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A General Narratology

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Yiheng Zhao

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Springer

Yiheng Zhao
College of Literature and Journalism
Sichuan University
Chengdu, China

Translated by
Fang Xiaoli
College of Foreign Languages and Cultures
Sichuan University
Chengdu, China

Zhang Xu
College of Foreign Languages and Cultures
Sichuan University
Chengdu, China

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Preface: A Tentative Classification Scheme for a General Narratology

The objective of general narratology is to explore the general rules governing all narrative genres. This endeavor begins with categorizing these genres, aiming to identify patterns and rules across narratives. A comprehensive classification of narrative genres addresses two fundamental problems: Firstly, the ontological status of a narrative genre, examining its connection to our perception of reality. This necessitates a clear distinction between fictional and factual narratives. Secondly, understanding the formal aspects of different narratives, particularly those related to time and space, requires highlighting the distinctions between recorded and performative narratives. These complexities cannot be adequately addressed by examining a single genre in isolation; only through cross-genre analysis can their core differences be revealed.

This book proposes a classification scheme that spans two dimensions. The first dimension categorizes genres based on their ontological status, distinguishing between factual and fictional narratives. Genette's seminal essay on this distinction, though insightful, focused solely on written narratives.[1] Extending this distinction beyond written texts requires redefining the factual versus fictional dichotomy in broader and more abstract terms.

The second dimension of the classification scheme integrates the concepts of medium and time. This approach is grounded in the principle of "modality," as discussed by linguistic philosophers such as Émile Benveniste, John Searle, and others, where medium and time function in close cooperation. Marie-Laure Ryan, in *Narrative Across Media,* identified five narrative genres in non-written media, "Face-to-Face Narration, Still Pictures, Moving Pictures, Music, and Digital Media,"[2] but primarily listed rather than categorized them, without covering all narrative genres. Her subsequent essay proposes a more comprehensive classification of four narrative "modes":

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[1] Gerard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," *Poetics Today,* vol. 11, no. 4, 1990 pp. 755-774.

[2] Marie-Laure Ryan, ed., *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, pp. v-vi.

1. Diegetic mode: telling somebody that something happened, usually in the past, such as novels and oral storytelling.
2. Mimetic mode: enacting a story in the present by impersonating a character and mimicking action, such as dramas and movies.
3. Participatory mode: creating a story in real time by playing a role in the story world and selecting one's behavior, like children's games of make-believe, and theater with audience participation.
4. Simulative mode: creating a story in real time by designing (or using) an engine that will implement a sequence of events on the basis of its internal rules and the input to the system, like story-generating systems (i.e., *Brutus* by Selmer Bringsjord and David Ferucci).[3]

While Ryan's "transmedia" approach introduces an innovative framework, the current book aims to refine and expand upon her classification scheme. Three and a half of Ryan's categories align with what I define as "performative narratives," which seem to be her primary focus. However, there are other important genres, such as dreams and hallucinations in mental images, which fit into a para-performative category and deserve inclusion. Moreover, Ryan's model overlooks conative narratives—such as predictions, divinations, and promises—and neglects picture narratives, which resemble recorded narratives like written texts. Additionally, her classification fails to address the crucial factual–fictional dichotomy that underpins all narratives.

As a result, Ryan's four modal types do not encompass the full spectrum of narrative forms. For instance, she includes oral storytelling as one of the modes, which is typically a performative genre. However, she does not distinctly separate it from written narratives. While both oral and written narratives use language as a medium, oral storytelling differs considerably from written texts in presentation. It is more appropriate to consider oral storytelling as a subgenre of theater, defined by characteristics such as improvisation, unpredictability, and audience participation. Treating oral storytelling as if it belongs in the same category as written narratives can lead to conceptual confusion.

The classification scheme presented in the present book, as illustrated in Fig. 1, is organized along two intersecting axes—vertical and horizontal. By crossing these axes, we generate approximately nine distinct categories, with each narrative genre falling into one, based on its factuality or fictionality and its particular combination of temporality and medium. To clarify the basis for these two axes: factual narratives are distinguished from fictional ones by the author's alignment with the narrator, which holds the author accountable for the text's factuality, i.e., its referential reality (though not necessarily its factual accuracy). In contrast, fictional narratives

[3] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narrative and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality," *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien* vol. 7, no. 1, 2005, p. 5. The essay was reprinted as "Beyond Ludus: Narrative, Videogames and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality," in Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska (eds.), *Videogame, Player, Text*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008.

Time	Media	Factual	Fictional
Past	**Recorded**: writing, speech, picture, sculpture	history, biography, journalism, diary, confession, legal speech, mural	novel, narrative poem, narrative lyric
Past-Present	**Recorded performative**: film and digital recording	documentary film, TV interview	feature film, recorded plays and other performances
Present	**Performative:** body, image, object, speech	live TV or radio broadcast, public speech	drama, competition, game, video game
Para-Present	**Para-Performative:** mental image, mental perception, mental speech	telepathy	dream, hallucination
Future	**Conative:** any medium	advertisement, promise, divination, prediction, oath	

Fig. 1 Basic classification of narrative genres

feature a surrogate narrator with a person–frame duality, who navigates between a narrative persona and a narrative frame. For example, Nabokov is not responsible for the factuality of *Lolita* (1955); that responsibility rests with the character Humbert. Similarly, when someone says, "Let me tell you a joke," he temporarily adopts a humorous persona, engaging with an audience split between reality and performance. In theater, the act of raising and lowering the curtain serves as a narrative frame, segregating the fictional world from reality. Thus, in fictional narratives, the creator avoids accountability for factuality, whereas in factual narratives, there is no such intermediary, and the text is directly referential.

The development of the medium–temporality axis in our classification scheme is informed by the concepts of modality and force, as articulated by semioticians such as Roman Jakobson and Emile Benveniste, along with key contributions from philosophers like Gottlob Frege and John R. Searle. These ideas culminate in what is known as the Frege–Searle hypothesis. Benveniste introduced the idea that language encompasses three discursive modes: "the declarative, the interrogative and the

imperative."[4] Catherine Belsey applied these modes to stylistics, identifying three types of literary narratives: classic realism (declarative), avant-garde literature (interrogative), and propaganda (imperative).[5] Analysts of advertising noted that imperative texts tend to project a future orientation.[6] Uri Margolin, in his compelling essay on narrative, explored the potential application of Searle's modality theory to various narrative texts. While Margolin did not offer a formal classification, he examined the interaction between medium and temporality, drawing parallels between Live TV and the present progressive tense.[7] Building on these insights, we propose a classification that incorporates the tense of past-present-future, sorting narratives into categories that encapsulate recorded, performative, and conative elements.

It is important to note that this classification extends beyond narrative genres alone. It is equally applicable to propositions or sentences, making it relevant to both narratology and discourse analysis. However, a challenge arises because most texts blend different sentence types. For instance, historiographies may contain fictional elements, and novels may include factual statements. Similarly, written content can appear within performative narratives, such as scoreboards in football games, or vice versa.

To classify a genre, one must consider cultural conventions and what Roman Jakobson termed the "dominant" within a genre.[8] For instance, while a novel may include various sentence types—narrative, commentary, or descriptive—it is classified as a narrative if the narrative element dominates. Advertisements, typically categorized as conative genres (a subset of factual genres, as they promote tangible products) often contain fictional elements.

In many genres, narrative elements are present but not dominant. For instance, songs and instrumental music may incorporate narrative elements, but they are not classified as narrative genres within our framework. This does not imply that individual narrative texts from these genres cannot fit within this classification scheme. As Marie-Laure Ryan correctly observed, "the set of all narratives is a fuzzy set."[9] The decision to exclude these "mixed genres" from our classification is made to

[4] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gable: University of Miami Press, 1971, p. 110.

[5] Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (2nd Edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 75.

[6] Hanna-Kaisa D., et al., "Addressing the Consumer in Standardized Advertisements: Linguistic Cues in French and Finnish Technology Products," *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, no. 12, 2006, p. 4.

[7] Uri Margolin, "Of What Is Past, Is Passing, or to Come: Temporality, Aspectuality, Modality and the Nature of Literary Narrative," in David Herman, ed., *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999.

[8] Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant," in Ladislav Matejka & Krystyna Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT University Press, 1971, pp. 82-87.

[9] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Introduction," in Marie-Laure Ryan, ed., *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, p. 15.

maintain clarity and to prevent the boundaries of our study area from becoming obscured.

Turning to the organization of this book, I wish to provide some historical context. In the 1980s, during my time as a student at the University of California, Berkeley, I compiled a series of notes on narratology. These notes were later published in 1994 under the title *When the Teller Is Told: An Introduction to Comparative Narratology*. Initially published by China Renmin University Press and reprinted in 2013 by Sichuan Education Press, this work primarily focused on the novel as the central genre. In contrast, this current book shifts its focus to explore narrative genres beyond the novel, with the goal of uncovering universal principles governing narrative structures. Although occasional references to novels appear throughout the book (e.g., *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1791), a quintessential classic), it deliberately avoids reiterating topics already extensively discussed in *When the Teller Is Told*.[10] However, a foundational understanding of fictional narratives is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of a general narratology. Consequently, this book includes succinct references to key issues related to fictional narratives, facilitating cross-referencing and offering a more rounded perspective where necessary.

Chengdu, China Yiheng Zhao

[10] Zhao Yiheng, *When the Teller Is Told*, Chengdu: Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2013.

Introduction

The Necessity of a General Narratology

Narrative serves as a fundamental method through which humans organize their existential and sociocultural experiences. Faced with the overwhelming complexity of empirical data, humans rely on two primary approaches: abstracting into statements or narrativizing by constructing a plot that links events. Without these modes, experiences would remain fragmented, rendering them unsuitable for memory, communication, or understanding, thereby plunging our existence into chaos and absurdity.

I concur with the view that the basic human needs for survival, ranked in order of importance, are "nourishment, a need to tell and hear stories, love, and shelter."[1] While individuals may endure without the latter two for extended periods, human society cannot persist without communication, and that communication inevitably takes the form of either a statement or a narrative.

Many scholars acknowledge narrative as a fundamental mode of human cognition. Human communities—whether tribes, races, or nations—require a shared belief system, rooted in a common story. This shared narrative underpins human cultures at large. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that human existence is an ongoing narrative: "A man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story."[2] Political philosopher Richard Rorty

[1] Reynolds Price, *A Palpable God: Thirty Stories Translated from the Bible with an Essay on the Origins and Life of Narrative*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985, p. 3.

[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007, p. 36.

proposed a distinction between "analytical philosophy" and "narrative philosophy,"[3] a division further explored by several philosophers.[4]

Nevertheless, not all scholars embrace the view that narrative is central to human knowledge. Despite the so-called Narrative Turn, some remain skeptical about whether their subjects are inherently narrative in nature. To assess whether narrative is deeply embedded in human nature, three methods are often proposed. The first is evolutionary history, which reveals that language evolved as the primary sign system of humans, from nonverbal communication in *Homo habilis* millions of years ago to the speech of *Homo sapiens* two to three hundreds of thousands of years ago. Language, as a defining characteristic of humanity, finds its highest expression in storytelling.

The second method involves observing infant development, which is considered a condensed recapitulation of human evolutionary processes. Recent studies suggest that even before acquiring language, infants communicate through gestures and sounds with their caregivers. "The infant, very early on, has the capacities to schematize interactive events in a primitive form of narrative-like mode of thought and perception," which can be termed "a protonarrative envelope."[5] The third method involves examining dreams and hallucinations, which often manifest as narratives. David Bordwell notes, "We often experience our dreams like little narratives. Narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world."[6]

From these perspectives, it becomes evident that narrative is not only an intrinsic feature of human nature but also a foundational mode of existence. Humans are not merely "*animal symbolicum*,"[7] as Ernst Cassirer suggested, but also narrating beings. We depend on storytelling for survival, utilizing a variety of signs—language, facial expressions, gestures, objects, images, and mental imagery. Thus, the study of general narratology encompasses the laws governing narratives across all these diverse sign systems.

To date, a general narratology that encompasses all forms of narrative remains unrealized. Roland Barthes's oft-quoted statement highlights the ubiquity of narrative: "Narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings, stained-glass windows, movies, local news, and conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present

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[3] Richard Rorty, *Analytic Philosophy and Narrative Philosophy*, University of California, Irvine Libraries. Special Collections and Archives. Critical Theory Archive. Irvine, California, 2003.

[4] Tom Sorell and G. A. J. Rogers, eds., *Analytic Philosophy and History Philosophy,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

[5] Daniel N. Stern, *The Motherhood Constellation: A Unified View of Parent-Infant Psychotherapy,* London: Karnac Books, 1998, p. 93.

[6] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (8th Edition), Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008, p. 74.

[7] Ernst Cassirer. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954, p. 44.

at all times, in all places, in all societies."[8] Despite the expansive range of examples listed, Barthes himself acknowledged that his focus was primarily on art and literature, inadvertently omitting many other forms of narrative.

Gerard Genette, in turn, critiqued Barthes for this limitation, noting that Barthes's work scarcely ventured beyond the novel and overlooked factual narratives such as history, biography, diaries, news reports, legal speeches, and even gossip.[9] Genette argued that the term "narratology" itself is a misnomer, as it "ought by rights to concern itself with stories of all kinds, fictional and otherwise. It is evident, however, that the two branches of narratology have until now devoted their attention almost exclusively to the behavior and objects of fictional narrative alone."[10]

In Western languages, the term "fiction" serves a dual purpose: referring both to "an invented statement or narrative" and "a literary genre that describes imaginary events." Traditional narratology generally addresses only the latter. Genette recognized that nonverbal forms of fiction, such as drama and cinema, have often been excluded from narratological studies.[11] He attempted to bridge this gap in his essay "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," comparing these two broad categories of narrative. However, his approach mainly scrutinized factual narratives through the lens of fictional narrative standards. With the rise of post-classical narratology, scholars have made concerted efforts to expand the field. The 2003 Hamburg Conference on "Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism" presented several noteworthy papers, but as Prof. Jan Christoph Meister pointed out in the preface to the conference proceedings, the event did not significantly transcend the confines of literary narratology.[12] Similarly, Prof. Wolf Schmid, in his conclusion to *Narratology: An Introduction*, admitted that "an independent development of categories hardly exists outside literary study… The mother discipline of narratology is still literary study."[13]

Semiotics and Narratology

A sign is a perception that is understood to convey meaning. Semionarratology, as the term suggests, is the study of all texts comprised of signs, thus a general narratology. This concept is not novel, as scholars have been grappling with it for some time. The present book does not propose an entirely new direction within

[8] Roland Barthes and Lionel Duisit, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no.2, 1975, p. 237.

[9] Gerard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," *Poetics Today,* vol. 11, no. 4, 1990, p 755.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Jan Christoph Meister, *Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality and Disciplinarity*, Berlin and New York: de Guyter, 2005, p. 5.

[13] Wolf Schmid, *Narratology: An Introduction*, trans., Alexander Starritt, Berlin & New York: de Gryuter, 2010, p. 216.

narratological scholarship, but rather addresses what previous efforts have yet to achieve. Among the early contributors, A.J. Greimas made significant strides with his *Narrative Semiotics and Cognitive Discourses*, published in English in 1990.[14] Paul Ricoeur, in the second volume of his influential work *Time and Narrative,* dedicated a chapter to Propp, Bremond, and Greimas, titled "The Semiotic Constraints on Narrativity."[15] Seymour Chatman, in the introduction to *Story and Discourse,* posed the question, "Is Narrative a Semiotic Structure?" and answered affirmatively.[16] Jonathan Culler also explicitly stated that "the analysis of narrative is an important branch of semiotics."[17] Despite repeated calls by scholars over the years, the discipline of semionarratology has yet to fully materialize.

Meanwhile, the narratological community has long recognized this issue. As early as the 1970s, Mieke Bal distinguished between two types of narratology: general narratology and "literary narratology," with the former being a subset of textology.[18] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan concurred but suggested that general narratology is more accurately a part of semiotics.[19] While narratology is undoubtedly an independent field, these scholars have expressed "the need of more theory, beyond narratology,"[20] yet their focus remained predominantly on literary narratives.

More recently, various scholars have proposed innovative frameworks for a general narratology. Marie-Laure Ryan, for example, introduced the concept of transmedial narratology.[21] Similarly, the debate among European narratologists regarding "natural and unnatural" narratives has expanded from literary to non-literary forms, probing the very essence of narrative.[22] Chinese scholars have made significant contributions to the study of non-literary narratives. For example, Fu Xiuyan and his team at Jiangxi Normal University have examined narratives in nontraditional subjects such as inscriptions on bronze vessels, stone chastity arches, ancient

[14] A. J. Greimas, *Narrative Semiotics and Cognitive Discourses*, trans., Paul Perron and Frank H. Collins, London: Pinter Publishers, 1990.

[15] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* Volume 2, trans., Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 29.

[16] Chatman, Seymour, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film,* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978, p.22.

[17] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001, p. 207.

[18] Mieke Bal, *Narratologie. Essais sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans modernes*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1977, p.13.

[19] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2nd Edition). London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 142.

[20] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2nd Edition), Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1997, p. x.

[21] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story,* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 4.

[22] Monika Fludernik, *Toward a 'Natural' Narratology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996; Jan Alber and Rüdiger Heinze, eds., *Unnatural Narratives-Unnatural Narratology.* Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2011.

divinations, and tea ceremonies.[23] Pioneering research by Zhang Shijun on narrative in Chinese architecture, by Qiao Guoqiang on literary history, and by Long Diyong on dream narratives represents exemplary achievements in this area.

Globally, whether in China or elsewhere, a general narratology is gradually taking shape. The lack of a unified effort may, in fact, be beneficial, as it allows this emerging discipline to evolve without being restricted by a singular framework. The purpose of this book is to contribute to the development of a general semionarratology. This approach does not reject classical literary narratology; rather, it seeks to deepen and refine our understanding of traditional narrative forms, such as novels and films, while offering new perspectives on more traditionally "marginal" subjects such as news, advertisements, games, sports, and law.

The Definition of Narrative

Over the past two decades, the so-called Narrative Turn has emerged across various branches of the human sciences, including psychology, legal practice, political campaigns, and even computer game design. This shift, which has the potential to revolutionize narratology, seems to have left the field perplexed about how to adapt to these new developments. Born from the analysis of novels over a century ago, narratology must now evolve to accommodate this expanding landscape.

However, not all contemporary narratologists, whether identifying themselves as "post-classical," "pluralistic," or simply "new," are eager to embrace the Narrative Turn. In his "Introduction" to *Narratologies*, David Herman suggests a narratological study extending beyond literary narrative may not require redefining fundamental concepts or unearthing new intellectual foundations. Rather, it aims to demonstrate how post-classical narratology draws intellectual sustenance and enrichment from adjacent disciplines.[24]

Contrary to this, my proposal aims to establish a narratological framework that encompasses all types of narrative, while still prioritizing the novel and cinema, given their complexity. This expansion of narratology mirrors the earlier shift from linguistics to semiotics in the works of figures like Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Such a shift necessitates grounding narratology in a broader, more inclusive foundation.

A critical task in this evolution is redefining the concept of "narrative" to encompass all forms of narrative. This requires moving beyond the long-standing notion of narratives as inherently "retrospective." James Phelan, a leading figure in New Narratology, views narratology and futurology as opposites, asserting "the default

[23] Cf. Fu Xiuyan, ed., *Narrative Series*, 1-3 Issues, Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2008, 2009, 2010.

[24] David Herman, *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999.

tense for narrative is the past."[25] Similarly, Porter Abbott also argues that an event occurring before its narration is "a defining condition of narrative."[26] This retrospective view, rooted in Aristotle's distinctions between diegesis (as in epics) and mimesis (as in tragedies), has led to drama's exclusion from the category of narrative.

Thus, although drama undeniably tells a story, it is not traditionally classified as narrative. This distinction remains vital, as Gerald Prince, summarizing twentieth-century narratological studies, defined narrative as "the representation of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two, or several narrators to one, two, or several narratees."[27] According to Prince, "Narrative is essentially a mode of verbal presentation and involves the linguistic recounting or telling of events rather than, say, their performance or enactment on stage."[28] However, the Narrative Turn forces us to reconsider this definition in light of forms like action art or live TV news, where the event seems to unfold in real time. Therefore, a new definition of narrative is needed—one that accommodates all forms of narrative in contemporary culture.

I propose the following definition: a narrative involves a narrating subject who places at least one event, involving at least one character, into a text, such that another subject (or the same subject) interprets it as having temporality and significance. This definition encapsulates eight elements across two narratizing processes: 1. A subject (usually the narrator) places an event (or events) in a text, which may involve one or more characters. 2. The text can be interpreted by the receiving subject (the narratee —typically someone other than the narrator, though it could be the narrator him/herself) as having temporality and significance.

In essence, a narrative is a collaborative process that involves two subjects: the first creates the narrative plot, and the second interprets it. This framework allows us to classify a text as either a statement (if it does not adhere to this definition) or a narrative (if it does). The inclusion of a character—whether human or anthropomorphic—is essential, as this ensures that the event relates to human action. Without such a character, reports of changes (such as weather changes or chemical reactions) might mistakenly be classified as narratives. Narratives with human or anthropomorphic characters typically carry ethical implications, which is not usually the case in reports of nonhuman situation changes.

Time, or the temporal dimension, is a pivotal element in defining a narrative. Our revised definition deliberately omits the element of "recounting" found in Prince's definition. While narratives must unfold within a temporal framework, this time need not be restricted to the past. Events unfolding in real time, such as performances or hallucinations, as well as future-oriented predictions or promises, all

[25] James Phelan, "Rhetorical Aesthetics and Other Issues in the Study of Literary Narrative," *Narrative Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 85.

[26] H. Porter Abbott, "The Future of All Narrative Futures," in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds., *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p.535.

[27] Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition), Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, p. 58.

[28] Ibid.

qualify as narratives. This broader interpretation of narrative allows for the inclusion of a wider range of forms that warrant further narratological investigation. However, there are still aspects of this definition that require additional refinement.

Is Character Essential in a Narrative?

The "character" plays a crucial role in plot development, but its definition remains complex and subject to debate. In narratives, characters are not confined to human beings; they can also encompass anthropomorphic animals and even objects, as seen in genres like fairy tales or advertising. For example, an animal might undergo changes in a text, but unless it exhibits human-like qualities or subjective experiences, its status as a "character" and the text's status as a narrative can be called into question. A text that involves an animal lacking the emotional or ethical attributes typical of a "character" cannot be considered a narrative, even if it experiences events, such as those described in a biological report. To be classified as a narrative, a character must be a "spiritual being," one whose experiences possess ethical dimensions. For instance, a cow's maternal affection for its calf, demonstrated through actions such as licking, can be regarded as a narrative, as the animal is imbued with human-like emotions.

Similarly, in advertising, when toothpaste is anthropomorphized with a will or purpose—such as changing its ingredients to protect human teeth—it becomes a "character," thus rendering the advertisement a narrative. In contrast, simply stating that toothpaste contains a new active ingredient is merely a statement, not a narrative. Likewise, a report on the decline of polar bears due to ecological changes remains a scientific account. However, if the bears are anthropomorphized to experience grief because of the environmental changes, the report becomes a narrative.

The role of characters in defining a narrative remains a contentious issue in narratology. Several scholars advocate for the concept of a "minimal narrative" that does not necessarily require characters. Linguist William Labov, for instance, describes a minimal narrative as a temporally related sequence of two phrases, emphasizing the importance of having at least "a single temporal juncture"[29] in a narrative. Philosopher Arthur Danto defines a narrative event as consisting of the following structure:

x is F at t-1.
H happens to x at t-2.
x is G at t-3.[30]

[29] William Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972, p 361.

[30] Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965, p 236.

Neither Labov's nor Danto's definitions require characters as "spiritual beings," and under these frameworks, narratives are clearly present in scientific fields, such as laboratory reports. According to Gerald Prince, a "minimal story" should be "a narrative recounting only two states and one event such that (1) one state precedes the event in time, and the event precedes the other state in time (and causes it); (2) the second state constitutes the inverse (or the modification, including the "zero" modification) of the first."[31] However, his example—"John was happy, then he saw Peter, then, as a result, he was unhappy"—involves characters.[32] Some other scholars argue that events involving animals should also be regarded as narratives. Arthur Berg, for instance, suggests that, "A narrative is, a story, and stories tell about things that have happened or are happening to people, animals, aliens from outer space, insects – whatever."[33] If this is the case, why should narratives be restricted to characters resembling humans or animals? Why not include lower organisms or nonliving things?

I firmly maintain that characters—whether human or anthropomorphized—are essential for narratives. Without characters, it becomes difficult to distinguish narratives from mere statements. If we were to classify all texts that describe changes —such as laboratory reports, descriptions of physiological reactions, mechanical explanations, chemical formulas, meteorological observations, or even cosmic and biological evolution—as narratives, the discipline of narratology would lose its core focus. This would undermine our ability to address crucial questions about the nature of narrative. Canadian scholar Uri Margolin supports this view, asserting the character as a primary and necessary component in constructing a narrative world. He explains that "'character' is a general semiotic element, independent of any particular verbal expression and ontologically different from it."[34]

However, some scholars take an alternative view, arguing that narratives require not only characters but that these characters must engage in more complex actions. Definitions of an "involved character" vary considerably, ranging from no character at all to a "living character," an "actantial character," or an "intentional character." My position adopts a middle ground, asserting that the presence of characters is a fundamental requirement for a narrative, but that these characters need not engage in highly specific activities in particular ways. For instance, even if a person is injured by a rock, the text that describes this event should be considered a narrative, regardless of whether the person enters into a situation, as defined by Greimas,

[31] Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition), Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, p. 53.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Arthur Asa Berger, *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life*, London: Sage Publications, 1997, p. 4.

[34] Uri Margolin, "Characterisation in Narrative: Some Theoretical Prolegomena," *Neophilologus*, vol. 67, 1983, p. 7.

whereby he/she "causes it to happen"[35] or acts with a particular intention as suggested by Van Dijk.[36]

Most of the scholars who argue that narratives do not require characters are philosophers and logicians. Although this debate has not been extensively explored within narratological circles, I am convinced that characters are indispensable in any narrative. The presence of characters fundamentally influences the nature of a text and determines its plot. Once a plot involves characters, it acquires a subjective dimension, rendering the narrative a "weakly coded text" infused with the unpredictability of human consciousness and imbued with a humanistic quality. Characters introduce cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions into the narrative, allowing audiences to interpret the subjective actions of these characters. In Part II, Chap. 2, we will explore "humanistic quality" as a key reason for the feasibility and necessity of "secondary narrativization." In contrast, scientific descriptions of change are governed by natural laws (e.g., water freezes at zero degrees) and reports of natural events must adhere to verifiable observations (e.g., a volcanic eruption). Such accounts do not allow for variation in secondary narrativization and must be understood in a singular, objective manner.

An event alone does not form a plot unless it involves characters. Without their involvement, a description of the event is not a narrative but simply a statement of fact. For example, "Voesuvius erupted in 79 A.D." is a statement about a historical event, but "Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D., and almost no one in the city was spared" is a narrative, as it connects the event with humanistic and social implications. The issue of human or human-like subjects or characters in narratives is not only central to the nature of narrative consciousness but also influences how narratives are received and understood. Phenomenology focuses on the subject's act of consciousness, highlighting the "noetico-noematic" relationship. This concept was further expanded by Ricoeur, who applied it to the connection between narration and the narrated. At the beginning of his three-volume work, Ricoeur asserts that consciousness of time and the time of consciousness are intrinsically connected: "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience."[37] Thus, the way narrative reproduces time intentionally, transforming it into "human time," becomes a key philosophical theme, as will be explored throughout this book.

[35] Therese Budniakiewic, *Fundamentals of Story Logic: Introducing Greimassian Semiotics*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1992, p. 43.

[36] Teun A. van Dijk, "Narrative Macrostructures: Cognitive and Logical Foundations," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature*, vol. 1, 1976, p. 500.

[37] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* Vol. I, trans., Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 3.

The "Narrative Turn": Narrative as a Ubiquitous Subject in Humanities

Narratology, originating in the early twentieth century, has predominantly focused on the study of the novel for over a century. While it was acknowledged that narratives were central to various fields such as history, journalism, and film, these narratives were often considered "natural" and not in urgent need of narratological analysis. However, this perspective has undergone a significant shift in recent years.

