds interpret incoming light signals to cope with changing illumination, horizontal or vertical motion, or gradients in intensity and color that signify surfaces or edges and therefore objects” (43). We are endowed with inference systems which are “so rapid, automatic, and reliable that we think we simply deal with ready-made facts and do not realize how much we infer”. Most of the time, we humans do not need to consciously make inferences, since “our evolved pattern-matching neural processing does the inferring for us,” providing immediate recognition and evaluation rapidly and automatically (134). It is only when we encounter difficult or novel situations that these intuitive and heuristic-based responses will be inhibited in order for new options to be formulated and assessed (258). I would like to borrow Boyd’s ideas, and understand *the cognitive activity* saturating any reading process in terms of what he calls “self-enclosed and modular systems,” and *the cognitive reading* as proposed by cognitive narratology in the light of conscious mental efforts to cope with new situations. Simply put, I want to draw a distinction between automatic mental activities, as in any processing of information, including literary reading, and a conscious pickup of cognitive tools for sense-making in novel contexts, as in unnatural narratives.

I am taking this differentiation as a move against the view that it is a basic cognitive requirement of us that we attribute to narrative agents information-processing activities and internal knowledge representations, and that “readers *need to* formulate hypothesis about the minds of agents and ascribe to them mental functioning in order to make sense of their doings in terms of human actions and interactions” (Margolin 284; my emphasis). In a similar vein, the view is expressed by Zunshine’s observation that “we may see the pleasure afforded by fictional narratives as grounded in our awareness of the successful testing of our mind-reading adaptations” (20). Indeed, both in fictional and nonfictional situations, narratives allow the reconstruction of an

interpretive system of goals, plans, and motivations around narrated events to describe the storyworld, but to reconstruct an interpretive framework is not *the sole goal* of narrative reading, especially in the fictional situation. While fictional representations of mental functioning may help the reader to be aware of the nature of mental activities, it is by no means the only purpose of reading fiction.⁸⁰ The distinction I lay out here therefore designates that in terms of reading fictional narratives, the cognitive reading remains a conscious option, and it is in this sense different from cognitive processing activities ubiquitous in our everyday engagements.

2.8 Second-Generation Approaches to the Cognitive Study of Literature

Why can we effectively simulate character perceptions and actions, and feel with fictional figures? As Antonio Damasio puts it, this simulative process depends upon globally shared mechanisms— “[w]e are wired to respond with an emotion, in a preorganized fashion, when certain features of stimuli in the world or in our bodies are perceived, alone or in combination” (131). The discovery of mirror neurons in the early 1990s plays an important role here. Mirror neurons fire “when we see others act or express emotion as if we were making the same action, and allow us through a kind of automatic inner imitation to understand their intentions and attune ourselves to their feelings” (Boyd 103-104). This sensing of other’s emotions, as Daniel Goleman notes, “seems to be as physiological as it is mental . . . the more similar the physiological state of two people at a

⁸⁰ Not to mention that mindreading can be practiced using other media than literature, the value of reading literature is multi-faceted. In and of itself, literature is a place of beauty and aesthetic experience; on a large scale, literature remains a strong cultural capital, and informs us of predominant thought systems. For more functions of literature, see *Why Study Literature* (2011), edited by Jan Alber, Rikke Kragelund, and Henrik Skov Nielsen.

given moment, the more easily they can sense each other's feelings" (25).⁸¹ This quotation underlines the embodied nature of emotion, to which I will turn now.

It is actually inaccurate to say that the cognitive approach is completely mind-driven. The so-called "second-generation" approach to the cognitive study of literature, represented by Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen, proposes a shift towards embodied models of mind, highlighting "the embodiment of mental processes and their extensions into the world through material artefacts and socio-cultural practices" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 261). While the "first-generation" in cognitive science conceives of the mind as based on abstract, propositional representations, the "second-generation" places mental processes on a continuum with bioevolutionary phenomena and cultural practices. Cognition in this context is approached as a form of embodied action: it "inhabits a world and often reaches out into the resources of that setting in ways that establish micro-ecologies or niches for thinking, and in which reciprocal feedback loops spread across mind, body, movements, tools, technologies and environment" (Garratt 6). Second-generation cognitive science can be essentially understood as "e-approaches" to cognition, which bring to the fore the embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended qualities of the mind.⁸² Besides, the experiential and the emotional dimensions are also in the picture, as experience and emotional responses are given

⁸¹ We can understand empathy in terms of mirroring. Experiments have indicated that "recognition of an emotion in someone else, and also when we read about it in a story, or see something of emotional significance in a film, typically involves mirroring" (Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams* 113).

⁸² The term 4E is often used to summarize these four varieties of explanatory model. "Embodied" is the core term that runs through the other three—"[w]hat embodiment is taken to mean influences the degree of endorsement its proponents are willing to give the three remaining 4E terms" (Garratt 7). More specifically, embedded cognition claims that cognitive processing depends on the interactions between the agent and his or her ecological setting; the enactive view proposes that agent-environment interactions matter in non-trivial ways to the work of cognition; the extended cognition argues that some cognitive processes are not brain-bound, and extend literally into physical features of the world around us (Garratt 7-8). "4E-cognition" has made its appearance in key areas of narrative theory such as the study of fictional minds and the multifaceted relation between narration and cognition, and connotations attached to "E" direct at different emphases. For fictional minds, see works of Alan Palmer; on the relation between narration and cognition, David Herman's *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* (2013) is an example.

more attention than before (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 261).⁸³ Here the rejection of classic disembodied cognitivism and the embrace of more diverse modellings is voiced (Garratt 6).⁸⁴

Embodiment and Enactivism

To get a better idea of second-generation cognitive science, we need to be familiar with “embodiment,” which is the key term that runs through the other e-approaches. In essence, the notion acts as a bridge of cognitive science and human experience, and contributes to comprehending our living condition. To talk about embodiment is to bring forth the correlation between the body and the mind, yet without privileging one over the other. In *The Embodied Mind* (1991), Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch examine the circulation between the sciences of mind and human experience. The scholars contend that we should see our bodies both as physical structures and as lived, experiential structures, namely, as both biological and phenomenological (xv). Inheriting the idea from Merleau-Ponty, they believe that we cannot understand the interface between the “outer” and the “inner” without investigating the embodiment of knowledge, cognition, and experience (xv-xvi). Accordingly, embodiment encompasses “both the body as a lived, experiential structure and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanisms” (xvi). This mutual constitution of cultural and embodied experience also indicates that while body schema—the human sensorimotor capacities ensuring bodily performance—shapes how we conceive of our environment, this experience is always restricted by the more

⁸³ Apparently, narrative empathy is also part of this “embodied” shift.

⁸⁴ Lars Bernaerts et al. distinguish “cognitive” from “cognitivist.” The former is a generic term used for a broad variety of approaches directly affected by the cognitive turn, ranging from cognitive narratology to evolutionary, neurological, and empirical studies of literature. The latter is the term we use in a strict sense for those forms of inquiry that focus not on the reader’s subjective experience but on the mental operations required to comprehend narratives (“Introduction” 8).

explicit body image—perceptions and beliefs attached to the body—that we entertain in relation to our social and cultural appearance and interactions (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 267).⁸⁵

In a more direct way, the important role that interactions between the agent and the environment play in the work of cognition is expressed by the idea of “enactivism.” The term enactivism is used by Varela and his colleagues to describe the growing idea that “cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs” (9). The fundamental insight of the enactive approach is “to see our activities as reflections of a structure without losing sight of the directness of our own experience” (12).⁸⁶ Behind this enactive turn is “a dissatisfaction with the very notion of a representational system” and a hope for developing “a nonrepresentational alternative from within the heart of cognitive science” (134). To summarize, “cognition is not representation but embodied action and that the world we cognize is not pregiven but enacted through our history of structural coupling” (200). To be more specific, narratives do not exist as narratives unless they are perceived by readers—*the phenomenological dimension becomes a constituent condition*; enactivism greatly sheds light on understanding the reader’s experiential input in the feedback loop between producing and receiving.

Human embodiment, more than “an object of constant cultural interpretation,” is also the result of “an evolutionary history and fundamentally shapes any psychological process, from emotional responses to higher-order meaning constructions”. The notion of embodiment also

⁸⁵ In “Body Image and Body Schema: A Conceptual Clarification” (1986), Shaun Gallagher distinguishes body image and body schema as two distinct concepts. There is a perceptual, cognitive, or emotional awareness of the body in the body image, and the body appears as owned, abstract and disintegrated. By contrast, the body schema operates in a non-conscious manner: it is unowned or anonymous.

⁸⁶ The enactive approach consists of firstly, that perception consists in perceptually guided action, and secondly, that cognitive structures emerge from the recurrent sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided (Varela et al. 173).

provides “a link between hermeneutics and bio-evolutionary and cognitive levels of analysis”, revealing the existential condition that we are “tied to biologically finite and phenomenologically conscious bodies” (Caracciolo, “Interpretation for the Bodies” 386). If, as Caracciolo observes, “[i]nterpretation is where the divergences between scientific and humanistic methods are at their most evident, thus representing a crucial test bed for any cognitive approach to cultural artefacts,” the embodied turn is believed to sidestep the irreconcilability between literary interpretation as culturally specific and cognitive science as reductive and generalizing (385). The notion signals a possible cooperation of the two.

How the Second-Generation Sheds Light on Interpreting Unnatural Works

By foregrounding and utilizing the bodily participation in interpretive moves, the second-generation cognitive approach explains how readers get to know characters’ mentalities and transport themselves into storyworlds; via the somatic synchronization, readers “feel with” fictional characters, and infer meaning by mobilizing their real-life-based imagination and perception.

How do readers simulate characters’ minds? Caracciolo argues that readers engage with narrative texts via enactment imagination, which consists in the simulation of perception (“Blind Reading” 89).⁸⁷ According to him, consciousness can only be either enacted in a first-person way or attributed in a third-person way. Consciousness-attribution is “based on our first-person understanding of what having a consciousness or subjective experience involves”, and it is an

⁸⁷ This enactment imagination is “the intentional mode through which readers direct their consciousness towards nonexistent objects” (Caracciolo, “Blind Reading” 90). Equating “consciousness-enactment” with “simulation” might be problematic, as simulation could have introduced a mimetic fallacy, as if there were some consciousness in the text or in the mind that we try to simulate. This is the caveat we should keep in mind (Caracciolo, “Fictional Consciousness” 58).

inevitable consequence of the tendency “to interpret first-person talk as expressive of consciousness” (Caracciolo, “Fictional Consciousness” 47, 48). Caracciolo highlights that because of the similarity in the way real people and fictional characters express their consciousness or subjective experience, “consciousness-attribution is the most natural stance readers assume towards fictional characters” (50).⁸⁸ Another mental activity, consciousness-enactment, requires internal focalization, and it is usually triggered by the insistence ‘on the character’s perceptual acts, and in general on the qualitative “feel” of his or her conscious experience’ (58). Consciousness-attribution plays an instrumental part in consciousness-enactment—the former is the default mode while the latter happens gradually, motivated by the accumulation of textual details (58-59). When fictional consciousness is enacted, “our own, narratively constructed self slips into the background of our consciousness, and we make room for another narratively constructed self—the character’s”. In this sense, “the reader lends her real body to the purely fictional body of a character” (58).

In terms of narrative space, Caracciolo points out that “our comprehension of spatial references in narrative contexts draws on mental imagery to produce a simulation of narrative space”; moreover, since both imagination and perception rely on the body, “[c]omprehenders are always virtually present in their mental simulation” (“The Reader’s Virtual Body” 134).⁸⁹ By this token, mental simulation relies on our sensorimotor system and involves the bodily participation—the reader brings along a virtual counterpart of his/her real body when engaging with a fictional

⁸⁸ Caracciolo also underlines the difference between attributing consciousness to real people and doing so to fictional characters: while in both cases the attribution is based on external signs, the body is perceived in the former whereas imagined in the latter (“Fictional Consciousness” 49).

⁸⁹ In *Mental Models: Towards a Cognitive Science of Language, Inference, and Consciousness* (1983), P. N. Johnson-Laird points out three different types of mental representation. Propositional representations are strings of symbols that correspond to natural language; mental models are structural analogues of the world; images are the perceptual correlates of models from a particular point of view (165).

world (119). Most of the time, the presence of a fictionally actual body helps the reader position his/her virtual body within the fictional world, and the fictionalization of this virtual body leads to an increased sense of experientiality (122-24). It does happen, however, that the reader's fictional body via which his/her imaginings is grounded is denied by the text—there is no possibility for the convergence of the reader's virtual body and the textually evoked, fictionally actual body. In the extreme situation where the reader's body is a purely virtual presence, narrative space is still embodied, as the reader can at least imagine the scene—imagination, like perception, is built “on our sensorimotor skills” and “on the movements we could perform in order to gain access to imaginative detail” (133).

This is all very illuminating. However, embodiment as reduced to merely pre-conceptual reaction is insufficient to account for the more sophisticated continuity between bodily states and reflective thinking. Mirror neurons only enable readers to feel and act in the way characters do, yet most of the time, the communicativeness of narrative goes beyond bodily sensations.⁹⁰ If storyworlds, narrative spaces, and fictional consciousness are embodied in and enacted by readers, why is a particular way of enactment preferred to another? How to negotiate readers' creative role and narrative *per se*? All these questions point at the necessity to upgrade the enactive approach to a more complex level. Kukkonen's conceptualization of “the embodied reader” is a meaningful attempt in this direction. For the scholar, “the embodied reader” refers to a model of the act of reading which takes into account the reader's embodied response, which is usually evoked by mirror neurons, moto-resonance, or other embodied features of human cognition (“Presence and Prediction” 367). Obviously, the embodied reader is an immersive reader (369). The notion can be

⁹⁰ From my vantage point, pornographic narrative is a type of narrative which particularly targets stimulating bodily sensations, and there is nothing much other than sexual excitement. The action movie is another example.

seen as a reaction against earlier models of the ideal reader that have focused much on “the temporal and conceptual dynamics of anticipation and propositional meaning-making”, yet ignoring the embodied engagements of reading (367-68).⁹¹ As to reflective thinking, Kukkonen points out that recent developments in the enactivist strand of second-generation approaches show that “embodied cognition is profoundly informed by sensing how actions are going to develop”; in other words, embodied thinking is predictive. Therefore, the embodied reader also has features of temporality and metaperspective (372).⁹² In a word, Kukkonen’s model is a joint effort which not only considers readerly embodied reactions to the protagonist, but also the translation of this local experience to the larger picture—plot and storyworld.⁹³

The embodied reading is an insightful interpretive move, yet how does it perform in dealing with narratives which refuse to be assimilated into mimetic interpretations? For second-generation cognitive theorists, the enactive view suggests a possible co-existence of immersion and defamiliarization, and greatly helps with familiarizing unnatural scenarios. For instance, Merja Polvinen discusses how to account for fictional spaces inviting both self-reflection and immersion via the enactive approach. As Polvinen points out, traditional cognitive approaches to spatial imagination argue that readers’ ways of experiencing fictional spaces is “a special, illusion-framed

⁹¹ A typical example is Wolfgang Iser’s “the implied reader.” The implied reader pays particular attention to the gaps in the text, considers how one passage fits into the larger pattern of inference and plot, and integrates what he/she reads here into his/her understanding of how the novel conveys and contrasts different worldviews (qtd. in Kukkonen, “Presence and Prediction” 370).

⁹² Kukkonen stresses the function of Bayesian predictive models, according to which cognition is a continuously developing process “in which our minds relate the prior hypothesis we have about our environment to new observations we make and to the likelihood of making these observations in an environment for which the prior hypothesis holds true” (“Presence and Prediction” 373).

⁹³ In “Bayesian Bodies: The Predictive Dimension of Embodied Cognition and Culture” (2016), Kukkonen also talks about some implications of the predictive-processing model for literary reading. Kukkonen argues that the adoption of the model can allow cognitive approaches to literature to develop critical connections between embodied cognition and the cultural, as well as imaginative, aspects of texts which lie at the heart of literary study. The predictive-processing model designates a feedback loop between probabilistic predictions which guide our movement, and the corrective input from our embodied perception (visual, haptic, proprioceptive, and so on), which leads us to recalibrate the predictions to better fit the current environment.

version of our visual experiences of actual spaces”, and the idea hinges upon “a model that naturalizes fictional perception through older, pictorial theories of real-world perception” (19, 23).⁹⁴ For experimental texts foregrounding the combination of immersion and estrangement, however, it should be possible to “perceive both the artwork and the fictional spaces it represents without see-sawing between two incompatible positions” (20). The believed irreconcilability between immersiveness and artificiality could be bridged if we adopt the enactive view that regards the literary imagination as enacting seeing, not seeing as a picture-like mental image.⁹⁵ As Polvinen claims, since the enactive approach shifts the focus “from the perceptual experience of fictional objects and towards the fact that the action of perception is also of the artistic object itself”, the duality of perceptual experience is stressed (29).

As Bernaerts and Richardson observe, “not all cognitive narratologists entirely follow Herman’s rejection of the exceptionality of fiction.” While folk psychology still plays an important role, indeed “literary specificity in the construction of fictional minds is given more attention” (531). While arguing for a continuity in readers’ engagement with fictional and actual minds, Caracciolo underlines that some narrative situations reveal authentic mind descriptions which are inaccessible in real life.⁹⁶ For him, there is no direct causality between the fact that fiction affords

⁹⁴ A typical example of the traditional view is David Herman’s Deictic Shift Theory (DST). DST suggests that readers not only imagine the relative positions of different items in the fictional space, but perform the imagined recentering of their own perspective within the fictional world, whether that perspective is tied to a specific fictional character or whether it is more like that of a floating witness. In this way, the reader gets inside the story (Polvinen 22). See Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (2002), 270, 297.

⁹⁵ This believed irreconcilability can be caught a glimpse of through the lens of possible-world theory. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, readers and spectators have to focus beyond the signs to witness the emergence of a three-dimensional life-like reality, as textual representation “behaves in one aspect like holographic picture”—“you cannot see the worlds and the signs at the same time” (“Virtual Reality and Literary Theory” 132).

⁹⁶ According to Caracciolo, there is a gap in Herman’s critique of the Exceptionality Thesis. Herman firstly describes the thesis as that “only fictional narratives can give us direct, ‘inside’ views of characters’ minds, and that fictional minds are therefore sui generis, or different in kind from everyday minds” (“Introduction” 9). Later he describes it as that “readers’ engagements with fictional minds are different in kind than their engagements with minds outside the domain of narrative fiction” (31). Caracciolo contends that the link between the claims is not as strong as Herman

us unique insight into characters' minds, and that readers will deal with fictional minds and everyday minds differently ("Beyond Other Minds" 31). It is one thing to say that readers draw their folk-psychological knowledge to deal with fictional minds; it is another thing to say fiction offers readers the opportunity to look closer into other people's mentalities. In other words, apart from the fact that fictional minds are always measured against real minds, we do need to think about what literary fiction, as a genre, can do—namely, its effects on readers (32). More often than not, Caracciolo points out, "readers' engagement with fictional characters can go beyond the second- or third-person stance that we tend to adopt towards real people", and it feels more authentic and real than that in real life (47).⁹⁷ In a similar vein, Marco Bernini argues that "narrative fiction remains exceptional in allowing *transparent access to the opacity of fictional minds*" ("The Opacity of Fictional Minds" 49; original emphasis). According to Bernini, insofar as we recognize that the mind's transparency is "an illusory *feeling* and that cognition is interpretive in nature, constantly mediated and rife with opacity" (38; original emphasis), the Exceptionality Thesis still holds water because narrative fiction can guarantee access to different kinds of opacities and transparencies, and represent the entanglement and mutual influencing between them (50).⁹⁸ In this aspect, the second-generation approach does fine-tune its predecessor: it takes into account the fictionality of literary minds and gives credit to text-oriented views.

implies. The first is about the effect of fictional narrative on readers, and the second is about different skills harnessed in reading different minds ("Beyond Other Minds" 32).

⁹⁷ Fiction can make empathetic identification much stronger than it is in our engagement with real people, though in both cases our engagements are based on real-life empathetic skills (Caracciolo, "Beyond Other Minds" 48). To some extent, the power of fiction lies in what Lubomír Doležal calls "authentication," the performative force whereby a certain kind of narrator can tag some fictional states of affairs, such as one's mental states, as true within fiction. The outcome is that readers, when engaging with narrative, cannot get such mental states wrong. It is an interplay between textual strategies and the reader's cooperation (qtd. in Caracciolo, "Beyond Other Minds" 36).

⁹⁸ According to interpretive accounts of cognition, access to our own mind is always sensorily mediated and hence equally interpretive in character, and the mind is always opaque. The feeling of transparent access is just an epiphenomenon of our interpretive machinery making us perceive the access to be direct while we are actually dealing with inchoate mental and bodily stimuli (Bernini, "The Opacity of Fictional Minds" 38-39).

Second-generation cognitive literary studies shed light on narrative reading, especially in foregrounding the role the body performs in readers' engagement with and interpretations of texts. In accordance with enactivism, narratives do not exist until they are enacted by the reader, and he/she can do so because consciousness is embodied and human beings share basic bodily mechanisms. Along this tradition, the meaning-affordance of readers' lived experience is more than ever underlined. The embodied shift proves illuminating for reading various aspects of the unnatural (not only minds, but also spaces and storyworlds at large), as sensorimotor coupling saturates our engagement with narrative. By this token, a narrative does not have to be emotionally engaging to evoke bodily reactions in readers; strictly speaking, our body is in operation in reading all types of narrative, and throughout the process. Meaning lies in the body, and how it feels tells what it is about; the continuity of the biological nature and the more complex meaning-making activity highlights the applicability of our acquired, everyday knowledge to even novel fictional contexts.

The Limitation of the Embodied Framework in Studying Unnatural Narratives

In and of itself, embodiment is not without problems in the discussion of unnatural narratives. Firstly, that the notion is adopted for interpretive ends is double-edged. Although interpretive methods employed by most scholars in the humanities do not fit into the agenda of first-generation, computational cognitive science, enactivism can effectively fix this problem (Caracciolo, "Narrative, Meaning, Interpretation" 381).⁹⁹ Humanistic inquiry is given more motivation because we know that "we engage with other human beings by negotiating and constructing values that are in part biologically inherited, in part socioculturally transmitted" (382). The enactive approach is

⁹⁹ The humanities ask questions about human beings, i.e. something interactive and abstract, whereas the core of first-generation, computational cognitive science is computations of symbolic representation.

hence a means to an end, and all the cognitive mechanisms adopted are the resources that interpreters use to make sense of the text, “constructing meanings that can be exported to the real world” (Caracciolo, “The Reader’s Virtual Body” 136). It is this blunt emphasis on meaning-production based on the essential same-ness of real minds and fictional minds that I want to underline. Applying the presuppositions of intersubjectivities and shared sensorimotor couplings to comprehending unnatural scenarios needs to be handled with skepticism. Of course, readers cannot resist projecting psychological motivations upon characters, and it is more so when “humanized features” and “human experientiality” are highlighted, yet it is also true that the production of meaning under this “human-like” bias will inevitably neutralize unnaturalness. It seems to me that the embodied branch of cognitive literary studies still cannot get rid of the label “mimetic reductionism.”

This leads to another reservation: the notion of embodiment puts so much emphasis on the reader that very little room is given to the autonomy of narrative.¹⁰⁰ To restate Caracciolo’s definition: human embodiment is not only an object of constant cultural reinterpretation, but also “the result of an evolutionary history and fundamentally shapes any psychological process, from emotional responses to higher-order meaning constructions” (“Interpretation for the Bodies” 386). Here a sense of determinism, if you will, can be detected, and this is in tension with the kernel of literary interpretation: a good literary interpretation should be novel and simulating; it should be perceived as giving insight into the text; it should be well argued and sufficiently grounded in

¹⁰⁰ It is summarized by Willemsen et al. that “cognitive narratology generally studies the process of interpretation via its relationship with textual features”, and it is generally “less concerned with extracting meanings from a text than with asking how this extraction takes place” (604, 603). The second-generation is the same in this aspect, like its predecessor.

textual details (Caracciolo, “Cognitive Literary Studies” 188).¹⁰¹ For the enactive approach, however, the body is essential and constitutive. In a weak version, we can say that “[p]hysical actions and gestures are inseparable features of perceiving” (Garratt 7). Radically, it can be claimed that the body is a self-individuating system, and it is “an adaptively autonomous and therefore sense-making system” (Paolo and Thompson 76). It is this suspicious privilege of the (embodied) body, which is driven by biological determinism, that I want to avoid in my model. For me, the interpretation of bodily experiences might be socio-culturally determined, yet fictional narratives, not to mention unnatural narratives, as artefacts, can—in a way, supposedly—challenge this restriction, bringing readers to unexploited areas. The capacity of a story’s magic and its metanarrative strategies to change readers’ views about real life are sidelined in the cognitive approach (Willemsen et al. 611).

