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## A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative

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# ‘Unnatural’ Metalepsis and Immersion

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Necessarily Incompatible?<sup>1</sup>

WERNER WOLF

### 1. Introduction: Two Formally Similar Metalepses, Two Different Effects—and a Research Problem

Imagine the following two reception situations and narrative scenarios: one—you are watching a film that is set during the Great Depression in the United States. It starts out as the realistically described predicament of a frustrated woman who is unhappily married and has an uninteresting job. Her only relief from drab reality is to watch Hollywood films in the local cinema. In spite of several *mises en abyme* of films within the film that you are watching (which, given the story, are perfectly plausible and natural) you are gripped by the film. In fact it elicits in you a vivid feeling of being immersed in the fictional storyworld—that is, until a scene in which the heroine watches one of her favorite films for the fifth time and in which the protagonist *mis en abyme* steps down from the screen amid the confusion of the viewers assembled in the cinema and the protests of the characters on the screen.

1. I would like to thank Jutta Klobasek-Ladler, Ingrid Pfandl-Buchegger, and Nick Scott for proofreading this text and for technical support (Ingrid Pfandl-Buchegger and Daniel Schäbler also for the translation of non-English passages) as well as Evelyn Kruppen and my former PhD student and expert on metalepsis, Jeff Thoss, for their valuable suggestions.

For the second scenario, imagine that you are listening to a rhapsode in ancient Greece who is just telling you and a fascinated audience the story of a sculptor who is frustrated about women in general but has the gift of producing exquisitely beautiful female statues. One of them is so charming that he falls in love with it and, abandoning his misogyny, prays to Aphrodite to give him a wife similar to the statue in question. The goddess grants him his wish and even more, as his statue appears to be suddenly endowed with life: his creation has risen to his own level of existence, so that creation and creator can even engender a child.

Both scenarios contain what can technically be classified as 'metalepses'; indeed, both stories even sport a classic case of this device, namely the confusion of different ontological levels—the level of represented 'reality' and the level of artifacts. These levels are short-circuited by what may be considered an 'unnatural,' physically impossible bottom-up border-crossing: a hypodiegetic artifact becoming a diegetic 'reality.' And yet both scenarios may arguably elicit different effects. These may even be so divergent that the second scenario would not necessarily appear as unnatural or impossible to its recipients. As a consequence, both scenarios will also differ in terms of immersion. The first scenario, taken from Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), will doubtlessly destroy the credibility of the story, be it only for the moment, and thus endanger our immersion, while the second story, a version of the Pygmalion myth handed down to us by book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoseon libri* (1 B.C.–c. 10 A.D.),<sup>2</sup> may go without triggering at least his contemporaries' disbelief and can thus be seen to be (or have been) compatible with immersion. It appears that similar metaleptic devices can produce conspicuously different effects.<sup>3</sup>

2. For the sake of argument I have here somewhat anachronistically projected the myth as transmitted by Ovid in written form back to an earlier oral context. Actually, in these earlier times Pygmalion appears not to have been an artist as yet but a king of Cyprus (cf. Martin 631: "Der für die Rezeption des P[ygmalion]mythos verbindlichen Version von Ovid (Ov. met., 243–97) geht wohl eine reichere, aber nur noch in Umrissen greifbare [. . .] Stofftradition voraus: P. wird als König der Kyprer erwähnt [. . .]"). ("Ovid's text, which has been the accepted version for the reception of the Pygmalion myth, is probably preceded by the richer, but only partially accessible outlines of a plot tradition: P. is mentioned as a king of the Cypriots [. . .].")

3. The animation of an artifact in the myth of Pygmalion must be distinguished from the tradition of humanoid automata or artificial human beings, machines that are constructed with a lifelike animation in mind right from the start (such as the female automata created by Hephaistos, as narrated in book 18 of the *Iliad*). These contraptions are technical miracles but basically remain automata which only imitate life without actually becoming living beings in the full sense of the word. In contrast to them, Pygmalion's statue (which is not a machine) makes a truly ontological leap and becomes genuinely human, a metamorphosis that gives the narrated event a formally metaleptic quality. For the tradition of humanoid automata see LaGrandeur, in particular 408–11; for the cultural history of the 'Pygmalion effect' of aesthetic simulacra that "rever[t] the hierarchy between *model* and *copy*" see Stoichita 5.

Such a divergence of possible effects has, however, not sufficiently been taken into account by research: in discussions of metalepsis—including what I myself used to write on the subject—it is the first of the aforementioned effects, the disruption of immersion and aesthetic illusion, which has one-sidedly been stressed on the grounds of its ‘unnatural’ paradoxicality (cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 358; Wagner 239; Pier, “Métalepse” 253; Pier, “Metalepsis” 193; Döpp). Referring to Coleridge’s well-known definition of aesthetic illusion, Genette, one of the first and foremost theoreticians of metalepsis, clearly states that metalepsis forms “une transgression qui ne peut que mettre à mal la fameuse ‘suspension volontaire de l’incrédulité” (“De la figure à la fiction” 30).<sup>4</sup> If one attributes ‘unnaturalness’ to all metalepses, as is done, for example, by Thoss (“Unnatural Narrative and Metalepsis” 189-190), the assumption of a tension between this device and immersion does not in fact come as a surprise, since, according to Jan Alber, “[a]ll instances of the unnatural have an estranging effect” (“Impossible Storyworlds” 80). Yet, arguably, such defamiliarization need not always occur, as Alber’s own research on the ‘naturalization’ of unnatural, impossible storyworlds implies (“Impossible Storyworlds,” “Unnatural Narratives,” “The Diachronic Development of Unnaturalness”). Indeed, as the second of the aforementioned scenarios indicates, there are cases in which even the particularly strong variant of ‘unnaturalness’ embodied by metalepsis does not of necessity appear incompatible with one of the most frequent and powerful effects normally elicited by plausible, ‘natural,’ well-told or represented scenarios, namely immersion (aka, in certain contexts, aesthetic illusion).<sup>5</sup>

This may be clear enough, but what is less clear and has so far hardly ever been addressed as a research problem<sup>6</sup> is the question of what conditions precisely elicit such contrary effects. In the following I propose to inquire into

4. This translates as “a transgression which cannot but do harm to the famous ‘willing suspension of disbelief.”

5. For the relationship between ‘aesthetic illusion’ and ‘immersion’ see section 2 in this essay and Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion.”

6. As an exception I would like to mention Sonja Klimek’s research on metalepsis (cf. “Metalepsis and Its (Anti-)Illusionist Effects” and *Paradoxes Erzählen*); I am grateful to her for having made me revise former, perhaps too apodictic, statements as formulated in my theory of aesthetic illusion and the breaking thereof (see Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung*, ch. 3.5.4). Nelles (94) also makes a brief remark on the possibility that metalepsis could produce an “effect of realism,” suggesting that narrator and character thereby appear to share the same sphere of reality, but this claim may at best be limited to rhetorical metalepsis and remains unconvincing, since the alleged continuity between the worlds involved in metalepsis could also be interpreted as indicative of their sharing the same irreality or fictionality. Finally, Schaeffer must also be mentioned in this context, but his contention that metalepsis, far from being incompatible with immersion, is actually its ‘emblem’ (331) rests on a misconception of both immersion and metalepsis (see note 14 in this essay).

precisely this: under what conditions may metalepsis disrupt immersion, as is assumed to be the case by the majority of researchers, and under what conditions may it, on the contrary, appear to be more or less compatible with immersion in spite of its theoretical unnaturalness? This discussion will first require the clarification of relevant concepts (metalepsis, the unnatural, naturalization, immersion and aesthetic illusion) before I can discuss the conditions mentioned and draw some conclusions that should contribute to a poetics of (un)naturalness.