Over the past two decades, a "Narrative Turn" has taken place across a wide range of humanities and social science disciplines. The recognition of narrativity in diverse social activities—such as law, politics, education, entertainment, games, and psychotherapy—has grown considerably. Despite this, narratology has remained primarily focused on the novel as its central genre. Although comparative narratological studies have been conducted between fiction and other genres, such as film, television, and history, the ongoing emphasis on the novel has made it difficult to establish a unified theoretical framework for analyzing various forms of narrative.

The first deliberate efforts to "narrativize" a discipline were seen in areas inherently narrative in nature, such as journalism and history. The advent of "new journalism," exemplified by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), blurred the lines between fiction and journalism, creating new hybrid genres. The true Narrative Turn in historiography, however, occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, notably with Hayden White's *Metahistory*[38], which is credited with initiating the "New Historicism" movement and transforming historiography through the lens of narrative or narrativization. Scholars like Mink, Greenblatt, and Danto furthered this shift, particularly with Mink's *Historical Understanding*[39], summarizing the key elements of the Narrative Turn in historiography. This influence quickly extended beyond historiography to the broader humanities.

The second key area where the Narrative Turn emerged was in sociology and psychology. In 1987, Jerome Bruner published two seminal works—"Life as Narrative"[40] and "The Narrative Construction of Reality"[41]—in which he proposed the critical idea that "there can be no self without narrative."[42] Sociologist Ken Plummer's *Documents of Life*[43] pioneered a new approach to sociological research, focusing on the narrative modes of life stories. The Narrative Turn also had a

[38] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe,* Baltimore: Johns Jopkins University Press, 1973.

[39] Louis O. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

[40] Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research*, 1987, vol. 54, pp. 11-32.

[41] Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Enquiry,* 1991, vol. 18, no.1, pp. 1-21.

[42] David Olson has provided an excellent summary of Bruner's contributions: David Olson, *Jerome Bruner: The Cognitive Revolution in Education Theory*, London: Continuum, 2007.

[43] Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983.

profound impact on the fields of social surveys and aid, especially regarding the narratives of suffering and illness, where self-construction became central to the process of aid. The Narrative Turn has since spread into highly specialized fields, including sports and tourism.[44]

In political science, the Narrative Turn transformed political strategies from complex tactics deployed by political elites to more methodical, operational approaches. John Horton's *Literature and the Political Imagination* treats literary narrative as a model for political analysis.[45] The Narrative Turn has even influenced jurisprudence, in what might be considered an unexpected development, since law has traditionally relied on the application of facts in sentencing. Peter Brooks' *Troubling Confessions* compares courtroom narratives of crime to literary narratives.[46] The Narrative Turn's influence has even reached the field of medicine, where storytelling has been shown to have therapeutic effects.[47] Perhaps the most striking testament to the success of the Narrative Turn is its entry into the natural sciences. The celebrated literary critic Geoffrey Hartman's essay, "Narrative and Beyond," published in *Literature and Medicine*, exemplifies this development.[48]

Another noteworthy development of the Narrative Turn is its effect on artificial intelligence. Researchers are now programming computers to replicate the storytelling abilities of the human brain, leading to the emergence of a new field known as "Narrative Intelligence."[49] This evolution underscores the increasingly widespread and significant role that narrative plays across various disciplines.

Some scholars have even observed a Narrative Turn within fiction itself, marked by a renewed focus on plot. This shift mirrors the earlier process of "novelization" in journalism and history, bringing traditional narrative elements back into contemporary literary forms. The "Nouvelle Vague" movement in French literature, known for its departure from conventional plot structures, has seen a reversal in recent years, with a resurgence of narrative structures and plot-driven storytelling. In France, this trend is exemplified by the works of Tournier, celebrated for his reinterpretation of classic legends. In the English-speaking world, authors like Philip Roth and Don DeLillo in the United States and Ian McEwan in England have gained recognition for their mastery of storytelling. Fiction research, too, has shifted its attention from avant-garde writers such as Borges, Calvino, and Robbe-Grillet to traditional "good storytellers" such as Dickens, Balzac, and Henry James, as well as popular genre fiction, including detective and adventure novels.

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[44] Brett Smith, "The Potential of Narrative Research in Sports Tourism," *Journal of Sport and Tourism*, vol. 12, 2007, pp. 249-269.

[45] John Horton, ed., *Literature and the Political Imagination*, London: Routledge, 1996.

[46] Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

[47] Dan McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live by*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; *The Person: A New Introduction to Personality Psychology*, New York: Wiley, 2006; *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, New York: APA Books, 2006.

[48] Geoffrey Hartman, "Narrative and Beyond," *Literature and Medicine*, 2004, pp. 334-345.

[49] Michael Mateas and Pjoebe Sengers, eds., *Narrative Intelligence,* New York: John Jameson, 2003.

This trend is even more apparent in the film industry. During the 1950s and 1960s, directors such as Bergman (*Wild Strawberries,* 1957), René (*Hiroshima, My Love,* 1959), Godard (*Breathless,* 1960), and Fellini (*8½,* 1963) challenged traditional narrative structures, producing films that became canonical only for those who studied film history. Today, French cinema celebrates directors like Luc Besson, whose works like *Léon: The Professional* (1994) have been compared to those of Steven Spielberg for their narrative-driven approach to filmmaking.

Similarly, China, like the rest of the world, has experienced extensive narrativization of culture. From the renewed interest in Chinese classical texts to the rise of tourism, cultural monuments, the Olympics, consumer branding, and even concerns about food safety, narratives have become a central tool for engaging with and understanding these domains. This significant Narrative Turn in Chinese culture, although not always explicitly acknowledged, highlights the growing importance of narratives in the modernization and cultural studies of China. Understanding the characteristics of narrative texts has thus become a crucial aspect of contemporary cultural studies.

The Ethical Turn and the Narrative Turn

The "Ethical Turn"[50] is considered a significant development in recent critical theory. How, then, does it relate to the "Narrative Turn"? At first glance, the two may seem to diverge: the Narrative Turn appears to focus on textual form, while the Ethical Turn addresses content and ideology. However, these two movements are essentially interconnected. As Frank McConnell observes:

> You are the hero of your own life-story. The kind of story you want to tell yourself about yourself has a lot to do with the kind of person you are, and can become. You can listen to (or read in books or watch in films) stories about other people. But that is only because you know, at some basic level, that you are – or could be – the hero of those stories too.[51]

Narrativization plays a crucial role in highlighting ethical concerns, not simply by constructing plots, but by serving ethical ends. Many scholars argue that narratives imbue human experience with ethical meaning; the primary function of narrative is to generate meaning, particularly moral meaning. This intersection of narrative and ethics is exemplified in Adam Zachary Newton's influential *Narrative Ethics*,[52] which explores the possible integration of both turns. Phelan, in his essay "The

[50] In recent years, there have been various other "Turns": the "Ethical Turn" in semiotics, the "Pragmatic Turn" and the "Discursive Turn" in psychology, and the "interpretative turn" in jurisprudence. These are all related to the Narrative Turn.

[51] Frank McConnell, *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 3.

[52] Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, London: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Ethical Turn and the Ethics of Rhetorical Narrative,"[53] suggests that these movements are not distinct but part of the same broader trend, emphasizing that readers' ethical judgment is an integral part of the reading process, which I term the reader's "narrativization."

The connection between the Narrative Turn and ethical considerations suggests that disciplines which have embraced the Narrative Turn, such as psychology and history, are inherently engaged in a quest for "truth" that is deeply intertwined with ethical concerns. The traditional idea of "truth" as something objective and independent is now outdated, but fields like psychology and history still demand a sense of "validity" in their investigations. Thus, "truthfulness" becomes a matter of "story credibility," and narrative provides the means to understand how experiences are "meaningfully connected."

Narrative's ethical dimension arises precisely because it cannot present empirical facts "as they are." In constructing a story, the subject's consciousness selects and reorganizes life's chaotic details. These seemingly disjointed events need to be "narrativized"—that is, to be made coherent, meaningful, and purposeful. Narrativization, then, allows for the establishment of a causal-temporal order, which is essential to understanding the relationship between the self and the world in a temporal dimension of experience. Narrative achieves what mere statements cannot: it provides the linguistic form to construct human "temporal being" and "purposive being." The plot connects various elements of an event to produce moral meaning. In this way, narrative does not extract meaning from its spatial-temporal context; instead, the unique connection between humans and the world emerges through the lived experience of the story.[54]

The Narrative Turn is thus closely tied to the "Linguistic Turn" that began in the early twentieth century. "One way to map the history of narratology is therefore to see it as adopting linguistic paradigms one by one as they arose in the twentieth century – structuralism (classical narratology), generativist linguistics (text grammars), semantics and pragmatics (speech act theory, politeness issues, etc.), text linguistics (conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis), and now cognitive linguistics (cognitivist narratology)."[55] This progression suggests that the Narrative Turn represents the contemporary phase of the Linguistic Turn. It reflects how the core values intrinsic to humanistic thought have evolved, merging the Linguistic Turn into a novel synthesis of the Narrative Turn and the Ethical Turn. By doing so, the Narrative Turn not only continues but also expands the linguistic frameworks of previous eras, incorporating ethical and moral considerations as essential elements in understanding how humans communicate and interpret their world.

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[53] Tang Weisheng, "The Ethical Turn and Rhetorical Narrative Ethics," *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2007, no. 3, pp. 9-18.

[54] Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1995, pp. 5-23.

[55] Monika Fludernik, "Histories of Narrative Theory (II): From Structuralism to the Present," in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds., *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p.48.

Contents

Part I
The Classification of Narratives

Chapter 1
Textual Intentionality

1.1 Textual Intentionality as a Classifying Principle

The "Introduction" section of this book delineates the concept of minimal narrative, engaging in a detailed comparative analysis with the definitions posited by other scholars in the field of narratology. Building upon this defined foundation, the book aims to construct a comprehensive taxonomy of the various narrative genres that pervade human culture. This classification primarily pivots on the textual quality known as "modality" in semiotics, "force" in the philosophy of language, and is referred to as "textual intentionality" within the scope of this work. Before embarking on an exploration of this classification scheme, it is essential to present a historical overview of the ongoing discussions surrounding this pertinent issue.

The academic history of intentionality shows the gradual evolution of this vital concept. It was originally seen as a psychological activity, then understood as a presentation of pure consciousness, then a mode to form meaning in the world, and eventually an interpretive way to construct cultural communities.

The concept of intentionality was originally introduced by the German philosopher Brentano in the nineteenth century as an object-oriented psychological activity.[1] Husserl, a disciple of Brentano, acknowledged intentionality as the fundamental cornerstone of phenomenology. While concurring with Brentano's characterization of intention as directive, Husserl critically scrutinized its psychological underpinnings. For Husserl, simply put, intentionality is meaningful, because it is expressed as an abstract connotation structure of consciousness.

As for the aforementioned "textual intentionality", how can a text—a non-subject—have intentions? A readily inferred explanation suggests that the creative

[1] Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, trans., Antos C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and Linda L. McAlister, London and New York: Routledge, 2009.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_1

subject's intention can be discerned from the text. However, the reality is that textual intentionality surpasses the influence of any individual subject. This implies that it extends beyond the realm of an artist, such as a writer or a painter, and is, more significantly, ingrained in the social category imparted to the text by the demonstrator, thereby emerging as a product of social and historical subjectivity. The combination of assorted elements serves to verify that texts embody the intentionality of cultural history.

With the exception of performances wherein some creators directly engage with receivers, the typical interpretative process for most literary or artistic texts lacks direct interaction between these two groups. Instead, receivers or interpreters engage directly with the texts and are influenced by textual intentionality. The concept of "textual intentionality" has not yet been systematically addressed, although numerous scholars, particularly those in analytic philosophy, have delved into discussions rooted in analogous concepts. While intentionality, as many have believed, is primarily a concern for phenomenologists, it is, in reality, semioticians who have displayed the utmost preoccupation with the intentionality present in texts, thereby substantiating the arguments presented in this book.

The semiotician Eco, for example, put forward the idea of the "text's intention"[2], believing that an intention must be presented in texts to be interpreted. Kaye Mitchell called this the "intentionality of form": some intentionality carried in the textual form.[3] Important in this context is the 1943 paper of Mukarovsky from the Prague School, "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art", and Searle's 1983 classic work in the philosophy of language, simply titled *Intentionality*.

Mukarovsky classifies various elements of a text into "Intentionality Elements" and "Nonintentionality Elements".[4] The former pertains to the elements within a text that originate from the "writer's intentionality". Nevertheless, the signs crafted for literature and art diverge from those designed for utility (i.e. "signs for communication"), as their purpose is not merely to effectively convey a specific meaning. In artworks, what holds paramount importance is thus the unified significance composed by both the intentional and nonintentional elements. Mukarovsky further explains that the so-called "nonintentionality" is not intended by the author; rather, it denotes those parts of a text that are not parts of the creator's intentions. These elements pose interpretive challenges that necessitate supplementation by perceivers. In this regard, Mukarovsky echoes Ingarden's concept of "indeterminacy" from the perspective of semiotics. To make a text literary or artistic, one represents it as literature or art. For this reason, in phenomenology, textual intentionality, namely

[2] Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 64.

[3] Kaye Mitchell, *Intention and Text: Towards an Intentionality of Literary Form*, London: Continuum, 2008, p. x.

[4] Jan Mukařovský, "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art," *Structure, Sign, and Function*, 1978, pp. 89–128.

the creative and demonstrative intention embodied in symbolic texts, is more of a cultural characteristic than an individual intention.[5]

Although it seems abstract, textual intentionality is part of the concrete classification of texts into genres, so it is a vital part of the "textual metalanguage", which operates along with a kind of text-imposed cultural pressure on interpretation. Concerning the meaning of artistic texts, the textual intentionality outweighs the "artistic quality" of the textual form, for the classification of textual genre—a matter of cultural form—determines the textual meaning. Similarly, concerning the expression of textual intentionality, the form category matters more than the content.

In the history of modern thought, a wealth of material delves into the concept of intentionality, with particular emphasis on the role of textual intentionality in art, garnering attention from both phenomenology and analytic philosophy. However, a persistent challenge arises from the fact that each side in the discussion of intentionality employs exclusive terminology in articulating their positions, and there remains a paucity of discussion on genre classification from the perspective of textual intentionality. To bolster the arguments in this book, the ideas and terms from various schools of thought must be scrutinized.

1.2 Modality

Up until the 1970s, the predominant focus of semiotics lay in linguistic studies. Scholars commonly approached semiotic matters through the lens of linguistics during this period. The semiotic concept of "modality" finds its origins in the linguistic concept of mood.[6] The mood of syntax includes declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory forms; In the realm of discourse analysis, the study of mood encompasses different aspects of "propositions", such as credibility, desirability, validity, authenticity, necessity, purpose, obligation, etc.[7]

But how does the concept of mood relate to the narrative text? In 1958, Jakobson made a presentation at a linguistics seminar at Indiana University, putting forward his famous theory of the six basic functions of verbal communication.[8] Jacobson's "functional theory" is closely related to the syntactic concept of "mood":

> The imperative sentences cardinally differ from declarative sentences: the latter are and the former are not liable to a truth test. When in O'Neill's play *The Fountain*, Nano, "(in a fierce

[5] David Woodruff Smith and Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality: A Study of Mind, Meaning, and Language*, Dordrecht and Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1982, p. 78.

[6] F. R. Palmer, *Mood and Modality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

[7] According to Dolezel, there are four "narrative modal systems": the alethic, the deontic, the axiological, and the epistemic. "The deontic system formed by the concepts of permission, prohibition and obligation." Lubomir Dolezel, "Narrative Modalities", *Journal of Literary Semantics*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1976, pp. 6–7.

[8] Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language*, New York: The Technology Press of MIT and John Wiley & Sons, 1960, pp. 350–377.

> tone of command)", says "Drink!" – the imperative cannot be challenged by the question "is it true or not?" which may be, however, perfectly well asked after such sentences as "one drank", "one will drink", "one would drink". In contradistinction to the imperative sentences, the declarative sentences are convertible into interrogative sentences: "did one drink?" "will one drink?" "would one drink?"[9]

Jakobson extends the three modal sentences—declarative, interrogative, and imperative—into three dominant semiotic functions. He emphasizes the convertibility of declarative and interrogative sentences, while identifying imperative sentences as more distinctive. This aligns with the exploration of three types of narrative texts in this book. Recorded and performative narratives can often be convertible into each other (e.g. novels being often adapted into plays). In contrast, conative narratives (e.g. prophecies) are hardly convertible into recorded or performative narratives.

The categorization of modalities introduced by Benveniste in his renowned work, *Problems in General Linguistics*, is notably clear and succinct. According to Benveniste, the declarative, interrogative, and imperative moods of utterances are considered universal. He asserts:

> It is everywhere recognized that there are declarative statements, interrogative statements, and imperative statements, which are distinguished by specific features of syntax and grammar although they are based in identical fashion upon predication. Now these three modalities do nothing but reflect the three fundamental behaviors of man speaking and acting through discourse upon his interlocutor: he wishes to impart a piece of knowledge to him or to obtain some information from him or to give an order to him. These are the three interhuman functions of discourse that are imprinted in the three modalities of the sentence-unit, each one corresponding to an attitude of the speaker.[10]

Thus, modality, reflective of the speaker's attitude, is expressed through two ways: firstly, the conjugation of verbs, or the use of modal verbs, on the intra-textual grammatical level; secondly, extra-textual factors, such as the tone of voice or other contextual elements (e.g. praying, predicting, proclaiming, promising). Modality, therefore, is a general character of "omni-text". This character extends beyond the confines of the text and constitutes an intentional exchange between the speaker and the receiver: the speaker, through various means, signals the modality of the text conveyed, and the receiver is expected to interpret it in a corresponding manner.

This bilateral relationship of modal intentionality is made clearer in another article by Benveniste: "The speaker appropriates the formal apparatus of the language and sets out his/her position as speaker by specific indices on one hand, and by incidental methods on the other…. Any enunciation is, explicitly or implicitly, an allocution and it postulates an addressee".[11]

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[9] Ibid., p. 355.

[10] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gable: University of Miami Press, 1971, p. 110.

[11] Emile Benvesniste, "The Formal Apparatus of Enunciation", in Johannes Angermuller, Dominique Maingueneau, and Ruth Wodak, eds., *The Discourse Studies Reader: Main Currents in Theory and Analysis*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014, p. 143.

Modality actually serves as an "omni-textual" function (the concept of "omni-text" will be extensively examined in Part IV, encompassing the text and all associated "co-texts"). Benveniste's three modalities epitomize the most fundamental forms of intentionality. His modal categorization, thus, furnishes a foundational classifying framework for the ensuing discussion in this book.

Another significant contributor to modal theory is Greimas, and the influential "Paris School" that emerged under his influence. This school comprises Greimas's collaborators Joseph Courtes, Jacques Fontanille, his student Jean-Claude Coquet, and the Dutch discourse analyst Teun van Dijk, whose theoretical perspective closely aligns with the tenets of the school.[12]

Their basic idea posits that the text and the utterance share a fundamental structure, implying that the text can be perceived as the "macro-structure" of the utterance.[13] In Greimas's framework, the text is not solely a semantically coherent whole but also a hierarchy of modal values that "orients the syntactic trajectory as follows: wanting → knowing → being-able ⇒ doing".[14] This implies that the sender is not only required to be a "knowing subject" but also an "able subject", i.e. a subject "whose ability to accomplish performances comes from an initially learned knowing-how-to-do" or who is "able by nature".[15] The final link in the above modal series is the "doing", and thus the central question of modal theory is "performance".

Modality serves as a criterion for the categorization of propositions, but the intensity of modality varies greatly from one text to another. For this reason, Fontanille introduced the concept of "tension" to account for these variations in intensity. "The tensive model is a representation of the manner or process in which meaning emerges from the sensible, or sensory perception… the elementary tensive structure is set up in the perspective of continuing signification".[16] And "before any categorization can take place, awareness of a presence is felt. This presence reveals itself in terms of intensity and in terms of expanse and quantity".[17] In declarative-recorded narratives, tension is generally not pronounced, whereas in interrogative-performative narratives, it becomes notably strong. The tension is particularly intense in imperative-conative narratives.

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[12] For a discussion of the similarity of the theoretical positions of the Greimas and van Dijk, see Irmengard Rauch, *Semiotic Insights: The Data Do the Talking*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 97.

[13] Teun A. van Dijk, *Some Aspects of Text Grammars: A Study in Theoretical Linguistics and Poetics*, The Hague and Pairs: Mouton, 1972.

[14] Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Elements of a Narrative Grammar", in *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, trans., Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 80.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Bronwen Martin and Felizitas Ringham, *Key Terms in Semiotics*, New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 71. Or see Fontanille, Jacques and Zilberberg, Claude, *Tension et signification* (*Tension and Meaning*), Liege: Mardaga, 1998, p. 224.

[17] Ibid.

The modal theory, originating from the concept of mood, can pave the way for various narratological studies with distinct objectives. The analytical framework of fictional narratology outlined in Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* frequently references the concept of "mood": "'Distance' and 'perspective', thus provisionally designated and defined, are the two chief modalities of that regulation of narrative information that is mood".[18] The Chinese scholar Li Xianjie employs Genette's category of narrative "mood" to scrutinize rhetoric techniques of cinematography, encompassing elements such as shots and depth of field in films.[19] Their discussions are highly significant; however, this book focuses on "modality" that determines the genre of a text, and the "macro-structure" related to the criteria for categorizing genres, as previously mentioned, rather than delving into the "micro-structure" of narrative rhetoric.

1.3 Force

Analytic philosophy has a longer history of exploring issues related to textual intentionality compared to linguistics and semiotics. Despite being distinct academic traditions, their focus converges on a common theme: the inquiry into textual intentionality. In the realm of analytic philosophy, this concept is often denoted as "force".

The development of analytic philosophy has been exceptionally intricate, yet the question of force has consistently been one of the central concerns: from Frege, one of the earliest pioneers of analytic philosophy, to Searle, one of the contemporary masters in this field, this concept of force has been a recurring topic of discussion. This question is commonly referred to as the "Frege-Searle Hypothesis", alternatively known as the "Principle of Force Independence".

Frege, who first used the term force, proposed that a sentence comprises two essential parts: "The sense of a sentence, as given by a stipulation of its truth-conditions, and the force attached to it is fruitful for an account of the use of sentences".[20] Frege "thinks that a sentential interrogative expresses the same thought as the corresponding assertoric sentence, and differs from it only in the force attached to it".[21] This viewpoint closely aligns with Jakobson's, as previously mentioned, wherein force can manifest in various elements, with speech modes (declarative, interrogative, imperative) being the most evident. However, this matter

[18] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans., Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 162.

[19] Li Xianjie, "The Function of Mood in the Picture Composition in Film Narrative", *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 1995, no. 4, pp. 80–86.

[20] Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973, p. 359.

[21] Ibid., p. 308.

occupies only a minor portion within Frege's system, receiving relatively limited attention.

The most significant contribution to the concept of force came from the "ordinary language philosophy", particularly Austin's theory of speech acts. Austin introduced his "performative" theory in a series of lectures delivered at Harvard in 1955.[22] His successor Searle made substantial contributions to the theory of speech acts, developing it into a prominent school in contemporary philosophy of language.[23] Austin's trichotomy of speech acts aligns closely with the typology of "intentionality" examined in this book, albeit Austin focuses on the qualities of utterances, while this book delves into the qualities of narrative genres. Austin's three types of speech acts are: locutionary, perlocutionary, and illocutionary. "Locutionary acts are acts that are performed in order to communicate; Perlocutionary acts are the by-products of acts of communication; Illocutionary acts are speech acts that we accomplish by communicating our intent to accomplish them. An illocutionary act is the conventional force of an utterance."[24]

Austin's trichotomy essentially constitutes a classification of "sentential intentionality". He posits that the generation of speech acts is not contingent on syntax and semantics, asserting their independence even from the literal meaning of the sentence. Austin further contends that speech acts can be identified by distinctive markers, falling into two categories: those external to the utterance, such as tone, intonation, and gestures; and those internal to the utterance, such as verbs, adverbs, and conjunctions. Searle extends this idea, suggesting that elements like word order and punctuation play a role in the formation of discursive force. This theory of force, incorporating both internal and external marks, bears a notable resemblance to Benveniste's approach, which I would like to characterize as the "omni-textual" interpretative method.

While Frege focuses on "assertoric force", Austin directs his attention to "illocutionary force", which as will be further explored in this book, proves particularly valuable for analyzing performative narratives. Searle generalizes the theory of illocutionary force, asserting that every utterance possesses illocutionary force. Given that utterances with identical content (i.e., Frege's "sense") can exhibit different forces, the analytical emphasis should shift from meaning to the examination of the distribution, categorization, and intensity of force. According to Searle, "Meaning is a form of derived intentionality. The original or intrinsic intentionality of a speaker's thought is transferred to words, sentences, marks, symbols, and so on. If uttered

[22] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford: OUP, 1962.

[23] John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

[24] Jerrold M. Sadock, *Toward a Linguistic Theory of Speech Acts*, New York: Academic Press, 1974, pp. 8–9.

meaningfully, these words, sentences, marks, symbols now have intentionality derived from the speaker's thoughts".[25]

What accounts for the force of language's capacity to exert a conative influence on the recipient, eliciting a psychological inclination to engage in action? Moreover, how does language, through its persuasive or directive expressions, prompt individuals to execute actions advocated or requested?

The psychological explanation proposed by Mark Johnson, namely, the "force gestalt",[26] as well as the "force dynamics"[27] proposed by Talmy in recent years from the perspective of cognitive science, suggest that the theory of force remains incomplete. Consequently, theories of force have been considered as "hypotheses" only. The widely acknowledged fact that utterances, particularly those with strong force, can alter a specific mental and emotional state in the listener's mind and evoke a psychological impulse to take action remains a universal recognition among theorists. Nonetheless, the primary objective of this book is to extend this understanding into the realm of narrative classification.

1.4 Modality-Force and Text

Semioticians and analytic philosophers, despite adopting markedly distinct approaches, have coincidentally arrived at roughly similar conclusions. However, the synthesis of these two modes of thinking has not been common, and it is only recently that some scholars have advocated for the integration of the theses discussed from these two perspectives into a unified mood-force correlation theory.[28] A substantial gap exists between these two academic traditions: analytic philosophy, primarily an Anglo-American school of thought, continues to hold sway in the Anglo-American philosophical sphere; on the other hand, before the 1970s, semiotics and narratology were predominantly the focus of French scholars, inheriting the continental philosophical system. Notably, Benveniste, a French scholar and a disciple of Saussure, does not dismiss Anglo-American philosophy. In 1963, he highlighted that analytic philosophy, particularly Austin's theory of speech acts, shared something in common with his own line of thinking.[29]

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[25] John R. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*, New York: Basic Books, 1998, p. 141.

[26] Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[27] Leonard Talmy, *Toward a Cognitive Semantics, Typology and Process in Concept Structuring*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000.

[28] See Peter Simons, "New Catagories for Formal Ontology", *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, vol. 49, no. 1, 1994, pp. 77–99.

[29] Emile Benveniste, "Analytical Philosophy and Language", *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gable: University of Miami Press, 1971, pp 231–238.

Ricoeur, a hermeneuticist, is another scholar interested in synthesizing the two traditions, probably because of his enduring interest in narratology and his association with Greimas. In the 1970s, Ricoeur already referenced Austin's performative theory as a crucial tool for resolving certain intricate problems, such as comprehending the meaning of the word "promise".[30] His ideas are closely aligned with the "conative studies" proposed in this book (see Part I, Chap. 4).