Therefore, although I agree with the argument that the evocation of the body goes throughout the reading process, and that the feedback loop between biological make-up and socio-cultural meaning-making—the constructing and the receiving—should be duly discussed, I do not go as far as to contend that narrative is purely simulated or enacted. I want to make it a baseline in my model that the autonomy of narrative should be recognized, and texts should be first and foremost read as end-products. As mentioned, I share Richardson’s opinion that “nearly all texts have some stability” (Richardson, “Rejoinders” 497). The primary role of the text is echoed by Iser’s phenomenological theory of art, according to which though any response to any text is bound to be subjective, “this does not mean that the text disappears into the private world of its individual readers” (*The Act of Reading* 49). While the subject disposition of the reader is mobilized, the

¹⁰¹ Interestingly, Caracciolo also recognizes this as the kernel of literary studies, but he obviously thinks the introduction of embodiment is a good tool to bridge the gap.

process of assembling the meaning of the text is to fulfill “conditions that have already been structured in the text” (50). All in all, although my reading of emotionally evocative unnatural narratives applies cognitive concepts like embodiment and enactment, I want to remind my readers of the limitation of doing so.

Enactivism cannot save us from the socio-cultural limitation of our interpretive activities. This restriction is surfaced when there is no prior knowledge in one’s cognitive system that can be consulted to process certain narrative details. Here again I want to refer to a scene from Carter’s novel to illustrate that the reader’s enactment of narrative can be limited. The excerpt portrays a rape scene of Desiderio and Albertina by the centaur:

The white centaur thoughtfully pushed three fingers bunched up together up Albertina’s vagina and listened to her scream judiciously, with his head on one side. He lowered his muzzle and began to sniff her comprehensively. His working nostrils travelled over every inch of her skin and occasionally he licked her, to let the palate verify the evidence collected by his nose. His warm breath and rough tongue tickled her; she began to laugh and, when the bay followed suit and started to snuffle over me, soon I was laughing too, though it was a laughter close to hysteria. (*Doctor Hoffman* 212)

Not to mention the suspicious narrating voice, I believe that just enacting this unusual scene requires much cognitive effort. What is happening here? We know that the characters are being molested, by perceiving ourselves being in their shoes—a surely disgusting process; but how do we make sense of this bodily experience? In reality (or realistic situations), the atrocity can be inflicted upon humans and by humans, yet by centaurs? Can it mean something other than sexual assault? I think most readers have no registered cognitive knowledge to represent it. Our

sensorimotor system indeed operates, yet it is doubtful our cognitive system can adequately account for this somatic experience, and bridge the knowledge of it and the high-level interpretation of the narrative. The excerpt also poses difficulties for attributing consciousness. How to interpret the characters' "laugh" and "hysteria" here? Are they supposed to feel this way under such circumstances? We do not know. It is even harder to cope with the centaur's mentality. Human readers can never think as a centaur does, and there is no way of working out why he listens "judiciously" or sniffs "comprehensively"; furthermore, the fact that the narrative provides no internal focalization aggregates this intangibility. From my vantage point, this is a typical case showing that the enactment of storyworlds and consciousness is shaped by our socio-cultural conditions. When readers apply their real-world knowledge to enact the scene, they are constantly impeded by the details which elude mimetic construction.¹⁰²

Most of the time, readers will not encounter much difficulty in enacting the fictional world; in the case of unnatural narratives, however, the attempt of establishing coherence or logic is usually obstructed. My stance is that if an unnatural narrative constantly frustrates readers' simulation process—as shown in my above illustration—then we should probably no longer rely on cognitive tools. Instead, we are cued to turn to the unnaturalizing, non-cognitive approach, immersing ourselves in the presence effects unnaturalness gives rise to.

¹⁰² According to the second-generation approach, *enacting seeing* does not have to be *enacting seeing something pre-existent*, and readers can enact unnatural storyworlds which contravene social-cultural conventions. To me, enactment in this sense does not help with the interpretive move, as we are only seeing instead of making sense of the unnatural; we may resort to the ontological status of fictional narratives—in a fictional context we can enact seeing unnatural scenarios which are impossible in real-life situations—yet this does not differ much from the textual approach, and the gap between the body and meaning still exists.

2.9 Interlude: From Reader to Text

Just now I contended that even in cognitive readings, the autonomy of narrative should be acknowledged, and texts should be first and foremost read as end-products; if such is to be observed, we need to explore textual features that tend to make unnatural narratives more affectively evocative. From another perspective, this attempt to draw textual patterns is necessary, as we want to focus on the cognitive reading instead of the cognitive activity: while the reader's body is involved in reading any unnatural narrative, I am interested in cases where textual characteristics indicate the mind approach as the optimal *choice of interpretation* over other options.

My hypothesis is that an unnatural narrative which highlights its antimimetic storyworld and offers few descriptions of characters tends to foreground the ontological boundary between the textual world and reality, therefore cueing the adoption of unnaturalizing readings. By comparison, an unnatural narrative which is rich in mind activities and characterization usually invites emotional engagements, hence encouraging a leaning towards cognitive tools. It should be clear that it is not my intention to build any causality between textual features and affective reactions—I am only talking about *likelihood*, and to what extent certain textual features contribute to the reader's affective experience is subject to other contextual factors.

My assumed affinity between mind descriptions and cognitive readings is inspired by human beings' tendency to "read" people. As Zunshine contends, "Attributing states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment" (6). Though "the joy of reading fictional minds are subject to some of the same instabilities that render our real-life mind-reading both exciting and exasperating," readers can still deploy their ability "to explain

people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" (20, 6).¹⁰³ Caracciolo also claims that "consciousness-attribution is the most natural stance readers assume towards fictional characters, because of the similarity in the way real people and fictional characters express their consciousness or subjective experience" ("Fictional Consciousness" 50). This expression of subjective experience is usually enabled by the description of characters' external signs, and the telling sign of consciousness—language (43). It is believed that the insistence on perceptual acts, emotions, and in general "on the qualitative 'feel' of a character's conscious experience", can trigger the reading of consciousness, and this is especially the case in internally focalized narration (56).

So, the correlation between character reading and mind reading, and consequently the necessity of cognitive tools, is highlighted. The unnegligibility of the cognitive input in reading even unnatural minds has been recognized and discussed by the unnatural tradition. As Richardson and Bernaerts point out, fictional minds often incur an oscillation between the mimetic, which implies recognizability and representation, and the antimimetic, which defamiliarizes (525). This dialectics make possible a cooperation of the text-oriented approach, i.e. unnatural narratology, and the mind-oriented approach, i.e. cognitive narratology.¹⁰⁴ They argue that this point of synthesis is feasible in dealing with fictional minds in general, and unnatural minds in particular, as the evocation of mental states is indispensable in reading fiction—"[i]t is only via a reader's

¹⁰³ More specifically, according to Zunshine, our ability to read others' minds allows us to make sense of fictional characters by investigating them with an inexhaustible repertoire of states of mind, in spite of the price that we might begin to feel that fictional people indeed have an inexhaustible repertoire states of mind (20).

¹⁰⁴ Unnatural narratology here refers specifically to the intrinsic camp of unnatural narrative theory, which stresses the primacy of the violation of mimetic conventions. According to Richardson, this camp includes Nielsen, Iversen and himself (*Unnatural Narrative* 19). Alber's cognitive approach to unnatural narratives is not subsumed under the name.

mind that a text becomes a work of fiction” (534).¹⁰⁵ Mind construction might be saturated in all sorts of fiction, yet the call for it is mostly urgent when fiction displays a certain degree of psychological plausibility. While in the practice of criticism there is a major gap between cognitive narratology and unnatural narratology on the understanding of fictional minds, it is not necessary that the gap should also arise in the theoretical models. My takeaway from Richardson and Bernaerts’ study is that represented mental states would cue readers to the possibility of establishing coherent minds, and when it comes to mind-building and character interpretation, cognitive tools are naturally at hand. This still remains true for unnatural minds, as their deviance from the norm only emerges when the attempt to construct natural human minds encounters obstacles. Following this train of thought, by contrast, when an unnatural narrative does not textually invite the reading of characters, and offers very minimal possibility of mind-building, other aspects of unnaturalness come to the fore.

2.10 Summary: Empathy and Embodiment

So far, I have been talking about the recognizable part of our phenomenological experience of reading unnatural narratives, and how it informs the interpretative act. It is without doubt that narrative empathy is part of the embodied turn of cognitive studies, and the two are hardly separable. Yet they carry different purposes in my model. If, as second-generation cognitive studies claim, human beings are endowed with shared sensory mechanisms, and the reader’s body is always working in the reading process, it is only natural that the reader, given the chance, adopts perspective-taking and feels what the character feels. This is what narrative empathy is grounded upon—the reader has to, on some level, pulsate with the protagonist. Primarily, the notion

¹⁰⁵ It should be emphasized that for Richardson, even in dealing with mimetic fictional minds, it is reductive to just adopt cognitive tools, as even natural fictional minds and actual minds differ in kind.

recognizes the fact that readers' bodies are called upon, and that, in a biological sense, it has to be so. But how to level up the physiological reaction to the cognitive domain? To do so, we need to be able to cognitively describe felt emotions and explain how they interface with the text. Narrative empathy, as a joint effort of the author, the text, and the reader, starts from, yet is not reduced to, intersubjectivities; further exploited, it illuminates the emotional transaction between recipients and narrative. In terms of unnatural narratives, while the natural gesture to identify with characters is often deliberately harnessed, the evocation of emotion should by no means be out of the picture. As I see it, the notion of empathy is insightful in examining the communicative dimension of unnatural texts.

By comparison, the incorporation of the embodied reading rather aims at meaning-production: how the feedback loop between the mind and the body bears upon sense-making activities. The illumination manifests itself in two aspects. Firstly, the reading of bodily experiences is socio-culturally determined, and for a specific narrative, it is contextual. For instance, we infer what has happened or predict what to do, on the basis of felt emotions, which are extracted from our evaluations of events that cause specific reactions. In this sense, the embodied reading is both intuitive and reflective, and this back-and-forth process helps readers to engage with narrative.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, if the reader considers the text not as pre-existent but as enactable, this enacted storyworld does not have to conform to any predetermined pattern. In doing so, the focus is shifted from the perception of narrative to the very process of this perception. In the discussion of unnatural narratives, enactivism effectively accounts for both estranging and

¹⁰⁶ This is typically reflected in appraisal theories of emotion. The basic premise of appraisal theories is that “emotions are adaptive responses which reflect appraisals of features of the environment that are significant for the organism’s well-being” (Moors et al. 119). Rather than consisting primarily of abstract cognitive principles, appraisal often involves the recognition of action affordances in perceived events—the perception that an event invites or suggests what one can do with it, or what it prevents one from doing (120).

immersive moments—the antimimetic and the mimetic. From the reader’s perspective, the second-generation approach to a great extent increases the approachability of unnatural elements, and facilitates the process of familiarization.

2.11 A Collaboration of the Two Generations

At this stage I want to sketch a comparison between first-generation and second-generation cognitive approaches. As Caracciolo and Kukkonen remark, the former regards the mind as based on abstract, propositional representations, and the latter puts mental processes on a continuum with bioevolutionary phenomena and cultural practices (261). In the previous chapter, I have elaborated on Alber’s set of navigational tools of making sense of impossible scenarios or events. The proposed reading strategies relate to both our real-world knowledge, which is acquired through our physical being in the world, and our literary knowledge, which is gained through our exposure to narrative literature (*Unnatural Narrative* 47). Accordingly, strategies like “the blending of frames” and “subjectification” fall into the first category; whereas “generification,” “foregrounding the thematic,” “satirization and parody”, and so on belong to the second. While focusing on readers’ active deployment of the mind, Alber apparently downplays the role of the body in sense-making processes. This separation of the body and the mind is rectified in the second-generation framework: core notions like enactment, attribution, and simulation, not only stress the bodily participation, but also describe how the somatic dimension bears on mind activities. Another difference in emphasis between the two generations plays a role here: one being static and one being dynamic. The feedback loop between the body and the mind highlights meaning-production as a constant process of negotiation; whereas the first-generation in this regard runs the risk of setting down interpretation once for all.

But I do not think that the two generations are diametrically opposed to each other. As Fludernik contends, any dichotomy between the two fails to note that “cognitive prototype theory was developed *alongside*—that is to say, *at the same time*—as frame theory and AI work and that a history of cognitive studies might perhaps better start out from an inherent duality in cognitive work” (original emphasis). Therefore, research that is static and abstract should work hand in hand with research that looks at the body and human experience (“Afterword” 406). Dealing with unnatural narratives, “e-approaches” draw attention to how our phenomenological reactions help to enact and dig into even the most estranging narrative world, and Alber’s toolkit, at a higher level, informs us of the ethical dimension of unnatural scenarios; working together, both camps turn out conducive to interpreting unnatural texts. Fruits from both generations hence will be included in my strategy, and detailed case analyses will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

2.12 An Upgraded Embodied Reading

In the light of the detailed analysis of narrative empathy and embodiment, one might wonder what a reading on the basis of the discussed mind approach is like. Now I will give a brief illustration by referring to Paul Auster’s novella *Timbuktu* (1999). The work is about the life of a dog, Mr. Bones, who is struggling to come to terms with the fact that his homeless master Willy G. Christmas is dying. The following is an excerpt from the text:

If there is any justice in the world, if the dog god had any influence on what happened to his creatures, then man’s best friend would stay by the side of man after said man and said best friend had both kicked the bucket. . . . That was what logic dictated, but who knew if justice or logic had any more impact on the next world than they did on this one? . . . What if Timbuktu turned out to be one of those places with fancy carpets and expensive antiques?

What if no pets were allowed? It didn't seem possible, and yet Mr. Bones had lived long enough to know that anything was possible, that impossible things happened all the time. Perhaps this was one of them, and in that *perhaps* hung a thousand dreads and agonies, an unthinkable horror that gripped him every time he thought about it. (50-51; original emphasis)

Let us start with the phenomenological dimension. I suppose that anyone who reads the novella, like me, feels pity for Mr. Bones: a dog on the edge of losing his longtime companion; his heartbreaking journey of finding a home; the eventual flinging into the promised land—Timbuktu ... We develop empathetic feelings for Mr. Bones because of the inherent sentimentality we possess for small furry animals, but also the extensive and humanized depiction of the canine mentality. Through the access to the dog's consciousness, we build emotional connections with him, and the ontological distance between actual readers and the fictional character is largely bridged. To some extent, such emotional engagements are too strong that we might forget the fact that this canine perspective is actually unnatural—dogs definitely have consciousness, but consciousness of a combination of unusual intellectual sophistication and canine naivety?¹⁰⁷ While both *Doctor Hoffman* and *Timbuktu* are unnatural narratives, our affective reactions to them are far from the same: Carter's narrative constantly defamiliarizes readers, whereas Auster's work engages us into the story.

So, we are enchanted by Mr. Bones' circumstances, and we pulsate with the dog's fate. Next, we need to work on how such immersiveness bears upon our interpretation, and how the

¹⁰⁷ It is obviously inappropriate to read Auster's story as a fable. The realistic context of the narrative, and its widespread, though implicit, self-reflection make it far from a simple moral tale. While the text is not as "hard-core" experimental as Calvino's work, it is to me undoubtedly unnatural. I will talk more about the narrative's unnaturalness in the next chapter.

overflow of sentimentality familiarizes the unnatural. The excerpt is an example of heterodiegetic narration with internal focalization, one upshot of which, I argue, is that the reader is aware that the consciousness he/she is experiencing is not human-like—he/she is entering a dog’s mind and he/she has to attribute consciousness to it. Yet this third-person attribution does not weaken the emotional engagement too much. In association with what has happened to Mr. Bones and what he is going to face, it is only reasonable to interpret his consciousness even from the human reader’s perspective; after all, the sorrow of losing beloved ones and the anxiety for the uncertain fate is something that every reader can relate to. As Caracciolo argues, both the experience of real people and the experience of fictional characters are narratively constructed (“Fictional Consciousness” 49). Even though Mr. Bones is a dog, the reader can still imagine what his experience is like on the basis of what he has been through and of the narrated consciousness. In this way, the strangeness of Mr. Bones’ consciousness becomes inconspicuous. Thematically, this sharing of mentality serves the larger plan of offering readers more food-for-thought about the human condition and the nature of love. Building emotional bonds is crucial, and Auster himself mentions the importance of feelings in the novella: “This book is much more nakedly about *feelings*. I wanted to try to enter a world in which *passion and the intensity of emotion are the dominant subjects*” (“Q&A”; my emphasis).

As affect and emotion are not mutually exclusive, an unnaturalizing interpretation is still optional. For the above excerpt, an unnaturalizing perspective foregrounds the constructed-ness of Mr. Bones’ consciousness—the dog’s improbable meditation is no more than the writer’s craftsmanship, and it is insufficient, if meaningful, to read the dog’s mentality against realistic parameters. As Thomas Nagel argues in “What is it Like to be a Bat?” (1974), “no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that

there is something it is like to *be* that organism,” and this is what he calls “the subjective character of experience” (436; original emphasis).¹⁰⁸ Thus, in reality, we have to face the asymmetry between facts on the one hand, and conceptual schemas or systems on the other (441). Reading Auster’s narrative, however, we can know exactly what it is like to be a dog like Mr. Bones.

To sum up, the cognitive reading in my model of unnatural narratology should go as follows. Phenomenologically, the reader experiences the evocation of emotion, a direct signpost of which is empathetic feelings. Different from the case of affect/presence effects where one encounters representational crises, the somatic reaction here is more recognizable—taking the character’s role, the reader knows what he/she feels and why he/she feels so. An unnatural scenario allowing such a flow of sentimentality invites the reader’s input and wants its communicative ends to be recognized. Insofar as the reader’s mind enters the picture, cognitive tools are ready to work. The next step is to justify the felt emotion and to ground meaning-production upon it. When the reader is already emotionally aroused, he/she supposedly projects real-life knowledge into the narrative—he/she treats fictional characters in the same way as he/she does real people. Through the embodied reading, the reader enters the text in the shoes of the character, and makes sense of what is happening by mind-reading—inference, predication ... Unnatural elements are not unsolvable, as long as the recipient adopts the enactive view and regards narrative reading as enacting seeing, rather than as fitting into existent picture-like mental images. While doing so, we examine what lies behind the bodily experience. Can we describe it? What is the purpose of feeling

¹⁰⁸ Nagel’s article can be read as a pioneering discussion of the mind-body problem, which is at the kernel of second-generation cognitive approaches. He claims that “mental states are states of the body; mental events are physical events” (446). Different from the second-generation, Nagel stresses the significance of consciousness in physicalism rather than the crucial role of the body in mind theories. Physicalism is the ontological thesis that everything is physical, and that there is nothing over and above the physical. See J.J.C. Smart, “Sensations and Brain Processes” (1959).

so? How is it related to the overall meaning of the text? In this way, our phenomenological experience is put on a continuum with the interpretation of narrative.

2.13 The Classification of Unnatural Elements

Now I want to take a detour to talk about some confusion ensuing from the current classification of unnatural elements. My intention to do so is out of practical concern. Unnatural narratologists classify unnaturalness into three distinct yet often connected aspects: unnatural storyworlds, unnatural minds, and unnatural acts of narration. Unnatural storyworlds contain “physical or logical impossibilities that concern the represented world’s temporal or spatial organization”; unnatural minds cue readers to evoke a mind, yet the process is hindered, disfigured or in other ways “challenged by identifiable and describable features of the narrative”; unnatural narrations refer to “physically, logically, mnemonically, or psychologically impossible enunciations” (Alber et al. “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” 116, 120, 124).¹⁰⁹ There is no doubt that such differentiation is insightful, yet applying it to specific analyses may lead to confusion and repetition: while an unnatural storyworld is comparatively differentiable among the three, the line between unnatural minds and unnatural narrations is often fuzzy—especially in the case of first-person narrative, it is practically impossible to talk about an act of narration without discussing the narrator and his/her mentality.

¹⁰⁹ In this thesis, I am using “mind” and “consciousness” interchangeably. In *Fictional Minds* (2005), Alan Palmer makes a distinction between the two: “Generally, I use the term *mind* in preference to alternatives such as consciousness and thought. The use of the latter two terms is often accompanied by a tendency to see mental life mainly in terms of inner speech. In addition, consciousness can have the implication of self-consciousness, which I want to avoid because it deflects attention from non-consciousness and latent states of mind” (19). My use of “consciousness” is not confined to inner states; it is an inclusive term encompassing not just cognition and perception, but also feelings, beliefs, dispositions, and emotions, just like “mind.”

For me, one's narration is the main medium through which we get to know his/her thoughts, and the detection of any mismatch—by mimetic conventions—between the narrator and his/her narration necessities the reference to represented consciousness. As Caracciolo underlines, unlike animals, human beings can use the powerful tool of language to express their thoughts, and thus language is commonly regarded as a telltale sign of consciousness (“Fictional Consciousness” 48). Daniel D. Hutto also contends that one's “linguistic utterances of pain are natural extensions of, or replacements for, [one's] earlier ways of expressing pain—i.e. shouting, bawling, and the like” (128). Hutto highlights the affinity between narration and consciousness, and it is this inextricability that sometimes makes the elaboration of the unnatural following the proposed tripartition repetitive. For example, in “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology” (2010), the discussion of the overlap of the narrating “I” and the experiencing “I” appears in the section “unnatural minds” as well as the section “unnatural acts of narration.”¹¹⁰ Having said so, however, I am not treating unnatural minds and unnatural narration as identical—I do think differentiating the two is significant for examining the unnatural in various facets. For the concision of textual analyses, I do not strictly follow the current differentiation; unless stated otherwise, I will discuss different aspects of the unnatural in relation to each other.

2.14 What's Next?

This chapter firstly discusses the necessity of including the bodily participation in the interpretation of unnatural narratives, and the philosophical basis of doing so—the phenomenological tradition. In the light of different body-mind relations, and consequently, different ways of sense-making, I

¹¹⁰ In the section “unnatural acts of narration,” this conflation is described as “the conflating of the time of the telling and the time of the action.” For me these are two sides of the same coin. See “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology,” 121-23, 128.

point out two aspects of the reader's affective experience of the unnatural—the representable and the unrepresentable. To theoretically account for the two sides, I respectively elaborate on the notions of affect and emotion, and their affordances in my proposed model. Moving on from the somatic dimension to the production of meaning, I explain in detail unnaturalizing readings and cognitive readings, respectively in view of Gumbrecht's philosophy and the embodied approach to cognitive studies. In the meantime, I also examine some practical issues: the contextuality of readers' affective reactions, the possible textual features of affectively engaging unnatural narratives, and the necessity of streamlining unnatural elements in case analyses.

I have shown the importance of readers' affective reactions in coming to terms with unnatural narratives. As I constantly emphasize, my model is by no means prescriptive, and I have no intention to build any dichotomies—affect and emotion, unnaturalizing and cognitive, they are all in continuous interaction with each other. The application of my model therefore should be flexible and contextual. In the next chapter, I will illustrate this flexibility and contextuality in case analyses. I will look at three fictional narratives that, though unnatural, bring readers different affective experiences, and examine how the phenomenological fact bears on the production of meaning.

CHAPTER THREE: CASE ANALYSES

Previously, I have examined the pros and cons of the current approaches to unnatural narratives, and pointed out the general standoff between textual and cognitive interpretations. To do justice to both the communicativeness and the textuality of unnatural elements, I bridge the two methodologies by introducing the reader's phenomenological experience into the discussion; my own model has illustrated why and how the heterogeneous affective dimension interacts with interpretive strategies. In this chapter, I will put the theory into practice, and demonstrate how my model performs in three phenomenologically-different unnatural contexts.