## 2. Terminology and Relevant Research: Metalepsis, the Unnatural and Naturalization, Immersion and Aesthetic Illusion

The term 'metalepsis' stems from Genette's structuralist narratology and was originally defined as the improbable transgression of the 'sacred' border between the world of narration and the narrated world<sup>7</sup> or, in more general terms, between the world of representation and the represented world. It has since been variously redefined and sometimes also expanded (see, for example, Nelles; Herman; Wagner; Genette *Métalepse*; Ryan, "Metaleptic Machines" and *Avatars of Story* 204–11; Pier and Schaeffer; Wolf "Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon"; Klimek, "Metalepsis and Its (Anti-) Illusionist Effects" and *Paradoxes Erzählen*). The most important expansions concern a redefinition of metalepsis not only as a narrative but also as a transmedial device open to all (representational) media, and the inclusion of lateral metalepsis ('impossible' leaps between parallel worlds)<sup>8</sup> as well as the suggestion of paradoxical border crossings occurring between a representation and the world of its author. As I have said elsewhere, "the prototypical case of metalepsis can be defined as a salient phenomenon occurring exclusively in representations, namely as a 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

7. Genette describes this border as follows: "[...] la limite [...] franchi[e] au mépris de la vraisemblance [...]: [la] frontière [...] sacrée entre deux mondes: celui où l'on raconte, celui que l'on raconte" (Genette, *Figures III* 245). ("[...] the boundary [...] in defiance of verisimilitude [...]: [the] sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 236).

8. This is a convincing proposal made by Wagner (247), which is, however, rejected by Klimek (see *Paradoxes Erzählen*, ch. 2.3.2).

differences)” (Wolf, “Metareference across Media” 50).<sup>9</sup> In short, metalepsis is the paradoxical violation of the outer border of a represented world or of the border(s) between represented worlds (cf. Thoss, *Metalepsis in Contemporary Popular Fiction, Film, and Comics* 179). Metalepsis thus “violates” the represented “world’s (conventionally assumed) autonomy” (Thoss, “Unnatural Narrative and Metalepsis” 190).

According to Nelles (93–95) one can distinguish between ‘rhetorical metalepsis,’ the ‘impossible’ suggestion (restricted to verbal narratives) that a narrator is affected by the story he tells (e.g., profiting from a pause in the action to insert a lengthy narratorial comment), ‘epistemological metalepsis,’ the existence of a paradoxical border-crossing only in the minds of characters or other fictitious agencies (this form is limited to media being able to represent thought and speech), and ‘ontological metalepsis,’ the apparent paradoxical transgression of a border by (represented) persons or objects.<sup>10</sup> As this is the most radical variant of metalepsis and hence seemingly the most unnatural, it will be the focus of the following discussion.

The defining paradoxicality of metalepsis obviously affiliates it with ‘unnatural narration’ (although metalepsis transcends the realm of narratives, for the sake of the present volume’s focus I will henceforth restrict my discussion to narrative metalepsis). Metaleptic ‘para-doxical’ unnaturalness can refer to logical impossibilities (the contamination of the ontologically different realms of ‘nature’ and ‘art’/‘artifacts’)<sup>11</sup> or to what goes beyond, and is therefore impossible according to, reigning ‘doxa’ (e.g., the ‘orthodox’ idea that the present cannot influence the past). Metalepsis thus affects precisely the two fields that Alber mentions in his definition of the unnatural: “physically impossible scenarios and events, that is, impossible by the known laws

9. Klimek, in her purist conception of metalepsis, restricts this device to paradoxical leaps, in the Genettian sense, between the narration and the narrated world (see *Paradoxes Erzählen* 43–44). A generally accepted case of this classical form of metalepsis occurs in verbal frame-structures as a paradoxical crossover between framing and framed parts. In other media, however, even this simple case can cause classificatory problems owing to representation as a postulated precondition of metalepsis. Since in another publication on defamiliarized framings and frame-breaks I also attributed the quality of metalepsis to a crossover between an abstract painting and its frame (Giacomo Bella, “Velocità astratta + rumore” [1913]; Wolf, “Defamiliarized Initial Framings” 322), I would like to clarify here that this and similar examples constitute borderline cases, which—if one insists on the absence of representation (which in the painting mentioned is, by the way, debatable)—would perhaps best be termed ‘quasi-metaleptic’ structures.

10. In other typologies only the distinction ‘rhetorical vs. ontological’ metalepsis occurs (see Ryan “Metaleptic Machines,” and Pier, “Metalepsis” 191–92).

11. A given phenomenon such as a character or person can be either fictional/a construct or real/natural but cannot possess both qualities at the same time (following the logical principle of *tertium non datur*).

governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by accepted principles of logic" ("Impossible Storyworlds" 80). What this definition does not explicitly mention, though, is the fact that the knowledge of the physical laws in question and the acceptance of logic as well as what is generally considered 'natural' are not stable givens but can vary according to cultural and historical parameters. For the Renaissance mind, for instance, the intrusion of witches into the world of everyday experience as represented in the opening scene of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was not necessarily an 'unnatural' impossibility, while the idea of such intrusions increasingly became so in later periods. As a consequence, impossible narration must in itself be regarded as a category dependent on historical and other cultural frames.

The same is true for the means of 'defusing' the unnatural: naturalization. The term was popularized by Jonathan Culler, who, drawing on Barthes' *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, employed it in *Structuralist Poetics* to designate the means by which written literature "reduce[s] its strangeness" (134, cf. also 137). Alber ("Impossible Storyworlds" 80–83) uses the term in the very general sense of "mak[ing] sense of the unnatural" (80) and proposes five ways of "cop[ing] with the unnatural" (83). These are as follows: (1) "reading [unnatural] events as internal states" (e.g., dreams); (2) understanding them as an aesthetic device to "foreground [. . .] the thematic" or (3) as a form of allegory; (4) recuperation of the unnatural by blending it with "pre-existing frames" or (5) by "stretch[ing] existing frames" (83).<sup>12</sup> Fludernik (*Towards a "Natural" Narratology*) also uses the concept in a broad sense, albeit not as a general means of recuperating strange elements in the reading and interpreting of *all* literature since she focuses on narratives only. Drawing on Ricoeur's three forms of mimesis (vol. 3, ch. I.3), she indicates three possibilities for doing this: (a) attempting to reintroduce what is seemingly outside experientiality into real-life experience (Alber's strategy no. 1 points in the same direction); (b) activating general "explanatory schemas" (43) which would help provide access to the unnatural (this coincides with Alber's strategies no. 4 and 5); and (c) integrating the strange into certain communicative situations, in particular literary "genres" as "large-scale cognitive frames" (44) (this is echoed in Alber's strategies no. 2 and 3).

In both Alber's and Fludernik's conceptualizations of naturalization, reference is made to man-made, artificial phenomena as a means of meaningful recuperation (e.g., reference to allegory and to generic conventions). At first

12. In his contribution to this volume, Jan Alber reorders and extends these navigational tools.

sight this appears to depart from what one intuitively to be the actual meaning warranted by the term 'naturalization' itself, namely to reintroduce something strange into the realm of the natural so that the strangeness is reduced or lost, in other words, to align it with what is regarded as ordinary, generally the case, and in accordance with the 'nature' of things, which is considered to follow principles rooted in the essence of reality and therefore to be resistant to the ever-changing moldings and constructs of human culture. Culler appears to have this meaning in mind when he says that "[n]aturalization emphasizes the fact that the strange or deviant is [. . .] made to seem natural" (137). However, Culler does not promote an essentialist view of the natural and appears to indicate by the formulation "seem natural" that in this 'seeming of nature' there may be a lot of culture and conventions. Indeed, although Culler does not mention this any more than Alber, one can generalize and say that in cultural representations the seemingly natural also, and arguably to a large extent, includes cultural-historical factors and conventions (although these tend to be taken for granted and need not be foregrounded in the process of reception).