Habermas, known for his skill in academic integration, recognizes that the conation-force issue significantly impacts many contemporary social problems. He suggests that, in the establishment of "legitimate interpersonal relations" and for the realization of his ideal "public sphere", it is crucial to fully acknowledge the significance of force: "Illocutionary force adds 'pragmatic' meaning to the purely linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered in a speech act. It does this by fixing the 'mode' of the sentence. The peculiarity of pragmatic meaning is that it situates the sentence 'in relation to reality' (i.e., in relation to the objective, subjective, and social worlds)".[31]

In his defense of "the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination",[32] Jakobson turned to the symptoms of brain damage to find the neurophysiological evidence. In recent years, attempts have been made to "examine the effect of localized brain lesions on processing of the basic speech acts of question, assertion, request, and command".[33]

Scholars with opposing perspectives contend that speech acts may not yield such distinct effects and are frequently intertwined in language usage. Neurophysiologist Gillian Einstein states:

> The sense of oneself as the person one is, is constituted not just by cognitive memory components but by conative components as well or by an admixture of cognitive and conative components. If I say I generally feel happy, I have not reported something that has happened to me or something I have done. I am telling you about a general way I feel. And the way I feel is at least as important to my identity as what has happened to me and what I have done.[34]

This observation is undeniably accurate; as we transition from propositions to texts, various forms of textual intentionality, as discussed earlier, unavoidably intermingle and overlap, giving rise to atypical categories. For instance, the inclusion of advertisements in TV dramas is evidently a conative element. If the integration of

[30] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 84.

[31] Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, trans., José Medina, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999, p. 167.

[32] Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language*, New York: The Technology Press of MIT, 1966, p. 358.

[33] Soroker, N, et al., "Processing of Basic Speech Acts Following Localized Brain Damage: A New Light on the Neuroanatomy of Language," *Brain Cogn.*, 2005, vol., 57, no. 2, pp. 214–217.

[34] Gillian Einstein and Owen Flanagan, "Sexual Identity and Narratives of Self", ed., Gary D. Fireman, Ted E. McVay, Jr., and Owen J. Flanagan, *Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology, and the Brain*, London: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 211.

advertisements does not alter the genre of TV dramas, the predominant narrative mode of TV dramas would still be "recorded performative". Conversely, even if an advertisement film adopts an "artistic" style and exceeds typical ad lengths, its fundamental purpose remains rooted in persuasion for purchase.

Reflecting on academic history, a pertinent question emerges: considering the role of intentionality in classifying utterances, propositions, and texts, why has its potential as a criterion for genre classification been overlooked?

In fact, some attempts have already been made to answer this question. The British critic Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice*, found that "Benveniste's distinction between three fundamental functions of speech may be used… to distinguish three kinds of texts, declarative, imperative and interrogative".[35] According to Belsey, "Classic realism clearly conforms to the modality Benveniste calls declarative, imparting 'knowledge' to a reader whose position is thereby stabilized, by a privileged narrative which is to varying degrees invisible".[36] Belsey highly praises the "interrogative text" as a feature of avant-garde literature and an Althusserian text that questions the reader's illusion of the stability of reality: "The interrogative text… disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation. The position of the 'author' inscribed in the text… is seen as questioning or as contradictory… The reader is distanced, at least from time to time, rather than wholly interpolated into a fictional world".[37]

The central theme of Belsey's book is the celebration of the interrogative text. Although her analysis is perceptive, she unfortunately dismisses the imperative text as propaganda, contending that it "gives orders to its readers". Furthermore, she argues that both imperative propaganda and declarative realism constitute the reader "as a unified subject".[38] Belsey's analysis reflects her own ideological bias and, more notably, she does not thoroughly explore Benveniste's theory. As her categorization lacks comprehensiveness, there are various other genres beyond the three "archetypes" that she identifies.

The significance of Benveniste's modal system in narratology was first recognized by the Chinese scholar Hu Yamin.[39] It is the scholars in the field of advertising who have extensively applied the modality of discourse to the study of genres. Hanna-Kaisa points out that the imperative emphasizes the speaker's present influence and should therefore be combined with the exclamatory: "Palmer considers the imperative as mirroring the future. Therefore, as the actual situation of enunciation is the source of utterance, we emphasize imperatives in relation to the present tense while simultaneously referring to a future action".[40] Some Chinese scholars in the

[35] Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (2nd Edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 75.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (2nd Edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 75–76.

[38] Ibid., p. 75.

[39] Hu Yamin, *Narratology*, Wuhan: Central China Normal University Press, 2004, p. 99.

[40] Hanna-Kaisa D. et al, "Addressing the Consumer in Standardized Advertisements: Linguistic Cues in French and Finnish Technology Products' Advertising Texts", *Journal of Intercultural*

field of advertising have also applied Searle's discursive force theory to advertising research.[41]

The Canadian narratologist Uri Margolin has more fully explained the relationship between discursive modes and narrative texts in recent years. He examines the connection between discursive modes and several experimental novels, delving into aspects such as temporality, aspectuality, and modality of utterances.[42] For example, Prince's concept of "disnarration" can be viewed as an extension of the negative sentence. Brooke-Rose's *Amalgamemnon* (1984), in which a woman about to lose her job as a professor of literature and history is planning her life afterward, can be seen as an extension of the future tense. Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler…* (1979) and Duras's *The Malady of Death* (1982) are extensions of conditional sentences; Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help* (1985) is an extension of the imperative sentence.[43] Margolin's article demonstrates that the stylistic experiments in contemporary Western experimental fiction have indeed explored the limits of language possibilities. While he notes that tense can be linked to specific narrative genres, such as live television broadcasts employing the present tense, he does not put forth a comprehensive scheme for the classification of narrative genres.

1.5 The Classification of Narrative Genres

We have conducted a brief review of the academic history surrounding the discussion of the problem of textual intentionality. Austin's theory of speech acts is notable for its clarity, Greimas's for its flexibility, Jakobson's for its comprehensiveness, yet, it is perhaps Benveniste's theory that proves to be the most fundamental: the correlation between the three syntactical moods and the three temporal orientations provides the basic scheme for genre classification.

I, therefore, would like to propose that all narrative genres can be categorized into the following three temporal orientations: past, present, and future. These temporal orientations are essential for analysis as they delineate all narratives into three fundamental categories: recorded, performative, and conative. Without these three temporal orientations, narratives would lack the foundational framework necessary for providing basic textual intentionality.

The first category is the recorded narrative genres, exemplified by the novel and historical accounts. The dominant modality is "declarative", and the dominant force is "locutionary": the act of narration itself is the primary purpose. While recorded

Communication, 2006, no. 12, p. 4.

[41] Tang Shuhua, "On Constraints of 'Presupposition' on Advertising Language Force & Stimulation", *Journal of Harbin University*, 2010, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 116–119.

[42] Uri Margolin, "Of What Is Past, Is Passing, or to Come: Temporality, Aspectuality, Modality and the Nature of Literary Narrative", in David Herman, ed., *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999.

[43] Ibid.

narratives can serve specific purposes, such purposes are not intrinsic to the narrative and only constitute a pragmatic extension of meaning. Representative genres include history, fiction, journalism, mural painting, etc., utilizing human-made "specific" recording media like words and images. Recorded narratives are oriented towards the past, and the durability of the media ensures their preservation for future recipients.

The second category comprises performative narrative genres, exemplified by plays, competitions, and games. The dominant modality is "interrogative", and the dominant force is "perlocutionary": narrating for the purpose of performing, which can also be understood as "performing the performative act". While performance can serve other purposes, its meaning must be realized in the present. As Belsey describes the "interrogative text": "Thus, even if the interrogative text does not precisely, in Benveniste's terms, seek 'to obtain some information' from the reader, it does literally invite the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises".[44] These narratives are conveyed through "non-specific" media, referring to media not specifically created for semiotic transmission. Examples include bodily postures, facial expressions, speech, and physical objects. Mental images, serving as a narrative medium for hallucinations and dreams, can also be considered a subcategory of performative narratives.

The third category encompasses the conative narrative genres, exemplified by prophecy, propaganda, and advertising, where the dominant modality is "imperative" and the dominant force is "illocutionary": narrating for the purpose of achieving effects. Conative narratives exhibit the most "tensive" intentionality in Fontanille's term and remain unchanged as their media change. They can be conveyed through the "past" media such as words, images, "present" media such as the body, physical objects, and even "past-present" media such as film and other electronic media.

Ryan puts forward a triad of "retrospective-simultaneous-prospective" in *Avatars of Story*,[45] which coincides with our "past-present-future", except that Ryan's categorization is based on the nature of media, while we start from the "textual intentionality" to the "modality-force". In the theory of proposition developed by modern semiotic-analytic philosophy, three modality-forces correspond with three temporal orientations as well as the three media, encompassing all narrative genres. This results in the following figure, which serves as a sub-figure attached to the general figure at the beginning of the book:

According to temporal orientation, this book classifies narrative genres as follows:

1. The declarative past-oriented (recorded) narratives: history, fiction, photographs, journalism, archives, etc.;

[44] Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (2nd Edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 75.

[45] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story,* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 15.

Modality	Declarative	Interrogative	Imperative
Temporal orientation	Past	Present	Future
Medium	Specific	Non-specific	(Any)
Narrative genre	Recorded	Performative	Conative

Fig. 1.1 The "Modality-Temporal Orientation-Media" Classification of Narrative Genres

2. The interrogative present-oriented (performative) narratives: theatre, performance art, interactive games, hypertext fiction, music, songs, etc.; and its variants in modern media (the recorded performative narratives): cinema, television, audio-recordings, video-recordings, etc.;
3. The imperative future-oriented (conative) narratives: advertisements, propaganda, predictions, promises, futurology, etc.

The true distinction among these three categories of narrative genres lies in the temporal orientation of the textual intentionality: the past orientation emphasizes recording, hence declarative; the present orientation emphasizes performing, with meaning suspended, hence interrogative; the future orientation emphasizes ordering, hence imperative. The difference is not based on the time of the narrated event (content): concerning the time of the narrated event, it can be recounted in various narratives. The "stories" told by different narrative texts can be similar, but the distinct textual intentionality of genres directs their intentions in different ways.

As Jakobson has pointed out, declarative sentences are convertible into interrogative sentences, and similarly, recorded narratives are convertible into performative narratives, and vice versa. The dichotomy between "diegesis" and "mimesis" established by Plato and Aristotle has posed a hindrance to Western narrative scholarship for an extended period. Western narratology traditionally places history and fiction at its core and has been constrained by the idea that narratives are inherently "retrospective". In the present book, the performative narrative occupies a central position from both theoretical and practical concerns.

It is important to note that the media in Fig. 1.1 represent pre-modern media. Modern film and digital electronic technologies have recorded performative narratives in the form of new genres such as film, television, audio, video, etc. These genres record live performances for later reception, thereby blending the two categories of recorded and performative to create a new category called "the recorded performative". Such narratives are, in fact, the present situated in the past, analogous to the "past progressive tense": at the time of recording, these narrative texts were in the present progressive tense. It is not surprising that many cinematographers assert that the essential tense of cinema is the present progressive, a topic that will be examined in detail in Part III, this chapter.

Chapter 2
Performative Narrative

2.1 The Performative and the Recorded

Performative narrative, which utilizes the body and physical objects as semiotic media, represents the most ancient form of human storytelling, with drama being its most archetypal genre. Modern variations of performative narrative, including film, television, video games, and platforms like TikTok, have emerged as the dominant narrative forms of our era. Distinct from other types of narrative—such as recorded and mental narratives—performative narrative is characterized by elements like "demonstration", "improvisation", "audience participation", and the use of "non-specific media". Historically, however, performative narrative has been underexplored in narratological studies.

The history of human "narrative" is inextricably linked to the emergence of humankind. Storytelling through the body, speech, and objects is an innate human instinct. Recorded narratives, by contrast, emerged much later—rock paintings, for example, date back around 40,000 years, while writing began roughly 5000 years ago. Even today, some tribes that lack written or pictorial narratives still possess performative narratives in the form of songs, dances, and other embodied storytelling traditions.

Despite advancements in contemporary narratology, there has been a notable lack of systematic study dedicated to performative narratives. This omission stems partly from theoretical misconceptions and a cultural emphasis on recorded narratives. While some narratologists have addressed drama, they tend to focus on written scripts rather than the actual performances themselves.[1] Furthermore, many scriptless performative narratives, such as live theater or dance, have received scant

[1] See Ute Berns, "Performativity," in Peter Hühn et al., eds., *Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009, p. 371.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_2

attention within narratological frameworks.[2] This significant gap in the field warrants urgent attention, and a general narratology must incorporate the study of this crucial category.

Performative narratives are texts that utilize "ready-made" media, such as the body, speech, objects, music, sound, images, light, and shadow, to tell a story. Among these, the primary form of performative narrative is the "performing" narrative, which includes genres such as drama, dance, singing, playing musical instruments, magic shows, exhibitions, speeches, oral storytelling, sand table exercises, and rituals. Additionally, competitive narratives—such as competitions, gambling, and duels—also fall within this category, as do "game" narratives, including those in video games, which are pursued for enjoyment or virtual objectives like scoring points.

Narrative performances, whether in the form of plays, games, or competitions, tell stories. While it may not be immediately obvious, activities like competitive sports or video games align with the minimal definition of narrative as texts that represent events involving characters and can be understood as having temporality and significance. This allows these activities to fit within the scope of a general narratology, which examines texts that represent "changes involving characters" and the narration of events. Unlike direct life experiences, such as actual fights or wars, performing narrative enacts a plot in a manner akin to theatrical performance—rituals, plays, soccer games, and video games all unfold within a narrative framework, offering mediated representations rather than the raw events themselves. Although the media through which they unfold (such as the human body or weapons) may mirror those in real-life experiences, their mediated nature ontologically distinguishes them from the experiences they represent.

Human civilization is replete with diverse narrative forms, and the characteristics of performative narratives become clearer when contrasted with other narrative types. One such category is recorded narrative, which includes both "factual" narratives (e.g., histories, diaries, reports, news, documentary pictures) and "fictional" narratives (e.g., novels, poems, plays, comic strips). Recorded narratives share several defining characteristics:

1. The content of a recorded narrative can be modified, possibly by someone other than the original author—whether through editing language, enhancing illustrations, or refining sculptures.
2. The medium of a recorded narrative allows for long-term preservation, enabling it to be revisited and read repeatedly by different audiences.
3. The narration of a recorded narrative occurred in the past, and the events described in the recorded narrative were situated in "the past of the past", with history being a prime example.

[2] From the "text-centered" theory to the "performance-oriented" method, see Vanhaesebrouck, Karel, "Towards a Theatrical Narratology," *Image and Narrative-Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative*, 2004, no. 9.

The temporal aspect of recorded narratives is oriented toward documenting past events. In "fictional" narratives, such as novels, the act of narration is part of the fiction, allowing the narrative act to occur at any point in fictional time, including the future. However, the events being narrated must always have occurred before the moment of narration. For instance, a science fiction novel set in the future deals with the past of a future time. In contrast, scripts—often treated as a literary genre—emphasize the written word, sidelining the performative aspect of plays. As a result, scripts do not exhibit key features of performative narratives, such as demonstration or improvisation.

Performative narratives, by contrast, exhibit three distinct characteristics:

1. The narrative unfolds in real-time, even if set in the "past" (e.g., in a period drama). While the performance may be rehearsed, it cannot be altered after it has been enacted.
2. The narrative is not designed to be stored. Once the performance concludes, it ceases to exist in the same form, eliminating the need for repeated engagement by an absent audience.
3. The most significant temporal quality of performative narratives is their present-progressive nature: they occur in the "here and now", with their meaning realized as they unfold.

This stark distinction between recorded and performative narratives echoes Aristotle's differentiation in Poetics between Greek epic as "diegesis" and Greek tragedy as "mimesis". Many Western scholars, however, have resisted the term "performative narrative", arguing that the temporality of narrative by its nature, is oriented toward the past, while performance unfolds in the present. As noted in *A Dictionary of Narratology*, some theorists, such as Gérard Genette, maintain that narrative is fundamentally a verbal mode, focusing on the linguistic recounting of events rather than their enactment on stage.[3] This view excludes drama and other performative narratives from the narrative category.

However, the temporal distinction between these types of narrative has become increasingly complex with the advent of modern photography and electronic media. Performances are now frequently captured on film, tape, and other electronic formats, leading to a shift in the temporal nature of recorded performances. For example, recorded music, filmed drama, or oral storytelling have all evolved into recorded narratives. In this sense, a DVD and a book share similar temporal qualities—they both serve as records that can be revisited by future audiences. In this context, the previous characteristics of performative narratives are nearly reversed.

First, unlike traditional live performances, audio and video recordings may undergo post-production refinement, and films are fundamentally shaped through post-production processing.

[3] Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition), Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, p. 58.

Second, what was once an ephemeral medium is now preserved indefinitely through new media technologies.

Third, modern technology allows audiences to engage with these performances at a later time, even if they were not present at the original "here and now".

The "new media" is a relatively recent phenomenon, with just over a century of history. This evolution in media has blurred the lines between recorded and performative narratives. Some scholars have even argued that film, despite its differences from theater, aligns more closely with novels.[4] Nevertheless, while new media allows for the storage and playback of performances, the essence of performative narratives—particularly in the "here and now" moment of their original enactment—remains intact. Even when the story being narrated concerns the past, the act of narration unfolds in real time. For example, in a documentary or feature film about the War of Resistance against Japan, the events may be historical, but the filming process occurs in the present—whether through a direct documentary capture or a reenactment for a feature film. This is distinct from the temporality of written or photographic histories, or novels about the war.

For this reason, audiences engaging with "recorded performative narratives" often perceive them as unfolding in real-time, experiencing the plot as if it is happening at that moment, rather than merely revisiting past events. Cinematographer Laffay asserts that "everything in the film is in the present tense",[5] and Christian Metz further elaborates that "the spectator always sees movement as being present (even if it duplicates a past movement)".[6] Due to these factors (the narrative time of film and television being the narrated "here and now", and creating a "sense of the present" during the narrative experience), the "temporality" of performative narratives in new media essentially remains its present quality.[7]

Therefore, the definition of performative narrative must evolve to account for modern media. A performative narrative is a text that tells a story through body-object media, with its defining characteristic being its real-time experience by the audience. Unlike recorded narratives, which are situated in the past and preserved for future audiences, performative narratives are primarily experienced in the "here and now", though they can be captured and stored through new media technologies.

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[4] See Ute Berns, "Performativity", in Peter Hühn et al., eds., *Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009, p. 372.

[5] Albert Laffay, *Logique du Cinéma: Création. et Spectacle*, Paris: Masson, 1964, p. 18.

[6] Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans., Michael Taylor, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 8.

[7] News of Sina Technology, August 30, 2012: "Researchers have developed a helmet, which will give the wearer the illusion that the TV scenes shown to them are the real scenes that are happening, but in fact they are pre-recorded. Even though the researchers have detailed its mechanism, some test participants were still unable to distinguish between the real and fake scenes". In fact, people watching movies regards it as "present", do not necessarily need to wear this helmet to occur, the helmet is only to enhance the effect.

Mental narratives—such as dreams, daydreams, hallucinations, and illusions—differ from both recorded and performative narratives. Like performative narratives, mental narratives share a present-tense quality, as they can only be experienced in the "here and now" (thus often resembling "watching a play"). However, a key distinction lies in the level of participation: individuals engage actively in performative narratives, while dreamers are largely passive, with little control over their dream narratives. Due to its unique medium, mental narrative requires separate consideration, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

2.2 Demonstration

While the media for different types of performative narratives may be similar, their underlying intentions can vary significantly. Performative narratives can be categorized into three main types based on their intentionality: First, performing: This category includes performances that exist solely for the sake of the performance itself, such as theatrical plays, rituals, singing, playing musical instruments, and oral storytelling. Second, competitive: These narratives emerge from contests and competitions—such as gambling, duels, or sporting events—that are conducted with the purpose of winning a prize or achieving a victory. Third, games: This encompasses various types of games, including video games, where the "purpose" may be purely virtual or recreational, offering no tangible prize other than the enjoyment of play itself.

Despite these distinctions, these three categories of performative narratives share certain key characteristics, particularly in their differences from recorded and mental narratives.

One such defining characteristic is demonstration, which involves the direct presentation of the narrative to an audience. Performative narratives always require an audience, even in cases where the performance appears solitary, such as a child playing alone, an individual performing a solo piano piece, or a person engaged in a single-player video game. In these instances, the performer becomes his own audience. This concept might seem somewhat sophistical, but it underscores a critical distinction between performative and recorded narratives. While recorded narratives (such as scripts, films, or pictures) can be revisited by future readers or viewers, even by the same person who created them, performative narratives necessitate an immediate, live audience. The meaning of the performance is realized in real time. The significance of the performance is contingent on its being demonstrated to an audience in the "here and now".

A useful analogy from the world of theater is the notion of the "three walls". This concept suggests that once the narrative world of a performance is established, it is separated from the real world, leaving only the "fourth wall" transparent. The fourth wall is a metaphorical concept, which represents the imaginary barrier between performers and the audience. It varies based on the performance setting. For example, ancient Greek theaters positioned the audience in a semi-circle and

performances in Chinese temple fairs seated the audience on three sides, while Roman theaters surrounded the performance on all sides. In modern contexts, sports events like boxing or soccer, and gambling venues like roulette tables, are designed for audiences to view from all angles, creating an environment in which the "frame" of the narrative is demonstrational and engaging. Video game narratives, like films, are typically viewed on a screen, but the key difference remains: a performative narrative always requires a demonstrational dimension. The audience's spatial relationship to the performance becomes essential for its meaning. Recorded narratives, by contrast, do not depend on the immediate presence of an audience. In mental narratives, where the subject is the creator, the receiver, and more often than not the major character of the story, there is thus no fixed audiences' viewpoint.

2.3 Unpredictability and Improvisation

The second defining characteristic of performative narratives is improvisation. Even in performances that follow scripts, musical scores, and established rules, or have thorough rehearsals, there remains a degree of unpredictability. This quality of uncertainty is what often gives live performances their excitement. Whether it's the danger of a mishap in an acrobatic show or the risk of an audience interruption during a stand-up comedy routine, the potential for something unexpected is central to the allure of performative narratives.

The technique of *Xian Gua*[8] in Chinese crosstalk can be a notable example of the improvisational element. It is an art technique rooted in quick wit and verbal dexterity. One famous instance occurred during a performance by Hou Baolin and Guo Qiru[9] in the 1950s, titled "Marriage and Superstition". In this routine, Hou humorously discussed the traditional wedding ceremony, where the bride steps over a basin of burning charcoal to enter the groom's home. During a live performance, Hou provided a detailed description of the ceremonial action.

> Hou: It is a basin of burning charcoal. A servant stands next to it, holding a glass of strong liquor. When the bride is going to cross, the servant will splash liquor on the coal to make the fire brighter, and just at the moment the bride takes a step forward, which implies "fire burning, luck coming".
>
> Guo: The accomplishment of the ceremony leads to a happy marriage.
>
> Hou: But how dangerous it is! What if her clothes are burned! And then cause a fire to …

Just at this moment, an unexpected siren sounded outside the theater. The sudden disruption caused audience members near the window to look outside. Without missing a beat, Hou quipped, "Maybe someone's holding a wedding ceremony!"

[8] "现挂", also named "现卦", is a technical term of Chinese crosstalk, which means the improvisational performance on the stage. Translator's note.

[9] Hou Baolin (1917-1993) and Guo Qiru (1900-1969) were the two crosstalk masters in the last century. Translator's note.

This improvisation skillfully drew the audience's attention back to the stage, demonstrating the role of spontaneity in performative narratives.

In contrast, improvisation is virtually nonexistent in recorded or dream narratives. In recorded narratives, the form is fixed after production, and dream narratives, by definition, are not controlled by the dreamer and thus not open to improvisation. The ability to improvise is a hallmark of live performance, and the more improvisational elements are incorporated, the more unpredictable the narrative becomes. This explains the frequent variation in oral traditions, where national epics or folk tales evolve with each new generation of performers, adapting to the unique context of the performance. Once transcribed into written form, these narratives become fixed. One notable example of the role of improvisation in performance can be seen in the "Happenings" of the 1960s and 1970s, especially in Europe and the United States. These performances were entirely improvised, with no pre-determined plot or script. Performative narratives also extend to the realm of sports. The unpredictability of athletes' performances is central to the excitement of a game, where outcomes are not entirely predictable. The spontaneity of a player's actions, unexpected victories, and last-minute turns of events all contribute to the suspense of the performance, keeping the audience engaged. Similarly, video games present an environment where improvisation and unpredictability are essential components of the experience. Players engage in dynamic scenarios that are shaped by their own actions, strategies, and sometimes even chance events, all of which contribute to the thrill and excitement of the game.

An example of the unpredictability inherent in live performance occurred during the 2007 Beijing TV Spring Festival Gala. When Gigi Leung accidentally fell during her performance, her live vocals nonetheless continued. The fall thus exposed that she was lip-syncing, resulting in a highly publicized incident that sparked speculation and had significant, unforeseen consequences. Similarly, high-stakes events like Formula One racing and air shows demonstrate how unpredictability can sometimes result in tragic accidents, occasionally affecting the audience in dramatic ways.

The unpredictability of live performances also extends to fields like magic. In magic shows, improvisation is often employed to incorporate audience participation, which serves to heighten the sense of mystery and surprise. For example, magicians may invite an audience member on stage to examine props or assist in the performance, creating a sense of immediate involvement. In the film *The Prestige* (2006), an example of how unpredictability shapes narrative structure can be seen when a magician invites an audience member on stage, only for a rival magician to sabotage the act. The tension builds as the magician is shown to have already switched the real object for a fake, escalating the unpredictability of the narrative to an extreme level. This example highlights how performative narratives can manipulate expectations and engage the audience in surprising ways.

While it is true that recorded versions of performative narratives—such as films, television shows, and taped performances—lack the immediacy of live improvisation, audiences can still sense the spontaneity and unpredictability of the original performance. This is one reason why recordings of live concerts, for example, often enjoy greater popularity than studio-produced albums. The unpredictability and

immediacy of the live event are embedded in the experience of the audience and make them have a sense of being part of a live performance.

In considering where improvisation may occur within a performance, music semiotician Eero Tarasti notes that it can manifest in any of the six elements identified in Roman Jakobson's communication model. According to Tarasti, improvisation might occur in the following ways:

1. A sender improvises… the improviser may rely on generative rules to such an extent that the result sounds like a completed composition.
2. A message is an improvisation… Western art music has numerous "traces" of improvisation in written compositions.
3. A receiver improvises. This process may obtain in certain avant-garde performances in which the art work consists of the audience's reactions to it.
4. A context becomes the object of improvisation. This takes place when social situations trigger improvisatory behaviors.
5. A channel is under improvisation: this can happen in a theater performance or spectacle, in which anything can serve as part of the event.
6. A code is improvised. This situation puts the whole process in jeopardy…[10]

2.4 Audience Participation

The characteristics of demonstration and improvisation in performative narratives naturally give rise to a third defining characteristic: audience participation, or the potential engagement of the narratee with the unfolding narrative. While recorded narratives also invite recipient participation through reader response, where the meaning of the text culminates in the reader's interpretation, the process of engaging with a recorded narrative does not inherently require the active involvement of the reader. In contrast, performative narratives are inherently reliant on different ways of audience participation at various stages of the narrative process.

It is evident that all three types of performative narratives necessitate audience participation, though the forms this participation takes may differ. Each performative narrative is framed by a narrative structure that includes second-level narrators—such as the *Fu Mo*[11] opening in Chinese opera, the chorus in Greek tragedies, narrators in oral storytelling, and cinematic voice-overs—and performers or players who enact the story. These participants can be termed "performer-subnarrators", as they play an integral role in constructing the narrative.

[10] Eero Tarasti, *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics*, Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002, pp. 187-189.

[11] *Fu Mo* ("副末") is a technical term of Chinese opera, which means an outsider of the play, and "Fu Mo opening" means that this outsider gives the audience a plot summary at the very beginning of the play. Translator's note.

Moreover, audience participation is not only allowed but often expected within the context of performative narratives. This participation can vary, ranging from vocal interjections, such as interruptions or booing, to more active engagements, such as halting the performance or altering the course of a competition. These forms of interaction, occurring both on and off stage, contribute to the improvisational nature of the performance. In Chinese opera, for instance, audiences are known to vocally support or interrupt an actor's performance, while in Western ballet, dancers often acknowledge the audience's applause with bows. In sports, the energy of the crowd—often referred to as the "home court advantage"—can significantly influence the outcome of a game. Historically, audiences in Austrian opera houses during Mozart's era were forbidden from singing along, yet today's concerts, particularly in contemporary pop and rock performances, actively encourage audience participation through singing, clapping, and cheering. This shift highlights the essential role of audience engagement as both a natural instinct and a routine aspect of performative narratives.