The three chosen unnatural narratives are *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* by Angela Carter, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* by Italo Calvino, and *Timbuktu* by Paul Auster, and they differ from each other in terms of the feelings evoked. I want to highlight that it is not my intention to classify unnatural texts; rather, I hope to underline that one's affective experience of unnatural narratives is never unified, and a detailed investigation of this diversity enables us to see how, in a specific case, the unnatural interacts with other contextual factors. It is expected that we gain a better understanding of how the rivalry between the invented nature and the affective baggage of the unnatural bears on the production of meaning.

This chapter is divided into three parts, in accordance with three generalized phenomenological experiences: the composite, the bodily dependent, and the emotionally provocative. I will start with Carter's novel, which strikes readers as affectively overwhelming, if not totally inexplicable; I then move on to Calvino's classic, which foregrounds the reader's physical relation to the text; lastly I zoom in on the animal story *Timbuktu*, whose provoked sentimentality far outweighs the transgressiveness of the represented unnatural. It is interesting to

see that, though all the three texts challenge established narrative conventions, the inscribed unnatural elements are exploited for different purposes, as a result of which the affective responses evoked in readers are diverse. In each case analysis, I will demonstrate in detail how the change in the affective property shapes the selection of interpretive toolkits. Apart from being unnatural, another commonality the three texts share is the inscription of the fantastic; with this genre as a connector, I aim to explore how fantastic elements are contextualized to produce different effects—I introduce this perspective to underline the situatedness of interpreting unnatural texts.¹¹¹

3.1 A Reading of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*

New readers of Angela Carter, if informed of the writer's liking of fairy tale, may expect her works to be enchanting and engaging. Indeed, Carter's appreciation of oral tradition is solid: to her, for most of human history, literature "has been narrated, not written", and stories typifying oral tradition, such as fairy tales and folk tales, are "the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created our world" ("Introduction" xi). It turns out that, however, Carter's narratives only strike readers as too odd to be comprehended. Reading Carter is a bittersweet experience, as we constantly recognize something familiar and then overturn this claimed familiarity; in the end, we may lament our naivety when approaching Carter in any conventional way.

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman (hereafter *DH*) features Desiderio, a government minister in the main city, which is under attack by Doctor Hoffman's desire machines.

¹¹¹ My use of the fantastic in this chapter is not confined to Todorov's definition—the hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous. The genre can also be defined in terms of the oscillation between this world and the world next door, to borrow Brian McHale's words (*Postmodernist Fiction* 75). I intend to offer an angle to examine how fantastic elements are exploited differently to produce different phenomenological experiences. This is different from using the concept to describe readers' reactions.

Desiderio embarks on a journey to assassinate the Doctor; choosing reality over desires, he eventually kills the Doctor and his daughter. The work is extremely imaginative in content and highly hybrid in form; it is often regarded as a representative of the fantastic and magic realism. In spite of the represented fantastic events, the novel cannot be satisfyingly classified as a fantastic work. While it definitely displays “a tendency to veer off into magical realism, and a world governed by dreams, magic and fairytales”, the employment of magic realism is often subversive, foregrounding Carter’s demythologizing purpose (Andermahr 13). According to the traditional, epistemological account, the fantastic is less a genre than a transient state of texts which belong to one of two adjacent genres: the genre of the uncanny, in which supernatural events are ultimately explained away by the laws of nature, and the genre of the marvelous, in which supernatural scenarios eventually become the norm (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 74). In either case, offbeat things are designed to be rationalized in epistemologically acceptable terms, or, from the readerly perspective, they can be naturalized without much effort, by turning recourse to either psychological explanations or literary conventionalities. In these readings, the boundary between this world, i.e. the reader’s reality, and the other world, i.e. the place where weird things happen, is clearly drawn. But Carter apparently does not sanction this interpretation, and her writings demonstrate constant moves between historical actuality and magic realism (Andermahr 13), or this world and the world next door, to borrow Brian McHale’s words.¹¹² As a result, our reading experience of *DH* is quite different from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). In *DH*, by parading the fusion of reality and vision, Carter frustrates the attempt of representing the real, as a result of which the expected fantastic effect is largely weakened.

¹¹² McHale argues that the postmodernist fantastic can be seen as a zone of hesitation between this world and the world next door, not between the uncanny and the marvelous (*Postmodernist Fiction* 75).

Carter's simultaneous inscription and disintegration of traditional forms may explain why our phenomenological experience of *DH* is hardly ascertainable. Although, as a postmodernist parody, the narrative can never escape being complicit with the system against which it aims to revolt, it effectively deconstructs the process of signification, and reveals the social nature of cultural activity.¹¹³ In terms of unnatural narrative theory, this double-coding process signposts a constant interaction between the nonmimetic and the antimimetic. Phenomenologically, at one moment the reader seems to identify with characters' emotions; the next moment he/she is struck by ontological anxiety and unnamed bodily sensations. In the following part, I will elaborate on this heterogeneous experience of reading *DH*, and on how different affective reactions lead to differential interpretive moves. My discussion starts with negative affective reactions, moves on to affects, and ends with emotional connections between readers and the character.

Turing Away: Personal Distress

The Unnatural Discourse

DH is an affectively challenging narrative. The flaunting of emotionless intercourse, the humiliation of the body, and the unabashed portrayal of indecencies are so overwhelmingly immoral, and they greatly hinder the reader's engagement with the text. My own reading experience of *DH* was far from pleasant. I constantly felt the mobilization of sensory organs, and in the meantime, the reluctance to experience this, hence the impulse to abort the reading process. In fact, I had to force myself to finish the novel.

¹¹³ According to Linda Hutcheon, though postmodernism is incompatible with activist ends, it views art as "a social sign inevitably and unavoidably enmeshed in other signs in systems of meaning and value", and aims at disclosing the constructed-ness of cultural activities (148).

As I see it, one important trigger of such negativity is the narrative's excessive deployment of pornographic discourse.¹¹⁴ For instance, the description of the peep-show is unclad: "The dark red and purple crenellations surrounding the vagina acted as a frame for a perfectly round hole through which the viewer glimpsed the moist, luxuriant landscape of the interior" (44). Here is another example: "[a] candle in the shape of a penis of excessive size, with scrotum attached, in a state of pronounced tumescence" (47). Such bold discourse as this, is also applied to the characters: "Then the white spread her [Albertina's] legs wide and investigated the aperture involuntarily offered him, clearly comparing it with the size of his tumescent organ. . . . Nevertheless he pulled her down to the edge of the table and in it went, after a hideous struggle" (212). Additionally, the illustration of immoral and perverted sex is enormous. Most readers will probably be driven away by the protagonist Desiderio's pedophilia: "When I climbed into the bed beside her [Aoi], she snuggled very prettily in my arms, reached down for my penis in a very businesslike way and began to stroke it with very considerable dexterity" (93). This unsettling scene of the nine-year-old Aoi's skillful procurement of orgasm for Desiderio is followed by the unorthodox sex between him and Mama: "She twittered a few words of admonition but, at the same time, slid fast the wooden bolt on the galley door and took me against the bulwark with a great deal of gasping" (95). As the narrator remarks, his time with the river people passes in elaborate love play with the erotic, giggling toy—Aoi—at night, and the toy's grandmother—Mama—in the morning.

It is interesting to see that, while sex is all over the place, the feeling of pleasure is missing, and in many cases, the separation of the body and the mind is conspicuous. Here is an example:

¹¹⁴ In terms of narrative, pornography "depicts sexuality as transgressively obscene" and it includes explicit or implicit portrayals of genitalia. Compared to erotic works, pornography is lacking in emotional elaboration (Herman et al. 444). For Gregory J. Robinson, to substitute a variety of metaphors for parts of the body is the most recognizable language conventions of pornographic literature (722).

“They [the Arabs] gave me the most comprehensive anatomy lesson a man ever suffered, in which I learned every possible modulation of the male apparatus” (135). In another case, “None of them [the centaurs] seemed to extract the least pleasure out of the act. They undertook it grimly, as though it were their duty” (213). To push the limits further, love-making and killing are juxtaposed, as in the Count’s murder of a prostitute: “I strangled with my legs a mulatto whore just as she coaxed the incense from my member with a mouth the shape, colour and texture of an overripe plum” (148). The narrative further disrupts readers by boldly describing the last barrier of human dignity—farts and excrement. The pirates are described as having only the most primitive idea of fun—“they stripped off their loincloths and, one and all, embarked on a farting contest” (180). In another case, the centaurs regard excrement as signifying the presence of their god, the Sacred Stallion, and “The twice daily movement of their bowels was at once a form of prayer and a divine communion” (208). Norms are savagely desecrated in these scenarios.

All these representations are nerve-racking, and what enhances the distressing effect is the metaphorical language. Carter’s picturesque and highly-loaded language slows down the process of decoding, and in the meantime foregrounds the mediacy of words. After the long process of translating the signifier into the signified, what readers get is a disturbing contrast between the beauty of the language and the indecency of what is represented, hence a more intensified sense of repulsion. In this way, the discourse of the narrative is very unnatural, as it is constructed to surprise readers and defy their reading habits. Carter’s play with language challenges the assumption that “language is undistorted mirror, of transparent window on, the ‘real’”, and hinders readers’ engagement with the storyworld (Palmer, “Realist Novel” 491).

Experientially, such unnaturalness gives rise to negative affective reactions, such as the withdrawal from reading, which is symptomatic of personal distress. As mentioned in the previous

chapter, different from empathy, personal distress is a self-focused, aversive affective reaction to the apprehension of another's emotion, which "often may stem from empathic overarousal or a kind of distortion of highly arousing empathic emotion" (Eisenberg 76).¹¹⁵ To grasp the distinction between the two, we shall understand the relationship of "self" and "other" in empathetic situations. Firstly, it is important to note that even for empathy, identification and distance go hand in hand. As Kathleen Lundeen claims, "empathy manifests the apparent affinity one person has with another, but in so doing it magnifies the difference between them" (269). In fact, "feeling with" and "feeling for" are hardly separable. Narratives often compel readers to imagine what we would feel in that character's place, yet because they have gaps that we must fill, our difference from the character always exists, no matter how sympathetic or empathetic the reaction is (Halpern 138). When self-oriented perspective-taking takes the upper hand, namely, when "otherness" is foregrounded, personal distress is more likely to occur (Halpern 139).¹¹⁶ Personal distress, in a nutshell, is coupled with self-oriented, egoistic concern, and it implies a metacognitive awareness of the subject reacting empathically: "One not only feels distressed but knows this feeling is a response to something unfortunate happening to someone else and to what one assumes to be the victim's feeling of pain or discomfort" (Hoffman 63).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Nancy Eisenberg also observes that personal distress sometimes derives from other emotion-related processes—shame, for instance—or from retrieving relevant information from mental storage or through perspective-taking (which leads to aversive emotional states) (76).

¹¹⁶ On the nature of empathy, Amy Coplan juxtaposes "self-oriented perspective-taking," where the observer imagines what she, with her own background and values, would feel in another's place, and "other-oriented perspective-taking," where the observer imagines what she would feel in another's place if she had had a similar background and experiences as the other person (9-10). Coplan does not regard "self-oriented perspective-taking" as proper empathy.

¹¹⁷ Martin Hoffman sees such distress as a signpost of maturation: "Mature empathizers have thus passed the developmental milestone of acquiring a cognitive sense of themselves and others as separate entities with independent internal states, personal identities, and lives beyond the situation and can therefore distinguish what happens to others from what happens to themselves" (63).

From my vantage point, Carter's parade of various obscenities successfully differentiates and distances readers from the characters: we do not want to experience what the characters go through, and the gap between "we" and "they" is established. The lack of identification may discourage readers from reading, and it is unlikely that the negative emotions evoked will bear on the actual life. In this regard, we can understand why empathy-related responding can predicate positive social and moral functioning, whereas personal distress is not socially beneficial: altruistic behaviors are often defined as those prosocial behaviors motivated by other-oriented or moral emotions rather than egoistic or pragmatic concerns (Eisenberg 76). In the context of personal distress, while what the body feels is recognizable, the emotional connection is overshadowed by critical reflection—the distance between "self" and "other."

Sex is familiar to us, yet why the sex between humans and non-humans? Why the mechanical intercourse devoid of emotions? Why the brutalization of supposedly wonderful love-making? Sex, in distorted forms, is so overdone in *DH* that the heavy-handed author is too present to be ignored. With both emotionality and textuality in the picture, how do we make sense of the above unnatural representations?

Coming to Terms with the Unnatural Representations

Some background knowledge of the author may help. Carter claims herself to be a demythologizer, and she believes that "*this* world is all that there is, and in order to question the nature of reality one must move from a strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality" (original emphasis). For the writer, "all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice" ("Notes from the Front Line" 25). Specifically, pornography plays an important role in Carter's demythologizing project. In *The Sadeian Woman* (1978), she proposes

the concept of “moral pornography,” which exploits pornography “as total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind” (20). It is in this context that Carter boldly reappraises pornography and the notorious Sade in feminist terms.¹¹⁸ To her, although pornography involves “an abstraction of human intercourse in which the self is reduced to its formal elements”, Sade’s philosophy is not good for nothing (4).¹¹⁹ Carter appreciates Sade’s straightforward depictions that “free women’s sexuality from a purely reproductive function”—“If sex is power in Sade, then women too can have that power” (10). Sexual relations as a social reality are hereby highlighted: women are encouraged to “fuck as actively as they are able, so that powered by their enormous and hitherto untapped sexual energy they will then be able to fuck their way into history and, in doing so, change it” (31).

By this token, readers should refrain from endorsing the presumed misogynist nature of pornography while reading *DH*; instead of arousing pleasure, these pornographic scenarios give rise to disgust and anxiety, and it is meant to be so—Carter’s narrative contrives to contravene the generic pattern by revealing the constructed-ness of sexual norms. We might as well take a closer look at the sex scenes. It should be noted that Desiderio, the male protagonist, is actually depicted as incapable when Albertina is being raped: “When I tried to scramble over the great board of oak to reach her and protect her, the bay easily held me down with one hand” (212). The male ego is thus ruthlessly crushed in front of the centaurs. Moreover, the prescribed “male gaze” is rewritten

¹¹⁸ Marquis de Sade was a French nobleman, revolutionary politician, philosopher, and writer. Sade is best known for his erotic works which depict sexual fantasies with an emphasis on violence, suffering, and criminality. The words “sadism” and “sadist” are derived from his name.

¹¹⁹ Evaluating Sade in feminist terms is controversial. Susanne Kappeler believes that reading Sade “as artist and writing subject” rather than criticizing his position as a “multiple rapist and murderer” is immoral (134). Andrea Dworkin dismisses Carter’s discussion of Sade as a “pseudofeminist literary essay” showing more interest in celebrating Sade than investigating implications of the asymmetrical gender relations underpinning pornography (84).

to be imposed from *men* upon *men*.¹²⁰ Desiderio is cruelly gang-raped by the Moroccans, and the teasing of gender roles is obvious: “I was surrounded by eyes. . . . Once again, they juggled with their hypnotic eyes and used their palpable eye strings to bind me in invisible bonds. . . . I was filled with important rage as the wave of eyes broke over me” (135). Scenes like these effectively dismiss the conception that the sexual relationship is naturally heterosexual and male-dominant. Furthermore, the idea that gender, as culturally and historically constructed, is different from the biologically determined sex, is voiced in Desiderio’s transgressive affairs with Aoi and Mama. The supposedly subordinate females are endowed with power. Desiderio’s long-expected intercourse with the girl never comes true—he is sexually at the mercy of Aoi all the time; the sex with Mama is not without compromise, as he experiences guilt, and feels like “a love slave” (96). There are also extreme moments when sex is demonized as a violent weapon: in the case of the Count’s murder of the prostitute, the reader is forced to realize the horrible consequence of sexism.

Carter’s demythologizing project also manifests in her disintegration of surrealist principles. First of all, blasphemy is inscribed. The religionization of the centaurs’ rituals, the desecrated juxtaposition of excrement and faith, and Desiderio’s haunting memory of the centaurs mingled with “the rich smell of fresh horse-dung” (*DH* 211), are full of degradation. These descriptions echo surrealism’s aesthetics of perversion and anti-clericalism: “Everything remains to be done, every means must be worth trying, in order to lay waste to the ideas of *family*, *country*, *religion* . . . there is no room for compromise” (Breton 128-29; original emphasis). Having said so, however, I do not think that Carter’s historical materialist worldview dovetails with

¹²⁰ Laura Mulvey argues that there are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, and scopophilia is a case in point. Sigmund Freud associates scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. Extremely, this gaze “can become fixated into a perversion” (806). The woman is usually “displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men” (811).

surrealism's belief in a deeper reality which unifies binary systems and reconciles contradictions; the final destruction of Doctor Hoffman also negates the possible merging of the unconscious and the real.¹²¹ While the surrealist canon is inscribed, it is eventually repudiated. At the end of the day, there is hardly a norm in Carter's narrative, and the seemingly solid footing previously established is subject to deconstruction.

In this section I try to come to grips with the unnatural discourse of *DH* in the light of the provoked personal distress. As I have pointed out, personal distress is a form of empathy-related responding, and it falls into the recognizable, emotional domain; however, because it is an aversive, self-focused emotional reaction, readers can hardly "feel with" the characters, and the distance between their reality and the storyworld is more underlined than that in proper empathy. Given this, to take into account both the experimentation with language and the emotions evoked, my interpretation includes both unnaturalizing and cognitive readings. In terms of the former, in view of Carter's cosmology, I call attention to the author's design in inciting uneasiness in readers, thus the invented nature of the unnatural; for the latter, I take the simultaneous inscription and disintegration of pornographic and surrealistic canons to be a case of Carter's parody, which foregrounds the deep-rooted cultural myths and their constructed nature.

Foregrounded Textuality: Affects

The negativity of affects is different from personal distress, in that it is not that the reader feels negative about what he/she feels—a metacognitive awareness—but that what he/she feels is cognitively ungraspable, and the explanative power of established epistemological systems is

¹²¹ As Scott Dimovitz comments, for Breton and his followers, surrealism aims for "a higher understanding of the world that synthesized the greater truth of the unconscious and the material world" (67-68).

doubted. *DH* provokes affects by highlighting the artificiality of the narrative, and the break in the mimetic illusion is reflected both in content and form. My discussion will start with unnatural events and minds: jumbled spaces and temporalities, and the protagonist's illogical and fragmented narration. I then proceed to the structure—the extensive use of self-reflexivity and intertextuality. I lastly demonstrate an unnaturalizing reading of these unnatural elements.

Unnatural Storyworld and Minds

The storyworld of *DH* is a metamorphosed world where the ontological boundary of spirits and humans is redefined. In it, stones are speaking, pillars are chanting, and “[h]ardly anything remained the same for more than one second” (13). To be exact, “the city was no longer the conscious production of humanity; it has become the arbitrary realm of dream” (13). Not only so, the conventional conception of time and space is denied: “Past time occupied the city for whole days together, sometimes, so that the streets of a hundred years before were superimposed on nowadays streets” (16). While metamorphosis gives off the uncanny vibe characteristic of fantastic texts, the direct confrontation between this world and the other world(s) transcends the traditional fantastic work. The ontological oscillation is further intensified by paradoxical juxtapositions and anachronism. Albertina and Desiderio climb into a military transport and fly to Hoffman's Wagnerian castle in which complicated scientific equipment is installed, and modern magazines like *Playboy*, *The New Yorker*, *Time* and *Newsweek* are read (232-34, 237); the Count and Desiderio, *riding horses*, escape from the pursuit of the *police cars* (164); on the ship sailing to Africa, the cabin-boy tells Lafleur about his motorbike in Liverpool—this is happening in the early nineteenth century (168-69) ... There are so many temporalities and spaces going on!

If, as Doctor Hoffman implies, spatial dislocation and temporal anachronism in “The Coast of Africa” and “Lost in Nebulous Time” are just manifestations of the unconscious, his own world is however by no means more real. In fact, the Doctor never subscribes to a solid reality, as he believes that “[i]t all depends on persistence of vision” (131), and he exists because, and *only because*, he *desires* (252). For Desiderio, his footing of reality relies on the heroic killing of the Cannibal Chief, which is yet despairingly negated by Hoffman: ““He [the Cannibal Chief] was brought into being only because of the Count’s desire for self-destruction”” (253). In the end, we wonder if there is any “reality” in this metamorphosed world.

Another unnatural element that readers have to wrestle with is the protagonist and the narrator of *DH*—Desiderio. Picking up this retrospective narrative, one may expect a high level of engagement, since first-person narration conventionally enables the narrator to narrate his own experiences and perceptions, and hence more likely evokes identification (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 97). But Desiderio is not a typical first-person narrator, and most of the time, he captures an external stance, somewhat like a detached third-person narrator (external focalization). Desiderio seldom describes his feelings, even in situations where he himself is very much concerned; when he does open his heart, his narration often strikes readers with a lack of building-up, as if he were at the mercy of some unnamed power. Examples are abundant: “*I do not know* why I scooped up the dripping corpse of the girl in my arms and tried to make my escape with her. *I think I wanted* to rescue her from the housekeeper” (*DH* 66; my emphasis); “though the message was undirected and unsigned, *I knew it was meant for me* and that it came from Albertina” (111; my emphasis); “I never dreamed I could regret those rank fish stews but otherwise *I found I bore up to captivity well enough*” (171; my emphasis); “I still suspect he [the Count] might really be the Doctor and *so I knew* I must travel with him, no matter what happened” (249; my emphasis). While claiming

himself to be immune to the Hoffman effect, Desiderio is obviously not that autonomous; rather, with a lack of logic and motivation, he passively accepts what is given to him without independent thinking. The character's incoherent thoughts are, therefore, difficult to deal with: there is no way to retrieve their source, nor is it possible to establish causality, just like the peep-show samples whose wholeness is replaced by fragments. As readers, we are unable to explain his behavior on the basis of natural minds, or predict his action as the journey continues. The denial to the inner world shapes Desiderio as a character with a human body yet without a "normal" human soul.

Yet it is not accurate to say that the body and the soul are totally severed. Although Desiderio's passivity makes him more like an automaton than an autonomous human being, there are moments when his stance and judgment are revealed. Interestingly, the immorality of his comments is so accentuated that the revelation only enhances the narrator's unnaturalness. Witnessing the disappearing Cathedral, Desiderio says: "I was faintly regretting that the spectacle had not taken place at night when I should have *enjoyed* it better. . . . Berlioz crashed above us, we stood in the heart of *a fantastic symphony*" (27; my emphasis). While the Minister is weeping for the losing of "reality," the narrator is nonchalant, untimely appreciating the collapsing view. The immoral tone is further enhanced in describing the rape: "their organs were so *prodigious*, their virility so *unmentionable*" (207; my emphasis). A few pages later, the centaur "lowered his muzzle and began to sniff her *comprehensively*" and his nostrils "travelled over every inch of her skin and occasionally he licked her, *to let his palate verify* the evidence collected by his nose" (212; my emphasis). This cold-blooded portrayal of one's beloved being raped makes us shiver, and it is hard to come up with mimetic explanations for the narrator's repelling detachment. In fact, in *DH*, violence has always been illustrated flowerily and metaphorically. This is how Desiderio narrates the final killing in the Doctor's lab: "And all the naked lovers had abandoned their communion to

lament their dead and the dying on whose beautiful flesh the *bright blood blossomed*" (258; my emphasis). In another example, the narrator goes that "I *savaged* her throat with my teeth as if I were a *tiger* and she were the *trophy* I seized *in the forests of the night*" (259; my emphasis). It is possible to attribute the immorality of Desiderio the narrator to his dehumanization, yet this to me is a reductive reading. If he is devoid of humanity, what about his disorientation at the end of the narrative? What about his lament and awakening that "the impossible is, *per se*, impossible" (264)? What about his defense of "reality"?¹²² From my vantage point, the unreadability of Desiderio lies precisely in the co-existence of his lack of rationality and marked idiosyncrasy.