Yet the question remains: is 'naturalization' an unspecified general recuperation or defusing of the 'strange' in literature (and other media), in other words, is it *any kind* of making sense of the 'unnatural' as Alber and Fludernik (most recently in 2010) appear to suggest in their broad conception of the term, or is 'naturalization' a *specific* way of recuperation in which the strange after all becomes seemingly natural in a narrower sense, so that one may at least momentarily forget about 'artificial,' cultural explanations and reduce the unnatural to apparently natural or ordinary causes, be it only within the logic of given storyworlds? The two interpretations of 'naturalization' are not identical. The situation of the protagonist Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days* (1961), who is "[i]mbedded up to above her waist in [the] exact centre of [a] mound" (II. 148) is, for instance, most unnatural indeed, yet it is a situation for which 'naturalization' in the broad sense, including 'allegorical reading' in particular, is better suited than the narrow meaning, for Beckett's text never offers any explanation for how Winnie came to be immersed in this mound in the first place nor how a human being can exist for a prolonged time under such unnatural circumstances.

In accordance with my focus on the possibilities of rendering compatible with immersion or aesthetic illusion what may be formally classified as a metalepsis and hence as a form of the unnatural, I shall opt for the narrower meaning of 'naturalization,' since it is clear enough that what can be made to appear natural should not present difficulties with immersion. In other words: 'naturalization,' as used in the following, is more than merely making sense



of seemingly strange phenomena of the story level; rather it means rendering such phenomena plausible by means apparently originating in the represented storyworld so that they become compatible with immersion: this, for instance, precludes an open 'determination' of strange story-level phenomena by discursive strategies such as foregrounding and allegory (Alber's devices no. 2 and 3). As far as the broader alternatives of making sense of the unnatural discussed by Alber and Fludernik are concerned, I would rather term them means of 'defusing' or simply of 'understanding' the unnatural.<sup>13</sup>

This leads me to the last of the relevant concepts to be clarified here: immersion and aesthetic illusion. I have defined aesthetic illusion elsewhere ("Illusion (Aesthetic)" 144) as

"a basically pleasurable mental state that emerges during the reception of many representational texts, artefacts[,] or performances. These representations may be fictional or factual and include in particular narratives. Like all reception effects, aesthetic illusion is elicited by the conjunction of factors that are located (a) in the representations themselves, (b) in the reception process and the recipients, [and] (c) in cultural and historical contexts. Aesthetic illusion consists predominantly of a feeling, of variable intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real

13. One may even question whether 'naturalization' in this broad sense is not always possible in the reception of works of art and hence whether a specific term is necessary in the first place for what, after all, is simply the 'natural' attempt to 'make sense' of apparent 'nonsense' when it comes to communication involving works of art. Indeed, making sense even of what seem to be the most nonsensical and impossible things is what we are trained to generally attempt when confronted with the frame 'artwork'—and such sense-making is also what authors throughout history have always assumed as their recipients' attitude toward seemingly nonsensical or impossible fictions or statements (a case in point being the rhetorical figure of the *adynaton*, a "form of hyperbole [. . .] which involves the magnification of an event by reference to the impossible" [Cuddon 9]). The motivation for such persistent sense-making is a specific constituent of the frame 'artwork,' namely what I term *Sinnprämiss* ('premiss of meaningfulness'): we automatically assume that artworks are meaningful constructs and that even obscure or seemingly nonsensical wholes or parts of them are not actually meaningless nor merely errors or slips of the tongue (an interpretation we would much more readily attribute to everyday communication) but that they are intentional and must mean something. In a recent essay Fludernik ("Naturalizing the Unnatural") applies blending theory to various forms of 'unnatural' storytelling elements and scenarios including metalepsis (cf. 21–22), contending that it is by blending familiar domains of scenarios that even metalepsis is 'naturalized.' Yet here, too, what she actually has in mind is the question of how we are able to *understand* metalepsis in the first place, not how we are made to forget its unnatural quality. To show what difference the broad and narrow conception of 'naturalization' implies, one could even argue that the blending of (individually understandable) domains in an incompatible, paradoxical way *produces* the effect of unnaturalness rather than naturalizing it—at least in the narrow sense used by myself.

life. This constitutive impression of immersion is, however, counterbalanced by a latent rational distance, which is a consequence of the culturally acquired awareness of the difference between representations and reality.<sup>14</sup>

Immersion is often used as a synonym of ‘aesthetic illusion,’ yet, strictly speaking, it only denotes the ‘immersive pole’ of aesthetic illusion and is not burdened with the historical connotations of presupposing a latent awareness of art and artifactuality as aesthetic illusion is. For a discussion of metalepsis that also extends to mythical narratives and archaic contexts, in which the concept of aesthetic illusion cannot (as yet) be applied, it is clear that a broader concept of immersion is more appropriate. What reception effects (immersion in both its narrow and broad meaning) share, and this is most important in the following, is the feeling of experientially participating in a representation, a feeling that is gradable in intensity in both cases.

### 3. Conditions Eliciting Anti-Immersive Effects of Metalepsis

We can now come back to the first scenario as an example of a standard metalepsis and clarify the conditions which contribute to the fact that the stepping down of a filmic character from a cinema screen as occurs in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is truly unnatural, so that it cannot be naturalized in the narrow sense and consequently impairs immersion.

Effects of artifacts on recipients always depend on an interaction between several constituents of medial communication. There is, of course, always the

14. For details see also Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion.” Schaeffer (332) radicalizes this ambivalence of aesthetic illusion (which he calls ‘immersion’) as an oscillation between letting oneself be drawn into the represented world and the awareness of the reality of the reception situation, for example, the cinema (“[. . .] il y a coexistence, chez le spectateur, entre l’immersion perceptive, qui se laisse guider par les amorces mimétiques [. . .] et l’attention perceptive périphérique, qui continue à traiter les informations provenant de la salle”) (“there is a co-existence, in the spectator, of perceptive immersion, which lets itself be guided by mimetic triggers [. . .] and peripheral perceptive attention, which continues to deal with the information coming from the surrounding cinema room”). However, the problem with this conceptualization is that Schaeffer omits to mention a decisive feature of aesthetic illusion: in this state the feeling of being recentered within a represented world is dominant, and therefore devices that run counter to this impression, such as many if not most metalepses, activate a subdominant reality awareness that is normally latent. As a consequence, Schaeffer’s claim that metalepsis, by its transgression of the border between different levels of ‘reality’ on the part of the recipient, is ‘emblematic’ of, rather than antagonistic to, immersion (331, 333) must be rejected. It is based on a reductive conception of aesthetic illusion and is unable to account for the disruptive effects most metalepses in fact have.

individual recipient (about whom it is difficult to say anything specific), and moreover the artifact or 'message': this not only implies the structure and content of the work in question but also the medial conditions of 'code' and 'channel.' In addition, the framing cultural conditions (i.e., in Foucault's terms, the factors of the ruling 'episteme') that shape the audience's preconceptions, as well as those of the author (the 'sender'), play a particularly important role as well.

In our case, an American film released in 1985, we may assume as such framing epistemic conditions essentials of the dominant secular worldview of the Western world of our times, a worldview that includes a belief in the validity of the physical laws of nature as explained by contemporary science and above all a conviction that representations cannot come alive or have a will of their own; in short, that medial artifacts such as films, be they factual or fictional, and the reality of the recipients are separate spheres divided by an insurmountable boundary. As far as *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is concerned, this film does nothing to disturb these basic assumptions for a considerable stretch of time. On the contrary: the realism both of the story or subject (a social critical variant of realism referring to economic circumstances as well as to the low-paid job and marital conditions of the lower-class heroine) and its filmic 'discourse' or transmission actively suggest, as is typical of realism in general, that there is a continuum between our universe and the represented world, in this case the world of the 1930s. This world may be divided from ours historically as well as by the ontological boundary between a represented world and the world in which the representation takes place, but the same natural laws and the same logic as in our experience essentially apply to it. Realism thus radicalizes what Marie-Laure Ryan called the epistemological "principle of minimal departure" (*Possible Worlds* 51). According to this principle the default option, which governs our access to storyworlds in all reception processes, is the assumption that the same basic laws are valid in both realms unless we are made aware of special conditions applying to the respective storyworld. Realism as prevailing in the initial phase of *The Purple Rose of Cairo* avoids signaling such special conditions, and this is what actually radicalizes the principle of minimal departure to a 'principle of apparently no departure at all.'

