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## A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative

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# Unnatural Spaces and Narrative Worlds

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MANFRED JAHN and Sabine Buchholz define narrative space in terms of “the environment in which story-internal characters move about and live” (552). Similarly, in my usage, the term denotes the *WHERE* of narrative, that is, the demarcated space of the represented storyworld, including objects (such as houses, tables, chairs) or other entities (such as fog) that are part of the setting and that do not belong to one of the characters.

Narrative space has traditionally been considered to be much less important than narrative time. For example, in the eighteenth century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing defined narrative literature as an art of time rather than space (102–15), and Gérard Genette was also much more interested in investigating temporal progression than issues of spatial organization in narrative. Furthermore, E. M. Forster’s notorious example of a minimal plot (“The king died and then the queen died of grief” [130]) does not contain any reference to space, and we are presumably all familiar with bare stages in the theater that do not really obstruct our understanding of the play’s represented action.

Other narratologists, however, have dealt with the representation of narrative space and its potential significance in greater detail. Already in the 1920s, Mikhail Bakhtin developed the concept of the “chronotope” or “time space,” which highlights “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Furthermore, Sey-

mour Chatman (96–97) distinguishes not only between story time (*erzählte Zeit*) and discourse time (*Erzählzeit*) but also between *story space* (the spatial parameters of the represented action) and *discourse space* (the immediate environment of the narrator or narrative discourse).

In *The Poetics of Space*, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard shows that “inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (47). He semanticizes architectural structures (such as houses, drawers, wardrobes, corners, and so forth) by developing the concept of ‘lived space’ (*espace vécu*), that is, humanly experienced space, and addresses the question of what space means to its inhabitants. The notion of ‘lived space’ “indicates that human . . . conceptions of space always include a subject who is affected by (and in turn affects) space, a subject who experiences and reacts to space in a bodily way, a subject who ‘feels’ space through existential living conditions, mood, and atmosphere” (Jahn and Buchholz 553). Gerhard Hoffmann also deals with the multifarious functions of narrative space as experiential space (3–7). More specifically, on the basis of a comprehensive diachronic outlook, he shows how narratives semanticize domains of space and, among other things, discriminates between comic, fantastic, grotesque, uncanny, visionary, and mythic spaces (112–266).

Other theoreticians—such as Algirdas-Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés; Gabriel Zoran; Ruth Ronen; Holly Taylor and Barbara Tversky (“Spatial Mental Models” and “Perspective”); David Herman (“Spatial Reference” and *Story Logic* 263–99); and Marie-Laure Ryan (“Cognitive Maps” and “From Parallel Universes”)—have shown that narrative comprehension closely correlates with an understanding of the narrative’s spatial organization.<sup>1</sup> In the words of David Herman, narratives necessitate “modeling, and enabling others to model, an emergent constellation of spatially related entities” (“Spatial Reference” 534). Similarly, Marie-Laure Ryan argues that “the reader’s imagination needs a mental model of space to simulate the narrative action” (“Cognitive Maps” 237).

According to Holly Taylor and Barbara Tversky, we use spatial concepts to organize “space hierarchically, by salience or functional significance, and by describing elements at the top of the hierarchy prior to those lower in the hierarchy” (“Perspective” 389). At issue are “deictic expressions such as ‘here,’ ‘there,’ ‘left,’ ‘right,’ etc.” (Jahn and Buchholz 552) as well as “locative adverbs (*forward, together, sideways*) and prepositions (*beyond, with, over*), which convey information about the geometric character of located and reference

1. In recent years, some critics have even begun to speak of a ‘spatial turn’ in literary studies (see Döring and Thielmann, for instance).

objects (volumes, surfaces, points, and lines)” (Herman, *Story Logic* 274–75; see also Dennerlein 75–84).

The aim of this essay is to further our understanding of narrative space by determining the potential functions of unnatural (i.e., physically or logically impossible) simulations of space in narrative fiction. Narrative spaces can be physically impossible (if they defy the laws of nature) or logically impossible (if they violate the principle of noncontradiction).<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I focus on the former. An example of a physically impossible setting can be found in Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *Lunar Park*, in which the first-person narrator informs us that his house was “actually scarring on its own accord. Nothing was helping it. The paint was simply peeling off in a fine white shower, revealing more of the pink stucco underneath. It was doing this without any assistance” (222). Both physically and logically impossible spaces can be found in Mark Z. Danielewski’s novel *House of Leaves*. When Will Navidson and his family return from a trip to Seattle in early June 1990, they realize that their new house has transformed itself: a dark, cold hallway (called “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway”) has developed in the living room wall, and it even exists at two places at the same time. At first, we learn that the hallway has developed “on the north wall” (4), but later on, we are told that it is located “in the west wall” (57; see footnote 68, which explicitly comments on this logical impossibility).<sup>3</sup>

In a first step, I show in what ways narratives denaturalize space. I measure the unnaturalness of these spaces against the foil of the natural, that is, cognitive parameters derived from our real-world experience of space (Fludernik 10–11). In this context, Lubomír Doležel argues that

in order to reconstruct and interpret a fictional world, the reader has to *reorient his cognitive stance* to agree with the world’s encyclopedia. In other words, knowledge of the fictional encyclopedia is absolutely necessary for the reader to comprehend a fictional world. *The actual-world encyclopedia might be useful, but it is by no means universally sufficient; for many fictional worlds it is misleading, it provides not comprehension but misreading.* (181; my italics, J.A.)