Here, one may think "doesn't my above analysis show a way of interpreting and hence naturalizing the character, with reference to conventional notions of human minds?" Yes and no. Firstly, I have to admit that reading Desiderio against mimetic canons is an intuitive move, though this attempt constantly gets frustrated. In "Unreadable Minds and the Captive Reader" (2008), H. Porter Abbott proposes three default responses to unreadable minds: the opaque type, the catalyst, and the symbol (453). To me, all the three fail to fully account for the protagonist of *DH*. Desiderio is definitely an opaque character—without a full access to his inner world, everything stays on the surface and no behavior is foreseeable. Yet to treat the narrator as opaque is not much different from seeing it as unreadable—it only proves that the endeavor to essentialize him does not work. The second response—to read it as a function in the characterization of another—is also endemic. Who can Desiderio serve? It is his narrative and he is the indisputable leading character of the story; for readers, there is no way to escape him, and the confrontation with his elusiveness is absolute. Nor is it convincing to read Desiderio as an idea, namely, to shift from what he is to what

¹²² I also sympathize with Heinze's view that first-person narrators often demonstrate recognizable idiolects, idiosyncrasies, and prejudices that strongly cue readers to treat them as "humans" (288).

he stands for. While it is natural to interpret him as a symbol of desire, what Desiderio signifies is actually ambiguous—he is the desiring one as well as the desired one. Moreover, as a demythologizer, Carter will not sanction simple symbolic readings; just like Desiderio's unfulfilled desire for Albertina, stable meanings of signs are likewise rejected.

As Abbott points out, of the three responses, “the opaque type” is the only illegitimate one “insofar as it forecloses a full response to the narrative”, and the other two, though legitimate, do not purport to be “a reading of the unreadable character *as a character*” (“Unreadable Minds” 453; original emphasis). While some parts of Desiderio are relatable, he is mostly an intangible character refusing complete comprehension—on the spectrum from the completely unnatural (unreadable) to the completely natural (readable), the protagonist is apparently closer to the former. To fully appreciate the appeal of Desiderio as a character, I propose to read him in a full acceptance of his insistent unreadability and to appreciate his defiance of mimetic explanations. In this process, empathy might be hindered, yet the engaging effect is still obtainable—it is the engagement with the generated affect, the blind spot of human cognition.¹²³ If we have to make sense of such unreadability, it is helpful to turn to the author—Carter is intentionally inventing an antimimetic fictional figure.

Self-reflexivity and Intertextuality

As mentioned previously, defined in terms of intensity, affect is narratively de-localized, disconnected from meaningful sequencing, “spreading over the generalized body surface” (Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect” 85). For *DH*, the highlighted spatiality and bodily sensations are attributable to its self-reflexivity as well as its dialogue with other existent fictional

¹²³ Abbott believes that empathy necessarily presumes the existence of a readable mind (“Unreadable Minds” 463).

texts. The consequent heterogeneity of the text poses a demand for high literature attainment, and continually prevents a linear and single-dimensional relationship with the story. For readers who do not know the referred literature well, the pre-interpretative stage—the feeling of presence effects—is even more noticeable.

The self-reflexive nature of the text firstly lies in the self-reflexive peep-show samples; in *DH*, reference is never drawn from the actual reality, but from the samples. In one sample “HUSH! SHE IS SLEEPING!” Desiderio observes its similarity to the sleeping-beauty-like Mary Anne: “She was as white as my last night’s anaemic lover and, like her, she was dressed in black” (63). Another sample depicting the intercourse between the pretty prince and the awakened girl also seems to echo the actual sex between Desiderio and Mary Anne. That Albertina is almost trampled to death by the centaurs is likewise a *déjà-vu* image to Desiderio: “I was particularly struck by a series showing a young woman trampled to death by wild horses because the actress bore some resemblance to Dr Hoffman’s own daughter” (123). Ironically, just like an onlooker of the peep-show, Desiderio can do nothing but watch Albertina suffer. For the narrator, the samples are a miniature of the story’s reality: “I came to the conclusion that the models did indeed represent everything it was possible to believe by the means of either direct simulation or a symbolism derived from Freud” (123-24). The nullification of the mimetic footing is additionally reflected in the centaurs’ belief in books. The centaurs’ reality and their ongoing writing act are mutually determined. On the one hand, they follow the written rituals; on the other hand, the Scrivener is all the time working on “a big new book” (223). It turns out that this book dictates what is to fall upon Desiderio and Albertina: “I [Desiderio] learned from the text how the master I longed for proposed to treat us” (226). Therefore, for the centaurs, the reality is the reality as written, and they have the power to prescribe what is to happen.

The inapplicability of realistic parameters also manifests in that the narrative is less concerned with the interaction of reality and the text—how words can teach us about this world—than with the interaction among different texts. In other words, the representational function of words is given way to the play with texts. Carter generously pays tribute to the existing literature by adding layers to the narrative: “The Minister had built up a hypothetical model of the invisible Dr Hoffman much as Dr Drosselmeier had built up a model of the unreality atom” (25), and the Doctor’s work room is both “Rottwang’s laboratory in Lang’s *Metropolis*” and “the cabinet of Dr Caligari” (244).¹²⁴ Besides, dialogue also happens between Carter’s fictional narrative and critical writings. Chinese philosophy, for instance, is employed as meta-comments to illuminate the storyworld. The learned Chuang Tzu is quoted to illustrate dialectics—his “Butterfly Dream Parable” is analogous to the slave-master relationship; Hui Shih is cited to demonstrate the concept of paradox—“The South has no limit and yet has a limit.”¹²⁵ Intertextuality is thus a powerful signpost of the narrative’s antimimesis in that we are reading the work on the basis of what we already know about other works of literature, rather than of the knowledge gained from everyday experience. From another perspective, the adding of different historical realities, carried by the borrowed texts, greatly enriches our phenomenological experience of *DH*. This experience is similar to what Ananda Mitra describes as “the decentering process” in reading hypertext: “it is likely that a user will enter the realm of the WWW from the specific text, but that text might not remain the center of attention for longer than a few moments as the links from the site draw the

¹²⁴ Dr. Drosselmeier is a side character in E.T.A. Hoffman’s tale. He is portrayed as a mad scientist. *Metropolis* is a 1927 German expressionist science-fiction drama film directed by Fritz Lang. Rottwang is a brilliant scientist and inventor. Dr. Caligari is an insane hypnotist from the 1920 German silent horror film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

¹²⁵ Chuang Tzu is a representative of Chinese Taoism. The “Butterfly Dream Parable” points to the relationship between reality and illusion: How do we know when we are dreaming, and when we are awake? How do we know if what we are perceiving is “real” or a mere illusion or fantasy? Hui Shih is a representative of the School of Names dialecticians, and is famous for ten paradoxes about the relativity of all things.

user away to other texts. . . . Yet, the process of constant movement across texts results in a decentering where the identification of a unanimous center, or central text, becomes particularly difficult” (“Characteristics of the WWW Text”).

An Unnaturalizing Reading

All the discussed unnatural elements—metamorphosis, unreadable characters, self-reflexivity, and intertextuality—point at the fictional nature of the narrative. The richness of Carter’s work—both in content and in structure—brings to the fore its materiality: in the light of the excess of characters, realities, and texts, the narrative is presented as a mosaic and mash-up. In my view, the reader’s immediate response should not be to gain intellectual control, but to embrace the narrative’s affective power. When mimetic laws prove ineffective, the physical dimension of our reading is stressed; if the production of meaning is inevitable, it is suggested to turn to the invented-ness of the work, to Carter’s craftsmanship in literary creation.

As a supplement to the unnaturalizing reading, I want to wield Alber’s navigational tool “foregrounding the thematic.” While I aim to locate the interpretive move on a more local plane to fully discuss the unnatural, it in no ways means that there is nothing meaningful about the antimimesis of the narrative. As a whole, Carter’s flaunting of unnatural elements intends to highlight “otherness”: alternative realities, together with their interaction with “this reality,” and their inhabiting unreadable characters, are displayed to embody ontological oscillation. As a postmodernist fantastic work, *DH* demonstrates a zone of hesitation between this world and alternative worlds without bridging the gap, as a result of which our perception of reality is at risk. Just like the constant layering of the text, the grasp of reality is constantly delayed, and to master it is like pinning down the never-ending mediacy of language.

Sympathy for Desiderio

This part focuses on the more positive part of the affective experience of reading *DH*—the sympathy provoked for the protagonist. It is strange that, while Desiderio is an unreadable and dislikeable character, I should have soft feelings for him when the story reaches the end: his impasse and disorientation incur my compassion, and the initial impenetrable protagonist gradually becomes relatable. Yet, can we develop emotional bonds with unreadable characters? If, as Abbott claims, empathy presumes a readable mind (“Unreadable Minds” 463), will unreadability rule out any form of emotional engagement?

True, in the short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853) discussed by Abbott, Bartleby remains distant and opaque from the beginning to the end, and even his death arouses more confusion than fellow feelings; the reader, as the lawyer in the story, tries hard to make sense of the scrivener yet keeps being disappointed. Yes, no empathy seems in sight, but let me draw attention to the fact that Melville’s work is *a first-person narration from the lawyer’s perspective*, which means that the reader mostly captures the narrator’s stance, and there is a certain distance between the reader/the narrator and the character Bartleby. The situation is different for *DH*. Desiderio is both the narrator and the protagonist, and the reader has no other optional character to identify with if any empathy is to be built. Consequently, the reader is expected to try harder than usual to understand the narrator, and that he/she *has to* follow this obscure protagonist throughout the narrative is a teasing of the conventional first-person narration, which grants the identification of the narrator and the reader. It is a feeling of “so near yet so far”—the paradoxical co-existence of distance and intimacy—that characterizes our experience of reading Desiderio. In the following section, I want to illustrate why the correlation between unreadability and empathy

is to be regarded as context-related instead of invariable, and how *DH*, notwithstanding its unnaturalness, still gives rise to immersive effects.

Looking for an explanation of my complicated feelings for Desiderio, I find Kathleen Lundeen's view particularly insightful: "Like metaphor, empathy claims that something *is like*, but *is not*, something else, so that even when openly expressed, it is at once a condition of sympathy and alienation" (269; original emphasis). Lundeen hereby echoes what Faye Halpern calls "the messy, unhygienic nature of sympathy in narrative communication" (126). As previously mentioned, Halpern considers "feeling with" and "feeling for" as hardly separable, and she believes that in narrative reading, we cannot extricate sympathy from empathy, nor can we firmly differentiate the self-oriented and the other-oriented perspective-takings (137). Empathy is, therefore, ethically ambiguous, as no readerly empathy is purely other-oriented. This unhygienic nature yet plays a crucial role in narrative communication, and illuminates on the evoked sympathy for some unreliable narrators.¹²⁶ Although unreliable narrators are by definition narrators we do not feel close to, the *intellectual* distance between the narrator and the authorial audience is not necessarily *emotive* (Halpern 126; my emphasis). As Halpern underscores, it is also possible that "the more an unreliable narrator claims things the authorial audience know to be wrong, the closer emotionally we feel to the narrator" (129). In this scenario, the emotional connection is inspired more by self-oriented perspective-taking than the ethical other-oriented character identification. As ethically problematic as sympathy is, it enriches our understanding of the communicative facet

¹²⁶ In fact, in any reading, if otherness—the difference between the reader and the character—is emphasized too much, sympathy dries up, and the reader may end up analyzing instead of experiencing (Halpern 139). In this way, the emotive dimension of narrative reading diminishes.

of narrative reading; more importantly, it shows that intellectual distance and emotional bonds are by no means exclusive.

On account of the discussed inseparability of “feeling with” and “feeling for,” I want to lay stress on this “unethical self” in the transaction between the reader and the text, and recognize its role in contributing to emotional connections. Self-oriented projection might be “impure,” yet its function in narrative communication can be real. Back to *DH*, my takeaway from the above discussion is that while reading the narrative, I might be subconsciously switching from the other-oriented perspective-taking to the self-oriented perspective-taking. As I have no access to Desiderio’s mentality, I project myself into the story; as I am unable to place myself completely in his shoes, I get immersed into the narrative by performing the imagined recentering of my own perspective within the fictional world. As Herman contends, via linguistic devices expressing information about the participant structure, object structure, spatial structure, and temporal structure of the narrated events, narrative offers a conceptual window through which the storyworld can be glimpsed, from the vantage of narratorial perspective (*Story Logic* 271).¹²⁷ By this token, in a sense, reading Carter’s work is more about me—the reader—than about Desiderio, and this readerly participation is given impetus by the narrative features of *DH*. Importantly, as it is hard to fit the protagonist into any logically full-fledged interpretation, the traditional centrality of the narrator in first-person narration is considerably disintegrated; correspondingly, that the reader’s sensorimotor system and bodily operation are constantly at work turns out to be particularly crucial. As Caracciolo argues, comprehenders are always virtually present in their

¹²⁷ This idea that readers are openly prompted to make a deictic shift to an alternative possible world is in line with the possible-world approach to narrative studies, which aims for an immersive reading experience.

mental simulation, and both imagination and perception rely on the body (“The Reader’s Virtual Body” 134).

As I see it, even though the narrator-protagonist is depicted as obscure, the narrative offers the reader much room for the simulation of the storyworld, thanks to the text’s lengthy and detailed descriptions of all the bizarre and motley events. The simulating process goes hand in hand with the mobilization of sensorimotor skills, and enables the reader’s projected body to gain access to the imaginative details; in the meantime, the reader also attributes or enacts character consciousness on the basis of his/her own experience in this storyworld. In this way, what the reader experiences is more a projection of his/her own phenomenological experience if he/she were in the same situation, than what Desiderio actually feels. The development of this self-oriented perspective-taking is for sure progressive, and it is the outcome of a continual negotiation of the represented unnatural and the reader’s lived experience: the recipient initially endeavors to get into the storyworld in the narrator’s identity, when the attempt gets turned down, he/she projects himself/herself into the narrative via active enactment.

Thus it becomes clear why I feel emotional bonds with Desiderio as the narrative goes on—the connection is built because I project myself into the story. What would I feel in face of these unexplainable scenarios? What would I do if my footing of reality is at risk? Would I sacrifice my beloved one? How to make the improbable choice between rationality and desire? At the end of the journey, carried only by “passive, miserable, apathetic force”, the narrator returns to the capital, though he “had neither reason nor desire to do so” (*DH* 264). While Desiderio eventually opts for order over chaos, he is haunted by the “insatiable regret with which we acknowledge that the impossible is, *per se*, impossible” (264). But it does not matter, because if what he has done has turned out for the common good, he might as well reap benefits from it: “The shrug is my

gesture. The sneer is his expression” (264). After having virtually gone through all the existential crises and ontological indetermination, the reader can more or less relate to this sense of disillusionment; naturally, the initially unreadable protagonist is now more recognizable.

The above analysis is apparently mind- and reader-oriented, and I would like to offer more evidence to make it also textually grounded. As the reader can easily tell, Desiderio is a suspicious narrator, in the sense that he cannot make sense of what happens to him or justify his behaviors; as a first-person narrator, he can hardly win the reader’s heart. Why is Desiderio unreliable? Firstly, there is a conspicuous discrepancy between what he says and what he does. Although he consistently claims to be immune to the influence of Doctor Hoffman, i.e. the desire machines, he is all the while chasing Albertina and her transfigurations, and he succumbs to sexual temptation at every turn. Another signpost is the narrator’s inconsistent words. The motive of his murder of the Doctor remains elusive: is it an act for the common good? Is it because of Hoffman’s hypocrisy? Is it out of incomprehension? Out of unintentionality? All are acknowledged, yet the real reason is never revealed. Desiderio also stays ambiguous about why he kills Albertina: “Why should I tell you how I killed Albertina? I think I killed her to stop her killing me. I think *that was the case*. I am *almost sure* it was the case. Almost certain” (*DH* 259; my emphasis). All these protean enunciations foreground the intellectual distance between the narrator and the authorial audience.

Expectedly, the reader knows what the narrative intends to convey by characterizing Desiderio as such. If we are familiar with Carter, we know that for her, the demythologizing work is crucial, and the unraveling of the constructed-ness of our culture has to be done. Accordingly, “the sleeping beauty” Mary Anne is endowed with rebellious power, and the male (Desiderio) can be the sex toy of the female (Aoi and Mama); at the end of the day, the Doctor has to die because

Desiderio has to grasp the last footing of reality—the heroic killing of the chief—and because the Doctor is the symbol of male hegemony in the name of liberation. In terms of the authorial design, everything goes back to the disclosure of the social construction of reality, for the sake of which all metaphysical forms have to be destroyed. Sadly, after all the killings, the seeming restoration of order fails to bring Desiderio comfort, and his reality will never be returned, just like his desire which will never be gratified.

Desiderio the narrator might not know the implied author as well as the ideal reader does, but he is not without progress. The surfacing of the retrospective voice—the narrator’s mocking tone in particular—at the closure of the narrative demonstrates his appreciable, if not complete, awakening: “I, an old hero, a crumbling statue in an abandoned square” (*DH* 264). Additionally, he also realizes that “the comforts of the old” are “*quite meaningless*” (265; my emphasis). The narrator’s partial progress toward the norm can be read as what James Phelan calls “bonding unreliability,” i.e. “unreliable narration that reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience” (“Estranging Unreliability” 223-24). In this situation, “although the authorial audience recognizes the narrator’s unreliability, that unreliability includes some communication that the implied author—and thus the authorial audience—endorses”, and the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance is nevertheless reduced (225). In the case of *DH*, while a certain intellectual gap still exists, the main effect of the narrator’s final reflection is to close the affective distance between him and us.

The sympathy evoked for Desiderio might be totally personal, and my reaction does not necessarily apply to other readers. Yet, apart from being an attempt to justify my own affective experience of the text, hopefully, the foregoing discussion also shows that, in spite of the difficulty of establishing a coherent mind, the narrative does not rule out emotional engagements. Firstly, in

terms of narrative situation, a first-person narrative with a protagonist that is hard to identify with invites readers to project themselves into the storyworld. In this sense, the imposition of real-life knowledge still allows a recognizable, vivid reading experience. Additionally, although the fallible narrator foregrounds the distance between him and the ideal reader, the gap provokes soft feelings for the narrator as he is in an intellectually inferior position. In both aspects, the reader's self-oriented perspective-taking plays an indelible role in giving play to the emotional dimension of *DH*.

At the beginning of this section I mentioned Carter's peculiar liking of various forms of oral narrative, yet as my preceding discussion shows, the endorsement of oral tradition, which usually follows expectable, if not mimetic, patterns, does not necessarily guarantee an intimate relationship between narrative and readership. For Carter's narrative, the negotiation between conventional forms and antimimetic elements is persistent, and our phenomenological experience accordingly turns out to be a mashup, which diversifies and complicates the following interpretative move. To respect the phenomenological heterogeneity of *DH*, I hesitate to give a generalized reading of it in my sense-making process, and this is different from my upcoming analysis of Calvino's and Auster's works, whose phenomenological dimensions are by comparison more generalizable. From my vantage point, for *DH*, an overall unnaturalizing reading offsets the aroused sensational effects in readers, and flattens out the diversity of the emotions evoked, and an overall cognitive reading naturalizes the obviously antimimetic elements; my meaning-production of this fantastic work hence turns out to be local and contingent.

In the next section, I will examine another unnatural narrative, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* by Italo Calvino, who also claims to appreciate traditional forms such as folklore and fairy tales. Different from the provoked emotional turbulence in Carter's case, affective reactions

to Calvino's work are mostly bodily dependent, refusing to be recuperated by mimetic interpretations. It will be interesting to see how unnatural elements are exploited to produce a different reading experience in Calvino's more mundane version of the fantastic, and how the unnaturalizing reading is adopted to justify the phenomenological dimension.

3.2 A Reading of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), Italo Calvino makes it clear that his fondness for folktale and fairy tales lies in “their style and structure, in the economy, rhythm, and basic logic that govern their telling”—the writer takes pleasure in reading these traditional forms which are brief and concise, yet in the meantime carrying huge narrative power and poetic appeal (42). Far from an escape from the actual world, mythic elements, to Calvino, are another reflection of reality: “In response to the precariousness of tribal existence . . . a shaman would nullify the weight of his body and fly to another world, another level of perception, where he might find the strength to alter reality” (32). From this perspective, our imagination says something about real life, and fantastic elements are a tool of searching for knowledge and reality. Calvino's preference to the fantastic is solid, but how is it reflected in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (hereafter *If on a Winter's Night*), which at first sight seems barely fantastic?

A massive literary mashup, the novel is composed of one framing tale, and ten interspersed, framed stories of varying style, genre, and subject-matter. The protagonist, the Reader, is reading a novel, and in the journey of searching for the authentic and complete text(s), he is caught up in an international book-fraud conspiracy, encounters a mischievous translator and a reclusive novelist, and gets involved into political insurgence ... All these events complicate the situation,

and at the end of the story, the Reader has to accept that not every story has a beginning and an end, and that reality is forever deferred, forever beyond one's grasp.

As Albert Carter observes, for Calvino, the fantastic is not only the depiction of the uncanny or the marvelous, the “self-indulgent” narrative of an author who wants to have a character shot in half, aloft in trees, or lacking in physical body’, but also “*the inner lives of the characters*” (61-62; my emphasis). According to this mundane variation, the fantastic is “part of the imagination, the vision, the daily hypothesizing and searching that we all share, that we all must do if we are to survive” (62). In this scenario, the genre is not recognized from the presence of imaginative details; rather, it is characterized by an oscillation between our world and a more complex one beyond our ordinary understanding (2). From this perspective, the fantastic nature of *If on a Winter's Night* is reflected in the foregrounded ontological hesitation, via the instability of language, the sense of paranoia, and the inaccessibility of truth. My own reading experience of the novel is full of confusion, interruption, and fragmentation; I was trapped in different narrative spaces, and found myself floating between reality and fiction.

In Calvino's works, that mundanity has its own fantastic quality often resides in the narrator's constantly failed attempt to work out a rational philosophy to deal with reality (Albert Carter 62). *If on a Winter's Night* typically inscribes this existential crisis. Different from *DH*, whose unnaturalness mainly lies in the storyworld (the metamorphosed scenarios and the fallible narrator-character Desiderio), Calvino's narrative foregrounds antimimesis via technical experimentation instead of paranormal events. If in reading Carter one needs to at least get into the story first to experience its estranging effects, Calvino frustrates this initial engagement by fusing narratives levels right at the beginning—“You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*” (3). As a whole, the extensive employment of the

protean “you” narration and metalepsis estranges readership from the narrative, and highlights a spatial relation to the text. In this section, I will first of all elaborate on the unnaturalness of *If on a Winter’s Night*, and then offer my unnaturalizing reading in the light of the triggered affects.

Unnatural Narration

The Flexible “You” Narration

Starting Calvino’s text, the reader is right off confronted with “you” narration, and the use of the second-person singular throughout the framing tale constantly indicates the flesh-and-blood reader as the potential addressee.¹²⁸ This narrative fact structurally brings out an “in-the-face” vibe by “suspiciously” including readership into the communicative circle. As Irene Kacandes contends, “literary performatives” are executed in many postmodernist second-person texts where the actual reader identifies with the textual “you”; in this situation, “*to read* the address is to perform what one reads” (original emphasis), and the flesh-and-blood reader is addressed directly by “you” narration (141).¹²⁹ The Calvino scholar Albert Howard Carter also comments that through the second-person point of view in *If on a Winter’s Night*, the author “continuously explores the interactions of text and reader”, and these interactions in fact underscore the reader’s role in the reading process: “fiction does not exist, literature is not literature unless someone—*you*—are reading it” (125; original emphasis).

128 My use of “address” here might incur confusion as it indicates a communicative framework. Richardson would avoid using the word, as he claims that “second person narration is an artificial mode that does not normally occur in natural narrative” (*Unnatural Voices* 19). On this point Nielsen also agrees with Richardson (“Naturalizing and Unnaturalizing” 91). I am however using the word in a very general sense, and I also do not mind the implied communicativeness it carries—despite its artificiality, second-person narration is not deprived of communicativeness.

129 “Literary performatives can be performed *only* by reading” (original emphasis). They are enunciated by a “speaker,” the writer, but they are only performed when read by someone (Kacandes 141). An example will be “You are proceeding through this sentence nicely.”

It is precisely the inclusion of the reader in second-person address that violates the ontological boundary between fiction and reality—how can a fictional narrative bear on flesh-and-blood readers? In the postmodernist context, the pronoun “you” is highly flexible, and the reader often finds himself/herself alternating between concentrating on the “you” as character and recognizing himself/herself in the text. In *If on a Winter's Night*, Calvino flauntingly plays with the pronoun, and his exploitation of the multifunctional “you” is a hot potato for readers.