The metaleptic screen passage of the actor *mise en abyme* Tom Baxter therefore comes as a considerable shock. Interestingly, it comes as a shock both to the real recipients and to the fictional patrons of the represented cinema—at precisely the moment when Baxter, who has as yet only been engaged in an epistemological metalepsis by directly addressing the diegetic heroine Cecilia ("My God, you must really love this picture"), "*begins to leave the*

*black-and-white screen*” and is thus shown in the process of an ontological metalepsis.

TOM: I gotta speak to you

*He begins to leave the black-and-white screen. The audience, reacting, begins to gasp. The film cuts to a shocked Cecilia, immobilized in her seat. As the other patrons cry out in the background, the film quickly cuts back to Tom. He actually walks off the black-and-white movie screen, turning into living color as he enters the theater.*

*The film cuts to a woman in a hat, sitting in the last row of the theater. She screams and falls over in a faint [. . .] The audience, in color, is in an uproar. (The Purple Rose of Cairo 351–52)*

The gasps of the audience, the shock of Cecilia, the fainting of a lady in the audience—all of these are *mises en abyme* of the intended shock reaction of the real recipients by what I call ‘reception figures.’ The reaction of these figures testifies to the unnaturalness of the represented metalepsis, an unnaturalness that is never physically or logically explained (Tom Baxter’s psychological interest in his admirer Cecilia being insufficient by way of naturalization in the narrow sense of the term<sup>15</sup>). This unnaturalness is obviously not only a theoretical one but is meant to be felt by the real audience as well. As a consequence, it is safe to assume that Baxter’s ‘impossible’ address to Cecilia and eventual leaving of the screen endangers the real recipients’ immersion, at least if they mentally compare what is possible in reality according to their convictions and what is ‘impossibly’ represented on screen. Through the ensuing irreconcilability of the two worlds, they will feel strongly reminded of the fact that they are ‘merely’ watching a film. If so, the repeated *mises en abyme* of the real cinematic reception situation which we have watched so far are at the same time belatedly foregrounded as additional reminders of artificiality, mediality, and fictionality. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* thus assumes a strong metareferential quality, a quality that is subsequently unfolded in an ambivalent criticism of what (Hollywood) film and its sought-after effect, namely strong immersion, can do to its audience for better or worse, that is, provide an acceptable escape from drab reality but also offer a potentially dangerous narcotic.

To sum up: the unnatural, immersion-hostile effect of metalepsis is based in the case of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*—a case representative of one frequent type of metalepsis—on several conditions:

15. Wishes or interests normally do not alter levels of reality.

1. the existence of an extracompositional epistemological framework ruling the (contemporary) audience and according to which the represented metalepsis is physically or logically impossible;
2. an intracompositional representation which in form and content at first seems to fulfill the epistemic assumptions as adduced under condition 1;
3. the lack of intracompositional explanations by which the metalepsis under discussion can be naturalized in the narrow sense of the term;
4. the indication of the actual unnaturalness of a given metalepsis through intracompositional 'reception figures,' who react in a corresponding way, betraying shock, disbelief, and so forth.

It should be noted that conditions 1 to 3 are necessary for the illusion-breaking or anti-immersive effect of nonnaturalizable unnaturalness, while condition 4 is optional, albeit frequently fulfilled. When this is the case, we may safely assume that the real recipient, too, experiences unnaturalness.

#### 4. Conditions Permitting Various Degrees of Compatibility between Metalepsis and Immersion

However, one question merits some further attention: is it really the case that a feeling of unnaturalness as in Woody Allen's film always leads to a reduction of immersion or a breaking of illusion? Formerly (cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* ch. 3.5.4, in particular 358; Wolf, "Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon" 101) I was convinced that this is so on the grounds that the contrast between the metaleptic event in the represented world and the assumptions we apply in our experience of reality inevitably foregrounds the fictionality of the storyworld and thus distances the recipient from the representation by metareferentially drawing attention to its artificial, made-up status. Thus one may in fact argue that in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* the metalepsis is clearly a case of implicit yet nevertheless powerfully distancing metareferentiality: on the one hand, it comments on the problem of recipients who permit themselves to become too deeply immersed in storyworlds (represented by Cecilia dreaming of being on speaking terms with cinema celebrities and participating in their world of glamour) while, on the other hand, it also contributes to a celebration of film's immersive power (again, illustrated by Cecilia's attitude towards film). I am, however, now inclined to qualify the claim that metalepsis is generally a strong means of distancing the recipient by conceding that, under special conditions, meta-

lepsis may be compatible with immersion. These special conditions, which include devices of naturalization in the narrow sense but may also go beyond them, function as ‘filter factors’ that influence the recipient’s reaction to the unnatural. Of course, what can be said in this respect without extensive empirical research is mostly speculation based on introspection and, perhaps, a few reception testimonies. Yet, some reflections, even if not based on statistical proof (which, by the way, would be unavailable anyway as soon as we recede in history), may be allowed nevertheless and could show the direction in which future research could go.

One of the conditions that may neutralize the anti-immersive effect even of strongly felt unnaturalness is certainly a high degree of emotional involvement in the storyworld. Apart from the specific predispositions of the individual recipients, which are too elusive for theoretical evaluation (and shall therefore here be bracketed off), it is, of course, the intracompositional makeup of the work in question that regulates this involvement. In this context the general tone of the work is of particular importance: seriousness favors both emotional involvement and immersion, while comedy or humor tends more toward distance, both in emotional terms (laughter having, according to Bergson, as one of its preconditions “une anesthésie momentanée du coeur”<sup>16</sup> [*Le Rire* 4]<sup>17</sup>) and in aesthetic terms (i.e., tending toward the reduction of immersion and aesthetic illusion).<sup>18</sup> If—contrary to what has been assumed in my discussion of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*—one would like to argue that the immersion at least of some recipients may not be remarkably impaired by the metalepsis in question, one could point to an unmitigated emotional involvement, perhaps even a strong empathy with poor Cecilia, and one could also say that this involvement is in turn supported by the prevailing serious mode of the film, which is a tragicomedy rather than a light comedy.

Sustained seriousness is, however, generally uncharacteristic of most of Woody Allen’s works. More typical than *The Purple Rose of Cairo* concerning Allen’s predilection for humor is one of his short stories that has become something of a classic and standard example of metalepsis (cf., e.g., Ryan, *Avatars of Story* 208): “The Kugelmass Episode” (originally published in 1977). If, in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the ‘impossible’ event of a character leaping from a hypodiegetic universe to a diegetic one can leave a conceivable margin

16. This translates as “a momentary anaesthesia of the heart” (Bergson, *Laughter* 11).

17. Cf. also: “Le rire n’a pas de plus grand ennemi que l’émotion” (*Le Rire* 3) (“Laughter has no greater foe than emotion” [*Laughter* 10]).