A similar dynamic is observable in competitions and games. In a competitive event, the opponent functions as the primary audience, an essential element for the event's progression. In games, participants interact with both playmates and virtual opponents, particularly in modern online gaming. Even in solo play, a player can perceive themselves as both participant and audience, observing and evaluating their own performance—whether through achieving a high score or progressing through levels. In this sense, the player assumes the dual role of both actor and recipient in the game's narrative, immersing themselves in the process while also reflecting upon their actions.

The influence of audience participation can also be seen in the contrast between large and smaller venues. For example, Old Trafford, the home of Manchester United and the largest football stadium in England with a capacity of 76,000, does not always generate the same level of excitement as smaller, more intimate venues. Sir Alex Ferguson described Old Trafford as having the atmosphere of a "funeral" when he spoke after Manchester United's 1-0 win over Birmingham City in the 2007–2008 football season. He meant that the lack of active fan participation negatively impacted the progress of the match.

In contemporary video gaming, particularly in the genre of "role-playing games" (RPGs), there is an increasing trend to replicate the dynamics of performative narratives similar to theater and film. In RPGs, players assume control over a character, much like an actor playing a role on stage. The key difference, however, is the freedom of choice available to the player. Unlike theater actors, who are constrained by their physical characteristics—such as gender, age, and appearance—video game players have the freedom to embody any character they choose, without such limitations. This flexibility allows players to immerse themselves in roles that might otherwise be inaccessible in traditional performance spaces, offering a unique form of participatory narrative that further blurs the lines between performer and audience.

2.5 Non-specific Medium

The final defining characteristic of performative narratives is their "non-specificity" in terms of media. The signs that constitute performative narratives are embedded in our everyday experiences: the human body is used as it is, and while certain movements in a musical drama may not be part of daily life, they are inherently similar to those found in everyday actions. Words, too, maintain their essence in performances, with dialogue often indistinguishable from regular speech. Similarly, the animals in a circus, though not typically encountered in everyday settings, are still recognizable as familiar creatures, and the equipment used in sports, though not part of daily life, functions similarly to everyday tools. There is no clear distinction between bodily movements as signs and as experiences—what might be a spontaneous handshake or hug in daily life can, in the context of a performance, be identical in action.

In contrast, the media of recorded narratives are considered "specific". For instance, words and pictures are media specifically designed to convey recorded stories. When reading a book, there is an inherent understanding that the text is communicating a story; likewise, the mental imagery evoked in dream narratives is clearly understood as distinct from real-life experience. Performative narratives, however, do not possess such a clear-cut demarcation in their media. Instead, they necessitate a "framing segregation" from everyday life. This means that a performative narrative requires a distinct narrative framework to signal that the ensuing actions are part of a narrative text, distinguishing them from everyday experience.

This narrative frame is critical in the performative narrative, as it transforms ordinary bodies and objects into the media of performance. Simple actions, such as the raising of a curtain, the dimming of lights, or the blowing of a referee's whistle, serve as these segregating indicators. Similarly, a child understands that at a specific moment, their clay dough and bamboo pieces morph into representations of tanks and soldiers, activating a shift in narrative perception. These indicators function as markers, signaling that a performative text is unfolding.

At the core of performative narratives is the human body, the most fundamental "non-specific" medium. All forms of performative storytelling are inherently tied to the body: vocal expressions such as speech, song, and shout are bodily functions; musical instruments, weapons, and tools are extensions of the body; sounds produced by devices often substitute for the human voice; makeup and clothing serve as adornments to the body; and props, scenes, lighting, and shadows all highlight the body's functions and presence.

This central role of the body in performative narratives can be traced to both its historical and intrinsic nature. Historically, the body was the primary medium through which stories were told. From a humanistic perspective, since narratives typically center around "events with characters", the human element naturally becomes the focal point of the narrative. The involvement of the body is crucial for demonstrating changes in the world around us. As such, performances, competitions, and games all rely on the body as their central medium. This emphasis on the

body has not only been a focal point in the development of performative narratives but has also led to considerable academic and philosophical interest in recent years.

When considering these four attributes—demonstration, unpredictability, audience participation, and a non-specific medium—it becomes evident that performative narratives are perhaps the most aligned with human nature. Moreover, in contemporary culture, where there is increasing focus on the semiotic significance of the body, performative narratives are receiving greater academic attention and garnering increasing academic interest.

Chapter 3
Mental Narrative

3.1 Why Are Dreams Narratives?

Mental narratives, which encompass dreams, daydreams, illusions, and hallucinations, have often been overlooked by narratologists and traditionally excluded from the category of narratives. However, based on the definition of narrative presented in the "Introduction" of this book, dreams can indeed be considered narratives for two primary reasons: first, they are texts conveyed through mental images rather than direct experiences; second, they feature plots that involve characters, with the narrator often directly participating in the events.

It is important to clarify that while recollections and imagination may involve "events with participation of characters" and are mediated through "mental images", they do not qualify as narratives. This is because they cannot be "understood by (another) subject as having a unified temporal and significant dimension". In other words, while they may involve a process of primary narrativization, they are without a secondary narrativizaiton.

Dreams, on the other hand, are classified as narratives because they are inherently secondary narratives. Although the mechanisms of their primary narrativization (i.e., the causes of dreams) remain poorly understood, the existence of the subject in the primary narrative is undeniable. Hence, dreams, daydreams, illusions, and hallucinations fit the definition of narratives. Similarly, "telepathy" triggered by various mechanisms can be considered a narrative, as it involves the process of secondary narrativization.

Hartmann suggests that human consciousness exists on a "continuum ... from the most focused waking thought through relaxed somewhat looser thought to reverie and daydreaming which begin to resemble dreaming".[1] This perspective is

[1] Ernest Hartmann, "Outline for a Theory on the Nature and Functions of Dreaming," *Dreaming*, vol. 6, no.2, 1996, p. 153.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_3

particularly insightful in considering daydreaming as "non-lucid". I propose that daydreamers typically are not engaged in a specifically linguistic form of thinking, but passively receive texts of mental images, internal sensations, and inner words, which constitute secondary narrativization, rendering them narratives in their own right.

Unlike recorded or performative media, mental narratives do not rely on specific forms of representation, such as words or images, nor do they use the human body or objects as media. Instead, their medium consists of mental images and other internal sensations, including mental hearing, touch, taste, and speech. Key characteristics of mental narratives include:

1. In mental narratives, the dreamer or the hallucinator does not actively create the narrative but receives and perceives it. The mental narrative functions as "a self-narrative" where one part of consciousness presents itself to another part.
2. Mental narratives are inherently personal and can only be received and experienced by the subject themselves. They are inaccessible to others, and no one can intrude upon another's mental narrative.
3. The narrator of the mental narrative is often a character involved in the narrative, participating in the events of the narrative.

In this book, "retellings" of mental narratives—such as dreams recounted to others or oneself (in memories or diaries)—are excluded from the category of mental narratives. This includes also dreams or imaginative sequences narrated in recorded forms (e.g., novels) or performative narratives (e.g., plays or films). These retellings, while they may retain the content of the original mental narrative, are no longer mental narratives due to the shift in medium. If only the content of a mental narrative is preserved, without its original form, it ceases to be a mental narrative. Furthermore, "stream-of-consciousness" novels and films, which imitate the loose, free-flowing associations of thought, do not qualify as mental narratives either, as they are representations in a different medium.

In general, mental narratives are not classified as factual narratives, as they do not refer to the real world. However, an exception could be made for "telepathy", where the mind is thought to perceive thoughts or feelings from a distance, often from a loved one, through non-sensory means. While numerous reports of telepathy exist, it has not been conclusively verified by psychologists. If proven to be real, telepathy could be classified as factual. Though it shares similarities with dreams in its passive reception, telepathy differs in that it is verifiable and can be confirmed by the receiver.

Dreams have been largely neglected in narratological research due to their lack of regular form. This book aims to demonstrate that dreams, by virtue of their unique textuality and narrativity, are indeed a form of narrative. Dreams are arguably the most frequently experienced narratives by humans, holding far greater significance in human life than is commonly acknowledged. On average, individuals spend about two hours each day and night dreaming, experiencing six to seven distinct dreams, each lasting anywhere from a few seconds to twenty minutes. This totals roughly six years of a person's life spent in the realm of dreams.

Historically, dreams have played a significant role in human life, as evidenced by their frequent documentation in ancient texts. For instance, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100-1200 BC) includes one of the earliest known records of dreams, the heroic king's dreams and his mother's interpretations. Similarly, in early Chinese texts, such as the *Yi Zhou Shu*,[2] numerous dreams of King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou are recorded, demonstrating the ancient understanding of dreams as guides for political decision-making. Due to the challenges they posed to the logic and common sense of human life, dreams were often viewed as divine messages, offering insight into the future or the will of the gods. In modern times, psychoanalysts have come to view dreams as a key to unlocking the spiritual and psychological mysteries of the human mind.

The fascination with dreams has been a significant part of human thought across various cultures. Despite this, dreams have not been a major focus in narrative studies, primarily due to the challenges involved in understanding their "narrativity" and the mechanisms underlying their formation. In the field of Chinese narratology, for instance, research on dreams remains limited. The article "Dreams: Time and Narrative" by Long Diyong represents one of the pioneering attempts to analyze dreams within the context of narrative theory in China.[3]

Many scholars argue that dreams are direct perceptual experiences rather than narratives. They suggest that dreams only become narratives when retold through specific media. For example, Prince challenges the idea of dreams as narratives.[4] Similarly, Kilroe posits, "The dream while it is being dreamed is experience, not text," and contends that "the experience becomes a text once it is a completed product". She further claims that "all dreams are texts... some but not necessarily all dream texts are narratives".[5] This view echoes Jung's distinction between "little dreams" and "big dreams" (also known as "significant dreams"), with the latter being seen as profound and revelatory. Jung regards significant dreams as "the richest jewel in the treasure-house of psychic experience," often being "ever remembered," while "little dreams" are viewed as trivial and fleeting, devoid of deeper meaning.[6] According to Kilroe, every dream "must have content, but that content does not necessarily have a message".[7]

[2] *Yi Zhou Shu* (《逸周书》) is the archives of ancient Chinese historical documents, also known as *The Book of Zhou*. The work mainly records the current events from King Wen, King Wu, Duke of Zhou, King Cheng, King Kang, King Mu, King Li to King Jing. Translator's note.

[3] Long Diyong, "Dreams: Time and Narrative", *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, no. 8, 2002, pp. 22-35.

[4] Gerald Prince, "Forty-One Questions on the Nature of Narrative", *Style*, vol. 34, 2000, pp. 317-327.

[5] Patricia A. Kilroe, "The Dream as Text, The Dream as Narrative", *Dreaming*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2000, pp. 125-127.

[6] C. G. Jung, *Dreams: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, trans., R.F.C. Hull, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1974, item 554.

[7] Patricia Kilroe, "The Dream as Text, The Dream as Narrative", *Dreaming*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2000, p. 126.

Prominent scholars in dream studies, such as Freud and Jung, have predominantly focused on the retellings of dreams. Freud acknowledged the inherent complexities in retelling dreams, stating, "It is impossible as a rule to translate a dream into a foreign language and this is equally true, I fancy, of a book such as the present one".[8] However, Freud and others mainly studied the retold dreams, treating these retellings, which are mediated through language and images, as the primary objects of analysis, seldom addressing the differences between dreaming and its retelling. This approach leads to a suspension of questions about the narrative nature of the dream itself, focusing instead on the narrativity of its retelling. This book, however, aims to examine the textuality and narrativity inherent in the dream itself, rather than its subsequent retelling. To this end, we need to highlight several key characteristics of dreams as narrative texts.

First, the dream itself functions as a text mediated through the dreamer's mental images. In the dream, the dreamer confronts not the world itself, but a version of it constructed from mental images. Although mental images lack the physicality of traditional sign media, they still function as sign vehicles or perceptions that convey meaning. Importantly, these perceptions do not need to be tangible or physical to communicate meaning effectively.[9]

The sign vehicles of dreams, especially mental images derived from various sensory experiences, can often reproduce the world experience with vividness and immersion that surpasses even the most realistic films. While perception in waking life is immediate and unmediated, in dreams, the dreamer is not directly perceiving objects but rather encountering signs in the form of mental images. These images form the text of the dream narrative.

Wittgenstein suggested that, "It is probable that there are many different sorts of dreams, and that there is no single line of explanation for all of them".[10] Dream narratives undeniably carry meaning, though this meaning is not always easily understood through current human knowledge. Ancient interpretations, modern psychoanalysis, and contemporary psycho-physiological studies have all contributed to our understanding of dreams, but significant gaps remain in fully grasping their meanings. This does not suggest that dreams lack meaning, but rather that they do not follow the teleological logic that is characteristic of the narratives we encounter in waking life. Dreams, as a form of communication, do not yet convey meaning in a purposeful or intentional way (i.e., they lack a "designed" communication of meaning). The practice of "dream incubation", in which individuals attempt to influence their dreams by focusing on particular ideas or goals before sleep, illustrates this point. While it may increase the likelihood of dreaming about certain

[8] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans., James Strachey, New York: Basic Books, 2010, p. 125.

[9] See Zhao Yiheng, *Semiotics: Principles & Problems* (Revised Edition), Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2016, Chapter One, Section One, "Sign Vehicle", pp. 25-27.

[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed., Cyril Barrett, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, p. 47.

themes, it does not guarantee the appearance of a clear, purposeful message within the dream.

As narrative texts, dreams are shaped through the paradigmatic axis of selection and the syntagmatic axis of combination.[11] The content of dreams is drawn from various sources, not solely from repressed desires, as Freud suggested. A significant portion of dream content originates from recent memories, particularly those associated with unresolved issues, or traumatic memories. Often, "Memories of unresolved problems from the previous day (day residues) and/or extraneous somatic stimuli impinging on and disrupting sleep arouse related associations from the more distant past of similarly unresolved developmental crises".[12] Dreams often prioritize traumatic or unresolved memories, but the selection mechanism by which this prioritization occurs is not yet fully understood. The incoherence and bizarre nature of dreams can be attributed to the complex processes of selection and combination that govern their construction.

Several scholars have identified recurring structural features within dreams, noting that they typically follow a pattern that includes a beginning, development, and climax. However, dreams often lack a clear conclusion. Jung argued that a "significant dream" includes both a beginning and an ending. Yet, most dreams do not meet this criterion; they often end abruptly at the climax or shift unpredictably in direction, leaving the dreamer to awaken before any resolution occurs. This absence of a conclusive ending is a key feature of dreams, contributing to their ambiguity of signification. In contrast, lucid narratives, where endings often carry significant ethical implication, rely heavily on a clear and purposeful conclusion. The lack of a definitive ending in dreams suggests a weaker intentionality in their narrative structure, but this does not diminish their narrativity.

In conclusion, dreams are not direct experiences or perceptions; they are narrative texts. The dreamer, also as the protagonist or an involved character, plays an essential role in the unfolding of the dream narrative. Each dream meets the definition of a minimal narrative, possessing the fundamental characteristics of narratives.

3.2 The Narrator of the Dream

The mystery of dream narratives lies in the dreamer's apparent lack of agency or control over the events unfolding within the dream, as if these events are not products of their own mind. Sartre emphasized that the defining feature of the dreamer is the absence of "reflective consciousness", which results in the dreamer being captured by the dream itself.[13] In this state, the dreamer is unable to process the

[11] In this regard, Freud's concepts of "condensation" and "displacement" are insufficient to account for the full complexity of dream processes.

[12] H. Hunt, *The Multiplicity of Dreams: Memory, Imagination, and Consciousness*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 32-33.

[13] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 188.

context of the dream, nor can they assess or regulate their reactions to it. Wang Chong's observation is particularly insightful: "When he sees, he does not know whether he is waking or dreaming, so he cannot know if what he sees are ghosts or humans".[14] This statement suggests that the dreamer lacks subjectivity and is instead a passive recipient of the dream's unfolding narrative.

As noted previously, the content of dreams is selected and organized into a narrative text. This raises a fundamental question: Who is responsible for organizing these dream materials, and where can we locate the "dream narrator" who possesses subjectivity? Ancient dream interpreters often attributed the creation of the dream narrative to an external force or another subject, such as fate, which implants the dream in the dreamer's mind. In contrast, modern psychoanalysts view the dream as a manifestation of the subconscious mind, with the dream serving as a fulfillment of repressed desires from waking life. Freud linked these desires to the instincts of Eros and Thanatos, while Jung posited that they are rooted in the archetypal consciousness inherent in the human psyche.

Contemporary research on dreams is primarily conducted by neurophysiologists.[15] In 1977, Hobson and McCarley introduced the "activation-synthesis" hypothesis, proposing that dreams are the result of the brain's forebrain processing neuronal signals emanating from the brainstem.[16] According to this hypothesis, dreams are the outcome of a complex interaction between physiological and psychological factors. In the 1990s, Hobson expanded his research to incorporate psychological dimensions, suggesting that "the dreaming brain is a self-organizing system…that…may form without any higher control".[17] He also observed that "coherent aspects of dreaming are present when self-organization is working optimally (as occurs in the waking brain), while incoherent or bizarre aspects reflect the failure of the brain-mind system to organize all features of the signals it internally generates into a consistent narrative".[18] This suggests that the dream narrative is not controlled by an external subject but is instead both organized and received by the same mind. Hobson likened the dreaming brain to a computer in standby mode, displaying a "screensaver" generated by the system itself.[19] Similarly, the psychologist Antonio Damasio proposed that "instead of a teller there is only – and persistently – what we might call a teller-effect, a self that emerges and lives its life only

[14] Wang Chong, *Lun Heng* (or *On Balance*), Chang Sha: Yue Lu Press, 2006, p. 45.

[15] J. F. Pagel, et al, "Definitions of Dream: A Paradigm for Comparing Field Descriptive Specific Studies of Dream", *Dreaming*, vol. 11, no 4, Dec. 2011, pp. 195-202.

[16] J. Allan Hobson and Robert W. McCarley, "The Brain as a Dream State Generator: An Activation-Synthesis Hypothesis of the Dream Process," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 134, no. 12, 1977, pp. 1335-1348.

[17] David Kahn & J Allan Hobson, "Self-Organization Theory of Dreaming," *Dreaming*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1993, p. 151.

[18] Ibid., p. 154.

[19] John Allan Hobson, *The Dreaming Brain: How the Brain Creates both the Sense and Nonsense of Dream*, New York: Basic Books, 1998.

within the narrative matrix of consciousness".[20] This concept implies that the "narrator" of the dream is not an external entity, but an aspect of the dreamer's own self.

The "self-organization" theory underscores the idea that the sender and receiver of the dream narrative are two distinct parts of the same mind. In contrast to traditional narratives, where one subject communicates a narrative to another, mental narratives – such as dreams, fantasies, and illusions – are unique in that they involve one part of the subject communicating the narrative to another part of the same subject.

3.3 Dream and Imagination

Dreams share several notable similarities with fictional storytelling. Freud observed that the creative process of a writer closely resembles daydreaming.[21] States also pointed out the connection between storytelling and dreaming, proposing that "storytelling springs from the same 'skill' that permits us to dream, that waking storytelling is simply 'modulated by different constraints' on the imagination, and that while creating the story the storyteller is, in a manner of speaking, really dreaming under different circumstances".[22]

A defining feature of dream content is the prevalence of "negative themes". Garfield, in a comprehensive survey of dream records from various cultures and historical periods, found that the most common dream themes were generally unpleasant—such as being chased, falling, drowning, feeling lost, being naked, dying from injury or illness, failing exams, missing transportation, losing possessions, and driving a car without brakes, among others.[23] Similarly, during the Eastern Han Dynasty, Wang Fu, in his work *A Treatise on the Latent* (*Qianfu Lun*《潜夫论》), listed ten types of dreams, each linked to a negative emotion or state, such as confusion from dreaming of rain or sorrow from dreaming of cold.[24] These findings indicate that, regardless of motivations given different cultural or temporal context, many dreams are defined by their unpleasantness.

States asserts that "negative experience, as opposed to happy birthdays, weddings, and career successes, is the dream's natural specialty",[25] highlighting dreams'

[20] Quoted from Paul John Eakin, "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" *Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2004, pp. 128-129.

[21] Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Daydreaming", eds., Ethel Spector Person, et al, *On Freud's "Creative Writers and Daydreaming"*, London: Karnac Books, 2013, pp. 1-14.

[22] Bert O. States, "Authorship in Dreams and Fictions", *Dreaming*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1994, p. 237.

[23] Patricia Garfield, *The Universal Dream Key: The 12 Most Common Dream Themes Around the World,* New York: Harper Collins, 2001.

[24] Wang Fu, *Qianfu Lun* (or *A Treatise on the Latent*), Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Publishing House, 2009, p. 56.

[25] Bert O States, "Dreams, Art and Virtual Worldmaking", *Dreaming,* vol. 13, no. 1, 2003, p. 8.

inherent tendency towards "the pronounced negativity".[26] The persistence of dreams throughout three million years of human evolution suggests they serve a beneficial function, although the exact role of dreams in human life remains the subject of various theories. States hypothesizes that dreams may function as warnings of danger, noting that, "In the virtual world of dreams and fictions we get to drive off a cliff into the sea many times in a lifetime, whereas in the actual world we can do it only once".[27]

Similarly, the content of human narratives, often tragic in nature, can serve as warnings of potential dangers. Barth, in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative", offers a poignant observation: "It may be significant that man's offspring should have 'invented,' at the same time (around the age of three), both the sentence and Oedipus' narrative",[28] implying that humans create narratives as a means of addressing psychological traumas. In Chinese culture, for instance, historical narratives have long held significance. Sima Qian remarked that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chun Qiu*《春秋》) were largely concerned with "criticizing the emperor, denouncing the vassals, and punishing the great officials". History, as well as modern news reporting, tends to focus on calamities and disasters. This pattern suggests a deep correlation between narratives and the theme of catastrophe. Some scholars have found that after major social disasters, "dream images" tend to intensify.[29] Thus, history, journalism, fiction, and film frequently center on disasters as their core theme.

In contrast to dreams, most other narrative genres typically conclude with a happy ending, where evil is punished and good is rewarded. Propp's analysis of the structural elements of Russian folk tales reveals a common pattern: the hero, often threatened by an adversary, ultimately brings about the villain's downfall and receives a reward or recognition from the family or community.[30] Similarly, in Greimas's actantial model, the subject consistently encounters opposition in their pursuit of a desired object.[31] This structure is prevalent because, unlike dreams, these narratives serve as a "community genre", with a responsibility to the broader community. Their primary function, alongside being intelligible and engaging, is to help audiences draw ethical conclusions and conform to community norms. The satisfying resolution of the story's conflict reflects its social responsibility.

Dreams, however, are inherently personal and do not carry any communal obligation, which often results in them lacking proper endings or clear resolutions.

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Bert O States, "Dreams, Art and Virtual Worldmaking", *Dreaming,* vol. 13, no. 1, 2003, p. 12.

[28] Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative", trans., Lionel Duisit, *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no.2, 1975, p. 272.

[29] Ernst Hartman and Robert Basile, "Dream Imagery Becomes More Intense After 9/11/01", *Dreaming*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2003, p. 61-66.

[30] V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Second Edition), Texas: University of Texas Press, 1968.

[31] Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Actants, Actors, and Figures", *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, trans., Paul J. Perron and Frank H, Collins, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 106-120.

States summarizes the "main structural features of dream narrative including the in medias res beginning, the unexplained gaps and shifts in scene, and the inconclusive ending".[32]

In dreams, the dreamer embodies a divided self: while dreaming, the dreamer is unaware of being in a dream; and the "I" involved in the dreamed events is not dreaming but experiencing the dream world. This split is also apparent in hallucinations, where the "real-world I" does not participate in the hallucination, and the "I" within the hallucination cannot recognize that they are experiencing a world created by a higher-level subject. While this concept may be difficult to grasp in the context of semi-conscious hallucinations, it is more readily understood in dreams: the dreaming "I" is unaware that they are dreaming, and the "I" within the dream does not realize it is engaged in a fictional experience. The self is bifurcated, with one half referred to as the "dreamer", which is distinct from the waking "I" but exists solely within the dream world. This is illustrated in the famous Chinese allegory of Zhuang Zhou: Zhuang Zhou once dreamed he was a butterfly, blissfully floating, unaware that he was Zhuang Zhou. Upon waking, he was perplexed, unsure if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it was Zhuang Zhou. Yet, there must be a distinction between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly. This story highlights the intrinsic division of self within dreams.

This concept underpins the principle of the narrative subject, which I term the "two-I's difference" (discussed in Part III, Chap. 5). The "two-I's difference" is particularly evident in first-person fiction, especially in the *Bildungsroman* genre, where the narrative recounts the experiences of a series of past "I's." In such novels, this "two-I's difference" tends to resolve as the character matures and converges with the narrator or the present "I". Every "mental narrative" operates on the structure of the "two-I's difference", where "this waking I" is distinct from "the other I", which exists solely within the constructed world of the narrative. For example, in Dostoevsky's short story "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man", the protagonist contemplates suicide but lacks the courage. However, in his dream, he successfully commits suicide and experiences the entire process of his death and funeral. The waking narrator and the involuntary dreamer illustrate the "two-I's difference".

This brings us to the question of the temporality of dreams. Unlike storytelling, which is retrospective and requires that events have occurred before being recounted, dreams and hallucinations unfold in the present, much like performative narratives (such as plays or movies). Thus, in this context, dreams and hallucinations can be classified as "para-performative" narratives.

Dreams are formed through representations of present events, with mental images always situated in the present tense. Mental images cannot be stored or recorded, and dream narratives lack flashbacks (unless a character in the dream recounts a past story) or flash-forwards (unless a character in the dream makes a prophecy). Even if there are gaps or shifts in a dream, or if the dreamer experiences

[32] Bert O. States, *Dream and Storytelling*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 75.

a second-level dream (as in the movie *Inception* 2010), it remains unclear whether these shifts represent flashbacks.

Dreams possess a remarkable capacity to create possible worlds that transcend the limitations of reality, enriching human spirituality. Through dreams, we can explore parallel worlds beyond our immediate existence. Without dreams, humanity would lack art, religion, and storytelling. Dreams elevate human experience beyond the mere physicality of existence.

The preservation of dreams as a vital physiological-psychological function over millions of years of human evolution suggests that they serve a critical purpose, yet the exact reason for their endurance remains unclear. One hypothesis is that dreams have persisted throughout evolution because they have significantly enhanced human narrative capacity. Dreams have enabled humanity to transcend basic survival instincts, organize experiences through storytelling, and transcend the mundane through imagination.

Chapter 4
Conative Narrative

4.1 The Universal and Particular Conativity

The term "conation" derives from the Latin conatio, meaning an act or attempt. This discussion engages with Roman Jakobson's concept of the "conative function", Emile Benveniste's theory of the "imperative" modality, and J. L. Austin's notion of "perlocutionary" acts, all of which collectively inform the characteristics of future-oriented narratives. These narratives aim not only to recount impending events, but also incorporate predictive elements designed to persuade or compel the audience to act. This broad category encompasses promises, advertisements, prophecies, warnings, exhortations, propaganda, and oaths, among other forms. Despite their prevalence and significance, conative narratives remain relatively unexplored within the field of narratology.

The defining feature of this genre is its assertion of future events, whether through promises or warnings, aimed at influencing the recipient's actions. The dynamic within conative narratives is characterized by a deliberate interaction between the sender and the receiver, where the sender anticipates the receiver's response to the narrative. This response is expected to "achieve effects", such as encouraging behavior change or decision-making. For example, propaganda seeks to warn or persuade, advertisements aim to influence purchasing decisions, and prophecies often strive to guide or alter the recipient's course of action, such as influencing their voting behavior.