While first- and third-person novels can easily find nonfictional sources in real-life situations like autobiography and biography, second-person narrative is “an exclusively and distinctively literary phenomenon” (Richardson, *Unnatural Voices* 35), as it occupies a middle position, “oscillating between but never reducible to either the homodiegetic or the heterodiegetic” (Richardson, “I etcetera” 319).¹³⁰ Despite this, reading second-person narration does not have to be an ontologically struggling experience. In *Unnatural Voices* (2006), Richardson generalizes three types of “you” narrative.¹³¹ The “standard” form is the closest to traditional forms of narration, and the story is told in the present tense, about a single protagonist who is referred to in the second-person (19-20), and in this context “the protagonist/narratee is quite distinct from the actual or implied reader” (20). The “hypothetical” form adopts the style of the guidebook to

¹³⁰ The only nonfictional analogues of the second-person are the pseudo-narrative forms of the cookbook, the travel guide, and the self-help manual (Richardson, “Poetics and Politics” 313). One may wonder: we talk about and to each other using “you” all the time; isn’t it the case, then, that second-person narratives are the most natural thing in the world? On this point, Nielsen clarifies that using the “you” as a disguised form of “I” or “everybody,” as in “you just get so mad in these kind of situation, don’t you?” does not count as you-narration since it does not specifically designate the protagonist but rather the speaker as part of an imagined community. Moreover, in fictional narrative, although the protagonist is designated by “you,” nothing suggests that he feels in anyway addressed, and this is different from the real-life situation where “you” always feels spoken to (“Fictional Voices?” 66).

¹³¹ Richardson defines second-person narrative as “any narration other than an apostrophe that designates its protagonist by a second person pronoun” and this protagonist is usually “the sole focalizer, and is often (but not always) the work’s principal narratee as well” (*Unnatural Voices* 19). Richardson also distinguishes second-person narrative from other types of fiction that frequently employ the second-person pronoun at the level of narration, such as authorial colloquy and autobiographical monologue. The authorial colloquy exists outside of the narrative proper, and the autobiographical monologue and related forms are addressed to characters within the fictional worlds—both are not second-person narrative, though the pronoun is adopted (“Poetics and Politics” 310-11).

recount a narrative (18), and it is marked with “the consistent use of the imperative, and the frequent employment of the future tense” (29). The “autotelic” is the direct address to a “you” who is “at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of the fiction” (30). The first two forms usually designate relatively full-fledged “you” protagonists, and underline the distance between the intrinsic, textual “you,” and the extrinsic, extratextual “you,” hence keeping the ontological boundary between text and reality intact. The third type, nevertheless, in consideration of its pronominal shifting, blurs the ontological divide, and leads to the reader’s alternation between identification and distancing—*If on a Winter’s Night* is a typical demonstration.

The Unnatural “You” in *If on a Winter’s Night*

As mentioned, the reader may find it hard to posit himself/herself at the beginning of the narrative. The opening sentence “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller*” (3) invites an identification with the intrinsic “you,” as the reader is experiencing exactly the same thing as the protagonist. Yet when this character is more personalized, the distance between the real reader and the textual “you” surfaces, and the identification disintegrates: “You’re sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything. . . . This is the conclusion you have reached, in your personal life and also in general matters” (4). The alternation between the generic “you” and the specific “you” however happens constantly. Several pages later, the narration directs to an unspecific collective: “we assume that your duties are a normal element in the system of unproductive activities that occupies such a large part of the national and international economy” (8). Here the address obviously targets a group of people rather than a single person. Then once more the momentary and partial coincidence of the reader and the textual “you” falls apart, when the latter has already started reading Calvino’s novel. The following lines

are addressed to the textual Reader: “No. You don’t recognize it at all. . . . But then you go on and you realize that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the author” (9). It is not until later when the actual reader proceeds to the first framed story that he/she again synchronizes with the protagonist. A result of this frequent collapse of the reader-protagonist distinction is the breakdown of the ontological boundary between text and reality; when the above two are being addressed simultaneously, “you” narration, as a textual phenomenon, in fact transgresses its fictional status, and bears on the flesh-and-blood recipient and his/her reality. This is *logically impossible*, and *typically unnatural*.

As the narrative continues, more characters—Ludmilla, Lotaria, and the Nonreader—are introduced into the picture, and the protagonist is more fully characterized; correspondingly, a rather coherent plot is gradually formed. In many cases, it feels like the text is no more than a third-person narrative with an omniscient narrator in the second-person form. For instance, extensive mind descriptions offer a panoramic perspective, which is characteristic of realistic, third-person literature. When the Reader tries to impress Ludmilla, the narrative goes “you liked letting her believe you had read it, now have to extricate yourself with generic comments” (30). Apparently, the narrating voice knows the Reader’s mind clearly: “You understand by now that Ludmilla, for all her mild manner, likes to take the situation in hand and decide everything herself: your only course is to follow her” (47). The revelation of the protagonist’s mind as such is numerous throughout the text: “But why should the OAP hijacks want to get possession of that manuscript? You glance through the papers, seeking an explanation, but you find mostly the bragging of Marana” (120). In another case, the narrating voice says that “You must decide immediately what attitude to take” (148). Not only so, other characters’ mentalities are also accessible. The narrating agent knows that “Lotaria wants to know the author’s position with regard to Trends of

Contemporary Thought and Problems that Demand a Solution” (44). It also reveals that Cavedagna agrees to bring the “Marana, Hermes” file because he knows that “you [the Reader] are determined to see the things through” (115). Although an omniscient narrator is empirically impossible, the phenomenon has had a long history and has been conventionalized, no longer striking readers as antimimetic; as a result, the reader will not encounter much cognitive difficulty in getting hold of it.¹³² Yet can we deal with Calvino’s narrative—at least partly—by subsuming it under the rubric of the third-person?¹³³ Interestingly, we see that mind representation is not always unimpeded, and there are moments when the voice is uncertain about what is happening: “Reader, we are not sufficiently acquainted for me to know whether you move with indifferent assurance in a university or whether old traumas or pondered choices make a universe of pupils and teachers seem a nightmare to your sensitive and sensible soul” (47). In another case, the Reader feels hesitant in Ludmilla’s house: “*Perhaps* it is the consideration that if you take advantage of her trust to carry out a detective investigation. . . . Or *perhaps* it’s because you think you already know by heart what a single girl’s little apartment is like” (141; my emphasis). So what is the relationship between the textual voice and the Reader? Does it fully know the “you” protagonist? The logic of the limited narration is never revealed, and it seems that the narrative cannot be reduced to a variant of third-person narration.¹³⁴ In fact, in most second-person narration, that the internality of “you” is knowable is never explained, which underlines the epistemological gap that

132 For Alber, scenarios like “the monumentality of the omniscient narrator in much realist fiction” and “the impossible renderings of character interiority (through free indirect discourse, psychonarration, or direct thought) in modernist fiction” can be seen as “muted” forms of metafiction that have been transformed into elements of the overall aesthetic illusion tied to a specific genre (*Unnatural Narrative* 43).

133 I say “partly” because in consideration of the convergence of different ontological levels, Calvino’s narrative presents a noticeable deviance from the standard form of second-person narration. That aside, we may want to know if other more natural parts of the narrative can be explained by traditional types of narration.

134 Richardson points out that while a third-person narrator may perform the act of disclosing what is in the minds of others, it should not stray beyond the established conventions of depicting such perceptions, as “the thought of one character may not be lodged within the mind of another without any intervening plausible explanation” (*Unnatural Voices* 6-7).

cannot be bridged by real-life parameters. Nor can Calvino's narrative be a remote form of first-person narration. It is practically impossible for the Reader to know the thoughts of other characters, and it is also hard to imagine that the protagonist would mutter his action to himself: "You turn the book over in your hands" (8). As Helmut Bonheim points out, "if one tells a story to a particular person who was on the scene of action himself, the reader will naturally ask why the 'you' needs to be told what he must already know" (76). In essence, this irreducible oscillation between first- and third-person narration, the hesitation between homodiegesis and heterodiegesis, simultaneously invites and precludes identification with the other pronominal voices (Richardson, *Unnatural Voices* 22).

The second-person is hard to theorize because it is a playful form. As Richardson observes, apart from being "original, transgressive, and illuminating", the pronoun is "always conscious of its own status and often disguises itself, playing on the boundaries of other narrative voices" ("Poetics and Politics" 314). In *If on a Winter's Night*, there are some "bold" moments when the "you" no longer wants to hide its artificiality; Calvino brings the invented nature of the pronoun to the fore by adding a metafictional twist to the narration—the authorial intervention.

The narrating voice sometimes exposes itself as the mouthpiece of Calvino, indicating that our struggle with the protean "you" is part of the authorial design. At one point the voice says: "This book so far has been careful to leave open to the Reader who is reading the possibility of identifying himself with the Reader who is read: this is why he was not given a name, which would automatically have made him the equivalent of a Third Person, of a character" (*If on a Winter's Night* 141). It seems to me that these words are addressed more to the actual reader than to any characters, as "This book" hints. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that the narrator should feel any responsibility of explaining to a fictional character why "you" is "you." Such specificity is further

underlined a few pages later: “You are always a possible you. . . . For a second-person discourse to become a novel, at least two you’s are required, distinct and concomitant, which stand out from the crowd of he’s, she’s, and they’s” (147). As I see it, these fragments act as meta-comments, illuminating readers on why the narrative is delivered in such an unnatural way, and this communication is happening between the author/the implied author and the reader/the implied reader. As the authorial voice instructs us on how to come to grips with the narrative, the concomitant presence of the author brings the text’s artificiality to the table. When we realize that everything is under Calvino’s control, that second-person narrative is essentially a literary phenomenon is further foregrounded—the flexibility of the pronoun can only be exploited to such an extent in a fictional context. On the reader’s part, the introduction of the authorial figure nullifies the attempt to pin down the floating “you.” If the ontological confusion is predetermined, if “he [“you”] has been kept a pronoun, in the abstract condition of pronouns, suitable for any attribute and any action” (141), why do we take the trouble if “certainty” is not intended in the first place? Considering that the cognitive perplexity evoked in the reader is the writer’s well-meaning teasing, the building of emotional connections is demotivated.

As Monika Fludernik argues, second-person narrative challenges realistic parameters in that it “plays with the multifunctionality of the second-person pronoun (*you* as address, as generic “one,” or *you* as self-addressee etc.) and with the reader’s attempt at constructing a situation for the discourse, at naturalizing the disparities within the text” (“Second-Person Narrative” 455; original emphasis). Apart from the collapse of the ontological stability, the inefficiency of realistic frames is also reflected in the undermining of the assumed distinction of story and discourse. The story-discourse distinction is one of the essential bases of structuralist narratology. According to Seymour Chatman’s definition, narrativity is based on the fact that all narrative is a mediation of

an underlying story that the narrative medium (discourse) projects from its discursivity (19-20). Second-person texts, however, by blurring this conventional distance, i.e. “a basic existential and differential gap between the story and its reception”, break the frame of narration, violate the boundary of narrative levels, and foreground the processual and creative nature of storytelling (Fludernik, “Second-Person Narrative” 457). In this sense, there is just no way to reconstruct the story without a certain involvement of “you” narration which can only happen—according to the classical dichotomy—on the discourse level. Fludernik further argues that the disintegration of this dichotomy is mostly foregrounded in second-person narrative written in the present tense and in the second-person imperative mode; in these situations, tense, as a criterion differentiating narrative levels and ontological demarcation, fails to properly perform its function (“Second-Person Narrative” 458).

If on a Winter's Night is undoubtedly a good illustration of the interpenetration of story and discourse, and concomitantly, the fictive nature of second-person narrative. Most of the time, the framing tale—the adventures of “you”, the Reader—is explicitly projected from the discourse, and is attributed to the “you” without any evidence relating to the story world.¹³⁵ Additionally, the consistent employment of the present tense mixes up the story time and the narrating time. Extremely, there are cases where the second-person imperative mode is adopted: “Watch out, you’re elbowing your neighbors; apologize, at least” (7); “Hold on a minute. Concentrate. Take all the information that has poured down on you at once and put it in order” (28); “Even if it seems to you that you do know her, act as if nothing has happened” (211). These scenarios are highly

¹³⁵ The “lack of evidence relating to the story world” refers to the fact that most second-person texts openings introduce the protagonist in a direct way, without any prior information: “If medias re-openings as a rule signals *fictuality*, a simultaneous reference and address to the protagonist will *accentuate* the fictionality signal. Opening a narrative by addressing a fictional protagonist flaunts its fictionality, doubling it up, as it were” (Reitan 163; original emphasis).

artificial, as “the imperative engenders story matter by enunciational fiat”, and the narrating act itself becomes the very precondition for “story” to take place. In this case, second-person writings turn out to be “radically antihistoric and contrafactual” (Fludernik, “Second-Person Narrative” 458).¹³⁶

There are also less unnatural moments when the distance between different diegetic levels is detectable, though they rarely occur. Directly recording the protagonist’s dialogue with other characters, the addresser occasionally drops some *narratorial* messages: ““Let’s hope,” you say, “that we’ve got a perfect copy this time, properly bound, so we won’t be interrupted right at the climax, as happens ...” (*As happens when, how? What do you mean?*) “I mean, let’s hope we get to the end satisfactorily”” (*If on a Winter’s Night* 31; my emphasis). In another case, the voice leaves playful comments: “You have turned up here at a time when those hanging around publishing houses are no longer aspiring poets or novelists . . . this is the moment (*in the history of Western culture*) when self-realization on paper is sought not so much by isolated individuals as by collectives” (96; my emphasis). In terms of the form, the brackets stress distance—what is bracketed can be read as the complementary information from the narrator; content-wise, these add-ons reveal epistemological gaps and chronological differences.

To conclude, the antimimesis of the “you” narration in Calvino’s novel is reflected in two aspects. First, the “you” narration suspiciously calls on both the textual addressee and the actual reader, dissolving the ontological boundary of the two. Second, it disintegrates the binary opposition of story and discourse, as enunciation cannot be clearly situated, nor a coherent story

¹³⁶ Fludernik also points out that the second-person imperative mode does not have to be anti-illusionist. For instance, in Lorrie Moore’s *Self-Help*, the mode is used consistently and extensively, and the narrative is easy to follow and creates the sense of immersiveness, as the reader just needs to posit himself into a speculated situation (“Second-Person Narrative” 458).

can be reconstructed. Now, having talked about the unnatural narration, I shall shift the focus to the storyworld, whose flaunting of metalepsis further provokes cognitive difficulties in readers.

Unnatural Storyworld

Unnatural Metalepsis

A narrative technique, metalepsis disrupts the demarcation of different narrative planes. It is often employed to create unnatural storyworlds. In *Narrative Discourse* (1972), metalepsis is defined by Gérard Genette as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by the diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse”, and as a violation of the “shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells” (234-35, 236).¹³⁷ With the advent of postmodernist writings which display a predilection for metalepsis, more and more attention has been paid to the technique in the new context, and different types of metalepsis are discussed. Marie-Laure Ryan, for instance, makes a distinction between rhetorical metalepsis and ontological metalepsis: the former is a temporary breach of illusion without threatening the basic structure of the narrative universe, whereas the latter “opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination” (*Avatars of Story* 207). Under the umbrella of ontological metalepsis, two subtypes can be generalized—the strange loop and the tangled hierarchy. The former describes the situation where metalepsis involves explicit self-reference and the latter explains properly the case where

¹³⁷ The use of the prefix meta- is debatable. According to Genette, narrative levels, arranged bottom upwards, are extradiegetic (narrative act external to any diegesis), intradiegetic or diegetic (events presented in the primary narrative), and metadiegetic (narrative embedded within the intradiegetic level). So metanarrative, or metadiegetic narrative, in Genette’s use, corresponds to the events related within diegetic narrative. Yet if understood analogously to metalanguage, metanarrative would correspond to the embedding narrative—a primary narrative on or about the second-level narrative (Pier, “Narrative Levels”). To avoid the terminological ambiguity, I will try not to use the terms “metadiegetic” or “extradiegetic” in the following analysis. My use of “meta” is analogous to metalanguage.

characters travel between ontological domains (209). The strange loop is analogous to the concept of *mise-en-abyme*. According to Brian McHale, a true *mise-en-abyme* has to meet three criteria. Firstly, it is a nested or embedded representation. Secondly, this nested representation resembles something at the level of the primary, diegetic world. Thirdly, this resemblance needs to be salient and continuous enough that we can say the nested one *reproduces* or *duplicates* the primary one (*Postmodernist Fiction* 124; original emphasis). While the transgression of the ontological threshold in *mise-en-abyme* is implicit, its essential self-referentiality definitely breaks down the philosophical distinction between use and mention, as in “the snake bites its own tail” where the same words are both used and mentioned (Ryan, *Avatars of Story* 212).

Greatly indebted to Ryan’s possible-world approach to metalepsis, Jan Alber and Alice Bell enrich the discussion by exploring the affinity between ontological metalepsis and unnatural narratology. In line with Alber’s definition of the unnatural as something physically, logically, or humanly impossible, the two aver that “only ontological metalepses involve disorienting transgressions of boundaries that are physically or logically impossible, and hence properly unnatural” (167). Three types of unnatural metalepsis are proposed: ascending, descending, and horizontal. Ascending metalepsis refers to the case that “a fictional character or narrator jumps from an embedded storyworld to a hierarchically higher one”; for descending metalepsis, “a narrator or a character jumps into an embedded storyworld or an author jumps from the actual world into the storyworld”; the horizontal describes the “transmigration of a character or narrator into a different fictional text” (168).¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Alber and Bell also claim that the classification applies to printed texts as well as to digital texts. While metalepsis might be represented differently in different media, “the thematic function that metalepses can enact can be the same irrespective of the medium in which it appears” (168). In essence, Ryan, Alber, and Bell put forward a world-based model, as opposed to the traditional level-based model, since “[w]hether or not a fictional entity switches diegetic

To summarize, metalepsis has two forms: the interpenetration of distinct ontological worlds and the transgression of ontological boundaries.¹³⁹ In the following section, I will examine the storyworld of Calvino's novel from two perspectives—self-reference and jumbled ontological domains.

Metalepsis in *If on a Winter's Night*

In Calvino's work, the disturbing self-reference occurs in two contexts. Firstly, the diegetic narrative is multi-layered, and it is constantly interrupted by information from other ghost writers which implies the logic of *If on a Winter's Night*. Secondly, for some of the nested stories, the imitation of the style of the framing tale is explicit, and the interpenetration of the two diegetic levels is underlined.

In the sixth chapter, the narrative proceeds from the Reader's meeting with the editor Cavedagna to the letters from the literary fabricator Ermes Marana, and the narration presents the rebel's plan as follows:

And so Marana proposes to the Sultan a stratagem prompted by the literary tradition of the Orient: he will break off this translation at the moment of greatest suspense and will start translating another novel, inserting it into the first through some rudimentary expedient;

levels when moving from one text to another, that movement is itself principally ontological rather than diegetic" (Alber and Bell 170). A world-based model therefore takes into consideration horizontal transmigrations: "A fictional entity that originates in another text may or may not be placed at the same diegetic level but will always belong to another storyworld" (169). As Bell herself argues, a level-based model cannot properly account for the metaleptic situation where the actual world is involved, as in the appearance of the author within his work or the use of second-person address (16).

¹³⁹ Another definition for reference is from Werner Wolf, according to whom "the prototypical case of metalepsis can be defined as a salient phenomenon occurring exclusively in representations, namely as usually nonaccidental 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)" (50).

for example, a character in the first novel opens a book and starts reading. The second novel will also break off to yield to a third, which will not proceed very far before opening into a fourth, and so on. . . . (125)

The logic rings the bell—the nested stories in *If on a Winter's Night* are indeed started only to break off at the moment of maximum suspense; yet it is also noticeable that the novel does not adopt the device of multiply-recursive embedding that Marana plans to use—it ‘descends no deeper at any point than the hypodiegetic level, one “story” down from the real world’ (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 126).¹⁴⁰ Not a perfect duplication, but a certain resemblance is detected, and a referential relationship can be built between the discontinued narrative that the Reader encounters and the project in Marana’s mind. A more salient resemblance is the novel Silas Flannery attempts to write. This time, the subordinate narrative level is displayed in the diary form, and the hierarchy between the two narrative planes is more distinct:

I have had the idea of writing a novel composed only of beginnings of novels. The protagonist could be a Reader who is continually interrupted. The Reader buys the new novel A by the author Z. But it is a defective copy, he can’t go beyond the beginning. . . . He returns to the bookshop to have the volume exchanged. . . . (197-98)

This novel turns out to be *If on a Winter's Night*, and the mirroring effect is complete. The upshot of such self-referentiality is two-dimensional. Firstly, as the inferior narrative level reproduces the primary one, the assumed narrative hierarchy is disrupted, and different ontological

¹⁴⁰ “Hypodiegetic” here is akin to “metadiegetic” in Genette’s theory, and “the real world” here should refer to the real world of the Reader, not the actual world of flesh-and-blood readers. As Ryan claims, “the so-called reality that becomes affected by the events of a higher level is not the world in which the actual reader and author are located but the first level of the fictional tower” (*Avatars of Story* 209).

domains dissolve into each other. Concomitantly, the foregrounded ontological instability highlights the self-awareness of the text, hence its invented nature.

In Calvino's work, some embedded narratives structurally echo aspects of the primary narrative, and the resultant entanglement of the two worlds is typically reflected in the first two nested stories. The nested *If on a winter's night a traveler* starts with a similar self-consciousness to the framing tale in the same-titled: "The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph" (10). Though the novel the Reader is reading is not the one the flesh-and-blood reader is reading, this pseudo-metalepsis still highlights ontological instability, as one name appears simultaneously on two different levels. The metaleptic effects are more enhanced when the text goes: "Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually. . . . Or perhaps the author still has not made up his mind, just as you, reader, for that matter, are not sure what you would most like to read" (12). Here the familiar "you" narration reappears. Likewise, in *Outside the town of Malbork*, the opening paragraph is reminiscent of the primary narrative: "Here everything is very concrete, substantial, depicted with sure expertise; or at least the impression given to you, Reader, is one of expertise" (34). One page later: "but then we wish to learn even more, as if the butter curler already determined the character and the fate of the person who is presented in the first chapter handling a butter curler, and as if you, Reader, were already prepared" (36). We should note that, here, not only the second-person pronoun is used, but also the first letter of "reader" is capitalized, just as in the framing narrative. Although the dissolving of ontological boundaries is momentary, and both nested stories gradually develop into rather consistent first-person narratives, the impact of such disintegration is evident. In spite of the textual and typographical cues, the fact that the reader is entering an inferior diegetic level from a primary one is neutralized by the

duplication of style, and the consequent confluence of diegetic levels causes cognitive traps for the recipient.¹⁴¹

The disruption of narrative levels definitely affects the time experience of the reader. As Ursula K. Heise argues, “the experience of temporal continuity depends on our ability to construct events in succession at a similar scale or a similar level of abstraction”, and leaping between diegetic levels hinders such construction—“events proceed at one level, yet they are suspended at the other levels until the narrative focus returns to them” (60-61, 61). As a result, instead of a linear development, the reader is confronted with a halted temporality, and the process of building coherence—meaning—is forced to suspend. When time is cut off, what gets foregrounded is space. We may recall Fredric Jameson’s discussion of the emergence of affect in art: one signpost of the phenomenon is a new form of temporality characterized with “eternal present” rather than the linear “past-present-future” (39). The jumbled narrative levels therefore highlight a physical relation to the fictional world, and prior to the production of meaning, the reader has to wrestle with this multi-layered spatiality. Indeed, put aside interpretation, Calvino encourages us to visualize our reading experience, and to “think through images” (*Six Memos* 113). The author’s statement of his creating process may shed light here:

I would spend hours following each strip from one issue to the next, mentally recounting the stories with various interpretations of the scenes, coming up with alternative versions, fusing individual episodes into a broad story, discovering and isolating and connecting the

¹⁴¹ These “cognitive traps” reflect in that the reader may for a moment forget that he/she is processing the embedded narrative instead of the primary narrative.

recurring elements in each strip, mixing on strip with another, imaging new strips in which secondary characters became protagonists ... (*Six Memos* 114)

So we see the role of Calvino's writerly cosmology in his experimentation with diegetic levels. In fact, when it comes to the author, another form of metalepsis needs particular attention. As I have constantly mentioned, in Calvino's novel, the pronoun "you" sometimes calls for a congruence of the Reader and the actual reader. Initially, the reader starts simultaneously with the textual "you": "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*" (3). For the next eleven chapters, though the protagonist and the actual reader occasionally identify with each other, most of the time the characterization of the textual "you" is full-fledged. It is not until the very ending of the narrative that again the two ontological domains fully converge: 'And you say, "Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino"' (260). What I want to call attention to is that although the reader is able to project himself/herself into this discourse situation, i.e. the fictional second-person narration does knock the door of reality, the ontological transgression bears no actual force on us; the reader may feel addressed by the "you", but the address does not have to have performative power. This is what Jeff Thoss calls "feigned transgression"—transgression between a storyworld and reality (190). Different from other forms of metalepsis disintegrating intra-fictional boundaries, in this dissolution of storyworld and reality, "we take the boundary to be real but the transgression to be make-believe" (200). As Ryan points out, "[a] story can represent the murder of a fictional reader by the protagonist of a fictional novel, but the only way for a real-world author to kill the actual reader would be by nonliterary means". Simply speaking, "the actual base of the narrative stack, the world of ground zero, remains protected from metaleptic phenomena" (*Avatars of Story* 209). An important takeaway from this observation is that ontological metalepsis is incompatible with a

realistic framework: “Since ontological transgressions cannot involve the ground level of reality, they cannot, by analogy, occur in a fictional world that claims to respect the logical and physical laws of the real world” (210). At the end of the day, literary manifestations of metalepsis, read literally rather than allegorically, are a relatively harmless game, and it demonstrates the attempt “to expand the empire of fiction toward the most remote worlds within the universe of the imaginatively possible” (210).