18. For the comic as generally favoring distance and as thus preparing the ground for illusion-breaking, cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* ch. 3.7.

for compatibility with immersion as a result of a high degree of emotional involvement, this relativizing condition certainly does not apply to similar (and inverted) leaps in “The Kugelmass Episode,” which therefore shall be dealt with in a brief contrastive digression. In this highly metareferential story Kugelmass, “a professor of humanities [. . .] unhappily married” (347), is looking for an amorous adventure and becomes the client of a New York magician, who claims that he is able to transfer Kugelmass into the storyworld of any work of world literature provided the respective book is thrown into a magic machine of his. In this story, too, a reception figure signals the impossibility of such a proposed ontological metalepsis: Kugelmass himself, on listening to the magician’s self-advertisement, “made a grimace of disbelief” (350). Later, when the metalepsis ‘really’ happens and Kugelmass meets the eponymous heroine of *Madame Bovary* within Flaubert’s storyworld, “students in various classrooms across the country” wonder “Who is this character on p. 100? A bald Jew is kissing Madame Bovary?” (352)—another intracompositional indication of the startling nature of the metaleptic event. And when Kugelmass finally asks the magician Persky to revert the metaleptic direction so that the hypodiegetic Emma can cross the border into diegetic Manhattan, the magician, while promising help, at the same time also signals the strangeness of the projected border-crossing, a strangeness that is immediately underlined by the narrator: “‘Let me think about it,’ Persky said. ‘Maybe I could work it. Stranger things have happened.’ Of course, neither of them could think of one” (354). Formally, everything thus points in the same direction as *The Purple Rose of Cairo*: in both cases we are confronted with a nonnaturalizable ontological metalepsis that characteristically elicits reactions of disbelief and puzzlement in ‘reception figures.’

And yet the effect of the two metalepses may arguably differ: in contrast to the emotional investment that the representation of unhappy Cecilia will certainly elicit in most viewers of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, and which may override the distancing effect of the cinematic metalepsis as well as the concomitant metareferentiality to a certain extent, the lighter tone of “The Kugelmass Episode” does not permit such emotional involvement and creates humorous distance right from the start. As a consequence, the metalepsis brought about by the improbable and incongruous character of a magician as an inhabitant of today’s Manhattan (!) may well be said to widen the distance to the point where (strong) immersion is certainly no longer possible. Rather, we are invited to follow Kugelmass’s adventure from a detached, amused point of view located outside his universe, a distance that is widened by the metareferentiality and overt intertextuality that characterizes the text even apart from its metalepses.

As we have seen in analyzing two tendentially contrastive works by Woody Allen, the intracompositional milieu in which a metalepsis occurs (concerning the general mood prevailing in a text, its emotional quality but also its degree of metareferentiality) are all factors that can considerably influence the actual effects of what technically seem to be similar if not identical metalepses. What is more, and as the above examples also show, this influence also extends to clearly nonnaturalizable metalepses as in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and “The Kugelmass Episode.”

Of course, if what can be formally classified as a metalepsis occurs in the context of factors that help mitigate its strangeness, the reduction or even lack of an anti-immersive effect is all the more understandable in cases where the text provides plausible (if physically impossible) explanations for the metalepsis in combination with a strong emotionality and possibly also specific generic frames. A case in point is Mary Shelley’s Gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818), which sports all three of these pro-immersive factors. The event relevant to our context in this novel is, of course, the transformation of an artifact (even if made out of organic material) into a living being. As long as the ‘monster’ is in the making, it is a representation of a human being, a “lifeless thing,” “an inanimate body” (318); after Frankenstein has “infuse[d] a spark of being” (ibid.) into it, the artifact leaps onto the diegetic level of his creator, characteristically changing grammatical gender from “it” to “he” (see 318–19), all of which conforms to the formal conditions of metalepsis—provided we import our contemporary knowledge of the physical impossibility and unnaturalness of this animation into the text.

However, this is precisely the point: we are not supposed to do so. Following the textual instructions directing our reading reduces the paradoxical, metaleptic quality of the event considerably. Already at the paratextual threshold of this Gothic novel a strategy of naturalization by means of quasi-scientific explanation is initiated, starting with the reference to the experimentations with “galvanism” by “Dr Darwin” in Mary Shelley’s “Author’s Introduction” of 1831 (263).<sup>19</sup> This strategy is then continued in the description of Frankenstein’s preparatory studies and activities in the main text. As a result of these attempts at ‘scientifically’ explaining the central event, *Frankenstein* is commonly also viewed as one of the first instances of science fiction besides being classified as a Gothic novel.

19. P. B. Shelley, in the “Preface” in which he assumes his wife’s voice, also takes up this strategy, albeit in an ambivalent way: “The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence. I shall not be supposed as according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination” (Shelley 267).



Admittedly, the generic extracompositional frame of science fiction was not yet established in 1818 and thus—contrary to the later historical development—cannot yet be adduced as an additional factor eliciting immersion-compatibility. However, what already existed in 1818 was the generic frame of Gothic fiction, a genre that had emerged with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1765. As is well known, this genre is focused on strongly eliciting specific emotions, in particular suspense, fear, and terror (or horror). It is thus predestined for unfolding strategies that overrule the anti-immersive effect of 'impossible' representations as occurring in metalepses by integrating them into the genre-specific strangeness of the represented storyworlds as well as by strongly appealing to readers' emotions so that the essentially intellectual operation of comparing represented phenomena with real-life notions of probability and possibility is suppressed. This is what also happens at the very moment of the 'metaleptic' coming to life of the monster: the scene is narrated in gruesome tones, with the setting of "a dreary night of November" (318) providing the appropriate atmosphere. Again a 'reception figure' prefigures the intended emotional reader-reaction: Frankenstein's "horror" (319), initially such a strong emotion that it can only be transmitted by the topos of unspeakability ("How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe [. . .]?" [318]). Clearly, such emotional loading, in combination with the aforementioned naturalizing strategy and generic expectations, renders the entire scene fully compatible with aesthetic illusion. One may even claim that the accomplishment of the monster's animation intensifies immersion—a graphic illustration of the fact that the seeming unnaturalness of what formally may be classified as an instance of metalepsis depends in its pro- or counter-immersive effect very much on intracompositional conditions, in particular on strategies of naturalization employed in the text, on emotionality, as well as on extracompositional generic frames.

'Scientific' explanation is, of course, not the only possibility for naturalizing metalepsis and taming its anti-immersive potential. A 'safety-bracket' in this respect, which is well known and figures as number 1 in Alber's "reading [unnatural] events as internal states," is intracompositional framing by dreams. This is what generally naturalizes the impossible in the dreamlands of Lewis Carroll's Alice stories, in particular the notorious epistemological metalepsis in chapter IV, "Tweedledum and Tweedledee," of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Here Tweedledee claims that Alice is only "a sort of thing in [the Red King's] dream" (Carroll 238) and that therefore Alice is "not real" (239). This amounts to an epistemological metalepsis: a hypodiegetic character (Tweedledee) claims that another hypodiegetic character (Alice inhabiting her dream) depends on the dream of yet a third hypodiegetic character (the Red

King): Alice thus appears to have paradoxically acquired a hypo-hypodiegetic status while ‘in reality’ being a hypodiegetic imagination of diegetic Alice’s dream. Yet in dreams all sorts of impossibilities may ‘naturally’ happen, and this naturalization neutralizes the anti-immersive effect that metalepses such as this one would otherwise produce.<sup>20</sup>

Linked with this kind of naturalization qua ‘internal states’ is the possibility of intracompositionally relegating the unnaturalness of metalepsis to embedded fictional texts (variants of artistic ‘dreams’). An interesting case in point because of its ambivalence is Flann O’Brien’s experimental novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). In this almost proto-postmodernist metanovel, characters of a hypo-hypodiegetic level profit from the sleep of their hypodiegetic author, which allows them to free themselves and thus perform an ascending metalepsis. Since all of this happens in an embedded novel, introduced as part of the “spare-time literary activities” (9) of a Dublin student, one could argue that it does not harm the credibility and immersive potential of the framing story per se, which by way of contrast with the manifest fictionality of the embedded stories may even appear to be particularly credible. However, while this would be true if one removes these metalepses from their context, a rather different effect is more likely if one takes the milieu and its general metareferential function into account. As the entire text is to an extraordinary degree shot through with metareferentiality that constantly and critically lays bare fictionality and the conventions of narrative, aesthetic illusion is hardly permitted to establish itself in the first place, nor is there a sufficiently powerful emotional or suspense-related pull to override the reader’s distance. Thus we have the curious instance of factors pulling in different directions: while the possibility of naturalizing the narrated metalepses between various hypodiegetic levels defuses the unnaturalness and may in principle serve to block their anti-immersive potential, the unemotional, ‘brainy’ metareferential context of the novel as a whole favors distance. All in all, the metalepses in question not only clearly function as instances of implicit metareference but also contribute to the anti-illusionist effect of the entire novel: in conformity with the antimimetic and moreover anti-illusionist aesthetic of the Dublin student-author, these metalepses fulfill the self-critical function of exposing the entire novel as a “self-evident sham” peopled by “illusory characters” (25).