Searle suggests that a speaker's utterance carries meaning only if it meets three criteria: first, the speaker must make a specific statement; second, the intention expressed by the statement must align with the relevant context; and third, the listener must not only comprehend the utterance but also accept its validity. However, the focus of the utterance shifts significantly when its force is reoriented. If the force is aimed at the message itself, the utterance serves a locutionary function and falls under phonetic, semantic, and syntactic analysis. If the force is directed inward,

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
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toward the speaker, it assumes an illocutionary function, making it a subject for pragmatic study. Finally, when the force targets the receiver, it becomes perlocutionary, with the effect on the receiver becoming the primary area of inquiry. Searle classifies "five basic kinds of illocutionary acts: representatives (or assertives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations".[1]

The distribution of these illocutionary acts presents a compelling framework. Notably, three of the categories—directives, commissives, and declaratives—align with the concept of "perlocutionary" acts, where the aim is to achieve effects through words. This categorization mirrors Jakobson's six functions of the speech act, but Jakobson's focus is largely on literary and artistic texts, where "conative narrative" is but one aspect. In contrast, Searle places emphasis on how the force of speech acts brings about intended effects. This line of investigation is central to the Austin-Searle theory of speech acts. To address this, I prefer to introduce the term "conativics" to describe the specialized study of conation.

The extent to which diverse narrative genres fulfill the conative function of achieving effects demands thorough examination. One might argue that conativity is a universal aspect of all narratives, across genres. This universality spans fiction, historical accounts, performative texts such as plays and films, and interactive media like video games. Every narrative inherently contains a moral dimension, often anticipating a future impact. For instance, when someone comments, "It's cold here," the listener may interpret this as a subtle suggestion to close a window, despite the absence of a direct imperative. This example reveals how conative aspects are embedded within the narrative, shaping the listener's perception and prompting action. As Sadock notes, "Perlocutionary acts are the by-products of acts of communication".[2] Similarly, scholars have pointed out that the imperative function is intrinsic to all narrative forms. A notable example is the "testimonial imperative", seen in the accounts of Holocaust survivors. These narratives serve not only as historical records but also as solemn warnings to future generations.[3] In this way, texts across various genres carry an imperative meaning, even if "not reducible to a moral imperative in the Kantian sense".[4] This forms the ethical backdrop of the "universal conation" inherent in all narrative texts.

While much of the research in this field has focused on content, this work shifts the focus to form, specifically exploring the "conative narrative" genre. This distinction is crucial in understanding why novel of the future should not be categorized as a conative future narrative. The temporal framework of such novel is unique.

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[1] John R Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts", *Language in Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1975, p.1. Or see John R Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

[2] Jerrold M. Sadock, *Toward a Linguistic Theory of Speech Act*, New York, San Francisco, and London: Academic Press, 1974, p. 8.

[3] Risa B. Sodi, *Narrative and Imperative: The First Fifty Years of Italian Holocaust Writing (1944-1994)*, London: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 2.

[4] W. David Hall, *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension Between Love and Justice*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007, p.2.

Traditional fiction typically organizes experiences in the past or present, with past narratives paralleling historical records and present narratives resembling journalistic reports. However, novel of the future does not follow this temporal structure. Prophecies, though set in the present moment, project into the future, whereas novel of the future presents a narrative of a future time that has already passed. The "futureness" in content does not diminish the "pastness" inherent in narrative form. For instance, in Jack London's novel of the future *The Iron Heel* (1908), the narrator Avis recounts from the perspective of the "Second Revolt" in 1932 events from the "First Revolt", which took place fifteen years earlier in 1917 and saw conflicts break out between the working class and fascism in the United States. While *The Iron Heel* depicts events set in the future relative to its time of writing, its narrative form is structured as a retrospective account, employing a past-tense framework. It intentionally seeks to incite working-class revolution, and with its plot set in the future, it clearly carries a prophetic intent, thus exhibiting a conative function.

The notion of "universal conativity" suggests that all narratives, to varying degrees, aim to achieve some effect through words. This goal, however, is contingent upon the receiver's interpretation of the narrative's content. The focus here is on the distinctive nature of the conative narrative genre, which, according to the "Principle of Force Independence" outlined in the "Frege-Searle Hypothesis", operates independently of the narrative's content. For example, advertising, regardless of the particular story or theme, seeks primarily to persuade individuals to purchase products or engage services. This intrinsic conative function makes advertising a prime example of a conative narrative.

Gerald Prince, in *A Dictionary of Narratology*, proposes that "those passages in narrative focusing on the NARRATEE can be said to fulfill a conative function".[5] However, this view may represent a narrower interpretation of Jakobson's framework. In the case of second-person fiction, where the narratee is depicted as a character, the narrative does not necessarily intend to compel the narratee to take specific action.

4.2 Formal Characteristics of Conative Narrative

Conative texts are primarily intended to command, promise, or persuade. Unlike fictional narratives, events narrated in conative narratives may occur in the future but have not yet taken place; they merely express a desire for such events to happen. However, while the events described in conative narratives have yet to occur, they are anticipated or expected within a foreseeable future, meaning they cannot be classified as purely fictional. These narratives typically emerge from a present unsatisfactory situation—such as a childless couple who want to start a

[5] Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition), Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, p. 15.

family—and anticipate the conditions under which this situation may change. Their primary intent is future-oriented, envisioning the resolution of the existing predicament once a specific moment arrives or certain actions are taken by the recipient, such as the anticipated birth of a child for the childless couple. Although fundamentally factual, their truth remains contingent on future validation, rendering them "quasi-factual".

Conative narratives, which encompass both imperative and perlocutionary forms, exhibit several distinct formal characteristics as follows:

1. These texts are fundamentally non-fictional because they are aimed at altering specific empirical realities.
2. The relationship between the speaker and the recipient is clearly framed in a "I speak to you" context.
3. Although conative narratives are temporally situated in the future, they frequently use the present tense in their discourse to create a sense of immediacy and to encourage immediate action from the listener.
4. Conative narratives are open-ended in structure, and do not adhere to a predetermined conclusion, effectively leaving the responsibility for resolution or closure to the recipient.

Further substantiating the "factual" nature of conative narratives is their explicit orientation towards the future, which becomes particularly evident when the foretold event occurs. At that moment, the prophecy transitions from being a prediction into a reflection of the present or past. For example, the prospect of a couple conceiving a child is negated once they surpass their reproductive years. This indicates the definitive temporal nature of conative narratives, wherein prophecies are directed toward the real world and fulfilled within it. A historical illustration of this shift can be seen in the declaration "The azure firmament has perished; the yellow firmament shall rise", associated with the Yellow Turban Rebellion at the end of the Han Dynasty. Once the Han Dynasty fell, this prophecy ceased to function as a prediction and became a historical record. Similarly, the Mayan prediction about the end of the world in 2012 lost its prophetic status in 2013, as the future it foretold became part of the past. This transformation in status is fundamentally rooted in the conative narrative's intrinsic "factual" nature, which manifests through its explicit and direct connection with observable reality.

Thus, the future orientation of conative narratives, despite its inherent ambiguity, is tied to a specific temporal frame: a promise is intrinsically tied to time. For instance, if a boss tells an employee, "The company will pay you tomorrow", this statement is not only future-oriented but also factually verifiable once the promised time arrives. By the following day, the statement can be validated as an empirical fact, transforming into a retrospective narrative in the past tense, such as "You said the company would pay me today". Therefore, future-oriented narratives are verifiable, grounded in the potential for factual confirmation.

In contrast, fictional narratives such as the "novel of the future" present a vision of the future that remains perpetually unattainable. Even after the specified future has passed, it continues to exist as a future concept, not yet realized. Take Wang

Xiaobo's *Silver Times* (1997), for example, which begins with the statement, "Now is 2020", but narrates events in the years preceding it, specifically 2010 and 2015. Even after 2015, *Silver Times* retains its status as a novel of the future, similar to the date 1984 in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), which continues to be perceived as a dystopian vision of the future. In these works, the temporal setting remains fictional and disconnected from actual chronological time, because it does not align with the real-world chronological axis. Consequently, the two temporal dimensions—fictional and real—do not intersect, and the fictional future continues to be conceived as a future possibility, rather than as a realized, past event.

4.3 The Nature of Conative Narrative

Another distinctive feature of conative narrative is its medium versatility, which enables flexible implementation through various media. This narrative form effectively employs both recorded media, such as written texts and visual images, and performative media, including bodily expressions, verbal communication, and physical object presentations. For instance, the Mayan prophecy, inscribed in a script that remains largely enigmatic to scholars, is similar to that of a soothsayer's prediction. Likewise, one may engage with Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of the Universe* through reading the text to grasp the potential annihilation of the Earth, or by attending a lecture on the topic. Despite the differences in the medium—whether a written document or a spoken performance—the fundamental nature of the conative narrative remains unchanged. While direct interaction with a fortune-teller leans more toward the performative, and the Mayan prophecy functions as a recorded narrative, they retain the same conative essence. The distinction between media, whether recorded or performative, does not alter the narrative's core conative function.

The "textual intentionality" embedded in conative narratives is so potent that it can radically alter the mode of the narrative itself. An illustrative case is an advertisement for the Kohler toilet, in which a man, observing an attractive plumber entering his neighbor's house, decides to clog his own toilet in a desperate attempt to gain her attention. However, regardless of what he inserts into the toilet, the Kohler model effortlessly flushes it away. The advertisement concludes with the slogan "Kohler Class-Five Flush Power". This narrative departs from the typical advertising formula which generally centers on fulfilling the protagonist's desires. In this case, the remarkable flushing capability of the toilet directly contradicts the protagonist's intentions. Yet, the conative dimension of this narrative is so potent that it leaves no room for ambiguity in its message—namely, the superior performance of Kohler's product.

In essence, the conative narrative functions as a contract between the narrator and the recipient regarding the perception of the future. This contract is fundamentally grounded in the recipient's trust in the narrator's credibility. Whether engaging with Mayan prophecies, attending Stephen Hawking's lectures, listening to a

political campaign speech, or visiting a fortune-teller, each scenario relies on the recipient's belief in the character and competence of the person conveying the narrative.

Textual intentionality refers to the narrative's endeavor to exert influence upon its audience. As described by Benveniste in his theory of three "discursive modes", it extends beyond simple storytelling or narrative content. It refers to the narrator's effort to influence the recipient's response, embodying an attitude that shapes the interaction between the speaker, the discourse, and the listener. Among these discursive modes, conative narratives display the highest degree of textual intentionality, as they are aimed squarely at eliciting specific effects from the audience.

Although this genre of narrative has yet to be formally recognized within the field of narratology, several scholars have alluded to a concept that closely resembles it. This suggests that a dedicated exploration of conativity in narrative is becoming increasingly necessary. Should such a field gain established recognition, it would represent a highly practical study of persuasion mechanisms. The insights derived from this investigation could have wide-ranging applications in areas such as advertising, propaganda, and mobilization efforts. This emerging discipline would likely encompass both universal conativity—the inherent intent of all texts to effect change—and particular conativity—the unique qualities of conative narratives. Moreover, it would aim to explore why conativity is a vital component of human rhetorical acts and communication processes.

Chapter 5
Factual and Fictional Narratives: Double Segregations

5.1 Factuality and Fictionality

The examination of fictionality has long been a central concern in intellectual discourse, posing both complex and intriguing challenges. This chapter focuses specifically on fictional narratives, a category that differs from both the "fictional proposition", as discussed in the philosophy of language, and "fiction" as a literary genre. While these concepts often overlap, they diverge in the scope of their application and implications. A fictional narrative is characterized by the interweaving of fictional propositions or statements alongside non-fictional elements. However, the primary aim of this chapter is to explore the mechanisms that make fictionality a defining attribute of such narratives.

Fictional and factual narratives represent the two primary modes of narrative signification: understanding one inevitably leads to insights into the other. It is important to note that factual narratives are often viewed as non-literary, while fiction is traditionally associated with literary art. However, these two categories have areas of both overlap and distinction. For example, documentary films, news photographs, commemorative murals, and advertisements are generally seen as artistic but not fictional, while dreams, games, and contests are considered fictional but not necessarily artistic. To avoid confusion, this book deliberately refrains from addressing the dichotomy between art and non-art.

This chapter explores the attributes that are universally characteristic of fictional narratives across a broad spectrum of genres and media, including those in recorded media (e.g., novels and epics), performative media (e.g., plays, contests, and games), recorded performative media (e.g., feature films and audio-video recordings), and para-performative media (e.g., hallucinations and dreams). The principles discussed here are abstracted from these various genres, rendering them broadly applicable to all forms of fictional narrative.

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The task of differentiating between factual and fictional narratives, the two fundamental types of human endeavors in meaning-making and thought, remains one of the most challenging and significant issues in intellectual inquiry. Virtually every subgenre of factual narrative has a corresponding fictional counterpart—novel versus biography, epic versus history, drama versus oratory, conscious thought versus dreaming, and so on. Factual narratives are, by their very nature, "concerned with facts", though they are not exclusively composed of factual elements. In contrast, fictional narratives are not primarily focused on factual accuracy, although they may incorporate factual components. The central concern of each type defines its nature. Consequently, questions regarding the factuality of a narrative are relevant for factual narratives but generally do not apply to fictional ones, assuming the text is properly classified. This distinction extends beyond narratives to all forms of texts, clearly demarcating the fictional from the factual.

5.2 The Potential to Differentiate Factual and Fictional Narratives Through Stylistic Analysis

Traditional narratology has primarily focused on the formal characteristics of novels, often assuming their fictionality without addressing the relationship between a novel's formal features and its inherent fictional nature. This leads narratology to concentrate on morphological description, a method that, while effective within certain parameters, does not fully engage with the distinction between factual and fictional narratives. Notably, there are significant formal differences between these two types of narratives, and stylistic signifiers play a crucial role in distinguishing between them. For example, the differentiation between novels and journalistic works is often immediately apparent. Factual narratives are particularly marked by certain formal features that are considered inappropriate in their structure:

A. Quoting characters' direct speech is typically avoided;
B. The use of dialogues is deemed inappropriate;
C. Describing a character's thoughts or emotions (even through euphemisms such as "he was probably thinking…") is regarded as unsuitable;
D. Employing a character's point of view to narrate the plot is generally not done;
E. Offering excessive detail in descriptions is inappropriate, except when conveyed through witness testimony.

The presence of these "inappropriate" elements in a text often leads readers to question its "factuality", prompting inquiries such as, "How could the author possibly know this?" when such elements are encountered in any type of factual narrative. Therefore, in order to establish a "factual style", authors typically avoid these "inappropriate" elements in factual narratives.

Genette acknowledges that this style can vary significantly depending on both literary trends of the era and the author's personal style. An illustrative example of

this can be seen in the opening scene of *Ruined City* (1993) by Jia Pingwa, who is often seen as avoiding the "literary tone" typical of contemporary literature, his language aligning more with a "historical" style reminiscent of classical Chinese narrative. Most novels begin with a "behaviorist" description of the narrative setting, which can bear a striking resemblance to historical biography. In contrast, the opening paragraph of *Ruined City* deviates from this pattern. Here is an excerpt from the opening scene of *Ruined City*:

> Something strange occurred in the city of Xijing in the 1980s: When two devoted friends in search of a little recreation visited the tomb of the Tang concubine Yang Yuhuan, known as Guifei, the Imperial Consort, they wondered why so many visitors were scooping up gravesite dirt. They were told that since Guifei was known as an ageless beauty, if they took dirt from her grave and mixed it into their potted plants, the flowers would grow bright and beautiful. So the friends scooped up handfuls of dirt, took it home in their clothing, put it in a black earthenware pot they had kept for years, and left it there until they could purchase some fine flower seeds. Imagine their surprise when green sprouts broke through the surface a few days later, and within a month had spurted almost magically into a flourishing growth the likes of which no one had ever seen. They carried it into town to ask an old flower expert at the Yunhuang Temple what they had. He did not know. It so happened that Abbot Zhixiang was passing by at that moment, so they asked him. He just shook his head.
>
> One of the men said, "I often hear people say that the abbot can divine the future by using the Eight Taoist Trigrams. Can you tell us how many shoots this flower will produce?"
>
> The abbot told the second man to select a word.
>
> Since he was holding gardening shears, he casually tossed off the word "ear."
>
> The abbot said, "This is a unique flower that will bloom on four stems, but it will be short-lived."[1]

This passage includes direct speech, dialogues, descriptions of mental activities, character perspectives, and other narratological features typical of fiction.

However, it is not always possible to distinguish factual from fictional narratives purely through stylistic analysis, as a factual narrative can adopt a fictional style, or vice versa. This is particularly evident in subgenres like "nonfiction novels" or "new journalism", where the lines between fact and fiction are deliberately blurred. For example, Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968) carries the provocative subtitle "History as a Novel/The Novel as History". On the other hand, some works by Ernest Hemingway adopt an "objectivist" style that avoids traditional fictional markers,[2] further complicating the distinction. Foremost, the task of distinguishing between autobiographies, diaries, and first-person fictional narratives based on stylistic elements presents significant challenges, particularly when psychological descriptions, character perspectives, and direct dialogue are included in first-person factual narratives. This blurring of lines between factual and fictional storytelling demonstrates the complexity of such categorizations.

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[1] Jia Pingwa, *Ruined City: A Novel*, trans., Howard Goldblatt, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016, p. 1.

[2] Gerard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative", *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1990, p. 762.

Likewise, the task of distinguishing between documentary films and feature films based solely on stylistic elements is notably complex. While documentary films are conventionally thought to use "objective shots"—capturing scenes as directly observed by the narrator—this distinction is often blurred in practice. In contemporary documentaries, "subjective shots", which present the perspectives of characters, have become increasingly common. For example, in Zhang Yiqing's film *Ying and Bai* (2002), which explores the lives of pandas, the opening shots of pandas being fed are inverted, with the ground placed at the top, to reflect the pandas' tendency to lie on their backs. This inversion of perspective offers viewers the pandas' point of view. While it is unusual for documentaries to begin with such subjective shots—much like news reports beginning from a character's perspective—this stylistic choice does not undermine the factual integrity of the film.

Moreover, the production process of documentary films, rather than simply documenting events, often resembles the "performance" aspects found in feature films. A notable example of this is Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), in which the protagonist, Nanook, reenacts traditional Eskimo hunting practices for the camera. This reenactment was necessitated by the harsh environmental conditions that made it impossible to film actual hunting. Such practices challenge the idea that documentaries are purely objective; they acknowledge that not all footage in a documentary can be guaranteed as "real". The inclusion of "subjective shots" and the staging of scenes are permissible within documentary filmmaking. However, this raises a crucial question: How can one ensure that a documentary retains its status as a "factual" narrative?

Many scholars argue that it is not feasible to differentiate between fictional and factual narratives solely through stylistic analysis. Gerard Genette, for instance, claims that "more precise comparisons would only be a statistical matter",[3] emphasizing that distinguishing between the two based on style alone is an insurmountable challenge. I concur with this view, recognizing that the task is far from straightforward.

Is there a fundamental criterion that can reliably differentiate factual from fictional narratives beyond their stylistic features? New historicism suggests that the distinction between fiction and history is neither feasible nor necessary. This viewpoint extends beyond stylistic concerns to the very essence of these genres. As Hayden White argues, history and fiction are not as separate as traditionally thought. In fact, he posits, "In general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences".[4]

Dorrit Cohn similarly examines this issue and reaches a pessimistic conclusion: "For to say that narratology can provide consistent criteria for distinguishing fiction

[3] Gerard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative", *Poetics Today,* vol. 11, no. 4, p. 758.

[4] Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 82.

from nonfiction is not to say that it can furnish a consistent, fully integrated theory of fictionality (even less, a simple definition of fiction)".[5] Genette also contends that "on the one hand, as though all the features which distinguished fictionality from factuality were of a narratological order, and, on the other hand, as though the two domains were separated by an impermeable barrier which would prevent any reciprocal exchange or imitation whatsoever". Furthermore, "The 'indices' of fiction are not all of a narratological order, mainly because they are not all of a textual order; more often, and perhaps increasingly often, a text signals its fictionality by paratextual marks which are a safeguard against misapprehension: the generic indication 'a novel' on the title page or cover is just one of many examples of this".[6] Genette's position demonstrates greater epistemological skepticism, arguing that the ontological status of a text as either factual or fictional can be reliably determined solely through the examination of paratextual elements, notably including designations such as "A Novel" on a book's cover.

In practical terms, distinguishing between factual and fictional narratives is typically not as challenging as it may seem. When considering all factors—stylistic elements, genre conventions, paratextual cues—it is relatively uncommon to confuse the two. However, the situation becomes much more complex when dealing with various media forms. For instance, the difference between documentary films and feature films, reports and performances, exhibitions and installation art, or even confessions and jokes, is far less obvious. In these cases, relying solely on stylistic features, what Genette refers to as "indices", or even the author's intentions, is inadequate. There must exist a deeper, more fundamental principle that can differentiate these two primary narrative categories. Yet, identifying this principle remains an elusive challenge within the field of narrative theory.

5.3 The Potential to Identify Factual and Fictional Narratives Through Referentiality

In academic discourse, referentiality is often invoked as a means to distinguish between factual and fictional propositions. However, this criterion is far from universally applicable, particularly when applied to narrative texts.

The concept of referentiality has long been a significant subject of discussion in analytical philosophy, notably in Gottlob Frege's "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" (1892) and Bertrand Russell's "On Denoting" (1905). These foundational essays address the truth conditions and falsity of referentiality within propositions, yet

[5] Dorrit Cohn, "Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective", *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1990, p. 800.

[6] Gerard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative", *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1990, p. 770.

their focus remains at the sentence level, without extending to the broader scope of narrative texts.

This chapter adopts "reference" as a foundational framework to explore the distinct characteristics of fiction, particularly within fictional genres. It examines how these traits manifest in both verbal and nonverbal texts, leading to a discussion of shared fictional attributes that pervade various narrative forms.

A crucial distinction arises between a narrative that is "concerned with facts" and one that is "based on facts", which reflects two fundamentally different conceptualizations. Factual narratives typically are concerned with facts or experiential reality. Fictional narratives may also establish a foundation in factual elements by incorporating real-world experiences, documents, or even observed phenomena. Bai Juyi's "Preface to the *New Yue Fu*" (809) exemplifies this concept, wherein he asserts, "These accounts are rigorously verified and true, ensuring that those who collect them transmit trustworthiness," and adds further, "Every piece is devoid of frivolous prose, each phrase adheres to a moral compass… Their only aim is to lament the plight of the common folk, aspiring to bring it to the Emperor's attention".[7] These narrative poems were interpreted not only as accurate chronicles, but also as formal inquiries presented to the royal court, resulting in the overall neglect of their fundamental poetic and fictional attributes. Such practices were widespread before the modern era, during a period when generic classifications remained fluid and less precisely defined. Modern writers, however, are perhaps just as likely to explicitly cite their factual sources, as in the case of Gabriel García Márquez, who humorously claims, "There is not a word in any of my books that is not based on facts".[8]

Within the spectrum of narrative forms that bridge the factual and the fictional, several intermediate genres exist that are characterized by their "factual basis". The first of these is semi-fiction, also referred to as "factual fiction" or "faction", which blends elements of fact and fiction. A notable example is Norman Mailer's nonfiction novel *The Executioner's Song* (1979), which the author asserts is based on extensive interviews with hundreds of participants yielded a comprehensive archive of fifteen thousand pages of primary source material. The second genre, fictional autobiography or autobiographical novel, uses the first-person narrator to present a narrative that shares significant biographical elements with the author's life. Dorrit Cohn describes this genre as "an imaginary discourse directly quoted by the author",[9] a description that highlights the challenge of distinguishing between fiction and nonfiction in these texts. A prime example is Yu Dafu's novella *Niao Luo Xing* (《茑萝行》1927), which, presented as a letter to his wife, appears to be a fictionalized version of an actual personal letter.

Alternatively, "counterfactual history" introduces fictional elements into historical narratives, speculating on hypothetical scenarios like the possible outcomes of

[7] Bai Juyi, *The Collected Works of Bai Juyi*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1999, vol. 3, p. 52.

[8] Quoted from Zhang Guopei, ed., *The Research Materials of García Márquez*, Tianjing: Nankai University Press, 1984, p. 158.

[9] Dorrit Cohn, "Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective", *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1990, p. 794.

alternative historical events, such as what if Hitler had successfully invaded Britain, or modern China had developed independently of western influence. Despite its departure from strictly factual reference, counterfactual history remains a form of historiography, belonging to the broader factual genre.

Although fictional texts may exhibit a more limited range of referential elements, it is problematic to adopt Cohen's approach of using the presence or absence of a "referential layer" as a definitive criterion for classification. The volume of referential material, akin to the formal attributes of genre, should be understood as a degree of connection between a fictional narrative and the real world.

The second significant issue when applying referentiality as a criterion for distinguishing factual from fictional narratives lies in determining "the truth" of a narrative. Two methods are commonly used to assess the "truth value" of a text. The first method relies on intuitive experience, where the reader's personal judgment and understanding serve as the basis for determining truth. The second method involves deriving "inter-evidentiality" from intertextuality, wherein the truthfulness of a text is verified through its relationships with other texts. Using these methods, a text written in a fictional style can still be classified as a "factual narrative". Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* provides an illustrative example. Capote consistently emphasized the factual accuracy of his work, stating, "All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with persons directly concerned".[10] Here, Capote's use of direct observation—gathered through personal experience—and "inter-evidence"—drawn from documents and interviews—demonstrates a form of verification grounded in both intuitive understanding and intertextual corroboration. For the reader, engaging in direct "observation" of the events Capote describes is challenging, as the subjects are no longer available for firsthand interaction, and intertextual evidence may be difficult to access due to changing circumstances. These modes of verification ultimately rest on the author's prerogative to assert claims about the text's factuality.

If we accept that the fundamental characteristic of fiction is a "false claim of authenticity"—one that deliberately misrepresents reality while purporting to depict it—Capote's work, *In Cold Blood*, can be seen as asserting a "true claim of authenticity". Thus, whether this work is classified as fictional or factual hinges on the reader's acceptance of the author's assertions. This issue remains contentious, as many critics argue that *In Cold Blood* contains fabricated scenes, dialogues, and episodes not derived from documents or interviews but from Capote's imagination. The boundary between fiction and fact becomes even more blurred in such cases, revealing the inherent difficulty in classifying narrative texts along these lines. It is hardly surprising that the factual foundation of historical events and other factual narratives is frequently open to question. As a result, trust in factual narratives ultimately rests on faith in the conventions of factual practices: the assumption that the author has earnestly and rigorously followed these established protocols and strived

[10] https://www.theguardian.com/books/1965/dec/02/classics, retrieved on April 29, 2025.

to uphold them to the best of their ability. Yet, such trust is fundamentally precarious. What might be described as fictional reference, therefore, arises as a co-constructed dynamic between the author and the audience, resembling a form of tacit collusion.

An author of fictional narrative can be highly attentive to referentiality, much like an author of factual narrative may employ "fictional techniques". This dynamic interplay gives rise to a range of hybrid narrative forms that challenge traditional genre conventions, where creators of both fictional and factual narratives exhibit similar concerns with referentiality. For instance, new journalism sometimes blurs the line between richly detailed fiction and factual reporting, while biographies grounded in factual events may, in their narrative techniques, appear indistinguishable from biographical fiction. These examples complicate the task of distinguishing between factual and fictional texts. As a result, it is clear that a more robust and universally applicable criterion is needed to differentiate these narrative forms effectively.

Thus far, this discussion has focused primarily on written narratives. However, when we extend the analysis to other forms of media, the challenge of distinguishing between fictional and factual narratives becomes even more pronounced. In alternative media mentioned previously, the stylistic markers specific to written language are absent, and the creators' intentions are often more difficult to discern. This absence of clear linguistic and authorial indicators further complicates the differentiation between factual and fictional narratives in these media forms.

In conclusion, while referentiality offers a potential tool for distinguishing between factual and fictional narratives, its limitations become apparent when applied to narrative texts, especially in hybrid genres and across different media.

5.4 Segregation Between Narratives and "Empirical Facts"

The defining characteristic of factual narratives does not lie in their textual form or referential nature, but rather in the socio-cultural conventions that govern their reception. Readers are conditioned to expect "factual" evidence from authors of such narratives. Consequently, factual narratives are categorized as "referentially relevant", while fictional narratives are deemed "referentially irrelevant". This distinction, however, does not suggest that fictional narratives lack relevance to the empirical world. Instead, it indicates that the genre of fictional narratives does not inherently require such relevance. Therefore, the key differentiation between fictional and factual narratives lies in the way a text signals its genre to the reader.