2. Katrin Dennerlein also discusses a few ways in which narrated spaces may deviate from our real-world understandings of space (67–68).

3. Even though I focus on physical impossibilities, the unnatural in my sense also comprises human impossibilities, that is, scenarios that transcend standard limitations of knowledge. Examples would be Saleem Sinai, the telepathic first-person narrator in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, or the impossibly eloquent child narrator in John Hawkes’s *Virginie: Her Two Lives*.

All of the cases that I discuss are *utopias* in the etymological sense of the word; they are ‘no-places’ that do not exist anywhere because they can only exist in the world of fiction.

In a second step, I then build on Bachelard’s concept of ‘lived space’ by positing a human experiencer to address the significance, that is, the purpose or point, of representations of impossible space. I assume that unnatural spaces fulfill determinable functions and exist for particular reasons; they are not just ornamental or a form of art for art’s sake. With regard to readers’ ways of coping with impossible spaces, I would like to suggest the following reading strategies or navigational tools, which readers may follow in order to determine the functions of unnatural spaces (see also Yacobi; Ryan “From Parallel Universes”; and Alber).

1. *Blending/frame enrichment*: the processes of blending (see Fauconnier and Turner *The Way We Think* and Turner “Double-Scope Stories”) and “frame enrichment” (Herman, *Story Logic* 108) play a role in all unnatural scenarios. Since the unnatural is by definition physically or logically impossible, it always urges us to create new frames (such as the shapeshifting house or the burning lake) by recombining, extending, or otherwise altering preexisting cognitive parameters.<sup>4</sup>
2. Readers may account for impossible spaces by identifying them as belonging to particular *literary genres* and *generic conventions* (such as the realm of the supernatural or magic [in epics, romances, or later fantasy narratives], or science fiction).<sup>5</sup>
3. We can explain some impossible spaces by attributing them to somebody’s *interiority*.
4. Alternatively, unnatural spaces may be seen as exemplifications of particular *themes* that the narrative addresses.<sup>6</sup>

4. In an experiment, Mante S. Nieuwland and Jos J. A. van Berkum show that subjects try to make sense of narratives that contain unnatural entities (such as an amorous peanut or a crying yacht) through the blending of frames. They report that the subjects need “to construct and gradually update their situation model of the story to the point that they project human characteristics onto inanimate objects. . . . This process of projecting human properties (behavior, emotions, appearance) onto an inanimate object comes close to what has been called ‘conceptual blending,’ the ability to assemble new and vital relations from diverse scenarios” (1109).

5. In such cases, the unnatural has been conventionalized, in other words, turned into a basic cognitive frame.

6. In this context, the term ‘theme’ refers to “a specific representational component that recurs several times in the [narrative, J.A.], in different variations—our quest for the theme or themes of a story is always a quest for something that is not unique to this specific work” (Brinker 33). Since “anything written in meaningful language has a theme” (Tomashevsky 63),

5. Narratives can use impossible spaces to satirize, mock, or ridicule certain states of affairs. The most important feature of *satire* is critique through exaggeration, and the grotesque images of humiliation or ridicule may occasionally merge with the unnatural.
6. Readers may also see unnatural spaces as parts of *allegories* that say something about the human condition or the world in general (as opposed to particular individuals).<sup>7</sup>
7. Sometimes we can make sense of spatial impossibilities by assuming they are part of a *transcendental realm* such as purgatory or hell.

These reading strategies, which might overlap in actual analyses, cut across Lubomír Doležel's distinction between "world construction" and "meaning production" (165; 160) because the cognitive reconstruction of a storyworld always already involves a process of interpretation. Nevertheless, I feel that (1) and (2), that is, my first two strategies, correlate with cognitive processes that are closer to the pole of world-making, whereas the others are closer to the pole of meaning-making.

With the exception of my third reading strategy, which naturalizes the unnatural by revealing the seemingly unnatural to be entirely natural, namely somebody's fantasy, all of my proposals involve the accepting of the unnatural as an objective constituent of the projected storyworld. And once we have accepted the narratives' deviations from real-world frames, we can speculate about the potential consequences for us and our being in the world. In what follows, I will first determine the unnatural spatial parameters. In a second step, I will then suggest provisional ways of making sense of these impossible spaces.

### **1. *The Third Policeman*: Hallucination or Vision of the Narrator's Afterlife?**

Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman* can be read as a vision of the narrator's afterlife (reading strategy 7) or as a hallucination (reading strategy 3). The narrative projects a storyworld that differs radically from the real world.

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this reading strategy plays a role in most (if not all) cases in which we try to come to terms with the unnatural.

7. For me, a distinction can be drawn between modes (such as allegory and satire) and proper literary genres such as the science fiction novel. In principle, one could try reading any text allegorically (or satirically), and therefore I base separate reading strategies on the concepts of allegory and satire.