20. Carroll’s metalepsis is, however, not as harmless as it may seem at first sight, for it, so to speak, ‘spills over’ from the hypodiegetic to the diegetic level when Alice wakes up and at the end of the concluding chapter, characteristically titled “Which dreamed it?” is no longer sure about her true ontological status to the extent that the narrator feels compelled to directly confront the reader with the problem, leading the novel to a concluding question “Which do *you* think it was!” (344); for more details on this metalepsis and the general metareferential implications of the Alice stories see Wolf, “Lewis Carrolls ‘Alice’-Geschichten.”

A factor that is at least as important as the intracompositional conditions surrounding a given metalepsis are the extracompositional framing conditions. These include not only generic frames, which could already be seen at work in *Frankenstein* and with which we will be concerned again presently, but also extracompositional epistemic and cultural-historical frames. This brings us back to the second of my initial examples, the assumed historical scenario of a recital of the Pygmalion myth in ancient Greece. For the sake of argument let us suppose that the audience is an archaic one whose epistemic frame and corresponding worldview admit the possibility of gods intervening in human affairs as well as the ontological instability of objects, plants, animals, and persons that may be metamorphosed into shapes and beings located on other levels of, to use a later concept, the Great Chain of Being. Clearly, for such an audience, a narrative about a beautiful statue changing into a beautiful woman as a result of the graceful intervention of a goddess would not constitute a breach of the possible. While such a metamorphosis would perhaps not actually be conceived of as 'natural' in the sense of something that 'might happen every day' even by our archaic audience, it would be neither unnatural nor paradoxical for them. As a consequence, if for us today the transformation of a representational artifact into a living being and thus the crossing of the border between hypodiegetic fiction and diegetic 'reality' would technically constitute a metalepsis, it would arguably not be conceived in such a way by the contemporaries of our scenario (had they a concept such as metalepsis at their disposal). In fact the metaleptic quality of the event would not appear since the defining feature of paradoxicality would be lacking. As a further consequence, any immersive quality that the narration, perhaps owing to the performative skills of the rhapsode, may possess would not be impaired by the recounting of the metaleptic metamorphosis. Nor does Ovid's text betray a reception figure's marked incredulity of the kind "this is impossible!" In Ovid's discourse there is no more than a mere remark amounting to the fact that Pygmalion is happily overwhelmed by what has happened: "dum stupet et timide gaudet fallique veretur" ("The lover stands amazed, rejoices still in doubt, fears he is mistaken" [Ovid 85]). If Pygmalion is 'stupefied,' he is so because he can hardly believe his luck, not because the metamorphosis he is about to experience is in principle impossible to his way of thinking; and if he is afraid that this may be deception, this fear is again not linked to a categorical impossibility of what he after all feels with his own hands—his rigid, cool statue having acquired the malleability and warmth of living flesh—but rather testifies to an awareness that senses and wishful thinking may conjure up irrealities. So even Ovid's written form of the myth pays tribute to the fact that in myth such miraculous transformations are

part of the possible rather than the unnatural.<sup>21</sup> It therefore does not disturb immersion, all the more so since in Ovid's version of the Pygmalion myth in his *Metamorphoses* the story is set in an intracompositional literary context in which 'miraculous' metamorphoses abound as a consequence of the fact that 'mythical transformation' forms a main unifying element of the text as a whole; the metamorphosis of the statue is therefore not unnatural but rather obeys an expected pattern within a textual frame in which special 'laws' apply.

To come back to epistemic frames as part of certain worldviews that are apt to permit a compatibility of metalepsis and immersion: in this context one should also mention medieval religious drama, for in this text type a device that is classifiable as epistemic metalepsis frequently occurs: *ad spectatores* or *parabasis*. In technical terms it consists of an 'unnatural' awareness of the existence of spectators on the part of characters and thus of a contamination between the world of representation and the represented world. However, in its original context, this kind of drama is conceived of as a reenactment of truths that are relevant to, and co-present in, the represented world as well as the audience's reality. As a consequence, the formally metaleptic quality of *ad spectatores*, in particular when focusing on religious or moral instruction, presumably did not (yet) lead to an anti-immersive effect (let alone a breaking of aesthetic illusion, a concept whose existence cannot be assumed for this type of text and cultural frame [cf. Wolf, "Shakespeare" 282])—no less than the many anachronisms that can also be observed in medieval drama. Rather, it may even have contributed to consolidating a community under religious auspices (cf. Hacker 261).

What in the case of an alleged preliterate Pygmalion story as well as in medieval religious drama may phylogenetically be classified as an early, archaic mythical or religious worldview that permits immersion-compatible metalepsis has certain ontogenetic parallels in the as yet unsophisticated worldview of children. For them, too, 'absurd' or impossible events may well fall into the realm of the acceptable. It is therefore no coincidence that illusion-compatible metalepses also occur in children's literature (e.g., the animation of a wooden jumping jack in Carlo Collodi's fairy tale *Le avventure di Pinocchio* [1881–83]) or all-age 'fantasy' fiction parading as such (cf. Klimek, "Metalepsis and Its (Anti-)Illusionist Effects" 181–83).

If the compatibility of metalepsis and immersion both in archaic myths and modern fantasy and children's fiction is largely an effect of certain extra-

21. For those among Ovid's contemporary readers for whom such a metamorphosis on the basis of a mythical worldview would no longer be acceptable, the reminiscence of such a worldview in conjunction with the awareness of the frame 'literature' or 'fiction' would arguably have contributed to the same immersion-friendly effect.

compositional epistemic frames, such a compatibility may also stem from the other extracompositional frame that has already been mentioned: generic conventions. Michael Ende's *Die unendliche Geschichte* (1979), a fantasy novel (parading as children's literature while in reality also appealing to adults), is a good case in point. Admittedly, the text of the initial chapters of this novel structured along the lines of an extended frame tale reads like a realistic novel. However, the paratexts (the cover illustration depicting, in the German paperback edition, an ouroboros circling an idyllic scene with an alley leading to an ebony tower amidst meadows and woods in which unicorns jump around) and the 'fantastic' initials that open all chapters dedicated to the hypodiegetic novel are sufficiently strong generic markers to indicate the genre fantasy right from the beginning.

The novel, which besides being fantasy fiction is also a metafictional allegory celebrating the salutary immersive and imaginative power of literature, is full of genuine metalepses. The first occurs when the diegetic hero Sebastian Bux, reader of the novel within the novel entitled "Die unendliche Geschichte," in a nice *mise en abyme* of reading effects, is himself so immersed in an adventure of the hypodiegetic Atreju being attacked by an evil spider that he utters a cry of terror. Paradoxically, this cry also resounds in the hypodiegetic world Phantásia and is immediately registered by its discourse so that Bastian is able to read about it and characteristically wonders: "Sollte es am Ende mein Schrei gewesen sein, den sie [die Spinne] gehört hat?" dachte Bastian zutiefst beunruhigt. 'Aber das ist doch überhaupt nicht möglich'" (Ende, *Die unendliche Geschichte* 81).<sup>22</sup> Bastian here functions as yet another 'reception figure' documenting the unnaturalness of metalepsis by his reaction of disbelief. Yet to argue that at this point the real reader's 'suspension of disbelief' is terminated would be to entirely misjudge the effect of this metalepsis. For, when it occurs, the generic frame 'fantasy' has sufficiently been established not only by means of paratextual illustrations but also by the embedded novel, a highly fantastic narrative about an empire threatened by an increasing lack of readers' interest in *Fantasie* (imagination) that occupies 90 percent of the entire book. As a consequence, the reader learns to accept so many 'impossible things' (the unicorn on the framing cover functioning as a nice foreshadowing or '*mise en cadre*')<sup>23</sup> that this metalepsis would at best produce a mildly startling effect. Therefore, the wonder (echoing Bastian's) that readers will feel is arguably less prone to be metareferentially resolved by jumping out of the fictional world

22. "Could it [the spider] have heard my cry?" Bastian wondered in alarm. 'But that's not possible'" (Ende, *The Neverending Story* 77).