Emotional Triggers: Mind Descriptions and Popular Forms

In the previous chapter, I speculate on the possible association between textual features and affective reactions, surmising that an unnatural narrative focusing on mind activities invites emotional engagements. As the above analysis shows, in the case of *If on a Winter's Night*, thanks to the internal focalization, the reader is presented with lengthy internal descriptions of the “you” protagonist and other characters, hence the access to their perceptual acts and emotions. Strangely, however, this almost unlimited revelation of mind activities hardly contributes to recognizable emotional responses on the reader’s part. Compared with our readings of classical yet unnatural narratives like *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which are marked with emotional resonances, our phenomenological experience of Calvino’s narrative is more of hesitation, distance and bewilderment.¹⁴² On a closer look, we may also notice that for Calvino’s work, the represented unnaturalness is constantly intervened by cliché popular forms which provoke in readers the expectation of established conventions. Thinking of Keen’s observation that all sorts of popular fiction, including formulaic romance novels, tend to incur empathetic

¹⁴² The unnaturalness of these classic works lies in the third-person omniscient narration.

resonances in readers, we may wonder why do readers hardly feel emotionally connected with the narrative (*Empathy and the Novel* 82)?

Calvino's text episodically saves us from cognitive struggles by offering relatable moments. Readers may find these ten embedded narratives very approachable, and it is particularly so when they are juxtaposed with the experimental framing narrative. Read closely, the ten tales are mostly familiar and popular types, though different widely in genre and subject—thrillers, spy stories, naturalistic novels, pornography, and so on. Indeed, as Albert Howard Carter argues, these fragments, by being more normal, provide clear, memorable beads “on the Reader's quirky string of adventures”, and they definitely offer actual readers relaxing and lazy moments by being cliché and predictable (127). But what is the purpose of such repetitive “copy-and-paste”?

The framed and the framing are for sure not unrelated. In metaphorical language, the “you” narration compares the lovemaking of the Reader and Ludmilla as reading, underlining its multidimensionality: “What makes lovemaking and reading resemble each other most is that within both of them times and spaces open, different from measurable time and space” (156). This idea is echoed in *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*: “[I]n the case of the novel you must consider that in the succession of sentences only one sensation can pass at a time, whether it be individual or general, whereas the breadth of the visual field and the auditory field allows the simultaneous recording of a much richer and more complex whole” (203). In another case the intertextuality of literature is stressed: “But how to establish the exact moment in which a story begins? Everything has already begun before, the first line of the first page of every novel refers to something that has already happened outside the book” (153). The point is echoed in *Looks down in the gathering shadow*: “I'm producing too many stories at once because what I want is for you to feel, around the story, a saturation of other stories that I could tell and maybe will tell

or who knows may already have told on some other occasion, a space full of stories” (109). The most notable act in cooperation lies in the sense of paranoia and conspiracy, which not only characterizes the Reader’s adventure, but also makes an appearance in almost every framed tale. For example, In *Leaning from the steep slope, Looks down in the gathering shadow*, and *In a network of lines that enlase*, both the protagonists seem to be framed, yet what actually happens—“truth”—is never explained. How does the protagonist get involved into the prison break? What is the actual identity of Bernadette? What happens between this professor and the kidnapped Marjorie? What accompanies these unresolved scenarios is the anxiety in face of uncertainty and inexplicability, and the existential crisis resulting from a possible confrontation of two, or multiple, alternative worlds—we may think of the mysterious vibe of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) by Thomas Pynchon. Additionally, the instability of signs, which is already highlighted in the protean second-person narration of the framing tale, also saturates the framed ones. The narrator of the framed narrative says that “The first sensation this book should convey is what I feel when I hear the telephone ring” (132), and his writing should convey “a cold luminosity, as in a mirrored tube” (163). In spite of being conveyed in more reader-friendly forms, the interspersed narratives in essence chime with the framing “you” narration: the themes of war, spying, murder, betrayal, and so on reinforce the larger subject of the discontinuity of human existence. By juxtaposing the popular and the experimental forms, Calvino pays tribute to the story-making urge that fuels the world of popular literature, and indicates that “such an urge is the same, at base, as the urge that drives highbrow literature” (Albert Carter 128).

It turns out that we are more concerned with the relationship between the Reader’s adventure and the interspersed stories, than with stories these fragmentary pieces deliver. If we replace the framed ones with other narratives, and as long as they carry the similar atmosphere of

mystery and puzzlement, our overall experience of reading *If on a Winter's Night* will not change much. As Albert Carter remarks, for Calvino, the form outweighs the content, and the notion of significance shifts “from direct allegorical or political meanings to indirect explorations of the meaning of significance itself” (9). While the story supposedly written by Calvino is attributed variously to Razio Bazakbal, Ukko Ahti, Ermes Marana, and so on, it is ultimately by the Italian writer; that meaning and authorship should be so arbitrary hints at the futility to establish coherence and order. As Kathryn Hume argues, Calvino’s stories concern a very physical universe, and more attention should be paid to the material qualities of his fictive cosmos (33).

On the reader’s part, the momentary ease is constantly cut off by the framing tale, and character identification is engendered improbable. Again, as Heise contends, the embedding of stories within stories and of plays within plays in itself does not necessarily cause any disruption of linear time, yet if the switching between levels occurs too frequently, it is difficult for readers to remember and piece together the fragmented pieces of each story line (59-60). Ryan likewise points out that just as the reader starts to develop a sense of place in the fictional world, “Italo Calvino allegorizes the difficulty of immersion by embedding in the narrative the beginning of a dozen other novels which are brutally interrupted after a few pages” (“Immersion vs. Interactivity” 129). If initially the reader feels annoyed by being interrupted; as the narrative goes on, he/she is already mentally prepared that he/she will not get a complete story, and in this way the motivation of engaging with the narrative is undermined. At the end of the day, the whole journey feels like a teasing from the author; manipulated by Calvino, the reader can hardly escape from being a passive recipient. In the following excerpt of the interview with Calvino, it is clear that the writer keeps this notion of authorial authority in mind:

In this new novel (*If on a winter's night a traveler*) I may be a more sadistic lover than ever. I constantly play cat and mouse with the reader, letting the reader briefly enjoy the illusion that he's free for a little while, that he's in control. And then I quickly take the rug out from under him; he realizes with a shock that he's *not* in control, that is always I, Calvino, who is in total control of the situation. ("Visiting Italo Calvino")

Hopefully I have demonstrated why the employment of popular forms and abundant internal descriptions fails to make *If on a Winter's Night* an emotionally provocative narrative. As previously emphasized, we should avoid building any natural association between textual features and affective reactions; with regards to Calvino's text, the drive to do mindreading and to participate in character identification is not strong enough for the reader to remove the guard. The metaleptic effects, contributed by the unnatural narration and the fusion of distinct ontological levels, are so unscrupulous that the entangled relationship of the reader, the text, and the author becomes unnegligible, and the break in the mimetic illusion far exceeds the emotional resonance. When it comes to interpretation, in view of the affective indicator, readers are advised to focus on the invented nature of the narrative, and adopt unnaturalizing readings.

An Unnaturalizing Reading of *If on a Winter's Night*

How do we proceed from the phenomenological dimension to interpretation? In line with my model, the reader is expected to firstly take in the presence effects the narrative evokes: throwing himself/herself into confusion and puzzlement, the reader experiences the heightened spatiality and its exertion on the body. Moving on to the interpretive stage, sense-making activities are based on the narrative's textuality.

In terms of the unnatural narration, we may refer to Nielsen's study. Nielsen points out that in fictional second-person narratives, although the protagonist is referred to and designated by the pronoun, "[h]e is not hearing voices, does not feel spoken to, let alone responds to the narrative". Therefore, in this situation, "nothing except the pronoun suggests that the protagonist is being addressed" ("Fictional Voices?" 66). Nielsen further claims that "the grammatical functions of verbs and pronouns do not work exactly the same way in these narratives as in non-fictional, conversational one", and that "narratives can contain language and narration that cannot be explained solely by taking recourse to natural storytelling situations" (76). By this token, we need not presume a one-to-one relationship between the narrating pronoun and its enunciation. Doing justice to the invented-ness of Calvino's "you" narration, we can interpret it as authoritatively rendered and different from any representation of real minds. In this way, the antimimesis of the "you" narration is accounted for by its artificiality, and the innovativeness of the narrative is celebrated.

As to the unnatural storyworld, I would like to spare some time to examine alternative ways of coming to terms with it, given that the phenomenon of metalepsis has been studied extensively; I also intend to illustrate the impropriety of employing mimetic tools to make sense of the ontological metalepsis in the current context.

As previously mentioned, Alber and Bell study ontological metalepsis from the perspective of possible-world theory. Specifically, they transport two seminal concepts "transworld identity" and "counterparthood" to the discussion of unnatural narratives.¹⁴³ The former designates that

¹⁴³ The two concepts "transworld identity" and "counterparthood" are respectively derived from two perspectives of possible-world theory—the Abstractionist perspective and the Concretist perspective. For the former, "possible worlds represent the way things might have been rather than how they actually are within an alternative ontological domain".

“individuals can traverse a potentially infinite number of possible worlds making up a system of reality”, and the latter regards “each individual within each possible world as a ‘counterpart’ of the others as opposed to the same individual travelling between domains” (Alber and Bell 171). In terms of Calvino’s text, “counterparthood” can be exploited to account for the fuzzy boundary between fiction and reality—the fact that the book *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino exists in more than one domain at the same time. In other words, we recognize this book as the one the textual “you”—the Reader—is reading; moreover, we recognize that it is the same book that flesh-and-blood readers—we—are reading. In this way, counterpart theory explains the ontological multiplicity caused by the (pseudo) transgression of reality and fiction. Alber and Bell further conceptualize the function of ontological metalepsis, on the condition that “no matter how odd the textual surface of a narrative, it always partakes in a meaning communicative act” (175). Among the proposed five thematic uses of ontological metalepsis, the most appropriate one for Calvino’s novel is “Metalepsis as Highlighting the Power and Potential Danger of Fiction.”¹⁴⁴ Accordingly, we interpret the represented contravention as demonstrating the author’s creativity in exploring the possibility of writing.

From my perspective, however, this is only an expedient explanation, and it is debatable to employ the possible-world theory in Calvino’s case. Ryan’s discussion of virtual reality and literary theory may tell us why this is the case. Examining the affinity of literary texts and virtual reality, Ryan contends that the school of literary theory inspired by the philosophical concept of

In this model, the actual world is a tangible domain and possible worlds comprise imaginary conceptions. Accordingly, their constituents, including the individuals that populate them, are also only imaginary”. For the latter, “possible worlds comprise tangible domains that materially exist and have the same ontological status as the actual world”. Therefore, “the constituents populating possible worlds exist in the same way in which the individuals populating the actual world exist” (Alber and Bell 170).

¹⁴⁴ The other four thematic uses are: Metalepsis as a Form of Escapism, Metalepsis as an Exercise of Control, Metalepsis as Mutual Understanding, and Metalepsis as a Challenge to the Creator—A Loss of Control over the Creation (Alber and Bell 176).

possible worlds is a forerunner. On the premise of the “willing suspension of disbelief”, the reader pretends that “there is an independently existing reality serving as reference to the narrator’s declarations”, though he/she knows that “the world displayed by the text is virtual, a product of the author’s imagination” (Ryan, “Immersion vs. Interactivity” 115). This immersive framework designates that the experienced emotions in make-believe in the fictional world can bear on the real world, causing physical reactions, and that readers do not relate to characters—the trigger of emotions—as literary creations nor as semiotic constructs, but as “possible human beings” (116-17).¹⁴⁵ Here the mimetic bias shows up. Most problematically, this immersive reading presupposes “a relative transparency of the medium”—readers turn the pages without paying much attention to the text itself, and what they want is the plot, the least language-dependent dimension of narrative communication (117). In essence, the motivation of the possible-world approach to narrative fiction is to establish an immersive reading environment, therefore an engaging experience. But, is the foregrounded textuality of Calvino’s narrative compatible with immersiveness? I do not think so, and I think Calvino’s experimentation with language is too salient to be subsumed under any emotionally engaging interpretation. As Ryan herself admits, unlike virtual reality, in textual matters, the materiality of the medium conflicts either with immersion or with aesthetic design, and often with both (“Immersion vs. Interactivity” 131-32).

This is an example of coming to grips with the narrative’s metalepsis through the lens of mimetic theories, and there are many other navigational tools we can pick to counteract the anti-illusionist effects of the disruption of ontological domains. As a complement to Ryan’s model, Merja Polvinen claims that if we adopt the enactive view that sees the literary imagination as

¹⁴⁵ This immersive approach also chimes with cognitive psychology, which proposes a phenomenology of reading based on two metaphors—transportation and performance (Ryan, “Immersion vs. Interactivity” 116).

enacting seeing, the believed irreconcilability between immersiveness and artificiality—"you cannot see the worlds and the signs at the same time", as Ryan puts it ("Immersion vs. Interactivity" 132)—will not be a problem, and the reading experience can still be engaging. But problems exist. If any narrative fiction indicates a combination of estrangement and immersion, I wonder how much room for immersion Calvino's narrative allows. Given the great mental activity of translating signs into information in face of such a hard-core unnatural narrative, the reader is unavoidably stuck in the physicality of the text; with restricted emotional input, it is improbable that he/she would treat the protagonist as an ordinary human being and smoothly engage with the storyworld. Nor is this the direction my proposed model encourages the reader to go. While I do not intend to imply any dichotomy between unnaturalizing and cognitive readings, *If on a Winter's Night* is a case where the two stances oppose each other explicitly. Different from our reading of *Doctor Hoffman*, which, on account of the prominent emotional dimension, sanctions a cooperation of the two approaches, Calvino's work hardly allows a co-existence of the two. The anti-illusionism of the narrative is so consistent and salient that it leads the reader to the autonomy of the text. In Calvino's case, the choice of cognitive tools cannot be intuitive; instead, it remains a very conscious, even imposed, decision. To me, the proper way of interpretation is to treat the metaleptic scenarios as literary games, as the writer's challenge of literary conventions.

Where is Communicativeness?

As Tommasina Gabriele observes, the accusation of having produced "meaningless" fiction, which had been targeted at Calvino at his departure from neorealism, arose again when the writer started to manifestly include modern literary critical theories in his narratives (29). Indeed, in *If on a Winter's Night*, the exploration of meaning itself outweighs the production of direct moral lesson: this is typically shown in the layout of different types of reader, the lengthy description of Silas

Flannery's struggles, and his mediations on the relationship between authors and readers. Yet does Calvino really cease to believe that literature could say something significant about reality, society, and humanity? I do not think so. We can still detect communicativeness in the interaction among different readers: the erotic development between the Reader and Ludmilla, the battle between the Reader and the saboteur Ermes Marana over the authentic texts, and so on. Moreover, we notice the presence of the authorial voice, and its eagerness to reach the reader: "How is it possible to defeat not the authors but the functions of the author, the idea that behind each book there is someone who guarantees a truth in that world of ghosts and inventions by the mere fact of *having invested in it his own truth*" (*If on a Winter's Night* 159; my emphasis). A certain "moral" exists, but it should not be understood in any narrow, limiting, or dogmatic sense of the word (Gabriele 32). During the adventurous journey, the Reader is constantly offered hope, yet constantly gets frustrated by the prospect of more mysteries—he seems so near yet so far from the truth; at the end of the day, as the narrative goes, the pursuit of a definite meaning has to stop, and the protagonist has to accept that the ultimate meaning has two faces—"the continuity of life, the inevitability of death" (*If on a Winter's Night* 258).

Hence, Calvino's cosmos is one in which there are no absolutes, no ultimate level, and no fixed categories; his attempts to come to terms with this cosmos display the failure of this intellectual project, yet he persists (Hume 55). Depicting a chaotic storyworld, the narrative "both alludes to and enacts the anti-essentialist stances concerning personal identity characteristic of poststructuralist theory and postmodern narrative"; as a result, "literature and theory interanimate each other, the concept of person dissolves, and presentation fuses with representation" (Richardson, *Unnatural Voices* 32). This is a quicksand world, and one cannot produce a perfect system for ordering either matter or culture; despite this, this fact should not stop us from

“assimilating swatches of the cosmos, combing them with orderly patterns, and creating from them our own inward civilization” (Hume 53). With the continual trial of building order, one can at least “provide as precise a map as possible, and better yet, to encourage an attitude suited to coping with the search for an exit” (43). Though literature cannot find the way out of maze, it is by no means random and senseless—it can chart passages and cultivate the habit of mind that lead to an expedient solution (127-28).

In “Myth in the Narrative” (1975), Calvino contends that literature is not only “a combinational game which plays on the possibilities intrinsic to its own material, independently of the personality of the author”; moreover, it is a game “which at certain stage is invested with an unexpected meaning, a meaning having no reference at the linguistic level on which the activity takes place” (79). After all, the whole struggle of literature is an effort to escape from the confines of language, from “the permutation of a finite set of elements and functions” (76). From this perspective, a textual reading of *If on a Winter's Night* leads readers to see Calvino's endeavor to challenge our representational system—language.

This part presents an unnaturalizing reading of Calvino's work on account of the evoked affects in readers. Apparently, Calvino's mundane version of the fantastic gives rise to a reading experience different from that of *Doctor Hoffman*. Specifically, I investigate how the adoption of the fluid “you” narration and metalepsis successfully lays bare the narrative's artificiality, in spite of the inscription of mind descriptions and popular genres. I also demonstrate how the induced affects direct readers to the materiality of the narrative, hence its invented nature. I argue that for a hard-core unnatural narrative such as Calvino's, any reading aiming at an immersive experience neutralizes its creative power, and it is reductive to impose mimetic explanations.

My third case analysis will be focusing on a more implicit unnatural narrative. Paul Auster's novella *Timbuktu* is an unnatural text whose unnaturalness is overshadowed by the evoked overflow of sentimentality. Notwithstanding the unnatural revelation of the canine consciousness, the identification between the dog protagonist and readership foregrounds the emotionality of the narrative, and points at cognitive readings.

3.3 A Reading of *Timbuktu*

As my previous discussion shows, both Carter's and Calvino's narratives are marked with fantastic elements: *Doctor Hoffman* is a postmodernist fantastic in which paranormal scenarios question the existing epistemological framework, and *If on a Winter's Night* presents itself as a mundane variation with the transgression of ontological boundaries. At first sight, Paul Auster's *Timbuktu* does not seem fantastic at all: the novella barely invokes the questioning of reality in readers, and it is often reduced to an ordinary animal fable, or children's literature. The story is told through the eyes of Mr. Bones, who, though not anthropomorphized, is internally focalized. A main running theme of the novella is Mr. Bones' worry that dogs will not go to Timbuktu (the place of afterlife), and he won't see his mother Willy again after death.

As Stefania Ciocia observes, the work has been neglected by critics because of its "heavy-handed sentimentality and fable-like moralism" (647). In fact, the cliché canine protagonist, the overflow of emotions, and the suspicious didacticism, are not totally exempt from the authorial intention: "This book is much more nakedly about feelings. I want to try to enter a world in which passion and the intensity of emotion are the dominant subjects" (Auster, "Q&A"). Indeed, when I was reading the novel, I never felt distant from Mr. Bones, though he is a dog. Rather, I felt for his sufferings and his isolation in this human-dominated world; I felt so close to him and all animals

(even human beings) who had experienced the similar misfortune. On account of its realistic setting, approachable language, and simple plot, the novella may unduly pass as an allegory—after all, animal characters and narrators in literature are not foreign to readers, and we take for granted the symbolic meanings they carry. Yet a closer reading of *Timbuktu* reveals that the narrative does not follow the generic pattern of dramatizing the expected logic of ideas. Don't let the aroused sentimentality erase the work's "fantastic" nature—it is a dog that serves as the narrative's reflector-character!¹⁴⁶ How can human beings know the mentality of dogs? Isn't the representation of the canine consciousness fictive and imaginative by definition? Can we have "an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination", as Thomas Nagel asks (449)? Unfortunately, literature cannot achieve such objectivity. While literature may involve and convey knowledge that enjoys scientific status in a given culture and time, as far as experience is concerned, "there is no scientifically sound way to *prove* that literary explorations of animals' life worlds are more than an exercise of imagination" (Bernaerts et al. 76; original emphasis).

So, if we understand the unnatural in terms of a foregrounding of invented-ness and textuality, nothing is more unnatural than the demonstration of a nonhuman mind. In spite of the inscription of nonmimetic forms, i.e. allegorical and fantastic elements, *Timbuktu* cannot be simply pinned down to a certain genre, and its unnatural elements cannot be conventionalized. Yet, it is also true that the narrative evokes readers' emotional input, and the sentimentality provoked is so strong that it often overshadows the antimimesis of the canine consciousness. In the following section, I will demonstrate how to interpret this affectively engaging unnatural text. My analysis

¹⁴⁶ In *A Theory of Narrative* (1986), F.K. Stanzel categorizes three narrative situations. For the first-person narrative situation, the mediacy of narration belongs totally to the fictional realm of the characters of the novel, and the world of the characters is completely identical to that world of the narrator; for the authorial narrative situation, the narrator is outside the world of the characters, and the process of transmission originates from an external perspective; for the figural narrative situation, the mediating narrator is replaced by a reflector, and the reader looks at the other characters of the narrative through the eyes of this reflector-character (4-5).

starts with the unnaturalness of the canine protagonist—how it defies literary norms and challenges cultural ontologies. I will then elaborate on how the reader’s emotional experience of the narrative—the developed empathy for the canine protagonist—neutralizes its estranging effects; lastly, with reference to the affective signpost, I try to make sense of the unnatural canine reflector-character through the lens of cognitive tools.

What is Unnatural about Mr. Bones?

A Non-Binary Approach to Nonhuman Minds

When Nagel asks the question “what is it like to be a bat?” he is not showing interest in the power of human imagination *per se*, but questioning its capacity “to bridge the gap between the first-person approach to the mental (phenomenology) and the third-person, scientific approach (which is concerned with physical states of the brain)” (Bernaerts et al. 76). According to Nagel, “no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism” (436; original emphasis). This subjective character of experience, as Nagel believes, “*could* never be represented or comprehended by human beings . . . simply because our structure does not permit us to operate with concepts of the requisite type” (441; original emphasis). While it is beyond the scope of literary practices to produce new scientific knowledge, values and meanings that are embedded in human experience undoubtedly play a crucial role in literature (Gibson 108-12).

Nonhuman beings are no strangers to us. We have read Aesop’s fables and Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales; with the advent of literary modernism, narratives have started to register “the eruption of animality through the eruption of language” (Rohman 41). As Joseph Anderton observes, “modernism’s interrogation of human identity leads to a fresh recognition and

reassessment of nonhuman beings”, and “animals attend the destabilization of human identity” (272). Writers like Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and Franz Kafka all write about canine minds.¹⁴⁷ Yet in what sense can nonhuman minds be read from a humanized perspective? On this question we have two opposed opinions—one that animal minds are radically inaccessible, and the other that human and nonhuman minds are equally accessible.