At the beginning, the unnamed first-person narrator informs us that he, along with John Divney, robbed and killed old Philip Mathers. More specifically, Mathers was “felled by an iron bicycle pump, hacked to death with a heavy spade and then securely buried in a field” (23). The stolen money is supposed to help the narrator publish his “De Selby Index” (11).<sup>8</sup> When the narrator reaches out for a black box, which supposedly contains the loot, everything becomes different “with *unnatural* suddenness” (20; my italics, J.A.), and he travels to a “mysterious townland” (40) of bizarrely shaped police barracks and gigantic policemen. Interestingly, the narrator repeatedly comments on this otherworld by using the term ‘unnatural.’ For instance, at some point, he informs us that he “had never seen with [his] eyes ever in [his] life before anything so *unnatural* and appalling” (55; my italics, J.A.). Also, throughout the novel, he does not manage to rid himself of “a very disquieting impression of *unnaturalness*” (57; my italics, J.A.).

Indeed, the spatial and temporal parameters of this world are unnatural in the sense in which I am using the term. For instance, the projected storyworld contains a two-dimensional police station that can become three-dimensional. When he first sees the house, the narrator describes it as follows: “It looked as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside and indeed very poorly painted. It looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child.” A few lines later, we learn that the house can transform itself into a three-dimensional entity:

As I approached, the house seemed to change its appearance. At first, it did nothing to reconcile itself with the shape of an ordinary house but it became uncertain in outline like a thing glimpsed under ruffled water. Then it became clear again and I saw that it began to have some back to it, some small space for rooms behind the frontage. (55–56)

The mysterious townland also contains buildings of impossible architecture (206), and it is populated with characters who have already died (such as old Mathers) (21–23) and semihuman bicycles (90–91).<sup>9</sup>

8. De Selby is a weird theoretician, and we learn about his thoughts about the world in both the running text and in footnotes. Among other things, de Selby believes that the earth is sausage-shaped rather than spherical (104).

9. The temporal setup of this world is equally bizarre. For example, when the narrator meets the dead Mathers, “years or minutes could be swallowed up with equal ease in that indescribable and unaccountable interval” (22). Also, at some point, the narrator reaches a timeless part “where it [is] always five o’clock in the afternoon” (87). At a different point, the narrator and a Sergeant take a “lift” (146) to reach “the entrance to . . . eternity” (139–42). The Sergeant

How can we explain the novel's unnatural spaces and its other impossibilities? Toward the end of the novel, we learn that John Divney booby-trapped the black box with explosives to make sure that the narrator does not get the loot (20–21, 214). That is to say that after the explosion, the narrator is dying. From this perspective, the story about the mysterious townland that follows the explosion can be seen as a fantasy or hallucination that details the narrator's attempts to come to terms with the crime and his feelings of guilt: the psychotic world of *The Third Policeman* can be explained as the result of the dying narrator's thought processes. In this context, David Herman argues that "the narrator's guilty conscience and fear of reprisal by the authorities may account for the otherworld's being populated chiefly by policemen" (*Story Logic* 287). Indeed, the first-person narrator's guilt might also explain why he permanently meets the dead Mathers, who, at one point, even appears as a policeman. It is of course rather unlikely that the narrator conceptualizes a story as complex and as long as *The Third Policeman* in the split second of his own death. However, it is also possible to assume that the narrator dies during a longer period of time, during which he imagines the story we read.

Alternatively, one can explain the spatiotemporal oddities in *The Third Policeman* by assuming that the narrator has already died and that the novel confronts us with a vision of his afterlife. The narrator might find himself trapped in a transcendental world in which he is punished for his sins. For David Herman, "the narrator's punishment is . . . to be perpetually unable to adjust, because of basic and general structures of cognition, to the spatiotemporal makeup of the world as de Selby theorized it" (*Story Logic* 289). One might argue that the narrator of *The Third Policeman* has already reached hell and is undergoing some kind of punishment there, which has to do with a state of cognitive disorientation.

## 2. Magical Spaces and Settings in Science Fiction

We can also explain unnatural spaces by seeing them in the context of certain literary genres (reading strategy 2). In such cases, impossibilities have been conventionalized, that is, turned into basic cognitive categories; the unnatural has become an important element of the conventions of genres such as epics, romances, fantasy novels, or science fiction narratives. Indeed, in the experi-

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explains that "you don't grow old here. When you leave here you will be the same age as you were coming in and the same stature and latitude" (149). Furthermore, we learn that eternity "has no size at all . . . because there is no difference anywhere in it and we have no conception of the extent of its unchanging coequality" (149).



ment mentioned earlier, Nieuwland and Berkum showed that subjects typically process impossible entities (such as amorous peanuts) by seeing them “as actual ‘cartoon-like entities’ (i.e., a peanut that walks and talks like a human, having emotions and possibly even arms, legs and a face).” The two scientists thus assume that “the acceptability of a crying yacht or amorous peanut is not merely induced by repeated specific instances of such unusual feature combinations, but somehow also—perhaps even critically—by the *literary genre* . . . that such instances suggest” (1109; italics in original). That is to say, the evocation of a particular genre, in other words, the construction of a supportive context, helps us come to terms with unnatural entities such as an amorous peanut, and this is obviously also true of impossible settings.