23. For framings functioning as the reverse of *mise en abyme*, a device I have termed '*mise en cadre*'; see Wolf, "*Mise en cadre*."

and considering the entire event from this extratextual vantage point as a mere fiction, thus destroying aesthetic illusion. Rather, this emotional reaction will immerse readers more deeply in the storyworld—by kindling their interest in the outcome not only of the adventure with the spider but also of the contact that has apparently been established between the diegetic and the hypodiegetic worlds by means of an epistemological metalepsis.

The mildly startling effect produced by Bastian's metaleptic cry is repeated in the second instance of an as yet epistemological metalepsis, namely when a hypodiegetic character gazes at a magic mirror representing diegetic Bastian, a fact that is again commented on by the boy: "Es war doch überhaupt nicht möglich, daß in einem gedruckten Buch etwas stehen konnte, was nur in diesem Augenblick und nur für ihn zutraf" (*Die unendliche Geschichte* 115).<sup>24</sup> Shortly after this, another metalepsis occurs which consists in the curious fact that Bastian's will begins to clearly influence events in Phantásia. Arguably because both Bastian and the readers are beginning to become used to the repeated metalepses, this 'impossibility' is no longer accompanied by markers of 'unnaturalness' from the reception figure Bastian. However, such markers turn up again ("Bastian erschrak"<sup>25</sup> [184]) when some pages later the metaleptic direction is reverted from a descending one (leap from diegetic to hypodiegetic level) to an ascending one (leap in the opposite direction): Bastian suddenly sees the face of the Kindliche Kaiserin, the Childlike Empress, the ruler of Phantásia, appear in the garret where he is reading about this hypodiegetic character. However, this astonishment is once again not exploited for the purpose of undermining immersion; rather, it induces Bastian (and with him the actual reader) to continue reading, if possible more avidly (cf. 185). After this it hardly comes as a surprise that characters in Phantásia start to reckon with Bastian as part of their own storyworld ("Ob er es weiß oder nicht—er gehört jetzt schon zur Unendlichen Geschichte" [197]).<sup>26</sup> What still elicits some wonder in both Bastian ("Bastians Gedanken verwirrten sich" [208])<sup>27</sup> and the real reader is the fact that leading hypodiegetic characters including the Kindliche Kaiserin consult an old man ("[den] Alten vom Wandernden Berge" [206]),<sup>28</sup> who turns out to be engaged in another epistemological metalepsis: he is supposedly the author not only of "Die unendliche

24. "How could there be something in a book that applied only to this particular moment and only to him?" (Ende, *The Neverending Story* 106).

25. "Bastian gave a start" (Ende, *The Neverending Story* 169).

26. "Whether he knows it or not, he is already part of the Neverending Story" (Ende, *The Neverending Story* 180).

27. "Bastian's thoughts were in a whirl" (Ende, *The Neverending Story* 192).

28. "[the] Old Man of Wandering Mountain" (Ende, *The Neverending Story* 189).

Geschichte" *mise en abyme* but of the framing novel as well (cf. 208–16). Interestingly, the recounting of the old man's writing threatens to become an endless *mise en abyme*, since it contains the act of reading the story up to the point where the Kindliche Kaiserin meets the old man. At this point Bastian decides to interfere and jumps into the hypodiegetic novel (see 216). This is actually the most impossible metalepsis, a classic case of 'descending' ontological metalepsis, but at this point the markers of impossibility and even of wonder cease—arguably a sign that even the last traces of an anti-immersive potential of metalepsis have miraculously vanished.

However, this vanishing is not so miraculous after all. It is an effect primarily of the generic frame 'fantasy' which shapes the readers' expectations so that they accept 'impossibilities' more readily. In addition, the text is written in a serious mood and is full of suspense, all of which increases the readers' emotional engagement while at the same time decreasing their readiness to metareferentially distance themselves from the fascinating storyworld(s).

The combined workings of generic frames and emotional tone can also be observed in drama with reference to the occurrence and effect of the aforementioned device of *parabasis* or *ad spectatores*. It is no coincidence that, as a rule, tragedy shuns *ad spectatores* and thus avoids endangering the audience's emotional involvement, while comedy sports *ad spectatores* much more frequently. In comedy, the effect of *parabasis* is often enough the reduction of dramatic illusion and immersion. However, if this reduction is not total, this may again be due to the workings of a generic frame: *ad spectatores* is after all a frequent and thus expected device in comedy. When it occurs in laughing comedy in particular it may in addition create or reinforce a 'carnavalesque' (*sensu* Bakhtin) community between audience and the stage world. This community is different from 'immersion' as the imaginary participation in a represented world as explained in section 2, but still it remains a noteworthy kind of contact between two worlds.

Yet another condition must be mentioned which also contributes to defusing the anti-immersive potential of metalepsis: habituation. Remarkably, the metalepses of *Die unendliche Geschichte* are introduced according to a pattern of intensification (from various forms of epistemological to ontological metalepsis), but this also means that the potentially startling effect of Bastian's culminating ontological leap into Phantásia is counteracted by the multiplicity of half a dozen preparatory ('merely' epistemological) metalepses, so that the scandal of this unnaturalness is considerably weakened (in this, one need not even take recourse to an allegorical 'naturalization' *sensu* Alber). Habituation is indeed an important factor, fueled by both intracompositional and extracompositional repetition, when it comes to assessing metalepses in fantasy,



postmodernist literature, and other media:<sup>29</sup> in fact, metalepses have become such frequent devices that, inevitably, the occurrence of yet another instance of this increasingly well-known phenomenon can certainly no longer muster the effect of ‘scandalous’ unnaturalness it may have had in former times. As a consequence, one would be inclined to say that such habituation reduces if not destroys the anti-immersive effect of metalepsis, were it not for the fact that the immersive quality of aesthetic illusion is often not sought after in postmodernist literature and art in the first place, especially not in its radically experimental variants. Yet there is also a ‘muted’ variant of postmodernism in which relatively traditional storytelling is combined with metareferentiality and forms double-layered works that can cater to different readers and expectations. There, habituation is certainly a relevant factor that discernibly tunes down the unnatural as well as its anti-immersive effects in an at least partially illusionist context. The compatibility of metalepsis and immersion resulting from habituation in muted postmodernism may already be observed, within the narrow confines of a short story, in “The Kugelmass Episode,” in which the crossing of an ontological border is effected not once but repeatedly; it is even more discernible in contemporary novels such as Jasper Fforde’s *The Eyre Affair* (2001), in which a machine similar to that of the magician’s in Woody Allen’s story repeatedly allows characters to enter hypodiegetic fictional worlds of literary texts.