Contrary to Nagel’s view of an unbridgeable gap between subjective and objective perspectives on consciousness, and as a result which, the radical otherness of animal minds, Daniel Dennett in *Consciousness Explained* (1991) suggests that there is no fundamental distinction between the way heterophenomenology functions in human-human interactions, and in human-nonhuman interactions. For Dennett, nonhuman experiences can be approached from a third-person perspective, via the interpreter’s adoption of the intentional stance, or the assumption that the human subjects produce the transcribed sounds for particular communicative reasons (74-78).¹⁴⁸ To compensate for the potential flattening-out of qualitative differences in how differently structured beings encounter the world, the notion of embodiment, which characterizes the mind as distributed across brain, body and world, is introduced to further rationalize the approachability of nonhuman subjectivity. Accordingly, if minds are understood as “inextricably embedded in contexts for action and interaction”, arising from “the interplay between intelligent agents and the worlds they inhabit”, then the mind is embodied and action-based, and “the intuitive divisions

¹⁴⁷ *Flush: A Bibliography* (1933) by Woolf, *Molloy* (1955) by Beckett, and “Investigations of a Dog” (1922) by Kafka.

¹⁴⁸ Heterophenomenology, or objective phenomenology, in Nagel’s use, refers to “a theory of what it is like to be a particular kind of creature based on the creature’s physiological structure, perceptual capabilities, behavioral dispositions, and so forth” (Herman, *Narratology beyond the Human* 214). Herman develops the concept into a cover term for “the constellation of discourse domains in which ascriptive practices take shape”—“the full range of relevant domains needs to be taken into account in characterizing human-animal interactions and attributions of intentions, emotions, volitions and other mental states and dispositions across species lines” (216).

between perception, action, and cognition no longer hold” (Herman, “Storyworld/Umwelt” 161, 161, 162).

Cutting across the binary opposition between the radical otherness and the transparent accessibility, in *Narratology beyond the Human* (2018), David Herman argues for a replacement of the binarized model of animal minds with “a scalar or gradient model involving different degrees of projected relatedness, mutuality, and rapport across species lines” (217). According to him, mind-ascribing acts always unfold “within particular arenas of practice” and the specific context determines “when, to what extent, and in what manner it is appropriate and warranted to impute subjective experiences to others, nonhuman as well as human” (213).¹⁴⁹ Correspondingly, in narrative studies, the examination of the mind should be premised on the continuity rather than the discontinuity between nonhuman and human experiences (Herman, “Storyworld/Umwelt” 161). To illustrate such a continuity, Herman specifically outlines two post-Cartesian continuums stretching between “fine-grained” and “coarse-grained” representations of how intelligent agents interact with their environments—one for consciousness representation and the other for representing nonhuman experiences (164-66).¹⁵⁰ My following discussion of the canine consciousness in *Timbuktu* is built upon Herman’s nonbinary perspective.

¹⁴⁹ Herman uses “discourse domain” to account for such contextuality. For him, “discourse domain trumps genre when it comes to modelling animal minds in narrative contexts, meaning that in a given instance a nonfictional account may feature more prolific and more fine-grained ascriptions of subjective experiences to animals than would a fictional account—depending on the domain in which the narrative is anchored” (*Narratology beyond the Human* 223).

¹⁵⁰ The post-Cartesian continuum for consciousness representation ranges from the coarse-grained to the fine-grained as follows: authorial narration, thought report, free indirect discourse, and interior monologue (Herman, “Storyworld/Umwelt” 165). The continuum for strategies of representing nonhuman experiences ranges from animal allegory and anthropomorphic projection, to zoomorphic projection and umwelt exploration, with animal allegory and umwelt exploration at the coarse-grained and the fine-grained ends of the scale respectively (166).

Post-Cartesian Representations: The Alterity of the Canine Consciousness

It is interesting to note that in the aspect of consciousness representation, Auster's novella is not ideally fine-grained. In the light of F. K. Stanzel's tripartite model, the narrative situation of *Timbuktu* oscillates between the authorial one and the figural one, as in many cases the narrator and the reflector-character are hard to differentiate. For instance, recalling the birth of Willy, the narrative runs as follows: "Willy *poked his little face* out from between her [Willy's mother] legs and *unexpectedly* refused to stop breathing" (14; my emphasis). Considering the superior and playful tone, the sentence may be naturally assumed to be the narrator's words; but one paragraph later, it is revealed that these are actually the dog's thoughts: "Or so reckoned the good Herr Doktor Bones" (15). Here is the situation where the actual figural narration is mistaken as the authorial narration, mainly because of the underestimation of Mr. Bones' intelligence. Yet, even if readers register that the dog's mind can be as sophisticated as human beings, the boundary between the internal and the external perspectives is still fuzzy. Another example is the following passage: "The blunt combination of vowels and consonants rarely failed to stir him [Mr. Bones] in the deepest parts of his soul . . . a wave of blissful well-being would wash through the entire length of his body—as if the word alone were a promise, a guarantee of better days ahead" (49). The former part can be easily recognized as the canine's internal thoughts, but how about the latter part? Given the smartness of the dog, it is possibly his own reflection, yet it also makes sense to ascribe it to the external narrator from the discourse level.

In cases such as this, readers may wonder in what sense they are looking at other characters through the eyes of the reflecting Mr. Bones, and to what extent they are actually guided by the narrator. From my perspective, even though the extensive figural narration dramatizes the impact of events on the particular consciousness of the dog, and brings out the canine subjectivity in his

interaction with the human world, the human mediator—the narrator—remains looming. In this way, the idiosyncrasy of the canine mind is potentially offset by anthropomorphic/anthropocentric attributions. Therefore, in terms of consciousness representation, *Timbuktu* does not *explicitly* deviate from the traditional way of ascribing mind-acts to animals. If unnaturalness is expected to defamiliarize readers, Auster’s narrative is not distinct in this aspect, and reading it may just feel like reading any ordinary animal story.

What is more noticeably unnatural lies in the representation of the canine experiences. At the fine-grained end of Herman’s scale is *umwelt* exploration.¹⁵¹ This representational form is concerned with “strategies for representing interspecies rather than intraspecies variations in experience”, and under it are grouped methods used to “emulate, with as much granularity or detail as possible, how other animals engage with their surrounding world” (Herman, “Storyworld/Umwelt” 174).¹⁵² In spite of the unavoidable use of the human system of signs, Auster endeavors to break away from its constraints on depicting the ontologically different canine mind, and Mr. Bones’ interpretation of human language showcases the human-nonhuman difference. The dog’s understanding of English is determined by his own lived experience rather than the correspondence between the signifier and the signified. As a result, English for the canine is “Ingloosh” (*Timbuktu* 6, 28), “Chicago” stands for “a bus splashing through a rain puddle on Michigan Avenue” and “Tampa” is “a wall of light shimmering up from the asphalt one August afternoon” (33), “tiger” is a threatening animal but not a boy’s name (126), and “family vacation”

¹⁵¹ The term “umwelt” is originally from the German-Estonian philosopher-biologist Jakob von Uexküll, and it is used by Herman to suggest “how the emphasis is less on the translation of the nonhuman into the human than on the lived, phenomenological worlds of nonhuman animals themselves—and on how a concern with nonhuman ways of encountering the world can reshape humans’ own modes of encounter” (“Storyworld/Umwelt” 167).

¹⁵² Originally, Herman’s analysis is conducted in the context of graphic narrative. He later extends the study to narrative studies in general (“Storyworld/Umwelt” 178).

means himself being put in a kennel (167). The world without Willy is a world beyond recognition, and the dog has to unravel mysteries of the new world by adjusting his old epistemological system, according to which that “the Orioles” is a baseball team does not make sense: “A baseball player was a man, and yet once he joined a team he was turned into an animal, a mutant being, or a spirit who lived in heaven next to God” (110). In the above cases, the subjective character of Mr. Bones’ experiences is delivered in his engagements with surroundings, and the alterity of his nonhuman mind is soundly reserved.

With a highlight of the otherness of the dog’s phenomenological experiences, Auster’s novella apparently departs from the established conventions of animal descriptions. Allegory, as Todorov contends, often “implies the existence of at least two meanings for the same words”, and the literal meaning tends to be effaced (63).¹⁵³ For Richardson, the sequencing of allegory follows the logic of ideas, and the development of ideas rather than probability or travesties of generic forms motivates the narrative (*Unnatural Narrative* 12). Measured against these expected understandings, Auster’s narrative yet means what it says—the canine does not function as virtual stand-ins for any human, and human motivations and practices cease to be the template for interpreting Mr. Bones’ behaviors. The narrative hence challenges conventional nonhuman descriptions instead of strengthening the anthropocentric paradigm.

Transgressions of Conventional Cultural Ontologies

Before my further illustration of the unnatural canine protagonist, clarification needs to be made about anthropomorphism and anthropocentricity. Bryan L. Moore points out that at least since

¹⁵³ According to Todorov, fable is the genre that comes closest to pure allegory, “in which the first meaning of the words tend to be completely effaced” (64).

Plato, anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism have long worked in tandem: “the former representing the world in human terms and the latter in proclaiming the whole world for human ends” (12). However, the correlation does not mean that anthropomorphism is automatically connected to anthropocentrism. Naama Harel, for instance, argues that notwithstanding the pronounced anthropomorphism, nonhuman narrators can still raise significant questions about nonhuman existence and its relationship with human existence; as a result, “[a]nthropomorphic representation should not necessarily lead to anthropocentric interpretation” (49). By and large, although the use of human language does not necessarily make the rendition of nonhuman minds anthropocentric, that certain anthropomorphism or anthropocentricity always participates in animal narrative should be recognized. After all, “Any account we come up with of ‘our’ relation to ‘animals’ will be from ‘our’ point of view” (Wood 19-20). Not least owing to the inevitable use of human language, even the most empathic literary explorations of the lives of animals may gravitate to the human self (Anderton 271). Given this, a certain humanized attribution is unavoidable in animal narrative. For me, the representation of the canine consciousness can be both anthropomorphic and cynomorphic.¹⁵⁴ As Val Plumwood remarks, some “humanization of perspective” will always be at the background level of any engagement with nonhuman lives, and what really matters is “how damaging [such humanization] is, what is its meaning, and what practices could be used to counter it if and where it needs to be countered?” (58).¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Cynomorphism refers to the manner in which a dog sees the world, including the attribution of doglike characteristics to non-canine animals, especially humans (“Cynomorphism”).

¹⁵⁵ Making a distinction between weaker and stronger forms of anthropomorphism, Plumwood suggests that “weak forms are unavoidable but not necessarily harmful, while strong forms may be damaging but are by no means inevitable” (58). In *Narratology beyond the Human*, Herman recognizes this nonbinary stance by contending that “it is possible to put practices in place to prevent a reflexive, unthinking colonizing of the other”, and an appropriate methodology for dealing with cross-species differences should emphasize on corrigibility and open expectations (6).

Having said so, however, Auster's work still seems to me very heavy-handed in humanizing the canine protagonist, and in many cases, such humanization riskily balances out the idiosyncrasy of the post-Cartesian depictions of Mr. Bones. After all, what is more anthropomorphic than picturing the dog as even smarter and more intelligent than human beings?

However, a closer reading reveals that the narrative is undertaking a subversion from within. Just like Carter's voicing of feminist messages via firstly inscribing patriarchy in *Doctor Hoffman*, Auster's narrative undermines our cultural perceptions of animals by firstly subscribing to the anthropomorphic paradigm. Revolts ensue. While Mr. Bones is very aware that he is only a dog, and that he cannot get rid of animal natures, e.g. the sensitivity to smells, the canine never feels necessarily inferior to human beings. Although Willy takes Mr. Bones' reaction to the experimentation with scents seriously, in the dog's eyes, the master's anthropomorphic attributions to the actual instinct behavior are totally self-righteous: "Mr. Bones was glad that he had not been endowed with the power of human speech. If he had, he would have been forced to tell Willy the truth, and that would have caused him much pain. For a dog . . . the fact is that the whole world is a symphony of smells" (44). In fact, Mr. Bones does not take pity on himself as a dog, and perhaps thanks to the denial of human speech, the canine acts as an observer, and in some cases even a judge, from a higher stance, of human beings. When Willy decides to go to the foreign Baltimore to spend his last days, Mr. Bones feels "grieved" as "A dog would never commit such *a blunder*" (7; my emphasis). As much as the dog is attached to his master, he always finds his talk about peace and brotherhood "a bit too sappy for his taste" (165). The canine feels offended by cute names given by humans as "he knew that *a dog of his melancholic temperament* would never adjust to it, that he would *cringe* every time he heard it for the rest of his days" (135; my emphasis). On hearing the family vacation excluding him, the dog watches Pony "with one of those *dreary*,

stoical looks that dogs have been giving to people *for forty thousand years*” (168; my emphasis). Examples like these go on.

All these scenarios disintegrate our cultural conceptions of interspecies hierarchy. In terms of cross-species relationships, there has been a debate between anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives of the world: “at issue are perspectives positing a hierarchical separation between humans and other species, on the one hand, and perspectives assuming a fundamental continuity across human and nonhuman forms of life, on the other” (Herman, *Narratology beyond the Human* 33). For a long time, the hierarchical understanding of human’s place in the larger biotic communities had shaped our dealings with nonhuman forms of life, and it was not until the proposal of Darwinism that the public started to consider the deconstruction of interspecies oppositions (3).¹⁵⁶ As Susan McHugh claims, with the advent of the modern society, “[p]eople not only started to accept the idea they owned dogs as property but, more importantly, envisioned even dogs in the street as representatives or extensions of themselves, if not beings entitled to protection from state torture” (137). The fact that Mr. Bones can be more observant and insightful than humans is one step further than a mere highlight of the interaction between animal agency and human subjectivity. In this regard, the novella re-examines cultural ontologies and challenges the norm of interpreting animal experiences; specifically, the literary tradition that the dog carries a natural association with underprivileged people is altered—while Willy is a pitiful bum, Mr. Bones is more a meditator and evaluator than a pure comfort source.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Darwin argues for a fundamental continuity “between the mental capacities and dispositions of humans and other animals” (qtd. in Herman, *Narratology beyond the Human* 3).

¹⁵⁷ According to Herman, cultural ontologies specify what sorts of beings populate the world and how those beings’ attributes relate to the attributes ascribed to humans. Grounded in such ontologies, “norms that guide the production and interpretation of narratives about animal experiences, like the norms bearing on narratives about humans’ ways of encountering the world, determine when, to what extent, and in what manner it is appropriate to ascribe mental

Therefore, the unnaturalness of the canine consciousness resides in its contravention of our assumptions about animal experiences, and in questioning readers' humanized attributions of mental states and activities to canines. By depicting Mr. Bones as capturing a superior posture in interacting with human beings, Auster's narrative discloses the ignorance of the human world, and cues readers to revise their normative interpretations of animal stories. It is important to notice that this intended recalibration is grounded upon certain subscription to anthropomorphism and even anthropocentricity: different from typical unnatural minds which are hardly recognizable, Mr. Bones' internalities are readable—they are largely rendered by a human narrator and read in the light of human motivations. The explicit humanization is only to be disintegrated later, and the dog's aloof counterattacks precisely tease readers' expectations. Auster's parody of conventional animal stories reminds me of the "Proteus Principle" proposed by Meir Sternberg. According to this rule, there is no direct correlation between narrative form and function, and the function of a technique, together with its effects on readers, "depends on a number of factors including the audience's expectations as well as the context in which a particular narrative device is employed" (qtd. in Bernaerts et al. 88). In the case of *Timbuktu*, it is precisely this transgression of the assumed correlation between form and function that defamiliarizes readers.

In this part, I have talked about the antimimetic aspects of the consciousness representations in *Timbuktu*. Firstly, via the post-Cartesian approach, the narrative brings out the canine consciousness in his interaction with the world he inhabits, and respects the otherness—the subjective character—of the animal mind. Additionally, notwithstanding the inscription of a

states and experiences to others". It is also pointed out that narratives can impinge on, and potentially recalibrate, normative assumptions about species of minds (*Narratology beyond the Human* 210). Joseph Anderton contends that dogs are usually associated with ostracized people, and they retain a negative symbolic value that haunts the image of the loyal and lovable pet; as a result, "the dog is simultaneously companionable and contemptible" (274).

largely humanized framework, the narrative disintegrates the traditional hierarchical understanding of humans and animals by depicting the dog as possibly more observant and sophisticated. In both situations, the established patterns of animal stories are undermined, and readers are induced to reflect upon their habitual interpretive strategies. Given the unnaturalness discussed, nevertheless, we wonder, why do many critics read the text as no more than a canine *bildungsroman*? Why do readers barely feel any “presence effects”? Compared with the affective turbulence of *Doctor Hoffman* and the heightened sense of spatiality of *If on a Winter's Night*, the phenomenological experience of *Timbuktu* hardly strikes readers as unusual. Why so? I will deal with these questions in the next section.

Projection of Experientiality

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one important trigger of emotions in fiction reading is readerly engagements with the textual world, as the concepts “empathy” and “sympathy” demonstrate. Such emotional connections with fictional characters, as Keen argues, may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, and can happen even when the character and the reader differ from each other in all sorts of ways (*Empathy and the Novel* 69-70). In the case of *Timbuktu*, I argue, it is just these shared feelings underwriting character identification that transcend the interspecies difference between human readers and the canine protagonist. In the following analysis, I will expound on how the evoked emotions background the antimimesis of the animal mind, and contribute to an overall immersive reading experience. Form-wise, the subjective-colored narrator and different perspectival views characterize the dog as a victim of the human world, arousing empathetic feelings in readers; in terms of content, alienating effects are neutralized by the naturalization of unnatural events. I conclude that as a whole, the emotional transaction between the narrative and readers outweighs the represented unnaturalness.

Mediating Narrator, Juxtaposed Perspectives

In “The Storied Lives of Non-human Narrators” (2014), Lars Bernaerts and others argue that readers can understand non-human narration via the projection of non-human experientiality (75), because of the dialectic of defamiliarization and empathy of non-human narrators (73).¹⁵⁸ In this way, while such non-human narration invites readers to recognize, for instance, the rat-ness of the rat or the cat-ness of the cat, the fact that it is narrated by a non-human entity, with accessible mental states and activities, cues the attribution of experientiality. Narrative techniques like focalization, characterization, and consciousness representation play significant roles in evoking the sense of “what it is like” and facilitating readers’ taking of the non-human narrator’s perspective. Different from this phenomenon of non-human storytelling, *Timbutku* is rendered by a human narrator. As a consequence of the human narrator’s conspicuous presence, the tension between the unnaturalness of the canine consciousness and the familiarity of human experientiality is further complicated by the narratorial intervention. As my analysis will show, the narrator’s apparent bias for Mr. Bones encourages readers’ favor of the dog and provokes identification.

A significant difference in tone in narrating Mr. Bones and Willy is noticeable. When it comes to the dog, the narrator’s wording is idyllic and even philosophical: “The dog studied the boy’s face in the flickering penumbra—so smooth and round in comparison to Willy’s ancient, bearded mug. . . . Tenderness welled up in Mr. Bones’s heart” (114). In another case, the narrative goes that “Mr. Bones had lived long enough to know that anything was possible, that impossible things happened all the time. Perhaps this was one of them, and in that *perhaps* hung a thousand

¹⁵⁸ Bernaerts et al. point out that non-human narrators implicitly and explicitly foreground strategies of distancing and identification, and what is at stake in non-human narration is the ability to acknowledge similarity and otherness at the same time (73-74).

dreads and agonies, an unthinkable horror that gripped him every time he thought about it” (50-51; original emphasis). In contrast with such delicacy and polish, the portrayal of Willy is via direct speech, which is marked by informality, even coarseness: ““We done it hit pay dirt, little pard,” Willy said, spitting out the last bits of mucus and pulmonary tissue. “It ain’t Miss Bea’s house, that’s for sure”” (46). Another example goes as follows: “They probably manufactured it [O’Dell’s Hair Trainer] by hiring teenage boys to *jerk off* into vats. ... I was going to be an American, by gum, and this hair meant that I belonged, that my parents knew what was *fucking* what” (54; my emphasis). Not necessarily a deliberate defamation of Willy (his language in fact matches with his unprivileged social status and cynicism), the narrator’s differential treatment of the two actually makes the canine a more likeable and attractive character.¹⁵⁹ Adding to the extensive revelation of the dog’s interiority, the narrator’s partiality further evokes readers’ inclinations towards him.

Another important contributor to readers’ identification with Mr. Bones is the juxtaposition of two discrepant perspectives—the external narrator’s rendition of the canine internality brings to the fore interspecies tension. Specifically, I would like to illustrate how the constant statement “Mr. Bones is only a dog” carries out the emotional baggage by being heterogeneous in meaning. As I see it, the statement can be understood in two ways. In the first situation, the canine is limited by his dog-ness, and this fact designates the deficiency of his cognitive system in comprehending his encounters with humans; besides, with the mediacy the narrator, the disparity in sense-making processes between the two species is brought out from an external perspective in an ironic way. Talking about the dog’s routine of running around with different smells and cockroaches in Willy’s house, the narrator goes: “It was a *dull, circumscribed routine*, but how was Mr. Bones to know

¹⁵⁹ It also makes sense to see the contrast as an intentional move to subvert the cultural ontology that dogs are assumed to be inferior to human beings.

that? *He was no more than a lame-brained pup, a nincompoop with floppy paws . . .* who was he to judge whether it was rich or poor in the stuff that makes life worth living?” (29; my emphasis). Another example is the excision surgery. About why it happens to him and what it means, the dog cannot decipher. Although he finally manages to examine the damage and finds out what is missing, “*because he was a dog and not a biologist or a professor of anatomy*, he still had no idea what had happened to him” (152; my emphasis). As the narrator remarks, “How was he to know that those missing parts had been responsible for turning him into a father many times over” (152-53)? Here we see the tension between the dog’s understanding of his world and the imposition of human judgment—what is enjoyable to the dog seems boring by the human standard, and the sterilization operation is a total infliction by Dick Jones without any consideration of Mr. Bones’ will. The conflict is real, and the innocence of the dog gains prominence in the light of the self-righteous superiority of human beings. In this aspect, the narrative’s shift in perspective effectively demonstrates the canine’s susceptibility to human control, and his powerlessness and weakness evoke soft feelings in readers.

What to me is more emotionally provoking is the other situation where Mr. Bones is fully aware of him being a dog. In this scenario, the dog tragically struggles between living up to human’s expectations and breaking away from such shackles; after all, as the narrative goes, “whatever divine presence he might have harbored within his skin, he was first and foremost the thing he appeared to be” (36). Because of the denial of human language, the canine cannot make his voice heard, though he knows well what is happening. When Henry asks about his name, Mr. Bones silently reflects—“how does he think I’m supposed to answer that one?” (102). As much as the dog hates to be given cute names, he is fully aware that he is “in no position” (111) to tell Henry and Polly his real name, and he has to endure being called “Cal” and “Sparky,”

compromising “his melancholic temperament” and cringing every time he hears it for the rest of his days (135). More pathetically, the canine protagonist has to please human beings, against his will, to survive this dangerous world. In order to pass Dick’s test and stay with the family, the dog decides to “take the initiative and do something to help himself”, “to impress Dick with *some canine derring-do*, some *spiffy dog* thing that would turn the tide in his favor” (140; my emphasis). So he goes, “*proud to be torturing himself* on behalf of such a *noble* cause” (140; my emphasis), and “refused to quit before the children gave up and flopped to the ground in front of him” (141). Sad as it is to be at the mercy of human beings without knowing, it is times more pitiful that Mr. Bones sacrifices his dignity for food and shelter. This discrepancy in perception between self and other hits the climax at the dog’s departure to Timbuktu. For him, dodge-the-car is not a vulgar suicide but a game, yet for others, it is a game that only a sick and crazy dog would play: “And that’s what he was now, wasn’t it? *A sick and crazy old dog*” (185; my emphasis). The convergence of the perspectives here gives rise to sarcastic effects: Who are we to judge Mr. Bones? Who are we to dictate what a dog should do? Who is sick and crazy? The dog or human beings?