For example, in the Old English epic *Beowulf*, the warrior hero Beowulf jumps into a mere to fight Grendel’s mother, a monster. This mere is not only infested with other monsters such as sea-dragons (“*sæ-dracan*” [98, l. 1426]); it also (impossibly) burns at night: “*þær mæg nihta gehwæm nið-wundor seon, / fȳr on flōde*” (94, ll. 1365–66). Hence, Richard Butts speaks of the “highly *unnatural* character of the landscape” (113; my italics, J.A.). We can explain this physically impossible mere because we know that supernatural forces and settings are important ingredients of epics, which typically deal with “heroes performing impressive deeds usually in interaction with gods” (De Jong 138). More specifically, the brave hero here has to enter a supernatural realm that defies the laws of nature and then serves as the stage for an archetypal fight between the forces of good (Beowulf) and evil (Grendel’s mother).

We can also easily cope with physically impossible settings in romances, which are “a species of magical narrative” (Heng 4). For instance, we can explain the insubstantiality of the splendid castle in the fourteenth-century romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which seemed pared out of paper (“pared out of papure purely” [23, l. 802]), as a form of magic once we know that it was conjured up by the witch Morgan le Fay in the context of her overall plan to test the Knights of the Round Table, drive Sir Gawain mad, and frighten Queen Guinevere to death (68, ll. 2459–60).

The animate door to Gryffindor Tower, one of the towers of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, is another physical impossibility that can be explained as a part of a supernatural setting. This door is the portrait of the so-called Fat Lady, who opens the door only if the students give her the correct password. We can cope with such a living door because it is part of an institution for wizards and witches who are capable of magic.

Finally, we may attribute impossible spaces to the far and technologically advanced future depicted in science fiction narratives. An example would be

Arrakis, the setting of Frank Herbert's science fiction novel *Dune*. Arrakis is a desert planet without any natural precipitation and full of monstrous sand-worms. However, in the novel the planet is "carefully structured as a coherent ecological unit" (Kneale 156). We can accept such a planet by seeing it in the context of the generic conventions of science fiction narratives, in other words, as an aspect of a potential future.

### 3. Foregrounding the Thematic in Borges and Davenport

Other unnatural spaces can be approached from a thematic angle (reading strategy 4). An example can be found in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Aleph," which confronts us with a rather extreme version of unnatural space, namely a vision of the infinite universe. In this narrative, the first-person narrator (called Borges) visits Carlos Daneri Argentino, who is a rival writer and the cousin of the deceased Beatriz Viterbo, loved by Borges. When the two descend to Argentino's cellar, the narrator views "the Aleph" (26), or, more specifically, a small point that projects a vision of "the unimaginable universe" (28). The writer-narrator describes what he sees as follows:

How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? . . . Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. . . . The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. (26–27)

The realism of the beginning and the ending of the story contrasts sharply with the unnaturalness of the Aleph, a vision of spatial infinity that is similar to the vision of eternity in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Thomas Pavel, "this impossible object is not composed of parts; within it part and whole meet, including everything past and present within a unifying perception" (96). From a different perspective, Lisa Block de Behar argues that

10. According to Borges, an object such as the Aleph "could not exist because if it did, it would completely transform our idea of time, astronomy, mathematics, and space" (as quoted in De Behar 13).

Borges's narrator "describes a planetary voyage without moving" (11). In any case, the Aleph involves an impossible vision, namely an image of the total sum of the spatial universe.

How can we make sense of this impossible object? One might read "The Aleph" as accentuating that both absolute transcendence and total knowledge are impossible and irrelevant because neither of them can ever be achieved. Furthermore, absolute transcendence and/or total knowledge cannot be properly represented either. The narrator immediately realizes that, in contrast to Argentino's transgressive "attempt to fixate the infinite universe in the finite form of a poem" (Kluge 293), it is impossible to depict the Aleph in verbal art. In this context, Sophie Kluge argues that the two writers stand for two radically different approaches to literary representation:

Whereas Argentino is confident that the tireless reworkings of the representational structures will eventually pave the way for a mimetic representation of the infinite in literature, Borges essentially denies the possibility of this project, emphasizing the necessity of perspective and the inability of literature ever to be more than language signifying itself. (297)

Indeed, after the incident, Borges haltingly describes the Aleph as "one hell of a—yes one hell of a," while later on, he simply refuses "to discuss the Aleph" (28).

At the same time, the short story suggests that the so-called total vision of the universe is relevant insofar as the narrator recognizes himself and his problems in the Aleph. Borges notably sees "unbelievable, obscene, detailed letters, which [his beloved, J.A.] Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino" (27), and presumably due to his feelings of jealousy, he declares the Aleph to be "a false Aleph" (30).<sup>11</sup> The unnatural universe of the Aleph might be seen as highlighting the common human desire to think the unthinkable, represent the unrepresentable, or represent infinity in finite form. However, it also illustrates that even the most unnatural scenario ultimately takes us back to ourselves, that is, to the nature of the human mind and our problems in the actual world, and this is interestingly also one of the major claims of this article. In other words, what matters to the narrator is not "the Aleph," the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, "which in Kabbalistic lore stands for and mysteriously participates in the infinity of the godhead" (Calinescu 4), but his hopeless love for Beatriz, whose name occurs in the narrative's first sentence and is also the short story's final word.

11. Earlier on, he notably addresses Beatriz's portrait—in a "seizure of tenderness"—as follows: "Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, darling Beatriz, Beatriz gone forever, it's me, it's Borges" (26).