This book proposes a conceptually abstract yet potentially viable solution to this challenge: the notion of "framing segregation". This theory asserts that all texts, regardless of medium, operate within a framework of segregation. In the case of factual narratives, the experiential world is replaced by signs that form a represented world. The boundaries of this segregation are typically marked by clear indicators such as opening and closing statements, titles, credits, and other formal

markers. Fictionality, however, introduces a secondary level of framing segregation within the primary one. This secondary frame makes the re-representation opaque, rendering factual references inaccessible and shifting the communicative dynamic from author-reader to narrator-narratee, thereby detaching the narrative from the realm of lived experience. From this perspective, it can be argued that all fictional narratives are embedded within a factual framework, which serves as a boundary for interpretation. I refer to this phenomenon as the principle of "double segregation".

The notion of a text as a construct that defines the boundaries of a combination of signs arises from the recipient's interpretative synthesis. This process involves the integration of textual forms, the interpretation of meanings, and the adherence to cultural conventions. Framing segregation thus constitutes a shared mode of signification and interpretation between author and reader, reflecting the cultural norms specific to the genre. Fundamentally, the way in which the recipient interprets and engages with the text is deeply influenced by the cultural conventions embedded within the genre. For example, a poem consisting of a single word can be regarded as a complete text, as the cultural parameters of the genre define what constitutes a poem.

Framing segregation, although it may seem like a matter of formal structure, actually serves to distinguish the represented world on three distinct levels: semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic. This notion was discussed in Chap. 2, where we examined mediation as a primary characteristic of representation. Mediation, as described, is necessary for the representation of direct experiences, as it allows for perception through the use of a medium. For any text to be perceived, it must undergo mediation.

The first level of framing segregation refers to the frame of representation itself, which isolates the text from the empirical world. Once an entity is represented in a specific medium, it is no longer present in its original form but is supplanted by a sign. Representation, in this case, acts as a substitute for direct experience and serves as a vehicle for perception—a sign infused with meaning. This primary framing segregation can be described as "representational segregation". Within this frame, the world presented is not the empirical world as we know it, but rather a constructed world of signs.

The process of substituting signs for real-world experiences is often subtle and may not be immediately evident. For instance, dreaming or hallucinating an event can feel almost indistinguishable from physically experiencing it, since the mental image functioning as a "non-specific medium" created in these states is constructed in a similar manner to direct perception. As Stuart Hall notes, the process of representing an object or event involves using a medium, such as a mental image, to signify something that is not present in its physical form: "Why do we have to go through this complex process to represent our thoughts? If you put down a glass you are holding and walk out of the room, you can still think about the glass, even though it is no longer physically there. Actually, you can't think with a glass. You

can only think with the concept of the glass".[11] The process of representation is fundamentally about producing meaning through utilizing a medium to represent an object or meaning that is not currently present, whether that medium is a mental image or a more conventional sign. Some scholars challenge the notion of mental images as a medium, primarily on the basis that they "cannot be shared with others". While this issue, often framed as a technical challenge related to mental visualization, is said to be in the process of being addressed, it is important to emphasize that shareability does not constitute a fundamental requirement for something to be defined as a medium.

"Medium substitution" is thus central to the representation. As discussed earlier, the boundaries of framing segregation remain discernible through elements such as titles, credits, disclaimers in documentaries, and cast lists of actors and characters in films. These markers serve as clear indicators of the framing context. In many cases, framing segregation is physically manifest, as in the case of a stage in a play, the frame of a picture, or the boundaries of a competition.

The concept of framing segregation does not inherently function as a tangible marker; instead, it is fundamentally an abstract construct. Even in performances where no physical stage is present, such as street performances, the boundary between what is "onstage" and what is "offstage" is still clearly recognized. Similarly, petroglyphs may lack a conventional frame like that of a painting, but they exhibit a demarcation between the areas within the artwork and those outside of it. In the case of frescoes in churches and temples, such as those depicting scenes of martyrdom, there may be no visible border between individual panels, yet viewers can still perceive both the separation and the connections between these panels. These borders are not always visual but are interpretive, as the viewer's engagement with the text actively defines the boundaries. The concept of framing segregation can be seen as a reverse application of André Martinet's theory of articulation, which posits that the articulation of the text is influenced by the viewer's interpretation. This suggests that the viewer's role in interpreting the text is essential in determining its boundaries and meanings within the semiotic framework.[12]

As noted in the "Introduction" above, texts can be broadly categorized into two types: narrative and non-narrative. The primary distinction between these two lies in the presence of a plot in narrative texts. For example, a song performance may possess a frame of representation, but this does not automatically classify the song as a narrative. Thus, a frame of representation is not inherently tied to a narrative structure. From the standpoint of representational segregation, there is no substantial difference between narrative and non-narrative texts. Both serve to represent some aspect of experience, and therefore, there is no specific segregation that applies exclusively to narrative texts.

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[11] Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage Publications, 1997, p. 17.

[12] See Henry Zhao, *Semiotics: Principles and Problems*, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2012, p. 94.

The first level of framing segregation is characterized by its "transparency", where the text is regarded as factual and perceived to refer directly to "empirical facts". It is crucial to recognize that this "transparency" is, in fact, an illusion generated by the process of representation. This illusion can lead to what I call the "representational fallacy", wherein the viewer overlooks the role of segregation and mistakes representation for reality. A prime example of this is Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*, in which a photographer believes that by enlarging a photograph of a potential murder scene, he will uncover the truth. Ultimately, he only discovers indistinct silver salt particles, which demonstrates the limitations of textual representation and parallels our inability to grasp the "reality" beyond the picture frame. The represented text, within the context of the first framing segregation, is "expected" to be interpreted as transparent due to the conventions of its genre, despite the fact that it is, in reality, a mediated construct.

5.5 The "Secondary Segregation" of Fictional Narratives

Fictional narratives require the establishment of a secondary segregation within the initial semiotic representation. This means that they function as a "further representation within representation". This idea is reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur's theory of "threefold mimesis": "The first mimesis refers to the pre-understanding of the 'narrative nature of experience' in everyday life…. The second mimesis refers to the self-construction of the narrative, which is based on the narrative codes within the discourse…. The third mimesis refers to the reshaping of reality by the narrative, which is equivalent to metaphor".[13] Ricoeur's framework can be interpreted as encompassing three stages: "Imaginative conception, factual representation, and fictional representation." The representation within this secondary framing segregation emerges as a result of the narrative's reconfiguration.

To effectively convey a fictional narrative, the author must create a distinct narrator persona. This creates a separation that signals to the reader the expectation to adopt the corresponding role of the "narratee", thus transforming the interaction from author-reader into a dialogue between narrator and narratee. Within this framework, the narrative no longer represents direct, primary mediation but becomes a secondary mediated representation, doubly removed from empirical reality. As such, readers no longer focus on the narrative's connection to empirical facts, as referentiality is no longer anticipated. This concept can be further clarified by extending Hall's illustration. Hall describes representation as the process of creating meaning through a medium, such as a mental image, which denotes an absent object or idea. For instance, witnessing someone drop a glass is an experience. Recalling this incident mentally represents a mental image, while documenting it in writing

[13] Paul Ricoeur, "Mimesis, reference et refiguration dans Temps et Recit," *Etudes phenomenologiques,* vol. 6, no. 11, 1990, p. 32.

transforms it into a factual narrative. However, when this scene is depicted in a comic strip, novel, poem, or film, it becomes part of a fictional narrative, detached from the original event. This process, although abstract, is a familiar and intuitive practice in everyday experience.

Various techniques can be employed to establish double segregation in narrative contexts. For example, an actor might begin with a factual narrative by introducing a play rehearsal. To transition into a fictional narrative, the actor could use segregating techniques such as gestures, the donning of a mask, dimming the lights, playing music, or other distinctive methods. These methods can vary in their subtlety and execution, but their purpose is to create a clear distinction between the actor's gestures and speech in the first framing segregation (the introduction) and those in the secondary framing segregation (the performance).

A poignant example of this can be seen in Mo Yan's play *Our Jing Ke* (2011), which begins with a thought-provoking secondary framing segregation:

> Qin Wuyang: (speaking with a modern, hipster accent): What is this place? People's Art Theatre? No! More than 2,300 years ago, this was the capital of the State of Yan.
>
> Dog Butcher: (stopping his work, also in a modern accent): You should say that more than 2,300 years ago, this was the most famous dog butcher's workshop in the capital of Yan.
>
> Gao Jianli: (singing in a modern accent) No relatives are big officials…
>
> Qin Wuyang: I say, Mr. Gao, you don't need to spend your years drinking and dreaming…
>
> Gao Jianli: What? Are you immersing yourself in the character now?
>
> Dog Butcher: I'm in!
>
> (The people on stage are refreshed, and they enter the play.)
>
> Gao Jianli: Where is Jing Ke? Why isn't he here today?
>
> Qin Wuyang: Maybe he has insomnia again.

Here, the first segregation is characterized as "referentially transparent", as it signals the "People's Art Theatre" and the actors' self-awareness of their roles. The phrases like "immersing oneself in the character" and the "refreshment" of their spirits serve as indicators of this separation. The actors then undergo a transformation, shifting from their roles as actors to those of their characters.

It raises the question of whether we can directly engage with the fictional narrative, bypassing the first segregation that serves as a backdrop to the introduction or as a "non-narrative act" (such as a curtain call at the end of a performance). It is important to note that, regardless of how subtle the first segregation may be, its presence is always detectable. For example, an actor might immediately begin the sketch upon entering the stage and exit without a curtain call. However, the very act of entering or leaving the stage constitutes a form of segregation.

In the empirical world, the actor is a person like any other, but within the first segregation, he assumes the role of an actor, conveying a narrative through speech and gestures. In the secondary segregation, he transforms into a character, participating in a fictional narrative. While the audience remains aware that the actor is

performing, they understand that his portrayal aims to immerse them in the "world of the character". In this sense, the actor occupies three roles: a person in the empirical world, an actor in the first segregation, and a character within the secondary segregation.

The opening of a film, with its title, cast listing, and disclaimer, represents the first segregation. This portion functions as a factual report from the empirical world (the filmmaking process) while simultaneously signaling the shift into the fictional world. As the narrative unfolds, the film moves into the secondary segregation—the fictional narrative. At the film's conclusion, the credits roll listing the names of the lighting engineers, costume designers, and other crew members signals a return to the first segregation. Gérard Genette's assertion that the paratext—such as statements like "This is a novel"—is the sole reliable indicator of the fictional genre refers precisely to those elements that augur the arrival of a secondary segregation. This applies to elements like the title page, publication details, preface, afterword, and ISBN in novels.

While factual narratives, such as documentaries or historical accounts, also contain opening and closing credits, as well as prefaces and afterwords, these elements are not distinct from the main text; rather, they are integral parts of it. For example, a report may refer to the content of its preface or dedication, while the body of a novel generally does not reference its preface unless it explicitly engages in "frame-breaking", a meta-narrative technique, because they constitute two separate narrative worlds.

The phenomenon of segregation can be observed in other contexts as well. For instance, the referee's whistle signifies the transition from warm-up exercises to the start of a game. Similarly, the initiation signal in a video game marks a clear separation from the preceding instructional portion. In music, an orchestra conductor raising their hand demarcates the boundary between tuning preparations and the actual performance. Likewise, the act of falling asleep creates a boundary, separating waking consciousness from the unconscious state.

The inclusion of outtakes or bloopers, such as NG (No Good) shots, during the end credits of films like *The Producers* (1967) or *Liar Liar* (1997) provides an interesting blurring of boundaries between the fictional world of the film and the real world. These shots, often humorous, reveal actors breaking character, flubbing lines, or laughing, thereby creating a form of self-aware rupture in the narrative. This technique transforms the closing moments of the film into a quasi-documentary, as seen in works like *A Time to Remember* (1998), where the climactic scene juxtaposes revolutionary fervor with the revelation that it is merely a film. The audience is left to recognize that the era depicted, though seemingly vibrant, can only be a "time to remember". Another example can be found in the sitcom *I Love My Family* (1993), where each episode concludes by incorporating the filming set into the frame, simultaneously capturing both the actors and the audience within a single shot, thereby creating a demarcation of the episode.

These examples render the fact of segregation explicit, but even if all traces of it are removed, the segregation itself remains. Whether such segregation is subtly implied or explicitly foregrounded within the text, its presence remains crucial. In

some cases, like *A Time to Remember*, the segregation is intentionally emphasized to create a sense of estrangement for the viewer, whereas in other cases, it may be deeply concealed, leaving only faint traces. Regardless of its visibility, the secondary segregation remains fundamental to any fictional narratives, functioning to delineate the fictional world from the factual one. Therefore, no narrative composition is free from segregation, and every fictional text inherently includes a secondary framing segregation.

The concept of segregation can be further understood through the semiotic theory of articulation, which suggests that our experiences are categorized and compartmentalized by frames: extra-representational versus intra-representational, and extra-fictional versus intra-fictional. This theoretical framework implies that our perceptual continuum is divided into distinct realms, each with its own ontological status. A significant consequence of neglecting secondary segregation occurs when the distinction between these domains is overlooked, leading to the transformation of the fictional into the factual. This is evident in cases where fictional elements, like smoke in a film, are mistakenly reported as real fires, or when radio plays create widespread panic. A well-known example is the 1938 CBS radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, based on H.G. Wells' novel, which was mistakenly believed to be a real alien invasion.

Historically, myths, now understood as fictional genres, were perceived as factual narratives by the cultures in which they originated. The distinction between fiction and history was not as apparent within the mythological context. This phenomenon persists today when contemporary myths are told: if the audience fails to recognize the narrative segregation, the myth can shift from a fictional story to an account perceived as a factual one, representing a direct replication of reality. A notable example of this is the analysis of American professional wrestling by Roland Barthes. In his view, wrestling is presented as genuine combat to the "bourgeois society", which chooses to disregard the fictional framework that underpins the spectacle.[14] The fact that certain forms of segregation go unnoticed in specific cultures is not due to an absence of observable traces but rather to a shift in the cultural norms that shape perception.

5.6 In What Sense Is Fiction Real?

Characters within a segregated world are typically unaware of the presence of the frame, oblivious to the fact that their world is constructed from signs. The primary function of this segregation is to separate the narrated world, a self-sufficient world, from the external world. This segregated universe functions as an autonomous world

[14] Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling", *A Barthes Reader*, ed., Susan Sontag, New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, pp. 27–28.

within which the represented and fictional objects and characters are perceived as experiential and real.

John Searle emphasizes this point, noting that, "It is the performance of the utterance act with the intention of invoking the horizontal conventions that constitutes the pretended performance of the illocutionary act".[15] In this context, while both Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu are fictional constructs to the readers of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, to Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu is a real person to be loved. Likewise, a dream, to the dreamer, remains indistinguishable from reality until the dreamer emerges from the dream-like state. Richard Walsh notes, "The function of the narrator is to allow the narrative to be read as something known rather than something imagined, something reported as fact rather than something told as fiction".[16]

The notion of "horizontal authenticity" is frequently contested, especially by critics who question the legitimacy of narrative segregation. Roland Barthes, for example, critiques "films which run the beginning of their story before identification of the cast",[17] a practice that gained traction in the 1960s. Barthes condemns this as an effort to "de-emphasize the coding of the narrative situation as much as possible: there are innumerable narrational devices which try to naturalize the ongoing narrative, artfully presenting it as the product of natural circumstances, and divesting it, as it were, of its decorum".[18] Figures like Bertolt Brecht, particularly in his experimental theater work, sought to expose the segregation in theatrical fiction, thereby reminding the audience of its constructed nature. Brecht noted that, "These problems are unknown to the Chinese performer, for he rejects complete conversion. He limits himself from the start to simply quoting the character played".[19] This "quoting" refers to the secondary framing segregation of the fictional narrative, creating a distance that fosters a sense of "verisimilitude". This may represent the "Chinese inspiration" that informed Brecht's concept of the "defamiliarization effect". A range of techniques employed by Brecht and other experimental dramatists were designed to disrupt the immersive experience of the audience, thus revealing the ideological underpinnings of capitalist society.

In the fictional frame, a narrative is regarded as factual within its own segregated universe; without this assumption, the narratee would have no reason to accept the fictional world as valid. For example, if Dr. Ray, the warden in *Lolita*, had not considered Humbert's deathbed confession as a factual narrative, he would have had no reason to engage with or endorse it.[20] The narratee, as an active participant in the

[15] John R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse", *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1975, p. 327.

[16] Richard Walsh, "Who Is the Narrator?" *Poetics Today*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1997, p. 499.

[17] Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives", *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no.2, 1975, p. 265.

[18] Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives", *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no.2, 1975, p. 265.

[19] Bertold Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting", *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetics*, trans., John Willett, London: Eyre Methuen, 1964, p. 94.

[20] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, New York: Putnam's Sons, 1955, p 8.

"game of communication",[21] must view the text as credible for the communication to occur. If the narratee dismisses the information as false, the entire communicative exchange collapses. This principle applies universally across all narrative framing segregation: fictions are considered fictional only from an external, empirical perspective; within the fictional world, they are accepted as fact.

Gregory Bateson's theory of "play and fantasy" highlights that communication game indeed involves an intricate relationship between fiction and reality. He notes that, "Paradox is doubly present in the signals which are exchanged within the context of play, fantasy, threat, etc. Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional. Not only do the playing animals not quite mean what they are saying but, also, they are usually communicating about something which does not exist".[22]

The relationship between the first framing segregation and empirical facts is inherently transparent, given that the narrative within the first segregation is a factual representation of the empirical world. By contrast, the secondary segregation encompasses fictional constructs, or representations of representations, which are doubly removed from the realm of direct experience. As a result, owing to its genre-specific nature, the secondary segregation must simulate factuality, creating a sense of reality. This distinction is evident in the differences between documentaries and feature films, as well as between historical accounts and fiction.

For example, in documentary filmmaking, private details—such as nudity or the identity of a suspect—are obscured using techniques like "mosaicking" which signals the documentary's framing boundaries. In contrast, in fictional feature films, the artifice is hidden more subtly. Private areas might be concealed using props or camera angles rather than overt techniques like mosaics. This maintains the illusion of reality within the fictional domain while keeping the boundaries of the secondary segregation invisible.

When the fictional frame is revealed, it disrupts the "inner reality" of the narrative. A prime example of this occurs in *The Truman Show* (1998), where the protagonist, Truman's life is being recorded and aired as a documentary-style television show. When he notices the repetitive and illogical events around him—such as the sudden reappearance of his supposedly deceased father, Truman begins to question his reality. These signs of the secondary framing segregation reveal the constructed nature of his world. Unlike the characters around him, who operate within the first segregation (the world of the actors), Truman, as the sole character within the secondary segregation, is aware that his world is a staged fictional narrative, thus prompting his desire to escape and discover the "truth" beyond the constructed frame. Before revealing the frame of secondary segregation, all actors within the show function as real to Truman since characters within the secondary segregation remain real to each other, reinforcing the authenticity of their experiences. This is

[21] E. Tory Higgins, "Achieving 'Shared Reality' in the Communication Game: A Social Action that Creates Meaning", *Journal of Language and Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1992, pp 107–131.

[22] Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy", *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1972, p. 188.

why the director informs Truman that he is "real" and that everyone loves him. The illusion persists within the fictional universe for the characters who remain unaware of the framing.

The primary objective of the preceding discussion on "secondary segregation" is to offer an alternative to Searle's principle. According to Searle, it is the reader who determines whether a genre is literary, while the author is responsible for deciding its fictional status. In contrast, I argue that cultural norms empower readers to discern the frames of both the first and secondary segregations. When engaging with a film or a play, the audience's initial focus, contrary to Searle's assertion, is not primarily on the literary or artistic quality of the text. Instead, their first point of attention is typically the scene that follows the opening credits or gong. At this point, they are not immediately concerned with identifying "literariness". Rather, they are determining whether they are engaging with a "factual" narrative (associated with the first segregation) or a "fictional" narrative (falling within the second segregation). This recognition sets the stage for their subsequent mental preparation and shapes how they receive the narrative that follows.

The process by which the audience identifies the narrative, influenced by cultural conditioning and prior reading experiences, may not always be entirely accurate. However, the reliance on the author's intention as a criterion for defining fiction is inherently subjective, as the author's perspective remains inaccessible to the audience. Therefore, the audience's recognition of a narrative as fictional, within the context of specific cultural norms, is generally more reliable than speculating about the author's intentions. This approach highlights the active role of the audience in interpreting the narrative, underscoring the importance of their understanding and cultural context over the often obscure intentions of the author.

Factuality serves as a fundamental characteristic of all narratives, whether factual or fictional. This raises the crucial question: what differentiates a lie from a fiction? Although both lack direct referentiality, lies are classified within the first segregation and are expected to provide a reference, even though they fail to do so. In contrast, fictional narratives fall within the secondary segregation and are not obligated to provide such a reference. A lie is perceived as a false narrative because it is categorized as factual within its genre. A confession, which asserts factual truth, may later be retracted by the confessor. However, fiction, due to its double segregation, cannot be retracted in this way. Instead, it may evolve into another fiction, as its fictionality is autonomously maintained, detached from the empirical world.

The "inner reality" of a fictional text, mentioned earlier, is the basis for the reader's expectation to "suspend disbelief", an experience that contributes to the "immersion effect". When crafting a fictional narrative, the author creates a segregation in which the characters perceive their world as an empirical reality. Likewise, the reader aligns with the narratee within this segregation, temporarily ignoring or dismissing the distinctions between the first and second segregations. Once this frame is consciously suspended, fictional and factual narratives, despite their differences in style, converge ontologically.

This phenomenon embodies the paradox of "fictional authenticity" in literature. Even though "realist" novels, like *War and Peace* (1869), contain rich detail or

"realist" paintings, such as Repin's *Religious Procession in Kursk* (1880–1883), convey historical depth and vividness, these elements alone cannot guarantee the reader's suspension of the fictional frame. The key to the "immersion effect" lies in the emotional engagement of the reader, which stems from their identification with the moral underpinnings of the fictional work. It is this profound moral resonance that creates the primary sense of "authenticity", effectively erasing the fictional frame and reducing everything to the realm of the "real".

As Nietzsche observed, "We had always believed that a proper spectator, whoever he might be, always had to remain conscious of the fact that what he saw before him was a work of art and not empirical reality".[23] In contrast, contemporary observers—whoever they might be—often perceive mediated representations as empirical facts. This shift raises the question: Are people, more than a century later, more naive in their engagement with artworks, or have today's sophisticated mediated representations made the distinctions between art and reality more easily overlooked?

5.7 Which Is the Markedness, Fictionality or Factuality?

The concept of "markedness" in semiotics refers to the characteristic of the less valued element within binary oppositions. This phenomenon is pervasive in dichotomies, where cultural markedness transforms the binary opposition into a ternary interaction. A key question that emerges from this is: within the binary opposition of factual versus fictional narratives, which is considered the marked, and which is the non-marked? This question has evolved beyond academic circles, becoming a significant topic of contemporary cultural discourse.

The debate traces its origins to the New Historicists' assertion that "history is fiction", coupled with a deconstructionist view on the nature of text. This perspective has catalyzed an intellectual movement within academia, arguing that all narratives and meanings are, in essence, artificial constructs—patterns imposed upon discourse. Within this framework, fiction is recast as the non-marked or "normal" form of narrative, while factual narratives are viewed as the marked, as deviations from the normal. Taken to its extreme, this view suggests that literary criticism itself, much like the works it critiques, is essentially a form of fiction, unconstrained by any fixed boundaries. As Norris articulates, "Criticism is now 'crossing over' into literature, rejecting its subservient, Arnoldian stance and taking on the freedom of interpretative style with a matchless gusto".[24]

Jonathan Culler similarly argues, "If serious language is a special case of the nonserious, if truths are fictions whose fictionality has been forgotten, then literature is not a deviant, parasitical instance of language. On the contrary, other

[23] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans., Ronald Speirs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 37.

[24] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (Third Edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 97.

discourses can be seen as cases of a generalized literature, or archi-literature".[25] In a similar vein, narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan argues that within the fiction-nonfiction dichotomy, fiction that yields "the prototypical narrative situation",[26] is regarded as the non-marked or normal form. In contrast, nonfiction is taken as a marginalized narrative form.

However, I am inclined to labelling fictional narratives as the marked or "negative term" in this dichotomy.[27] This perspective originates not from Habermas's cultural politics, Searle's semantic theory, or Abrams's textual ethics, but from the theory of semionarratology. Semionarratology contends that factuality is intrinsic to all narratives, providing a deeper understanding of why fictional narratives are considered marked. Texts that straddle the line between fiction and fact emerge as what cultural semiotics calls a "middle term", simultaneously neither one nor the other, or both at once. This ambiguity often leads to the interpretation of such narratives as factual rather than fictional. A notable example of this is Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, subtitled *History as a Novel/The Novel as History*, which was categorized predominantly as reportage and awarded the Pulitzer Prize for "General Non-Fiction" in 1968.

This "neither-nor" middle term takes three primary forms: first, when the secondary segregation between fiction and fact is overlooked, the fictional becomes perceived as factual; second, when this segregation is acknowledged, the fictional world operates with what can be termed "horizontal authenticity"; and third, when the audience is deeply emotionally invested, the fictional world is experienced as an empirical reality. In summary, as long as the secondary framing segregation is suspended, the fictional narrative world is treated as factual.

In response to the discussions sparked by Derrida's deconstruction, my position aligns more closely with that of Searle, Abrams, and Habermas: I maintain that factual narrative represents the foundational or unmarked form of narrative, while fiction constitutes the marked and exceptional variant.

[25] Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 181.

[26] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 186.

[27] See Zhao Yiheng, *Semiotics: Principles and Problems*, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2012, p. 283.

Part II
The Basics of a Narrative

Chapter 6
Narrator

6.1 The Duality of a General Narrator

As the cornerstone for the construction of any narrative, the narrator is the key figure in originating a full-fledged narrative. Narratology during the last century has developed around the issues related to, and complicated by, the narrator's notorious elusive identity. Jonathan Culler rightly observes, "Identifying narrators is one of the primary ways of naturalizing fiction".[1] By "naturalizing" he means understanding the text in common sense, that is, retelling (mentally, in most cases) the plot in a straight-forward manner. Furthermore, most narratologists agree that "an intertextual narrator can in principle be assigned to any narrative text, not just a fictional one".[2]

The pursuit of the narrator's identity is predominantly confined within the realm of novel studies, and it becomes elusive once we cross such a boundary. Venturing into diverse narrative territories—from history and news to drama, movies, and even the realms of dreams and hallucinations—the narrator's trace fades, akin to a distinct pathway in a dense jungle giving way to a vast, featureless desert. This transition renders previous discussions and debates about the narrator obsolete. In this boundless void, where conventional narratological tools lose their edge, the narrator seems to disappear.

Since to find the narrator is the starting point of any serious narratological discussion, we are left with no choice but to find a universal principle to locate the narrator in all narratives. If we cannot find him/her/it in one narrative text, out of the question is any conception of a general narratology since the latter presupposes a

[1] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 234.

[2] See Uri Magolin, "Narrator", in Peter Hühn et al., eds., *Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009, p. 351.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_6

common narratorial scheme. A narrative, by definition, must be narrated to come into being. Without a comprehensive understanding of the narrator's general shape, however chameleonic, no common ground can be established for comparing different modes of narration.

Checking the huge works of narratology since the very early years of its burgeoning till the so-called post-classical narratology of today, it is evident that no concerted effort has been made toward a general narratology throughout its history. This lack of endeavor is, in part, attributed to the difficulty in successfully summarizing the ever-changing forms of narrators, even though many narratologists acknowledge the necessity of identifying the narrator in the narrative structure. As Gaudreault observes, "What is needed, therefore, is first of all to attribute primary responsibility for a narrative's entire content to an implicit agent, which we will henceforth call the 'underlying narrator'".[3] Indeed we feel his/her/its eerie presence in the many names scholars have already suggested for this entity—illocutionary source,[4] implicit agent, underlying narrator, primary originator, and others, but, so far, the shape of the ever-changing narrator has successfully slipped out of our grip.

From the perspective of communications, the narrator serves as the information source from which the narratee receives the story. In the formation of a narrative text, the narrator can solely decide what and how to tell a story in the narrative text, since any narrative is formed by the narrator's free choice and organization of the empirical materials. Therefore, every narrative text must have a narrator, albeit possibly assuming different guises.