## 5. Toward a Poetics of (Un)naturalness

What does all of this amount to? Metalepsis as a particularly clear case of unnaturalness and the varying immersion-relevant effects it may have in different circumstances provide a revealing case study for a poetics of (un)naturalness. When mentioning a ‘poetics of (un)naturalness’ as a part of—in the context of the present essay—narratology and a theory of aesthetic illusion, one should, however, make clear right from the start that what is at issue is not a new, ‘unnatural narratology’ as has recently been suggested (cf. Richardson; Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson) but an extension or modification of existing theory. One should also be aware that in this the traditional categories, including those that are modeled on ‘mimetic’ narratives and what in Western culture has been regarded as ‘natural’ for a considerable time, cannot be suspended or rejected altogether but must be used as a necessary back-

29. Habituation is all the more important in this historical context since, as Richardson has emphasized, postmodernist (as well as modernist) literature is generally prone to produce ‘extreme’ and unnatural forms of narration.



ground against which the 'unnatural' can be perceived and described in the first place. The abolishing of 'natural' categories would entail abolishing the description of the 'unnatural' as well. In this concluding section some elements of such a complementary poetics of unnaturalness shall tentatively be extrapolated from the preceding case study, building blocks that derive from what has been said so far. This concerns in particular the following results:

1. The natural and the unnatural (such as metalepsis) and their reception-theoretical effects must always be conceived of as a co-production of several factors of communication; apart from the 'message' (the text or artifact where the phenomenon under discussion occurs) these include in particular the extracompositional factors of the given epistemological cultural context as well as those of specific generic conventions framing the work under discussion.
2. As a consequence, the natural and the unnatural are not stable, trans-historical, and transcultural essences but historically and culturally variable; this gives these categories a slippery nature and makes them difficult to handle, in particular when it comes to discussing texts and artifacts from outside present Western culture.
3. Similarly, there is no clear one-to-one relationship between what formally may be classified as unnatural and specific effects such as defamiliarization, the prevention of immersion or the breaking of aesthetic illusion; at best one may assume a certain tendency as a starting point or reception-theoretical hypothesis, in particular a marked anti-immersive or illusion-breaking potential of 'unnatural' devices such as metalepsis.
4. However, the extent to which this theoretical potential is actualized in given cases (and in particular the actual impossibility of naturalization in the narrow sense) depends on a variety of 'filter factors' that may apply individually or jointly and sometimes even pull in different directions. As far as extracompositional factors are concerned, see above, number 1; as far as intracompositional factors are concerned, the following may contribute to an assessment of the effects of unnaturalness as embodied in metalepsis:
  - the degree of affiliation a given work or artifact assumes with reference to dominant cultural frames and to well-known generic conventions (see also above, nos. 1 and 2): generic frames such as fantasy, science fiction, or children's literature can defuse the unnatural;

- the existence of intracompositional elements that can render the seemingly unnatural plausible, that is, explicable as a result of the workings of science and technology or as dreams, magic, or as parts of hypodiegetic texts or fantasies (sometimes in combination with specific generic frames);
- the degree of emotional involvement (including suspense) elicited in the context of the unnatural occurrence: a high degree can also neutralize the anti-immersive potential of the unnatural;
- in conjunction with the presence or absence of a strong emotional appeal: the general mood (serious or comic) of a given work; seriousness favors immersive 'adhesion' since it is frequently combined with a strong emotional involvement and therefore can counteract the defamiliarizing effect of devices such as metalepsis, while the comic tends to loosen the immersive relationship, thus generally facilitating or favoring anti-immersive effects (at the same time, the comic can produce a carnivalesque community effect, which can also reduce the felt unnaturalness of, for example, metaleptic parabasis);
- a variant of the 'general mood' may also be the given or absent tendency towards metareferentiality in a particular work; a high degree of metareferentiality may reduce the recipients' immersion so that when unnaturalness occurs it does so in a context that facilitates a further reduction of immersion, perhaps even a reading of the unnatural as a means of implicit metaization (a foregrounding of the fictionality of the work in question)<sup>30</sup> which would break the aesthetic illusion;
- where the unnatural fulfills a metareferential function the specificity of this function may also play a role in the overall effect: where metareferential unnaturalness is (self)critical of the representationality of the work in question it will reduce immer-

30. The following should be noted, though: theoretically, a prevailing metareferential milieu promotes anti-illusionism and therefore should actually reinforce the disturbing effect of metalepsis when it occurs, since metalepsis itself is in principle a form of implicit metareference. Yet this milieu may be overruled by other factors such as emotional involvement. This can, for instance, be observed in Ende's *Die unendliche Geschichte*. Its general metafictionality, while remarkable enough, is, however, not strong enough to provide a sufficiently anti-immersive milieu for the several metalepses to function as obstacles to immersion. For the novel is engaging in terms of suspense and emotions such as empathy to such a degree that the distancing effect of both the metareferential milieu and the metalepses is neutralized. In contrast to this, the equally general metareferentiality of *At Swim-Two-Birds* does promote the anti-immersive effect of the metalepses because, as stated above, this novel does not lure the reader emotionally into its storyworld.

sion, while in the case of metareferential unnaturalness that in some way contributes to praising or supporting aspects and qualities of the work in question, the contrary effect may be produced;<sup>31</sup>

- the degree of habituation resulting from repeated occurrences of the unnatural within the work or text in question: as with high emotional involvement, here, too, a high degree may mitigate the effect of unnaturalness.<sup>32</sup>

5. Sometimes the existence of intracompositional 'reception figures' mirroring intended reader responses may be used as indicators of unnaturalness (or the absence of it); however, as we have seen, these signs are not always reliable, since other factors, in particular the aforementioned 'filter factors,' may yield different results.

Assessing the (probable) effect of individual metalepses—and something similar may be claimed for unnaturalness in general—thus turns out to be a complicated multistage affair. The starting point will always be the hypothesis that a given metalepsis (or unnaturalness in general for that matter) has a potentially defamiliarizing and/or anti-immersive effect. However, before one rushes to conclusions, the parameters mentioned in the foregoing discussion must be taken into account. One must, for instance, ask whether certain epistemic, cultural, or generic contexts may neutralize the hypothesized effect, and/or whether certain intracompositional filter factors may work in a similar immersion-compatible way. In addition, the existence and reactions of reception figures should also be considered. Only when none of this yields indications that a given metalepsis (unnaturalness) is in some way neutralized may one safely assume that it will unfold its 'native' anti-immersive potential.

As a consequence of all this, the question forming the title of this essay, "unnatural' metalepsis and immersion—necessarily incompatible?" can now clearly be answered in the negative. There are, as we have seen, cases in which

31. Cf., for example, the contrast between *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in which metareference including metalepsis as an implicit variant undermines the representationality and credibility of the novel, and *Die unendliche Geschichte*, in which Bastian's 'impossible' entry into Phantásia is an implicitly metareferential allegory of the fascination exercised by both the embedded "unendliche Geschichte" and literature in general and in which metareference and metalepses thus ultimately serve to reinforce immersion.

32. To a certain extent these 'filter factors' correspond to the 'additional factors' regulating the effect of metafiction that I have detailed elsewhere (Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 256–57; 472–74): plausibility (→ naturalization); position in the text; frequency (→ habituation); saliency, extension, and the content of the metareferential reflection (whether, for example, aggressively laying bare the fictionality of the work in question or claiming authenticity for it).

the unnaturalness of metalepsis appears to be compatible with immersion and aesthetic illusion, and hence there is not a necessary incompatibility in all cases. Having said this, one must, on the other hand, put this result into perspective: since the central question of this contribution was formulated in this particular way, the focus was automatically on ‘exceptions.’ What remained outside the focus was the fact that the majority of metalepses may still be regarded as following the hypothesis that unnaturalness produces defamiliarization and, as a consequence, may obstruct or even disrupt immersion. It is the task of research to constantly question its own assumptions and generalizations. The claim that metalepsis has a “strong anti-illusionist effect” as a “common function,” which I myself have voiced (Wolf, “Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon” 101), belongs to those generalizations. It may still be said to apply to the majority of cases (testing this, at least for contemporary recipients, would form a further research project), but, as Klimek is quite right in suggesting (“Metalepsis and Its (Anti)Illusionist Effects” 184), it is a generalization that must be relativized—at least for a noteworthy minority of cases.

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