The unnatural geography of Guy Davenport's short story "The Haile Selassie Funeral Train" can also be explained as a thematic occurrence. In this narrative, an unnamed narrator tells art critic "James Johnson Sweeney" (1900–1986) about a train ride through a geographically impossible version of Europe. More specifically, the train travels along the following itinerary: from Deauville in Normandy (108), it passes through Barcelona (110), along the Dalmatian coast (111), through Genoa (112), Madrid, Odessa, Atlanta (Georgia, USA), and back to Deauville (113).<sup>12</sup>

This narrative dispenses with real-world notions of space, and it also deconstructs our real-world notions of time and temporal progression: we learn that the train ride took place "in 1936" (108–9) even though the train is the funeral train of Haile Selassie (Ras Tafari), the last emperor of Ethiopia (1892–1975). Also, the train includes an odd collection of passengers such as James Joyce (1882–1941), Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), "ambassadors, professors from the Sorbonne and Oxford, at least one Chinese field marshal, and the entire staff of *La Prensa*" (109). With regard to the narrative's temporality, it is worth noting that Guillaume Apollinaire died in 1918 (so he cannot possibly be there in 1936), while Haile Selassie, the "Lion of Judah" (111), died in 1975 (rather than in 1936). Hence, the short story fuses the narrative's present (the year 1936) with the narrative's past (the period before 1918, when Guillaume Apollinaire was still alive) and the narrative's future (the period after the death of Haile Selassie in 1975).

Davenport's short story revives Guillaume Apollinaire, "one of the first to have conceived of modern Europe as a heterotopian zone" (McHale 46),<sup>13</sup> while simultaneously killing Haile Selassie, "the last emperor of a three-thousand-year-old monarchy in Ethiopia" (Olsen 157). The short story thus argues in favor of the end of the totalizing and hierarchical monarchy system and the simultaneous development of a more open or hybrid Europe, and the collagelike spatiotemporal oddities and impossibilities serve to underline this argument. In this context, it is worth noting that the unnamed narrator, who is of American origin, is clearly fascinated by Apollinaire, who can be characterized in terms of hybridity as well: Apollinaire was actually called Wilhelm Albert Włodzimierz Apolinary Kostrowicki, and he was a French poet of Italian-Polish descent. At one point, the narrator tells us that "a bearded little

12. Other impossible geographies exist. For example, Guy Davenport's short story "The Invention of Photography in Toledo" fuses Toledo, Spain, with Toledo, Ohio, in a "disorienting double-vision" (McHale 47), while Walter Abish's novel *Alphabetical Africa* (1974) transforms the landlocked Republic of Chad in such a way that it suddenly has beaches.

13. The concept of the heterotopia was developed by Michel Foucault: "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25).

man in pince-nez must have seen with *what awe I was watching Apollinaire*, for he got out of his seat and came and put his hand on my arm” (109; my italics, J.A.), while at another time, he highlights “the compassion [he] felt for the wounded poet” (109).

#### 4. Satires and Allegories: Abbott, Carter, and Danielewski

Other spatial impossibilities become meaningful as parts of satires (reading strategy 5) or allegories (reading strategy 6). For instance, the two-dimensional world of Edwin A. Abbott’s novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* can be read as a satire on the limited perspective of representatives of the class system in Victorian England. The projected world is described as follows:

Imagine a vast sheet of paper on which straight Lines, Triangles, Squares, Pentagons, Hexagons, and other figures, instead of remaining fixed in their places, move freely about, on or in the surface, but without the power of rising above or sinking below it, very much like shadows—only hard and with luminous edges—and you will then have a pretty correct notion of my country and countrymen. (3)

“A Square,” the first-person narrator, informs us, the inhabitants of a three-dimensional world, that since the citizens of *Flatland* are not familiar with the third dimension, they “cannot distinguish one figure from another. Nothing was visible, to us, except Straight Lines” (4). Even though the individual citizens cannot be distinguished from one another, the society of *Flatland* is strictly hierarchical. That is to say, the novel’s hierarchies are purely imaginary insofar as they are not really based on observable features. Nevertheless, the narrator differentiates between the individual classes as follows:

Our Women are straight Lines. Our Soldiers and Lowest Classes of Workmen are Triangles with two equal sides, each about eleven inches long. . . . Our Middle Class consist of Equilateral or Equal-Sided Triangles. Our Professional Men and Gentlemen are Squares . . . and Five-Sided Figures or Pentagons. Next above these come the Nobility, of whom there are several degrees, beginning at Six-Sided Figures, or Hexagons, and from thence rising in the number of their sides till they receive the honourable title of Polygonal, or many-sided. Finally, when the number of the sides

becomes so numerous, and the sides themselves so small, that the figure cannot be distinguished from a circle, he is included in the Circular or Priestly order; and this is the highest class of all. (8)

In this context, Andrea Henderson argues that “although Flatlanders believe that to know each other’s shape is to know each other’s essence, we as readers are urged to question this faith” (461). Indeed, the point of the well-ordered two-dimensional world of Flatland, which is both rainy and foggy (6; 22), seems to be to mock or ridicule the hierarchically ordered society of Victorian Britain. In the words of Elliott L. Gilbert “the satire . . . of an essentialist British class system in the late nineteenth century is clear enough” (396). *Flatland* can be read as a social satire that critiques the limited perspective of advocates of the class system of the nineteenth century, and in particular the general disrespect for women: the idea that women can make themselves “practically invisible at will” (11) mocks the Victorian ideal of women as quasi-invisible angels in the house.