Examining various narrative genres from this point, this book proposes that the general shape of a narrator takes a form of person-frame duality. It can assume various shapes, ranging from a fully individuated flesh-and-blood person, to a fictionalized character, to an almost totally depersonalized frame. The narrator, however, consistently functions as the source of the narrative discourse, sliding along a frame-person scalar duality while integrating both aspects. The "frame" constitutes the fundamental form, while the "person" represents a specific form. In certain genres, or specific moments, the "person" may temporarily emerge from the frame. The shaping of the narrator depends not only on the narrative genre but also on the narrative style. For a broader analogy, this duality bears a resemblance to the dualistic nature of light in quantum physics, in which light exists as both a wave and a particle simultaneously. The prominence of each aspect depends on the observer's perspective.

Initiating a profound discussion on the narrator requires first addressing the nature of a narrative. A narrative text is not a spontaneous occurrence in nature; rather, it is the outcome of a specific semiotic process involving paradigmatic selection and syntagmatic combination. This process is executed by a subject and mediated to be shared with others. Mere changes of state do not inherently constitute a

[3] Andre Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumiere: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*, trans., Timothy Barnard, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2009, p. 67.

[4] Robert Stam et al, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Beyond*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 117.

narrative, nor does the experience of these events by sentient beings. Events transform into narratives only when they are mediated and shaped into a text that recounts an event involving human or anthropomorphic characters. Narratives without human characters typically take the form of reports about changes in the natural world or scientific accounts.

A narrative involves two procedures of "narrativization" by two subjects, in which the former organizes specific events into a text, and the latter reads the text to construct the narrative's plot. The construction of such a text inherently demands intentional efforts from a subject, utilizing one or more media. However, it is noteworthy that the subject does not necessarily have to make an appearance or leave traces in the narrative. Any text which has the potential to be narrativized can be considered as a narrative text. This includes single images, such as cartoon pictures or news pictures, as long as they can be interpreted as extending in dimensions of temporality and meaning.

Where, in such a narrative text, should we look for the narrator? Uri Margolin proposes that the narrator should be found where it is "linguistically indicated, textually projected and readerly constructed".[5] Although his analysis is limited to the novel, his three propositions for identifying the narrator remain broadly applicable to non-fictional or non-verbal narrative, but need to be reformulated as "textually indicated", "generically projected", and "receptively constructed". The issue of the narrator becomes more intricate as it depends on the specific genres and sub-genres, which, in turn, are influenced by the chosen medium.

The narrator, thus conceived, is a function of signification composed by the three elements of text, genre, and receiver, which could be individuated as a real narrator with flesh and blood or non-individuated as a frame for a narrative. To gain a comprehensive understanding, it is essential to examine the prominent narrative types, revealing how the narrator transforms into various frame-person combinations to fulfill the requirements of different genres.

In broad terms, narratives can be classified into two categories: factual (concerned with though not necessarily telling facts) and fictional (not concerned with facts). Additionally, narratives can be categorized based on two types of media: recorded (created in a specifically designed medium for future reception) and performed (occurring in a natural medium, such as voice or body, for immediate reception). Combining these distinctions, we can identify five narrative types, encompassing all known narrative genres:

1. Factual recorded narratives (history, journalism, etc.), and "quasi-factual" narratives (promises, propaganda, advertisements, divination, etc.);
2. Fictional recorded narratives (epics, narrative poems, novels, etc.);
3. Factual performative narratives (documentary films, live TV shows, legal speeches, reports, confessions, etc.);
4. Fictional performative narratives (dramas, games, films, etc.);

[5] See Uri Magolin, "Narrator", in Peter Hühn et al., eds., *Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009, p. 351.

5. Mental fictional performative narratives (dreams, daydreams, hallucinations).

The five types of narratives indeed require four distinct kinds of narrators, which take the forms of either a frame, a person, or often something in between. Which side of duality emerges more saliently depends on the specific genre, style and arrangement of the narrative text. It can be asserted that the narratorial frame constitutes the fundamental form in all narratives, while the narratorial personality may emerge within this frame. Generally, the factual narratives require highly individuated author-narrators, while fictional genres allow narrators to slide on the person-frame scale, changing from one genre to another, and from text to text.

6.2 The Author-Narrator: Factual Narratives

A factual narrative, whether recorded or performative, does not necessarily tell facts but, supposedly, tells a story about the facts. Whether in written or oral form, factual narratives have a flesh-and-blood author-narrator.[6] In other words, the narrator is none other than the author (e.g., the historian, the journalist, the reporter) him/herself, who actually produces the text, and injects into the narrative his/her personal will, emotions, intentions, opinions, and judgments. If there is prejudice in the text, it originates from the author-narrator; if there are fabrications, he/she is responsible for them. Except for the reported speeches quoting other people, every word in the text is from the author.

Since the "factuality" may be falsified or verified by the facts to which the text refers, it may ultimately prove to be false. The author-narrator can later declare that they were "deceived", "confused", or "forced" into creating a narrative that failed to represent the known facts (for example, a confession made under extortion). The author-narrator could assert that the originator of the previous narrative text was only his/her "second self" at that particular moment, not necessarily his/her "true self". Falsity is actually part of the definition of the narrative factuality. Indeed, a lie can be called a lie only because it is "factual". It ceases to be a lie when the receiver no longer cares about the possible facts it covers and no longer holds the author-narrator accountable for those facts.

Therefore, in the case of factual narrative, we may regard the author-narrator as the "executive personality" of the author, that is, only one part of the author's personality (not encompassing the entirety of it) responsible for the actual narration of the text. As the narrative text is factual, cultural conventions of receiving such texts dictate that the text must be interpreted as a report about the facts. When the receiver picks up the text, an inter-subjective agreement is established between the author-narrator and the receiver, shaping the understanding of the text as pertaining to facts, though whether the factual content of the narrative text is verifiable or not is beyond

[6] Gerard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative", *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1990, p. 757.

the scope of the narrative game at that moment. One may attempt to verify the facts referred to by the text (as, say, a police report) empirically (through a coroner's autopsy), or inter-testimonially (by comparing with other pieces of legal evidence). Whether such attempts prove effective or not falls outside the purview of narratological studies. Nevertheless, the author-narrator remains accountable for the facts presented in the narrative, akin to a policeman being answerable for his report, a lawyer for his legal statement, a journalist for his news, or a fortune-teller for his divination. Given that the narratives are entirely their own, their personality must be held responsible for the facts presented in their narrative.

That does not imply that all historians who write "sincerely" would arrive at the same conclusion about a particular event. Those who extol the French Revolution and those who criticize it might both assert that the credibility of their narratives is based on some "factual reports" found in (supposedly reliable) historical documents. Their narration obliges them to personally answer for the factuality of their narratives. Nevertheless, there are methods to diminish or even circumvent their accountability to verification when they transform a character in the narrative into a second-degree narrator. Journalists often reference the words of observers, lawyers have the right to summon witnesses, and fortune-tellers frequently allow their clients to randomly select the first clue—be it a tarot card or a Chinese character—to be interpreted.

That is why untruthful "factual" narratives, such as a liar's confession or a madman's report, are still considered factual. By acknowledging the genre of the text, the receivers enter into a cultural contract, treating the text as factual and thus granting themselves the right to pose questions about the veracity of the events recounted in the text. The same applies to rumors and gossip, which can attract a large number of curious readers because, although sensational, they belong to the factual genre.

Promises, prophecies, divinations, and some other similar sub-genres narrate events that are anticipated to occur in the future. Since these events have not yet taken place, they are not considered facts. However, these narratives are intended to be believed and are therefore treated as facts. In these types of narratives, the narrators must be the authors themselves. The audiences trust the authors' personality and their abilities to foresee the future, and they listen to these narratives with the expectation that what is told will become factual when the time comes.

6.3 The Split Narrator: Recorded Fictional Narratives

In diametrical contrast, all words in a fictional narrative (apart from the characters' speeches or thoughts directly quoted in the text) originate from a fictional narrator, to whom the author delegates the narration. In essence, the author is unable to interject any words into the text. Consequently, the author of a fictional narrative is not held accountable for factuality, as he/she has essentially declared before initiating the narrative, "Now I let someone else tell you a story".

And the story is considered true only in the narrator's and narratee's mind, not the author's and the reader's. In communication, any narrative that intends to be listened to or read should be factual (that is, containing something worth hearing). Otherwise its reception is self-defeating. As observed by Thomson-Jones, "The narrator is part of the story, the events of the story are real for him or her, whereas they are fictional for us…. The task of the narrator, fictionally at least, is to report or present those events to the audience".[7] The fictional narrative is essentially discussing "facts" within its narratorial frame, forming a fictionalized "factual" world, distinct from the real world. In a novel, for instance, the author constructs the narrator from a character or a narratorial frame. Thus, on the receiving end, a narratee can interpret the narrative as factual within this segregated fictionally-factual world.

Therefore, a fictional narrative requires a segregating frame within which the narrator's words can be conveyed. For example, Vladimir Nabokov has Prof. Humbert recount his life as a confession to the narratee, Dr. John Ray, the superintendent of the jail where he has been residing. In the world both of those two inhabit, Humbert's confession is factual as a confession must be, which enables Dr. John Ray to comment after reading it that it "should make all of us – parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world".[8] What Nabokov provides is not just a narratorial person but, more importantly, a narratorial frame that enables the narrator to serve as the author of the narrative, allowing the fictional text to be perceived as factual within it. Nabokov's fabrication could spare his characters from fictionalization, allowing them to be the author-narrator of a "factual" narrative within the framed world. Therefore, even the so-called first-person narrator (Humbert in this case)is always a "frame narrator".

The character-turned-author-narrator in a novel can certainly further fictionalize his/her narrative, but it is necessary for the narrative within this narrative to be "factual". In Ian McEwen's novel *Atonement* (2001), the protagonist-narrator, Briony Tallisout, wrongly accused her cousin's fiancé of rape due to jealousy. Tormented by guilt, during WWII, she describes repenting in the presence of the couple and promising to withdraw her accusation. However, by the end of the novel, it is revealed that this scene of repentance was purely her imagination, as both her cousin and the wronged young man had already been killed earlier in the war. Although the protagonist, being a novelist, has the right to fictionalize, the withdrawal of an accusation, as a narrative, must be factual, just as her previous false accusation was. The intended factual narrative now exists only in fiction within the framed world of the novel, and the protagonist, deprived of the chance to atone for her guilt, suffers from the remorse of failed atonement throughout her life.

In the two novels under discussion, there exists a notable presence of secondary narratives intricately woven into the overarching third-person narrative structure.

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[7] Katherine Thomson-Jones, "The Literary Origins of the Cinematic Narrator", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2007, p.78.

[8] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita,* New York: Putnam's Sons, 1955, p. 8.

This structure acts as the fundamental narrative framework. In the realm of fictional storytelling, authors invariably follow a methodology akin to that employed by Nabokov and McEwan. The process entails the construction of a narrative framework, wherein the author either explicitly or implicitly communicates, "I am presenting a story, narrated by another, which is to be accepted as truthful within this context". The engagement of the reader or listener in this narrative necessitates a willing suspension of disbelief. By continuing to engage with the story, the audience implicitly agrees to set aside their skepticism, entering into a tacit contract that acknowledges the events described within the narrative as factually accurate, albeit confined to the boundaries of the narrative's communicative framework.

Then, how about those who find themselves victims of "libel" by a fictional narrative? The initial step in legal proceedings or other forms of justice (such as public opinion) handling such a case generally involves establishing that the text, having transgressed the boundaries of its genre, is no longer a fictional narrative but a factual one. Consequently, the author is to be repositioned as the accountable author-narrator for the relevant parts. Should the implicated text be a biography or a news-report, the judgment of the libel can skip this first step, as it is predetermined by the genre that the author-narrator of the factual narrative has to be answerable to the facts covered by the text. In cases involving a biography or news report, the judgment of libel may bypass this initial step, as the genre inherently dictates that the author-narrator of a factual narrative must be answerable to the facts presented in the text. This principle even extends to a "false" entry in one's diary. For instance, if someone, like a biographer, aims to cite this entry as evidence of intentional deception by the diarist in their real life, they must first argue that the author-narrator should be held accountable for deliberately exceeding the genre's boundaries.

After the preceding argument, the narratorial structure in so-called third-person narratives can be readily understood: within the narratorial framed text, no character is designated to tell the story. Occasionally, a voice appears, providing commentary (e.g., "Unfortunately our hero forgot what he had said and blurted out…") seemingly emanating from nowhere. Narratologists often interpret these instances as the implicit narrator occasionally becoming semi-explicit. In reality, the voice originates from the frame, or, more precisely, from the unseen personal facets of the frame. Therefore, the frame itself serves as the narrator. This framic scheme holds significant importance. If we entertain the viewpoint of certain narratologists who argue that it is the author telling the story in a third-person fictional narrative, then such narratives are not fundamentally distinct from factual narratives.

6.4 The Frame Narrator: Performative Fictional Narratives

The narrative medium plays a crucial role in shaping the narrator. A performative narrative employs non-artificial media, such as the human body, voice, objects, etc., to tell a story. This form of narrative has deep roots in human history, predating the invention of specially-made media for storytelling, such as painting or writing.

While oral storytelling predates it, drama is the most typical genre of performative narrative. However, identifying the narrator in drama poses a challenge: it is not the playwright, who merely provides a script not necessarily followed in the performance, who plans the presentation and supervises rehearsals but need not be present during the actual performance; nor the stage manager, who coordinates the performance; nor the actors themselves, who should be regarded as media employed in narration. To locate the narrator in drama, one can envision a scene: above the stage, a sign (e.g., starting music, changing light, or rising curtain) signals the descent of a narratorial frame. This transforms the people on stage from actors into characters and the stage lighting into the sunshine within the narrative. When the actors eventually bow to the audience's applause, they step out of the narratorial frame and return to "real life". This narratorial framing is omnipresent in all performative narratives, although the actual "pushing in and popping out" mechanism may vary widely from one narrative to another. Children, for instance, know perfectly well when their mud cakes turn into tanks and wood sticks into soldiers at a certain moment, and cease to be so at another.

But what about the role of the story-teller in a performance? When an actor on the stage starts narrating a story, he/she assumes the position of the narrator within the narrative frame. This can be observed in the chorus of Greek tragedies, the Prologue Speaker in traditional Chinese opera, or the voice-over narrator in films. Even the story-teller in oral story-telling serves as a narrator within the narrative frame, despite their more consistent voice. In Chinese traditional fiction, the narratorial frame is akin to an "oral storytelling theatre", which holds more importance than the story-teller-narrator. The latter might or might not appear in the narrative text, and even if they do, they serve as second-degree narrators.

The debate on the filmic narrator has remained unsettled in film-study circles for over half a century, and it continues to be unresolved today. In 1948, Claude-Edmonde Magny proposed that the camera served as the filmic narrator, with the director's role being likened to that of the author.[9] Similar to this was the concept of "Camera-Stylo" proposed by Alexandre Astruc in the 1950s.[10] During the 1950s–1960s, the prevailing idea was "auteurism", proposed by Andre Bazin and those who argued that it was the director who narrated the film. However, in the late 1970s, auteurism gave way to a more sophisticated concept. Sarah Kazloff asserted that the filmic narrator was an "implicit story-teller" who could be identified as the "image-maker".[11] Christian Metz compared the film narrator to the master of ceremonies in drama, whom he named "grand imagier".[12] All these are "person-narrator"

[9] Claude-Edmonde Magny, *The Age of American Novel: The Aesthetic of Fiction Between the Two Wars*, trans., Eleanor Hochman, New York: Ungar, 1972, pp. 32–33.

[10] Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo," *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed., Peter Graham, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968. pp. 17–24.

[11] Sarah Kazloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

[12] Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans., Michael Taylor, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 21.

theories that, in some sense, continue today, as can be seen in Tom Gunning's proposal of "Demonstrator",[13] or Jerold Levinson's idea of "Presenter".[14] Nevertheless, there are scholars who contend that the filmic narrator should be regarded as an institution. For instance, David Bordwell has argued against the necessity of identifying a narratorial personality in the film. For, "In watching films, we are seldom aware of being told something by an entity resembling a human being…[filmic] narration is better understood as the organization of a set of cues for the construction of a story".[15]

Both of the perspectives—personal and institutional—hold merit, and this book emphasizes that the two actually complement each other, forming the frame-person duality of the narrator. The filmic narrator can be conceived as a single concept that incorporates both Bordwell's "set of cues" and Levinson's "presenter", embodying an imagined personality that symbolizes the narratorial frame established during production. This personality encompasses all narrative cues, orchestrating elements such as image, speech, writing, lighting, camera movement, music, sound, and montage within the filmic text. It also plays a role in excluding deselected elements outside the narratorial frame during production and post-production. This frame scheme is vividly illustrated in the film *The Truman Show*, where a frame, though somewhat physically evident, embodies all the cues integrated by the production team. The large dome in the film, along with the character and the director, serves as a second-degree frame within a higher narratorial frame.

Only through this dualistic theory can one articulate the distinction between the factual narrative of documentary films and the fictional narrative of feature films. In the former, the production team assumes the role of the author-narrator, represented by (though not necessarily identical to) the voice-over. In documentary films, all materials captured by the camera are deemed eligible for use in the film because, by definition, the events in the film are factual. In a feature film, however, those parts filmed not in accordance with the cues—that is, outside the frame—must be excised. The so-called No-Good shots (instances where the actor, for example, bursts into laughter when supposed to be serious) need to be removed or utilized in the "extras", as seen at the end of the film *Liar Liar* and many others. These serve as a meta-narrative gimmick in contrast to those within the filmic frame. Such "extras" are, in fact, "factual" as they exist outside the narratorial frame, i.e., not part of the narrative text.

Dramatic irony, where the audience knows more than the characters, exposes the performative frame to interference from an eager audience. This phenomenon serves to illuminate the dualistic nature of the narratorial frame. The significance of the performative narrative comes to fruition at the "present-presence", driven by the

[13] Tom Gunning, "Making Sense of Films", *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/film/, Published online, February, 2002.

[14] Jerold Levinson, "Film Music and Narrative Agency", eds., David Bordwell et al., *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, pp. 248–282.

[15] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 62.

constant unpredictability of its next developments. As spectators observe from outside the narratorial frame and gain awareness of foreshadowing details unbeknownst to certain characters, they may feel compelled to exclaim, "Juliet is not dead!" or even rush onto the stage to prevent Romeo from stabbing himself. This spectator's impulse enhances the narrative suspense to a greater extent than can be achieved in recorded narratives, such as a novel, as the frame itself allows the narratee-audience to be emotionally or even physically engaged in the performative narrative. On one occasion, during Guo Degang's captivating storytelling of a tomb-raiding adventure, a cell phone unexpectedly rang among the audience. He had to add into his narrative, "Suddenly there came the ringing of a phone at the most dangerous moment in total darkness. They were so startled that…" For a moment, the narrative frame allows for intrusion from the audience.

The "interferability" resulting from the "frame-breaking" extends further in interactive narratives, notably in video games, where the spectator-player's participation is a necessary force that propels the narrative forward. Game-players are no longer mere theater audience members occasionally forgetting themselves by losing themselves in the narrative. Instead, they are required to assume a personality, step into the narratorial frame, and, by substantiating the narrative with their participation, become a character-narrator within the frame.

6.5 The Narratee-Dominant Mental Narratives

In mental narratives, such as dreams, daydreams, and hallucinations, the narratee assumes the leading role, making it challenging to trace the narrator. This is why we often liken dreaming to "watching" a film. In reality, those who dream or experience hallucinations do not act as narrators but as narratees. We say we are "dreaming" because the narrator of the dream is another part of the subject, deeply concealed and requiring exploration by an interpreter or psychoanalyst. The dream received by the dreamer originates from the dreaming subject. However, the dream plot is the result of the narrator's (the dream consciousness) selection, arrangement, and processing, imbued with the narrator's subjective consciousness. Therefore, since ancient times, interpreting dreams has been a crucial way for delving into the secret of the subject.

Our knowledge of the narrator in dream narratives is limited because it cannot be directly observed. Typically, dreamers are unaware that they are dreaming, with the exception of lucid dreams where some awareness exists but usually without control over the dream's events. Similar to how an audience cannot alter a situation affected by "dramatic irony", dreamers are unable to change the narrative content. The dream's narrator, although implicit, is an integral part of the dreamer's subjective consciousness.

Therefore, the dream narrative is a story received by the dreamer, akin to the narrative received by the audience of a movie. The dream narrator remains implicit within the narrative frame. Its under-exploration is not due to a lack of study but

rather because this unconscious personality inherently resists complete revelation. The process of delving into it involves applying the language of consciousness to the unconscious, a challenge that precludes the full understanding of the dream narrator.

Dreams exhibit a highly intricate narrative mechanism, arguably the most complex when it comes to identifying the narrator. The dreamer assumes the role of the narratee rather than the narrator in the dream narrative, likening the experience to watching a movie. During dream narratives, only a segment of the dreamer's self (the mind's eye) engages in perception instead of the entire self, while the other segment of the dreamer's self engages in narrating the dream stories.

Dream narratives originate from the dreamer's self-consciousness, a process Freud referred to as dream-work. Similar to diary writing, dream narratives are self-narratives. Just as a diary is a record crafted by today's "I" for tomorrow's "I", a dream is a performance undertaken by one part of my consciousness for the benefit of another part of my consciousness. Presently, our understanding of the consciousness from which the dream narrative emerges remains limited, as direct observation of this source is unattainable.

Freud contends that dreams result from the interplay of two forces: one selecting dream material and the other processing it, a process resembling film editing. The dreamer's perception of a distorted and incoherent dream stems from various "rhetorical devices" employed by dream-work. The narrator of dreams, however, does not necessarily process dream materials by "censoring" and "repressing" the overly sexual materials. For instance, a dreamer shared a nightmare with me involving a burning bus after a widely reported disaster. In the dream, she found herself in the burning bus, and as it was engulfed in flames, her consciousness leaped out. From the air, she observed the burning bus before returning inside until she woke up in fright. If the fear of being caught in a fire is considered a wish, the processing does not strictly adhere to Freudian concepts like "condensation" or "displacement".[16] Instead, as this example illustrates, the dream's narrative form can unveil a clearer dream plot.

Dreams, being mediated narratives rather than direct experiences, have historically served as a means for individuals to delve into inner secrets, irrespective of the specific secrets one seeks to uncover. This is why dream narratives bear a striking resemblance to daydreams and various types of hallucinations, including those induced by injury, experienced on one's deathbed, brought about by drugs, inspired hallucinations, and those associated with psychopathology. While the waking conscious subject is in a state of suspension during dreams, it is challenging to entirely segregate waking consciousness from dream narratives. Dreaming often incorporates elements from consciously perceived experiences, such as sounds from the surroundings (wind, rain, or human activity) or sensations of warmth, cold, and touch. These stimuli may trigger visions in dreams that elude comprehension by the waking consciousness: "Therefore, when the negative element grows strong, he will

[16] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Ware: Wordsworth, 1997.

dream of being frightened by flood, when the positive element becomes strong, he will dream of being burnt by fire…Sleeping on a belt generates dreams of snakes; seeing a bird holding hair in its bill creates dreams of flight".[17]

Freud offered his interpretation of the dream narrator by distinguishing between "manifest dreams" and "latent dreams". According to him, manifest dreams, those presented to the dreamer, are the result of the transformation of latent dreams. "There is a psychic force which expresses itself in our dreams and establishes this apparent coherence; that is, the material obtained by the dream-work undergoes a secondary elaboration."[18] Manifest dreams undergo a narrativization process akin to retelling dreams, involving the selection and arrangement of materials in a sequential manner to construct a cohesive narrative. Recent advances in the physiology of dreaming suggest potential insights into the location of the organ responsible for dream processing. Solms, for instance, discovered individuals with damage to the parietal lobe no longer experienced dreams.[19]

6.6 The Dualistic Narrator

The diverse genres of narratives, spanning different media and factuality/fictionality schemes, require their narrators to adopt a specific position along the frame-person scale. This positioning contributes to the narrative's overall structure, emphasizing either the narratorial frame or the narratorial person within the text. It is only when the narrator is conceptualized as a dualistic narratorial frame-person that they can effectively fulfill the five narratorial functions:

1. Narrating function: The narratorial frame-person consistently serves as the origin of the narrative voice across various genres.
2. Directing function: The frame comprises the comprehensive set of cues essential for organizing all elements and motifs into the narrative.
3. Forming the narrating situation: As the fundamental narratorial device, the frame delineates the mediated and represented narrative world from the "real" world.
4. Function of communication: The narratorial frame-person plays a crucial role in prompting the narratee's comprehension of the temporal-ethical dimensions of the narrative, thereby realizing its signification.
5. Function of attestation: Within the narratorial frame, every element is considered "factual" within this segregated world.

Due to its ability to fulfill the five functions, the universal and indispensable nature of the frame-person duality is evident in all narratives, regardless of their variability.

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[17] Liezi, *Liezi*, trans. Liang Xiaopeng. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2005, pp. 68–71. Liezi (列子), a Daoist philosopher from the 4th century BC. Translator's note.

[18] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Ware: Wordsworth, 1997, p. 301.

[19] Mark Solms, *The Neuropsychology of Dreams: A Clinico-anatomical Study*, Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum, 1997, p. 34.

It can be confidently asserted that the narrator in any narrative exists in a perpetual dualistic state, with the frame being more foundational than the person, though not always more apparent. Even in a confession, where the narrator is inherently the flesh-and-blood author, the narratorial frame remains discernible: it commences when the confessor implicitly or explicitly agrees that his words, after a certain point, can be considered on the record, and off the record after another, thus encapsulating the narrative text.

The same holds true for the novel, which is both the most familiar and structurally complex genre. However, different styles of novels occupy various positions on the scale. According to the narratorial duality theory, the so-called "third-person" novel is primarily a frame-dominant narrative, whereas the "first-person" novel is person-dominant. Nevertheless, in all novels, the two phases are inherently coexistent. In the "third-person" frame-narrative, the "implicit" narratorial person may intrude, providing commentary or direction. In the "first-person" narrative, the frame remains visible, as the narrative voice can switch to a more objective description of the event's situation, often at the beginning or end. Due to the extreme diversity and sophistication of the novel genre, its narratorial duality is intricate but still analyzable using this theory.

Chapter 7
Secondary Narrativization

7.1 Narrativization and Secondary Narrativization

Primary narrativization, or simply narrativization, takes place during the process of structuring a text. Narrativizing a text means to convert a text into a text with narrativity. Narrativization specifically pertains to plotting and mediating, constituting a complex process extensively discussed in Part III and Part IV of this book. This chapter, however, concentrates solely on secondary narrativization.

Secondary narrativization takes place during the reception of a text. The completion of narrative communication relies on the receiver's engagement in secondary narrativization, as any text requires this process to be transformed into a narrative text. This is not merely about comprehending the narrative text or recalling the plot; it involves deriving meaning from the plot. The text is not simply "structured" but is an ongoing process of "structuring". The term "structured" pertains to narrativization, and the dynamic aspect of "structuring" is vividly evident in the process of secondary narrativization.

Is it then the case that any text can be secondarily narrativized? If the secondary narrative is shaped by an individual's personal imagination or interpretation, there is minimal need for the text to possess a specific quality of narrativity. An individual might envision a scenario where dragons and tigers engage in battle amidst a chaotic sky of clouds, deriving personal insights from what may seem like a disorderly scene. However, relying solely on the reader's interpretation criteria is not entirely convincing. According to Fludernik, "Narrativity … is not a quality adhering to a text, but rather an attribute imposed on the text by the reader who interprets the text as narrative, thus narrativizing the text".[1] This perspective tends to exaggerate the significance of secondary narrativization. It is important to note that no secondary

[1] Monika Fludernik, "Natural Narratology and Cognitive Parameters", *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, David Herman ed., Stanford: CSLT Publications, 2003, p. 244.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_7

narrativization can transform a text that is entirely lacking in narrativity into a narrative text.