As such, the narrative invites readers’ emotional input, and encourages them to experience the sufferings and struggles of Mr. Bones. First of all, the reflector mode through the eyes of the canine facilitates role-taking, notwithstanding the cross-species divide. As Keen highlights, the choice of internal representation of the thoughts and feelings of a character in third-person fiction has a particularly strong effect on readers (*Empathy and the Novel* 97). The consequent shared feelings between the protagonist and readers bring out the narrative’s experientiality—the sense of “what it is like.” On the basis of such emotional connections, readers’ empathetic responses are further intensified by the intervening narrator; particularly, the narrator’s partial narration and the juxtaposition of contrasting perspectives incite readers’ compassion for the dog.

Apart from these formal features, the overflow of sentimentality is attributable to other contextual factors. Confronted with a story about the life of a dog, who is struggling to come to terms with the fact that his homeless master is dying, and trying to survive this world fraught with danger alone, I suppose that most readers would think of some relatable experiences. Memories of losing friends and facing uncertainties, the dealing with identity issues, the dilemma between dignity and bread and butter ... These are universal problems that every human needs to cope with. In this sense, the narrative revives readers' emotional memories from the autobiographical past (Oatley, "Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact" 114). Put another way, the situational empathy provoked responds primarily to plot and circumstance, involves less self-extension in imaginative role-taking and more recognition of prior or current experience (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 80). Another trigger is something more intuitive. As Brian Boyd argues, in evolutionary terms, humans have self-enclosed and modular systems impervious to introspection (43). I believe that through ages, humans have found habitual comfort in animals.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, it just feels natural that we have sympathy for fluffy animals, and our soft feelings are so rapid, automatic, and reliable that we may simply take them as ready-made facts. In the case of Mr. Bones, the narrative only enhances the already possessed connections with the dog.

Naturalized Unnatural Events

So far, I have been talking about how Auster's work encourages the projection of experientiality. Apart from the backgrounding of unnatural canine consciousness, unnatural events are also kept

¹⁶⁰ I have discussed self-enclosed and modular systems in Chapter Two, under the section "Cognitive Activities and Cognitive Readings."

at bay. In terms of the storyworld, there are at least two scenarios that call attention to the transgression of ontological boundaries, yet are somewhat naturalized by psychological reasons.

The first unnatural moment happens when Santa Claus on TV is directly preaching to the then William Gurevitch. While William initially sticks to the difference between reality and make-believe, and takes the incident as no more than the consequence of drunk-ness, a few moments later, he starts to believe that “[w]hat could not happen was happening” (19). Notwithstanding William’s struggle against the apparition, this “unlikeliest fiction, this contradiction of everything Willy stood for” (21) successfully dispels his skepticism and turns him into a saint—the man decides to adopt the moniker of Willy G. Christmas (22).¹⁶¹ How do we account for this scenario? Is Santa Claus really addressing to the bum William or is it just a coincidence? According to Herman, this is an instance of metalepsis: “Auster uses metaleptic boundary crossing to suggest the far-reaching consequences of listening to voices that might otherwise remain unheard, bracketed or as unreal or relegated to the domain of the imaginary” (*Narratology beyond the Human*, Chapter One, Note 28). Metalepsis understood as such is more thematically considered than structurally inscribed—the point is that Willy takes seriously the voice which is not meant for him, rather than if the ontological boundary is really violated.¹⁶² From my vantage point, reading the incident as an ontological metalepsis is debatable, and the antimimesis of the event is neutralized by two facts. First, it is totally possible that Santa Claus is in fact addressing to a fictional figure whose name happens to be William Gurevitch, and in this case, apart from

¹⁶¹ Willy is from a Jewish family.

¹⁶² Herman’s emphasis on the thematic concern is further illustrated as follows: “Over the course of *Timbuktu*, the reader is made privy to just such a voice, that is, the nonhuman voice of Mr. Bones, through a blend of reports about events in which the dog participates more or less centrally, accounts of Mr. Bones’ perceptions, memories, and emotions, and free indirect discourse, in which the heterodiegetic narrator’s statements take on the subjective coloration of the dog’s own experiences, as modeled by Auster” (*Narratology beyond the Human*, Chapter One, Note 28). It seems to Herman that Santa Claus’s messages is only a specific embodiment of all the overlooked voices that we should have paid attention to. The unnaturalness of the event *per se* is not the core here.

coincidence, nothing fantastic happens. Second, the narrator never offers any authorial comments on the situation, and readers are provided with only Willy's internalization of the delivered ethic of "goodness, generosity, and self-sacrifice" (*Timbuktu* 21)—the lengthy mental descriptions weaken the transgression. In this way, I believe it is more proper to say that the event has metaleptic effects than to say it is itself a metaleptic phenomenon.

Another unnatural moment occurs when Mr. Bones dreams the dream in which he listens to Willy's recollections before the master's admittance to the hospital. Embedded in this dream is another dream where one part of the dog transforms into a fly who follows the ambulance to the hospital, witnessing his master's final reunion with Mrs. Swanson and his eventual death. The dream itself is not unnatural—after all, anything can happen in dreams; what is unnatural is a constantly implied confusion of dream and reality. This is a strange dream, as the narrator says: "There was no distortion, no wavy interference, no sudden switching of channels. It was just like life, and even though he [Mr. Bones] was asleep, even though he was hearing the words in a dream, he was awake in the dream, and therefore the longer he went on sleeping, the more awake he felt" (68). Indeed, as it later turns out, "the dream wasn't a dream but a vision of things to come" (87). It is revealed that what happens after the dream is the same as what is depicted in the dream, and just as in the dream, the dog runs away when the police come for Willy. Is such coincidence only a chance event? The narrative never clarifies. But for Mr. Bones, the dream foresees what is to come in reality, and for him, *it is* the reality—the dog's fate after his escape is all grounded upon the dream being realized.

We may first examine the dog's dream in the light of the fantastic. Supposedly, readers experience certain hesitation and they wonder if what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion (Todorov 41). Of course, it is only a dream, and on account of that,

the transformation into a fly is not impossible; however, its magical resemblance with reality and the canine's unwavering belief in its realness, which are further confirmed by the plot development, cue readers to entertain the authenticity of the dream. In my understanding, the event cannot be satisfyingly explained by laws of reason. How can a dream be so detailed? How can a dream predict future? Moreover, the effect of the event on the protagonist, unlike any ordinary dream, is indelible; especially in terms of structure, the dream is decisive in propelling and shaping the direction of the story, more than just creating sensations in the character and the reader.¹⁶³ This is the unnaturalness I want to highlight: even though the event's antimimetic nature is offset by the uncanny framework (it is only a dream), its impact on the character and its function in structure are solidly real.¹⁶⁴ Alternatively, we can also examine the layered dream from the perspective of metalepsis. In terms of narrative levels, if we regard respectively the primary narrative in which the canine exists, the dream, and the second, embedded dream as level one, level two, and level three, there is a confirmed resemblance between level one and level two, and a likely coincidence between level one and level three.¹⁶⁵ Given the correspondence between different narrative levels, the interpenetration of ontologically distinct worlds is underlined; not only so, as the dream

163 From my vantage point, the scenario does incur a hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous, and at the end of the day, to reduce it to either of them is not fully convincing. This unnatural moment challenges mimetic parameters and indicates a modification of reading strategies. Although works of fantasy are regarded by Richardson as nonmimetic, namely, the conventionalized unnatural, in Auster's work, because the fantastic event only locally occurs, it still strikes readers as estranging; the effect is different from that of a typical fantastic narrative which follows the established pattern throughout.

164 According to Todorov, in works that belong to the uncanny, "events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar" (46). For the works that belong to the marvelous, these are narratives that suggest the existence of the supernatural, "by the very fact that it remains unexplained, unrationalized" (52). While Mr. Bones' dreams unnaturally resemble and bear on reality, the provoked fantastic effect is neutralized by the fact that they are dreams, and they can be explained by the laws of reality. As the narrative goes on, however, readers are invited to believe in that something inexplicable and marvelous happens—what is dreamed of becomes Mr. Bones' reality, even though the phenomenon itself (dreaming) does not violate realistic restrictions.

165 In reality, the dog runs away when the police come, and there is no *confirmed* resemblance between the second dream and what actually happens to Willy in hospital.

chronologically precedes and heralds reality, the embedded level in fact determines the ground level instead of the other way around, thus deconstructing the hierarchy of narrative levels.

As I see it, this disintegration of ontological boundaries is the most artificial moment in the storyworld of *Timbuktu*: in the dog's transformation into a fly, the author's intervention is significantly disclosed, and his intention to fill up readers' knowledge gap of Willy's fate is conspicuous. On the other hand, the antimimesis of the contravention is partly recuperated by its psychological origin; because it all happens in a dream, the unnaturalness of the scenario is downplayed.

This section focuses on the emotionally provoking aspects of the narrative. Particularly, I talk about how the narrative situation contributes to the evocation of empathetic reactions, and how primarily unnatural events are naturalized by contextual factors. To summarize, in spite of the unnaturalness of the canine mind, the narrative unsparingly motivates readers to attribute experientiality to the protagonist and develop sentiments for him; besides, unnatural events like metalepsis only occasionally happen, and when they do occur, transgressions are never solidly founded. Now, moving on to the interpretive move, I will investigate how the phenomenological fact affects the sense-making of the text, and how cognitive readings perform in this regard.

A Cognitive Reading of Mr. Bones

In view of the emotionally engaging experience discussed above, the invented nature of the canine protagonist is largely sidelined, and readers are expected to pick up cognitive readings. My reading is divided into two parts. Firstly, I will elaborate on the efficacy of cognitive mechanisms in the reading process, in which the embodied approach plays a significant role. Secondly, I examine the meaning of the inscribed antimimesis, for which I mainly refer to Alber's reading strategies.

As mentioned previously, the notions of embodiment and enactivism stress the feedback loop between the body and mind in the interaction with narrative, and foreground the reader's crucial bodily participation in bringing out narrative features.¹⁶⁶ In essence, this process highlights “how readers supply their own embodied resonances of movement, bodily states, and directions to make sense of written language” and “how readers place their body at the disposal of the text, leading to immersive experiences” (Kukkonen and Nielsen 488). In accordance with this, when readers initially get confronted with Mr. Bones, they have certain expectations for him—he is supposed to fit in with the dog image in conventional animal stories. With the triggering of such equivalent or parallel cognitive processes, they immerse themselves into the story, mirroring the fate of the dog as if they were in his shoes. This is a process of immersion which evokes readers' specific and embodied self, with the degree of immersion variably effected by previous cognitive repertoire and enactive experience (Anderson and Iversen 577). Importantly, this embodied self is flexible and changeable—readers are cued to modify their previous conceptions when Mr. Bones is revealed to be not conventional. It is necessary to reiterate that the antimimesis of the canine consciousness here is differential from other unnatural minds.

While Auster's work in many cases underlines Mr. Bones' animal natures, i.e. his sensibility to smells, his naïve trust in humans, his struggles with human language and so on, their estranging effects are compromised by the presence of the human narrator. Compared with animal stories which are narrated by non-human entities themselves, the story of Mr. Bones is embedded

¹⁶⁶ For cognitive theory, it can be argued that there is no such thing as “narrative features” outside the reader's mind; to some extent, this basic idea is the very reason that cognitive narratology—preceded by theories of reception and reader response—exists and that we would invent it if it did not yet exist (Bernaerts and Richardson 530).

in a humanized framework.¹⁶⁷ By comparison, what strikes the reader as more antimimetic is the narrative's subversion of the hierarchical conception of interspecies relationships—the human's assumed superiority to other living creatures. Given the above, in coming to terms with Mr. Bones, readers evoke a hybrid consciousness. On account of his sophistication in thinking, the dog is very much humanized, and this recognition also includes the moments when the dog is more “evolved” than human beings, as reflected in his outstanding insight and pursuit of equality. Considering the represented gap between the dog world and the human world, it is believed that some animality of the canine is reserved. On the premise that talking and thinking animals have been accepted as possibilities in the world of fiction over the development of fictional narrative, readers need to stretch their cognitive frames beyond the convention and incorporate the subversive aspect of the canine consciousness. With the fine-tuned cognitive frame in sight, readers can again immerse themselves into the narrative. This is what Alber calls “the blending of frames,” i.e. “[w]e have to conduct seemingly impossible mapping operations to orient ourselves within storyworlds that refuse to be organized by real-world parameters only” (*Unnatural Narrative* 48). In this process of naturalization, with the help of vivid and detailed instructions provided by the text, readers are able to take imaginative leaps beyond their usual cognitive constraints (Anderson and Iversen 578).

When it comes to the meaning-production of the text, Alber's other two navigational tools, “foregrounding the thematic” and “satirization and parody,” prove insightful. From a thematic perspective, the figural narrative situation discloses the canine mentality, and represents the relationship between human and animal experiences in terms of continuity rather than

¹⁶⁷ For instance, *Pig Tales* (1997) is narrated by a pig who metamorphosed from human form, and *The Man I Became* (2016) is narrated by a gorilla who later gets plucked and trained by humans. The two are used as representatives of unnatural minds respectively in “Unnatural Minds” by Stefan Iversen, and “Fictional Minds: Coming to Terms with the Unnatural” by Bernaerts and Richardson.

unbridgeability. The breakdown of cross-species boundaries underlines the power of narrative to “reframe the cultural models or ontologies that undergird hierarchical understandings of humans’ place in the larger biotic communities of which they are members” (Herman, *Narratology beyond the Human* 4). As Karla Armbruster argues, the key to representing animals lies in “both inviting the reader to identify with the nonhuman animal as a fellow living being and reminding him or her of the inevitable differences between humans and other species” (24). In what sense can we say there is a fundamental continuity of the mental capabilities and dispositions between humans and other animals? How far can we go? The significance of such questions is far-reaching. In this aspect, the impossible mindreading in *Timbuktu* is driven by our curiosity about the hidden secrets and private thoughts of others. We want to know the inner world of our animal friends, especially what they think about us, and the penetration into their minds answers such psychological needs (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 101). To restate Herman’s point, Auster’s novella suggests “the far-reaching consequences of listening to voices that might otherwise remain unheard, bracketed or as unreal or relegated to the domain of the imaginary” (*Narratology beyond the Human*, Chapter One, Note 28).

In what sense is such mindreading authentic? The belief that human language cannot capture the fullness of animal existence often carries the implied assumption that it *can* capture human’s experience of the world (Armbruster 26; my emphasis), whereas in fact, we might have overlooked the instability of human language itself—this is implied in Mr. Bones’ rumination on English. As Derrida claims, “[t]he animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (23). The truth might be that we humans are always radically other, not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, which we share with animals, but

also in “our subjectivity and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a radically ahuman precondition for our subjectivity, for what makes us human” (Wolfe 571). Following this train of thought, *Timbuktu* can be read as a manifestation of the move of narrative interest from using animal characters for purely human concerns towards the actual experiences of animals, and further to the notion of a reciprocal relationship between humans and animals” (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 69). To serve this end, different from “anthropomorphic projection” which usually flattens out the phenomenological specificity of nonhuman encounters with the world” (Herman, “Storyworld/Umwelt” 170), the characterization of Mr. Bones in many cases retains his animality and respects the subjective character of his experiences. More radically, the depiction of the canine as being morally superior in contrast to the human being contemptible disintegrates the assumed interspecies hierarchy. Via Mr. Bones, the egocentricity of human beings is parodied and ridiculed; at the end of the day, we are reminded that it might be humans, rather than animals, that are ignorant.

The above displays a cognitive reading of the unnatural *Timbuktu*. In view of the aroused reader-character identification, the narrative may easily pass as a traditional animal story; yet the antimimetic portrayal of the canine protagonist should not be erased by the overflow of sentimentality. Although cognitive tools are adopted to account for the communicativeness of the narrative, they cannot satisfyingly explain the represented unnatural as, fundamentally, a textual phenomenon. In the production of meaning, we should remember that while illusion-breaking effects are overshadowed by emotional connections, they are not reducible to mimetic explanations.

3.4 Summary

This chapter presents the application of the proposed model to phenomenologically different unnatural narratives. Both Carter's and Auster's narratives present a strong evocation of emotions; differently, the former in many cases drives readers away because of the negative personal distress, and the latter encourages a strong identification between readers and the canine protagonist. On account of the affective sign, in terms of meaning-production, *DH* directs to a cooperation of unnaturalizing and cognitive readings, and the interpretive move needs to be made regionally; by comparison, *Timbuktu* overall sanctions the adoption of cognitive tools. Calvino's narrative is the most unnatural of the three, and it impresses readers with multiple spatialities and bodily sensations, thanks to the flaunting of fictionality; as a result, my interpretation of the text largely relies on unnaturalizing readings. Through the lens of the fantastic, my analysis demonstrates how the genre is exploited differently in the three unnatural texts to produce different phenomenological experiences. In all my three case studies, I endeavor to place my sense-making activities locally, so that unnatural phenomena can be discussed contextually and adequately. Expectedly, this chapter sufficiently demonstrates the dynamic interaction between affective responses and the production of meaning.

In the first chapter, I have stressed that unnatural elements are artificial as well as communicative, and both properties need to be duly concerned in sense-making activities; in other words, an unnatural narratology should discuss how unnaturalness invalidates mimetic understandings as well as inform us of the purpose of doing so. The inclusion of the reader's body in my model highlights the role of one's phenomenological experience in reading, and offers an index for the choice of interpretive tools. By doing so, not only is the gap between the two interpretive approaches bridged, the fact that unnatural narratives provoke different affective

reactions in readers is also respected. My above case analyses show that with reference to the mind-body continuum, the interpretation of an unnatural narrative should be situated in its context, as one unnatural technique can be exploited differently in different stories—the metalepsis in Calvino’s novel is extremely alienating, yet the same transgression in Auster’s novella hardly strikes readers as being inexplicable. A comprehensive interpretation should move from a local unnatural phenomenon to its interaction with other contextual factors—sometimes the invented nature of the unnatural is too salient to ignore, sometimes its illusion-breaking effects are overshadowed by the emotionality of the narrative. While overall, one reading approach is chosen over the other, the constant wrestling between affect and emotion and, as a result, the modification of navigational tools, are never missed in my analyses.

CONCLUSION

This project started with my personal experience of reading unnatural and other experimental narratives: I often find it hard to place myself in the textual world and develop identification with fictional figures. Do defamiliarization and immersion always exclude each other? I wondered. Can we simultaneously indulge in the textual reality and appreciate its artificial nature? Does the constructed-ness of fictional narratives have to drive readers away? My intuitive answer is no. Writers like Paul Auster practically demonstrate that a full play of the writerly creativity is not necessarily “highbrow,” and immersion can not only co-exist with defamiliarization, but also outweigh it even in unnatural texts. After all, even the most unnatural work designates a continual interaction between the antimimetic and the mimetic. Correspondingly, the phenomenological experience of reading an unnatural work is never invariable, and the discussion of the reading effect should be contextually specific.

So my initial conclusion is that while the unnatural is invented, this ontological status *may or may not* bear on the reading experience, and the interpretation of unnatural narratives *may or may not* follow the mimetic paradigm. When we read an unnatural text, we react to its artificial moments, and more importantly, to the whole package. This means that in the interpretive move, we need to consider how the unnatural is situated in the overall context: the choice of methodology depends on whether the unnatural is foregrounded, or overshadowed, by contextual factors.

The phenomenological dimension—the reader’s affective experience—offers a perspective to mediate the debate between the textual and the cognitive approaches of interpretation. However, the feelings evoked in reading unnatural narratives are idiosyncratic and hard to pin down; in this aspect, I take myself as the representative reader, and assume that my

personal experience can speak for the general readership. My model of unnatural narratology, therefore, does not intend to minutely describe readers' reactions to unnatural texts. Rather, it aims to stress first, the role of one's bodily participation in the interpretive move, and second, the fact that one's somatic experience can be beyond our representational, cognitive system. Significantly, my model highlights the constant dialogue between bodily sensations and mind activities, hence the situatedness of making sense of unnatural works.

With regards to the mind-body continuum, I find inspirations in the phenomenological tradition. This philosophical input brings to the fore "the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience" (Smith). Specifically indebted to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, I introduce two phenomenological facts into the discussion. Firstly, we are always in a physical relation to the world; secondly, the body is significant in human experience, and it is infused with the cognition of the world. Transferring these insights into reading unnatural narratives, my model recognizes that for each unnatural work, while the invented nature of the unnatural essentially calls forth a substantial relation to the text, there are also engaging moments when the bodily experience and the mental representation correspond with each other. The phenomenological index thus calls for a necessary bifurcation of sense-making activities, and consequently, a cooperation of the mentioned two approaches. In view of the continuity of body and mind, I draw on Gumbrecht's conceptualization of presence cultures centering on the bodily senses, and second-generation cognitive literary studies which highlight the feedback loop of the lived body and consciousness. When it comes to making sense of unnatural texts, the former leads readers to the non-representational approach which respects their ontological status, and the latter guides to the cognitive toolkit that does justice to the emotions provoked in readers.

The two interpretive methods are by no means binary. As my application chapter demonstrates, textual and cognitive readings always work hand in hand, and even the most experimental narrative leaves room for naturalization on the reader's part. To account for the phenomenological diversity of reading unnatural texts, the three chosen works are typical concerning the evoked bodily experience. For texts with a foregrounded affective heterogeneity like Carter's, both unnaturalizing and cognitive interpretations are applicable, depending on the somatic experience regarding the textual aspect discussed. For highly experimental narratives like Calvino's, whose form far outweighs content in significance, the non-representational approach is preferred. When it comes to sentimental works like *Timbuktu*, cognitive readings are adopted to justify the prominent emotionality. My analysis shows that although unnaturalness by definition refused to be mimetically interpreted, an unnatural narrative is not necessarily so; in this way, my model proposes a more flexible and dynamic stance of sense-making activities.

As my model illustrates, the standoff between unnatural and cognitive narratologies is not irreconcilable. Is there continuity between making sense of fictional narratives and real-life situations? The two approaches answer differently, yet part of the disagreement is "merely a matter of emphasis" (Willemsen et al. 598). The mind approach emphasizes relatively universal and generalizable knowledge of textual processing (601), and "favors explanatory perspectives on interpretation over the practice of interpreting" (602). By contrast, unnatural narratology does justice to the ways fictional narratives and our interactions with them discontinue from real-life situations (605). In essence, the debate is between a conceptual tool that helps readers with the appreciation of specific texts, or the singularity of texts, and a theoretical framework that describes our engagements with them. The clash is particularly prominent in dealing with unnatural narratives which foreground the ontological status of fictional narratives and the insufficiency of

cognitive strategies. As I see it, this does not have to be an either/or situation: we want to understand the specific qualities of unnatural texts *as well as* the literary experience and the processes underlying it. In other words, we want to know not only how unnatural works violate mimetic limitations, but also how to process such transgressions so that they can be heuristically grasped. More crucially, my model conceptualizes the unnatural as a fundamentally local, textual phenomenon, and an unnatural narrative as an end-product of the interplay of various textual factors; in this regard, the joint effort of the two approaches provides a more inclusive description of the experience of reading unnatural texts.

While the import of the phenomenological dimension tentatively bridges the gap between the textual specificity of the unnatural, and the communication between literary creation and readership, the discussion of the reader's lived body on the theoretical level has limitations. Foreseeably, my model of unnatural narratology might be critiqued as being too individual, as the analysis of the reader's affective experience is personally based. In view of my background as an experienced reader with professional literary training, it is right to be dubious that my bodily experience can speak for every reader. Although the consideration of the experiencing body echoes the paradigm shift that exposes and transcends the limitations of purely formalist models (Bortolussi and Dixon 2), my argumentation relies on "purely intuitive speculation formulated in the absence of an objective method of validation" (5), and it is unable to "resolve the relationship between individual and collective reading experience" (6). How readers actually feel about and react to unnatural narratives cannot be known from any speculative hypothesis or monolithic views of reading experience; rather, these are essentially empirical questions "that can only be answered by systematic observation of actual readers reading actual texts" (13). In this sense, in terms of the reader's affective experience, my model is lacking in empirical evidence.

Speaking of empirical evidence, a practical issue is whether we can analyze the body independently of the mind. For my project, the empirical research should be conducted on how readers feel about unnatural texts instead of how they process them, though any somatic response of the reader involves a certain cognitive processing of the text. Even in an extreme situation where the relation between the reader and the unnatural text is purely physical, triggers of bodily sensations are still text-based, and the feeling of affects is a result of the unsuccessful application of representational systems. This means that while in theory, the bodily dimension is regarded as bearing on the interpretive move, in practice, one's somatic response is preceded by mental constructions. This is the caveat we should keep in mind if any empirical research is to be done on the reader's lived body in my model.

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