In a second step, Abbott’s narrative extends this critique of nineteenth-century Britain by showing that other societies suffer from limited perspectives as well. At one point, the narrator has a vision of Lineland, a one-dimensional world (53–63), and he is introduced to Pointland, “the Abyss of No dimensions” (92), where a miserable being exists as a voice in some kind of nowhere. We learn about this creature that

He is himself his own World, his own Universe; of any other than himself he can form no conception; he knows not Length, nor Breadth, nor Height, for he has had no experience of them; he has no cognizance even of the number Two; nor has he a thought of Plurality; for he is himself his One and All, being really Nothing. (92–93)

Furthermore, the narrator encounters a visitor from the three-dimensional world of Spaceland (64) and he even visits Spaceland himself (78). The interesting thing is that, due to their limited perspectives, the inhabitants of these numerous worlds can never imagine what the other worlds might potentially look like. The following dialogue between Square, an inhabitant of a two-dimensional world, and the King of Lineland, a one-dimensional world, nicely illustrates this point:

*I:* Besides your motion of Northward and Southward, there is another motion which I call from right to left.  
*King:* Exhibit to me, if you please, this motion from left to right.

*I*: Nay, that I cannot do, unless you could step out of your Line altogether.

*King*: Out of my Line? Do you mean out of the world? Out of Space?

*I*: Well, yes. Out of *your* world. Out of *your* space. For your Space is not the true Space. True Space is a Plane; but your Space is only a Line.

*King*: If you cannot indicate this motion from left to right by yourself moving in it, then I beg you to describe it to me in words.

*I*: If you cannot tell your right from your left, I fear that no words of mine can make my meaning clear to you. But surely you cannot be ignorant of so simple a distinction.

*King*: I do not in the least understand you. (61; italics in original)

The fact that the King of Lineland is the king of a one-dimensional world (in which one can only move along a line) renders the very idea of being king *ad absurdum*. Also, with regard to the miserable creature in Pointland we learn that “to be self-contented is to be vile and ignorant, and that to aspire is better than to be blindly and impotently happy” (93). Furthermore, *Flatland* highlights the limited perspective of Spaceland in the attempt to visualize space beyond the three dimensions we are familiar with (the “land of Four Dimensions” [87]). The general point that I am trying to make here is that readers can cope with the two-, one-, or nondimensional worlds of *Flatland* and their limitations when they see them in the context of common satirical strategies (such as parody, travesty, burlesque, exaggeration, or analogy) that seek to critique certain features of society.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes readers can also make sense of unnatural spaces by reading them in the context of allegories. The unnatural spaces in Angela Carter’s magical-realist novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, for example, can be explicated as parts of an allegorical structure. In this novel, the diabolical Dr Hoffman wages a massive campaign against reason, and he uses reality-modifying machines to expand the dimensions of time and space. Desiderio, the first-person narrator, informs us that

Dr Hoffman’s gigantic generators sent out a series of seismic vibrations which made great cracks in the hitherto immutable surface of the time and space equation we had informally formulated in order to realize our city and, out of these cracks, well—nobody knew what would come next. (17)

As we learn later on, Dr Hoffman seeks to liberate the unconscious and to

14. Similarly, the flying island of Laputa in Part III of Jonathan Swift’s novel *Gulliver’s Travels* can be explained as ridiculing the period’s new institutions and schools of learning, in particular the inapplicability of the learned subjects.

objectify desire, and his machines use the secretions of numerous copulating couples in mesh cubicles to do so (208–14). The doctor's machines manage to turn the novel's storyworld into a physically impossible phantasmagoria that is reminiscent of an LSD trip or the paintings by the surrealist Salvador Dalí:

Cloud palaces erected themselves then silently toppled to reveal for a moment the familiar warehouse beneath them until they were replaced by some fresh audacity. A group of chanting pillars exploded in the middle of a mantra and lo! they were once again street lamps until, with night, they changed to silent flowers. Giant heads in helmets of conquistadors sailed up like sad, painted kites over the giggling chimney pots. Hardly anything remained the same for more than one second and the city was no longer the conscious production of humanity; it had become the arbitrary realm of dream. . . . The sense of space was powerfully affected so that sometimes the proportions of buildings and townscapes swelled to enormous, ominous sizes or repeated themselves over and over again in a fretting infinity. (18–19)

In this novel, internal desires become externalized and materialize as entities in the storyworld. Later on, the projected world reaches another phase, called “Nebulous Time” (166), which carries Dr Hoffman's epistemological revolution to an extreme. During this phase, Desiderio meets a Lithuanian count, and his slave Lafleur, who turns out to be Albertina, Dr Hoffman's beautiful daughter, with whom Desiderio falls helplessly in love. Desiderio and the count then visit a brothel whose interior is physically impossible because its furniture is actually alive:

They had employed a taxidermist instead of an upholsterer and sent him a pride of lions with instructions to make a sofa out of each pair. At both ends of the sofas, flamboyantly gothic arm-rests, were the gigantically maned heads of these lions. Their rheumy, golden eyes seeped gum and their cavernous, red mouths hung sleepily ajar, gaping wider, now and then, in a sleepy yawn or to let out a low, rumbling growl. 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. The occasional tables ran about, yelping obsequiously; they were toadying hyenas and on their brindled backs were strapped silver trays containing glasses, decanters, bowls of salted nuts and dishes of stuffed olives. (131–32)



Readers can make sense of the impossible spaces in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* by seeing them 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. In this conflict, the drab Minister of Determination (who loves empirical reality, logic, and stasis) represents the former ideas, while the crazy sadist Dr Hoffman stands for the latter ones.

Furthermore, the novel illustrates that, taken to an extreme, every idea (including the idea of freedom) may possibly lead to the establishing of hierarchies and thus to a state of domination. Hence, we should take not only one's ideas but also one's attitude toward these ideas into consideration. For example, Dr Hoffman's former physics professor (who now works as blind peep-show proprietor) believes that

when the sensual world unconditionally surrenders to the intermittency of mutability, man will be freed from the tyranny of a single present. And we will live on as many layers of consciousness as we can, all at the same time. After the Doctor liberates us, that is. Only after that. (100)

However, as the novel shows, Dr Hoffman's yearning for "absolute authority to establish a regime of *total* liberation" (38; my italics, J.A.) implies tyranny, subjection, and confinement just like the Minister's vulgar logical positivism and sense of order. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is structured around a rather static dichotomy or binary opposition that does not allow its two poles to merge, interact, or reach a state of equilibrium. At the end of the novel, Desiderio feels caught between two alternatives that cannot "possibly co-exist": while the Minister's attitudes lead to "a barren yet harmonious calm," Dr Hoffman's attitudes imply "a fertile yet cacophonous tempest" (207). Desiderio must choose between desire (Dr Hoffman wants to lock him up in a cubicle with his daughter Albertina) and reality. He finally opts in favor of restoring reality and kills both Dr Hoffman and his daughter Albertina (216–17).

The architecturally impossible house in Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* can also be explained as an allegorical setting. This novel deals with *The Navidson Record*, a book written by an author called Zampanò on the basis of film footage about Will Navidson and his family (Karen Green, his wife, and their children Chad and Daisy). The Navidson house on Ash Tree Lane is interesting because it permanently transforms itself. For instance, at the beginning, Navidson and his family discover a new "white door with a

glass knob” that leads to a “walk-in closet” and a “second door,” which “opens up into the children’s bedroom” (28). Furthermore, when Navidson begins to investigate this phenomenon, he discovers that the house’s inside is bigger than its outside: “the width of the house inside” (impossibly) exceeds “the width of the house as measured from the outside by 1/4” (30). In addition to that, a dark, cold hallway (called “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway”) has developed, and this hallway also changes its size: it can both shrink (60) and grow (61). When Navidson inspects the hallway, he realizes that it has expanded into some kind of labyrinth of seemingly infinite dimensions: “a constant stream of corners and walls, all of them unreadable and perfectly smooth” (64). Inside the hallway, spatial orientation is impossible (68), and compasses refuse to settle on any one direction (90).

Like Will Slocombe, I think that one can explain the unnatural spatial parameters of this house by reading them as signifying the nothingness that potentially pervades all human relations. The house’s labyrinth puts an end to Karen’s and Navidson’s otherwise thriving sex life (62), and it also leads to “impatience, frustration, and increasing familial alienation” (103). In other words, the domestic family home gradually gives way to a nihilist space of disorientation. From this perspective, the house becomes a version of the hostile world that systematically undermines successful interactions with others, and the novel becomes an allegory that makes a general point about our existence in the world.

However, Danielewski’s novel does not only describe the problem of the nothingness of our existence; rather, it also presents a solution to this problem, and this solution has to do with love, or, more generally, the confrontation with others. *House of Leaves* frequently contrasts the nothingness of the house with the relationship between Karen and Navidson. For example, Karen produces a film called “A Brief History of Who I Love,” which

serves as the perfect *counterpoint* to that infinite stretch of hallways, rooms, and stairs. The house is *empty*, her piece is *full*. The house is *dark*, her film *glows*. A *growl* haunts that place, her place is *blessed by Charlie Parker*. On Ash Tree Lane stands a house of *darkness, cold, and emptiness*. In 16mm stands a house of *light, love, and color*. By following her heart, Karen made sense of what that place is not. (368; my italics, J.A.)

The production of this film enables Karen to rediscover “the longing and tenderness he [i.e., Navidson, J.A.] felt toward her and their children” (368). Furthermore, when Navidson is trapped inside the hallway in a state of total despair, his thoughts turn to his wife: “‘Light,’ Navidson croaks. ‘Can’t. Be. I

see light. Care—” (488). Sophia Blynn, one of Zampanò’s many quoted ‘critics,’ argues that “it’s commonly assumed his last word was ‘care’ or the start of ‘careful.’” However, she believes that “this utterance is really just the first syllable of the very name on which his mind and heart had finally come to rest. His only hope, his only meaning: ‘Karen’” (523). Once Karen and Navidson reunite, the house notably dissolves and they find themselves on the beautiful lawn of their “front yard” (524). According to Natalie Hamilton, “the novel implies that their love for each other brings them safely out of their individual labyrinths.” For her, “each level of Danielewski’s text involves characters attempting to navigate the maze of the self, and these attempts are in turn echoed in the structure of the text” (7; 5).

## 5. Conclusion

Numerous narratives openly and deliberately deconstruct our real-world notions of space and spatial organization. As I have shown, in the world of fiction we may encounter shapeshifting locations; burning lakes; insubstantial castles; impossible planets; visions of the infinite universe; unnatural geographies; two-, one-, and nondimensional worlds; literal manifestations of internal processes; houses that are bigger on the inside than they are on the outside; and so forth. Furthermore, I have proposed the following reading strategies that readers may try out when they are confronted with unnatural spaces (they constitute options and are not intrinsically connected with specific examples):

1. the blending of scripts / frame enrichment
2. generification (evoking generic conventions from literary history)
3. subjectification (reading as internal states)
4. foregrounding the thematic
5. satirization
6. reading allegorically
7. positing a transcendental realm

I do not conceive of the mental operations of these reading strategies in terms of a chronological before-after sequence. Rather, I assume that several cognitive mechanisms are layered on top of each other simultaneously during the reading process.

Interpretations and readings are of course always a tricky issue. Poststructuralist critics, for example, assume that texts can never be mastered because

they deconstruct themselves. Indeed, according to J. Hillis Miller, meaning is always already deferred because “the critic’s attempt to untwist the elements in the texts he interprets only twists them up again in another place and leaves always a remnant of opacity, or an added opacity, as yet unraveled” (247). Critics such as Ann Wilson even consider the process of interpretation to be inherently evil. She argues that “mastery always involves domination (in the case of interpretation, of understanding fully the action and hence, being able to control and contain its effect).” For her, interpretative mastery is “a mode of social regulation and containment based on relations of power which are, by definition, hierarchical and potentially oppressive” (187). From my perspective, these two approaches lead to a critical impasse insofar as they imply that the only thing that can still be said about literary texts is that ultimately nothing can be said.

My own approach differs from both of these critical perspectives. I am aware of the ultimate meaninglessness of our desperate attempts to create significance, and I appreciate this assumption as a necessary footnote to everything we do. Nevertheless, without trying to *master* literary texts once and for all, I attempt to enrich the polysemic makeup of fictional narratives by presenting interpretations that use unnatural spaces as their starting points. My readings are provisional explanations that primarily serve to illustrate that the unnatural is not completely alien to our thinking. Since, as I have shown, we can in fact engage productively with impossible spaces, they do not paralyze our interpretive faculties.<sup>15</sup>

For me, fiction is interesting and special because physically or logically impossible scenarios and events can be projected only in the world of fiction. Having said that, I refuse to see the unnatural as something transcendental or godly that we poor human beings cannot even begin to make sense of. Such an approach, which involves remaining in a state of “anxiety and wonder” (Abbott, “Unreadable Minds” 448), amounts to the monumentalization of the unnatural. The unnatural is created by human authors and should therefore be approached from the vantage point of our (human) world. Furthermore, we as readers are ultimately bound by our cognitive architecture (even when we try to make sense of the unnatural). Therefore, the only way we can possibly

15. From my perspective, H. Porter Abbott’s proposal “to rest in that peculiar combination of anxiety and wonder” (448), which is praised by Stefan Iversen in this volume, has nothing to do with the process of interpretation because it does not address the potential purpose of the unnatural at all. I think Abbott merely describes a preinterpretive state that calls for further elucidation and explanation. In her essay in this collection, Maria Mäkelä also follows what I call “the Zen way of reading” (Alber, “Impossible” 83–84) insofar as she repudiates cognitive explanations. I think this approach is challenging from a psychological perspective but I do not think it generates interesting readings of the unnatural, because we basically remain wondering.

respond to narratives of all sorts (including unnatural ones) is on the basis of cognitive frames and scripts. Hence, I emphatically argue in favor of a *cognitive* approach to the unnatural.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, I would like to thank David Herman and Peter Rabinowitz for suggesting that the unnatural might also figure prominently in new scientific theories. Indeed, Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, for instance, claim that “it is possible to travel to the future” (*A Briefer History* 105), and that the universe consists of numerous subuniverses “with many different sets of physical laws” (*The Grand Design* 136). However, in contrast to fictional storyworlds, scientific theories are hypotheses which make predictions that can then be tested by observation. If they are not falsified (like Hawking’s earlier theory that before the Big Bang, time had moved backward), such theories may ultimately lead to a renegotiation of the relationship between what we consider to be natural (or possible) and what we perceive as being unnatural (or impossible). It is only that, in order to actually influence our natural cognition of the world, that is, the cognitive parameters that we use to make sense of the real world, we will have to experience a journey into the future or see a universe with different sets of physical laws, and I think it might still take some time before this is technically possible—if it is possible at all.

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16. For an alternative perspective, see the essay by Henrik Skov Nielsen in this volume. From my vantage point, Nielsen does not actually present interpretations; rather, he shows that in certain cases, we have to accept the fact that narratives move beyond real-world frames. This is actually the first step (“world-making”) in my model. In my model, this first step is then followed by a second one (“meaning-making”) which addresses the potential point of such ‘deviations,’ that is, the question of why narratives might use the unnatural.

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