There are numerous arguments regarding the primary determinant of meaning interpretation. While it is not feasible to conduct an exhaustive discussion on the theories of various schools here, their views can be broadly categorized into three main groups: meaning generated in the author's intention (Hirsch et al.);[2] meaning generated in the text alone (the "New Criticism"); and meaning generated in the reader's reading (reader-response theory, reception theory).[3] Efforts are underway to harmonize divergent perspectives, exemplified by Eco's proposition aimed at reconciling the initial two arguments. The assertion that meaning possesses infinitude does not negate the existence of constraints or criteria governing its interpretation. Eco thus underscores the potential misapplication of the concept of "unlimited semiosis".[4]

At times, the absence of a standardized interpretation may appear preferable, leading to an open text characterized by unlimited semiosis. However, it is imperative to recognize the necessity of interpretative standards for engaging in discussions concerning textual structure and signification. Without such standards, it is impossible to interpret the meaning of the text, to construct the implied author, or to discuss the reliability of the narrator. Thus interpretation emerges as a dynamic and open-ended concept, incorporating criteria while eschewing absolute standards. The focus of research inquiry, as proposed by Stanley Fish, extends beyond an individualized and "atomized" relativistic scenario, directing attention instead towards the general rules adhered to by an "interpretive community" within a given society or culture when encountering a text.[5]

This book advocates the reconciliation of the notions that the text and the reader are the source of narrative meaning, specifically emphasizing that the reader interprets the meaning of the text in a particular manner. Secondary narrativization can be categorized into four groups based on their complexity, as delineated below:

Reactive secondary narrativization, characterized as the most straightforward, pertains to texts featuring a coherent and lucid plot. In such instances, recipients are expected to passively receive and "faithfully" replicate the narrative. This tendency is commonly observed in narratives possessing limited humanistic qualities, notably those associated with the conveyance of intelligence information.

Reductive secondary narrativization is applicable to texts characterized by a comparatively disorderly plot, necessitating a rearrangement of the narrative.

Compromising secondary narrativization, on the other hand, is employed when dealing with texts featuring exceedingly chaotic plots, requiring a substantial restructuring of the narrative.

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[2] E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.

[3] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

[4] Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 3.

[5] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Creative secondary narrativization is employed for texts exhibiting logically contradictory plots, demanding a recreation of the narrative.

Given that the narrating subject of secondary narrativization is the "interpretive community" possessing cognitive capacities within a specific cultural context, individuals who are members of this community are uniquely equipped to engage in such secondary narrativizations. This capability is restricted to those who broadly align with the prescribed mode of reading and interpretation. It is essential to recognize that the capacity for secondary narrativization is not inborn. Although it may have some roots in human nature, specifically the human propensity for storytelling, it has more to do with the culturalization of individuals within a particular cultural milieu. Consequently, the secondary narrativization expounded upon in this section is inherently collective and socio-cultural in nature.

The interpretive community's capacity for secondary narrativization, though devoid of personal attributes, is dynamic rather than static. A case in point is the discernible evolution over the past century, wherein the contemporary cinematic "interpretive communities" exhibit a significantly augmented capacity for secondary narrativization compared to what could have been envisioned during the nascent stages of cinema's development. This expanded capacity for secondary narrativization has, consequently, engendered a substantial transformation in the narrative conventions employed in filmmaking. Numerous present-day filmic narratives would have been utterly incomprehensible to audiences in the initial decades of the twentieth century, and a comparable acceleration is possibly even more evident in the realm of advertising narratives. The present television audience, having been exposed to an extensive array of commercials numbering in the hundreds of thousands before reaching adulthood, is conversant with diverse narrative techniques employed in advertising. This heightened familiarity grants contemporary advertising designers greater creative latitude, rendering advertisements from two decades ago appear awkward and, to some extent, ludicrous by contemporary standards.

Furthermore, a discernible decline in the capacity for secondary narrativization is observed, as the overall complexity of contemporary fiction tends to be lesser than that found in the works of Faulkner, Joyce, and Borges from half a century ago. Present-day readers, influenced by their reading habits in popular literature, often find themselves incapable of engaging with the intricacies inherent in the "modernist" fiction of that era. The capacity for secondary narrativization is a culturally cultivated phenomenon, and there exists no compelling rationale to anticipate that human culture will inherently "evolve" towards increased complexity.

7.2 "Reductive" Secondary Narrativization

In the process of secondary narrativization, the primary focus lies in the restructuring of the text's plot, an umbrella term encompassing various constituent elements. Notably, four of these elements coalesce into the two pivotal chains of

temporal-causal and logical-moral dimensions. The approach advocated in this book aligns somewhat with the operation of the five "codes" proposed by Barthes in *S/Z*.[6] The reason why Barthes calls motifs "codes" may be that there is something similar about the ways readers interpret motifs and the codes needed to interpret a text. While the narrative text contributes varying degrees of material for these four aspects, it invariably falls short of completely filling informational gaps or presenting them in their "original state of events". It is precisely these aspects that necessitate rearrangement, restructuring, and recreation during the course of secondary narrativization.

One could imagine the plot of a paradigmatic narrative text adhering to the following structure:

The narrative unfolds within a linear structure, characterized by a temporal and logical arrangement of actions and events that adhere to a "natural" progression. The causal chain maintains consistency with the temporal sequence, ensuring a clear, coherent, and uninterrupted progression of "cause and effect". Logically, all clues are methodically interconnected, culminating in a satisfactory closure where distinctions between good and evil are sharply demarcated, leading to their respective rewards, and each narrative thread reaches its culmination.

When faced with a narrative text characterized by an unambiguous alignment of its temporal-causal and logical-moral chains, requiring no deciphering challenges, such a text necessitates merely reactive comprehension. However, the prospect of encountering a narrative that effortlessly fulfills these conditions seems elusive. Even seemingly straightforward narratives, such as bedtime stories for children or ancient national legends, do not entirely escape the reconstruction of secondary narrativization. As an individual evolves into a "cultural being", or as a nation matures, there ensues a gradual development of the capacity for intricate reconstruction. Consequently, narrative texts acquire increasing complexity across its temporal, causal, logical, and moral chains.

A prevalent criterion for engaging in "reductive" secondary narrativization is the identification of the narrative's "intelligibility" in alignment with cultural norms. Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* introduced the concept of "naturalization", a term encompassing the broader domain of secondary narrativization. However, as we will explore further below, a substantial proportion of narrative texts proves resistant to being effectively "naturalized", rendering Culler's terminology susceptible to misinterpretation. The German narratologist Monika Fludernik, in her work *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, posits that the criterion for "naturalization" lies in oral storytelling. According to Fludernik, when a narrative text can be naturalized by the reader to resonate with the characteristics of oral narration, the text undergoes a process wherein various narrative complexities are rectified, leading to enhanced comprehensibility. Fludernik's assertion reignites the contentious discourse surrounding secondary narrativization. A cohort of scholars, including Richardson, stands in opposition, advocating for an "unnatural" narratology. Their

[6] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans., Richard Miller, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

stance contends that numerous narratives resist reduction to the purported "naturalness" associated with oral storytelling.[7]

I put the word "reductive" in quotation marks, just as Fludernik puts the word "natural" in quotation marks. This choice stems from the acknowledgment that there exists no inherently natural text or an original form to which secondary narrativization can be reduced or "naturalized". Instead, the role of secondary narrativization lies in rationalizing the narrative to a state of "comprehensibility". The criteria for this comprehensibility are grounded in the various cognitive rules, not necessarily consciously applied, by which individuals organize their everyday experiences. This book proposes the "common sense" principle of secondary narrativization, emphasizing that its purpose is not to be "naturalized" into an "oral naturalness" but rather to be "naturalized" into the realm of common sense.

The "reductive" secondary narrativization reconstructs the narrativity of a text through three chains. Temporally, this involves the reorganization of disordered events into a coherent order and sequence. For instance, in genres like detective novels or crime films, which typically commence with a deceased individual and subsequently trace the investigation to identify the perpetrator, the secondary narrativization process necessitates discerning whether a given episode constitutes a flashback or a flash-forward. Narratives characterized by significant chronological reversals, particularly in intricate constructs like "puzzle films" exemplified by works such as *The Burning Plain* and *Mulholland Drive*, may pose considerable confusion but retain the potential for clarification through the reordering process.

It remains consistently plausible to fill in gaps within the causal chain when discerning that specific segments of the narrative have been omitted. Analogous to fictional omissions, film editing necessitates skipping and omitting certain scenes, such as the events that take place between a character waking up and arriving in the office, to expedite the plot's unfolding. The secondary narrativization process serves to fill in these omitted scenes, allowing the audience to comprehend that certain actions, like the character's journey to the office, have been intentionally excluded. A pivotal characteristic of fictional narratives involves the delegation of "narrative agency to a narrator". By establishing the narrator as the presumed voice of authority (as exemplified by Gulliver recounting the tale of Lilliput), children listening to the story tend to accept it without questioning when presented by a narrative agent—the narrator—and find it more convincing. While adult recipients may harbor skepticism, the engagement of the story often prompts them to temporarily set aside doubts regarding the legitimacy of such delegation.

The most challenging aspect of secondary narrativization lies in dealing with the moral and ethical implications of narratives, which "reductive" secondary narrativization can only extrapolate from the text as a whole, particularly when the text does not explicitly articulate its moral principles. For instance, if an individual is portrayed as achieving success in life and career as a result of their virtuous actions, this

[7] Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models," *Narrative*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 113–136.

inherently implies a reward for moral qualities. While the narrative text may not overtly state, and often refrains from directly stating, that this success is a "reward for good deeds", secondary narrativization endeavors to distill these moral values embedded in the text. However, the crucial role of the receiver's moral competence becomes apparent when a narrative contravenes ethical principles. In such instances, the recipient is likely to find the narrative "unacceptable". The enduring prevalence of the Hollywood formula featuring a "happy ending" over almost a century underscores a cultural predisposition: Americans, valuing family highly, are generally resistant to narratives that deviate from this established moral formula.

"Reductive" secondary narrativization functions to fortify the narrativity of the text, thereby minimizing any discernible gap between secondary and primary narrativization with respect to causality and morality. This process unfolds seamlessly within the parameters set by the primary narrative. Deliberately introduced gaps, such as intentionally distorted chronological order or purposefully unspecified value judgments, are strategically left within the primary narrative to be addressed or rectified by the secondary narrativization.

7.3 Compromising Secondary Narrativization

Compromising secondary narrativization may have to be adopted when the plot exhibits such a degree of disorder that the application of reductive secondary narrativization becomes untenable.

Temporally, certain texts may lack a discernible progression of the plot altogether. The events depicted in the text may not be temporally situated, presenting, for instance, a singular image without a defined time span. In such instances, secondary narrativization becomes essential to reconstruct the chronological sequence and contextualize the before-and-after process. Notably, some narratologists contend that a solitary image does not inherently constitute a narrative. The American scholar Arthur Asa Berger, for example, states very clearly: "Generally speaking, pictures that stand alone are not understood to have narrative content".[8] According to Gerald Prince: "Narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictive events… neither of which logically presupposes or entails the other."[9] Indeed, a single image possesses the potential to be reconstructed into a narrative through the process of secondary narrativization. Even an exceedingly condensed film or a highly manipulated photograph can be interpreted as a narrative. An illustrative example is the following advertisement.

[8] Arthur Asa Berger, *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life*, London: SAGE Publications, 1997, p. 7.

[9] Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition), Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, p. 58.

To narrativize this single image, one needs to combine two scenarios (frying eggs and SEDEX—EXPRESS DELIVERY) into one. This "secondary narrativization" is just the process of understanding such narrative texts (e.g. advertisements).

Alber introduces nine "reading strategies" for secondary narrativization, among which the "blending of frames"[10] emerges as particularly effective. This entails perceiving the fictional narrative world as a fusion of two potential causal chains. For instance, Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* (1918) blends a madman's delirious utterances with a prophet's analysis of Chinese society. When faced with a narrative text that defies explication through everyday life's norms, the secondary narrator resorts to conjuring multiple causal chains until the entire narrative becomes essentially rationalized. This facilitates the comprehension of seemingly implausible scenarios, such as "ghosts speaking to us". Compromising secondary narrativization employs a frame-blending strategy, wherein elements of naturalization are selectively applied, and the rules and principles derived from daily experience and culture are partially set aside. For instance, adult readers, unlike children, may question the feasibility of Gulliver's experiences in Lilliput, yet conditionally embrace the fantastical nature of this captivating story. This form of "frame-blending" reading involves dividing the text into distinct parts, each adopting secondary narrativization in a different manner.

Arguably, the most formidable challenge for secondary narrativization arises in the context of unreliable narratives. The secondary narrator is tasked with discerning that the explicit statements within the narrative may likely convey the opposite of what is intended, necessitating an understanding that what the narrator says is not synonymous with their true meaning. This nuanced approach becomes crucial for deciphering the concealed ethical attitudes embedded in the narrative. A primary contribution of secondary narrativization to the narrative activity lies in constructing an implied author whose values align with those proposed by the text. A more

[10] Jan Alber. *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016, pp. 47–57.

in-depth exploration of these challenges, particularly in the realm of "unreliable narration", is reserved for the dedicated chapter (Part IV, Chapter Two). However, it is essential to highlight here that all unreliable narratives typically lean on compromising secondary narrativization to address interpretational quandaries. In such cases, conflicting meanings and values within the text necessitate the interpreter's adept correction, bringing the interpretation closer to the implied author. Nevertheless, these compromising readings are shared by members of the interpretive community and remain grounded in the text. For instance, in the narrative of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the narrator's critical commentary on Jia Baoyu's behavior is known by the interpretative community to be unreliable, with the implied author expressing sympathy towards Jia Baoyu. This exemplifies the enchantment of secondary narrativization.

7.4 Creative Secondary Narrativization

When the causal-logical chain within the narrative text becomes exceedingly perplexing, the receiver may give up on the task of secondary narrativization due to the text's lack of coherence. However, the realization of the text's semiotic meaning hinges on the active engagement of the receiver. At this juncture, the task of secondary narrativization becomes particularly formidable: reductive secondary narrativization is inapplicable, as there is no distinct original stance to revert to; compromising secondary narrativization or a "frame-blending" approach is unfeasible, given the irreconcilable nature of the text's varying possibilities, effectively nullifying each other. In response to this challenging scenario, secondary narrativization must then "suspend" its unattainable aim of "naturalization" based on the limited clues provided by the text. Instead, it necessitates a more open-ended and creative interpretation. Such a form of secondary narrativization goes beyond the boundaries of "objectivity" in interpretation. The text, rather than being a passive object for interpretation, transforms into a springboard for re-creation.

When a narrative text incorporates "denarration", it compels the receiver to engage in a creative secondary narrativization. "Denarration" represents a unique narrative technique wherein a plot line is initially introduced, only to be subsequently declared nonexistent or nullified. This technique is predominantly observed in postmodern avant-garde fiction and contemporary cinema. Notable examples include films like *Run Lola Run* (1998) and *Source Code* (2011), where the protagonist encounters obstacles repeatedly, prompting them to revisit and reattempt the task before them until success is achieved. A prominent practitioner of this technique is Robbe-Grillet, something that is evident in works like *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965), where the narrator discloses that a preceding episode is a performance on a theatre stage, or *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970), where the narrator asserts, midway through, that the first half of the narrative is akin to a poster. In Ma Yuan's *Fictionality* (1986), the story concludes by asserting that the entire narrative never happened.

With these episodes erased from the narrative text, the question arises: how is secondary narrativization to be conducted? The secondary narrativization must justify that the erased episodes could occur under specific circumstances. While the text explicitly denies the existence of these parts, the recipient is compelled to acknowledge their meaning since they are integral to the text. The act of erasure, in fact, becomes a defining feature of the narrative, constituting the very essence of the theme. The secondary narrativization process involves unraveling the significance behind these erased episodes, recognizing that their omission serves as a pivotal element that shapes the narrative's identity.

Creative secondary narrativization also comes into play when dealing with texts that are morally and ethically deemed "taboo". In such instances, certain narratives explicitly defy established norms of morality and civilization, necessitating the discovery of a "vicarious value" within the text. Every narrative inherently possesses moral underpinnings, and throughout literary history, societal moral codes have often been revised to accommodate taboo themes. This evolution is evident in works such as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), and narratives exploring paedophilic relationships as in *Lolita* (1955). These narratives are morally unyielding and resistant to compromise. In response, secondary narrativization must formulate new moral justifications for their acceptance. This might involve asserting that "human nature takes precedence over taboos" or rationalizing actions with statements like "the murderer had no choice" or "the aggrieved party had to retaliate". This form of creative secondary narrativization seeks to construct alternative moral frameworks that can justify the unconventional themes present in the text.

"Creative" secondary narrativization presents a formidable challenge, testing the endurance and moral capacity of the secondary narrator to extremes. If the recipient, or the entire interpretive community, finds the narrative unbearable, there's a risk of them choosing to disengage, leading to a cessation of narrative communication. However, over time, cultural evolution may play a role in "educating" the interpretive community, potentially altering its attitude and fostering acceptance of the narratives. For instance, today's interpretive community might eventually come to accept the moral complexities presented in works like *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *Lolita*, either through a compromising narrativization or even, in some cases, a reductive narrativization. The ability of a culture to influence the interpretive community's perspectives highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of narrative reception within a given society.

7.5 "Reductive" First or "Creative" First

How do the four secondary narrativizations differ from Hall's three kinds of codes: "dominant-hegemonic code, negotiated code, and oppositional code"?[11] In accordance with Hall's assertions, audiences possess the capacity to interpret any filmic text through three distinct modes, each yielding divergent meanings. The three delineated modes of secondary narrativization, as expounded by the author, encapsulate the strategies that receivers must employ when confronted with diverse texts. Hall's emphasis resides in the examination of the methodologies consciously selected by readers, while the present discussion directs attention towards the intrinsic methods necessitated by the textual content itself.

The majority of the preceding discussion has focused on examples within the realms of fiction and film. It is noteworthy that the requisites for secondary narrativization exhibit variations across different genres. In the domain of factual narratives, such as news reporting, historical accounts, and courtroom debates, there is a distinct expectation for secondary narrativization to adopt a "reductive" stance. While these texts are not uniformly bound to absolute veracity, their fundamental purpose lies in offering an account that approximates the concept of "truth". In the context of factual narratives, the term "factual" pertains to the relational dynamic between the narrative subject and the receiving subject. In essence, the secondary narrator is mandated to approach the text as a factual representation as conveyed by the narrator.

Recipients of factual narratives, such as a scientist perusing a field research report or a prosecutor reviewing a letter of accusation, typically eschew the mediation of a narrative agent. This practice extends to "quasi-factual" texts, including advertisements, propaganda, prophecies, or promises. In the case of these texts, the receiver is intolerant of causal-logical confusion, as any such ambiguity tends to arouse suspicion regarding the potential presence of intentional misinformation. For instance, practitioners of fortune-telling often cryptically assert that "the truth cannot be revealed", perpetuating an air of mystery and adding to the reader's skepticism.

Irrespective of whether a "factual narrative" ultimately leads to a discernment of the "truth", its secondary narrativization, compelled by the conventions inherent in the genre, must diligently strive toward approximating the "truth". Consequently, the predominant mode in this context is one that aligns with the "reductive" approach. Exceptions to this norm may arise in specific cases, such as factual narratives within fields like archaeology or intelligence analysis, where the paucity of material might hinder the construction of a comprehensive narrative text. In such instances, a compromising secondary narrativization could potentially find application. However, the utilization of creative secondary narrativization is considerably improbable within the domain of factual narratives, including intelligence analysis.

When confronted with contradictions in a text that cannot be resolved through a reductive approach, a compromising secondary narrativization, akin to the blending

[11] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding", *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Culture Studies, 1972–79*, ed., Stuart Hall, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 117–127.

of frames, becomes necessary. In such instances, it becomes challenging to uphold the classification of narratives as strictly factual. Within the realm of factual narratives, the narration ideally emanates not from a “person-narrator” but from an “author-narrator”. The narrator in a factual narrative must be the author, ensuring accountability, and cannot be a deceased individual or an individual with compromised mental faculties. Once a reader resorts to compromising secondary narrativization when engaging with historical biographies, news reports, spokesperson speeches, courtroom arguments, or “quasi-factual” narratives such as campaign promises or commercials, the factual narrative inevitably loses its claim to factuality.

When a factual narrative text incorporates elements of “denarration” or presents contradictions, the secondary narrator faces significant challenges in achieving a coherent interpretation. In legal contexts, for example, a higher court may reject a lower court’s decision by highlighting inherent self-contradictions within that decision. Given that a compromising secondary narrativization undermines the factuality of the text, the narration of a factual narrative text is confined to a reductive mode. This underscores the imperative for maintaining the factual integrity of the narrative through a more streamlined and cohesive interpretive approach.

The aforementioned observations hold true for recorded narratives in written media. However, the landscape shifts considerably in the context of performative narratives, introducing a pronounced asymmetry of meaning-values between the narrative text and the interpretation facilitated by secondary narrativization. Predictions for a sports game, by and large, demand a straightforward approach, often manifested in the form of simple assessments such as the “odds” in football pools. Conversely, the post-match analyses conducted by football authorities, sports journalists, or the lessons learned by fans tend to exhibit a higher degree of eloquence and reasoned articulation. When secondary narrativization is applied to the tournament, there is a tendency to understate or even disregard various elements of chance and luck within the “text”. The unfolding events may appear inexorable, adhering strictly to the anticipated rules of plot development.

As a performative narrative text, a game is inherently intricate, characterized by numerous uncontrollable factors. A “hindsight” narrative of a game is a typical “creative” secondary narrativization, starkly in contrast to the simple narration of prediction before the game. This principle extends beyond dramas, performances, and sports to encompass domains such as gambling and gaming. In all instances of “performative narratives”, orchestrating the progression of the text poses a formidable challenge. However, the secondary narrativization is compelled to imbue the narrative with coherence, offering not only causal-logical reasoning but, more crucially, ethical justification. For instance, attributions of performance failure may be linked to “going too far” and “losing control”, while competition setbacks may be ascribed to “disunity among players” and “diminished morale”. Failures in gambling may be attributed to “insatiable greed” or even viewed as “retribution for sins”. Given that the process of performance is concurrent with its reception, the ethical interpretation within secondary narrativization necessitates a creative mode. This creative approach, inherent to human nature as moral beings, serves to make sense of the constantly evolving narrative.

The secondary narrativization of dream narratives stands out as a quintessential example of the reactive mode. In narrative texts like dreams and daydreams, the recipient is invariably the dreamer, and the act of dreaming itself constitutes the narrative. Dream narratives tend to be disorganized and incoherent, compelling the dreamer to passively accept (experience) them in a reactive manner. In such instances, the dreamer lacks the capacity for cognitive adjustments; even when confronted with completely incomprehensible content, the dreamer can only passively receive it without the ability to reorganize or reconstruct the narrative.

For any narrative, secondary narrativization has the potential for perpetual extension, giving rise to what semiotics refers to as "infinite semiosis". This phenomenon is particularly evident in contexts such as book reviews, film reviews, game reviews, and notably, dream interpretations. The secondary narrativization of a recollection or narration occurs when a dreamer recalls a dream that has been comprehended or recounts it to someone else, seeking an interpretation or psychoanalysis of the dream. Given that dreams are often rife with contradictions, deviations from norms, and logical impossibilities, the secondary narrativization involved in "dream interpretation" goes beyond merely arranging events in a clear and comprehensible temporal chain of plot. More importantly, it entails discerning causality and ethical value from the apparent disorder and irrationality within the plot. Both traditional dream interpreters and contemporary psychoanalysts excel in the art of secondary narrativization.

The secondary narrativization employed by dream interpreters is fundamentally characterized by a creative approach. Nevertheless, when they present explanations to persuade others, they adopt a compromising secondary narrativization. In this process, they selectively set aside certain elements of the dream narrative and restructure the remaining plot through interpretation, inviting others to understand it from a particular perspective. A notable example is found in Freud's seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which abounds with instances of "compromising" interpretations:

> A young physician, who heard this dream related in my lecture-room, must have felt that it fitted him, for he hastened to imitate it by a dream of his own, applying its mode of thinking to another theme. On the previous day he had furnished a statement of his income; a quite straightforward statement, because he had little to state. He dreamt that an acquaintance of his came from a meeting of the tax commission and informed him that all the other statements had passed unquestioned, but that his own had aroused general suspicion, with the result that he would be punished with a heavy fine. This dream is a poorly disguised fulfilment of the wish to be known as a physician with a large income. It also calls to mind the story of the young girl who was advised against accepting her suitor because he was a man of quick temper, who would assuredly beat her after their marriage. Her answer was: "I wish he would strike me!" Her wish to be married was so intense that she had taken into consideration the discomforts predicted for this marriage; she had even raised them to the plane of a wish.[12]

[12] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Ware: Wordsworth, 1997, p. 65.

Freud's secondary narrativization in dream analysis employs the strategy of "blending of frames", where certain narrative threads are temporarily set aside in favor of emphasizing a specific causal thread. Freud referred to this as "distortion in dreams", wherein a surface-level story is utilized to conceal a latent one. It is noteworthy that many dream interpreters seem to adhere to a similar compromising secondary narrativization, substituting the peculiar narrative of the dream with a seemingly more realistic story purportedly grounded in "experience".

7.6 Function of Secondary Narrativization

Narrative serves a crucial social function as a means of semiotic signification, and secondary narrativization plays a pivotal role in this process. Without secondary narrativization, narrative communication would be unattainable. Beyond its indispensable role in communication, secondary narrativization significantly enhances the semiotic richness of human culture.

First and foremost, secondary narrativization facilitates the dissemination of the meaning of texts, ensuring that the interpretation of meaning is not confined solely to the sender's intention. While this dissemination is somewhat limited in "reactive" and "reductive" secondary narrativization, it profoundly enriches cultural signification in the realms of "compromising" and "creative" secondary narrativization. These latter approaches render the text open-ended, capable of multiple interpretations, and susceptible to infinite semiosis. The sender's intention, often aimed at obtaining a definitive interpretation, encounters challenges due to the uncontrollable nature of the secondary narrativization process. Even in the case of factual narratives, recipients may opt not to adopt a reactive mode.

The inherent uncertainty of meaning constitutes a fundamental characteristic of narrative texts within human culture, as emphasized in the introduction to this book, particularly in the context of explaining the necessity for narratives to include characters. "There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality.... A good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds. Both can be used as means for convincing another. Yet what they convince of is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness."[13] Bruner's classification is significant as it liberates narrative texts from the daunting responsibility of portraying an absolute "truth" (given the lack of definite meaning-values in empirical world events). Instead, it empowers them to excel in rendering lifelikeness, skillfully narrating the destinies of characters that evoke sympathy in the audience. Therefore, the role of secondary narrativization extends beyond a mere technical process; it often assumes an emotional and moral dimension. The

[13] Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Cambridge, Mass, and London.: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 11.

social function of narrative unfolds through the dissemination of meaning prompted by secondary narrativization and its subsequent extensions.

Furthermore, secondary narrativization proves essential in the interpretation of multi-media narratives. When a text is transmitted through various media, it is common for each medium to "articulate its narrative independently", resulting in a lack of harmony. The receiver must interpret the meanings conveyed by each medium separately and then synthesize them. For instance, when the speech of characters in a play conflicts with their facial expressions, the lyrics of a song do not align with the melody, the musical tune does not correspond to the title, or the images in a film do not match the language, deciding which medium takes the leading role in interpretation becomes a matter of discretion.

In multi-media texts, one medium often establishes the tone for meaning interpretation. In the case of conflicting messages between different media, the interpreter loses the foundation for an integrated reading. The medium that sets the tone for meaning is typically determined by the cultural pattern of the genre, not by the "importance" of the medium but by the definition of the medium, or, in McLuhan's terminology, by the medium's "hotness". For instance, the meaning of a painting is often determined by a para-text such as the title, and the meaning of a piece of music is frequently found in the lyrics, as both the title and lyric constitute forms of text with relatively clear meanings and generally become the "tone-setting medium" for multi-media texts.

In this scenario, secondary narrativization cannot perform a purely reductive reading of the text since the text itself does not clarify the hierarchical relationships of meaning between different media. Secondary narrativization reorganizes the messages of different media according to culturally inherited genre conventions, treating the messages of some media as dominant while considering the messages from other media as either supportive or contrasting.

Furthermore, it is secondary narrativization that imbues narrative with artistic value and defines it as a quintessential human expression. The essence of art materializes in the act of rereading. Barthes contends that rereading is a form of resistance against the ideology of commercial society. "Rereading is no longer consumption, but play (that play which is the return of the different). If then, a deliberate contradiction in terms, we immediately reread the text, it is in order to obtain, as though under the effect of a drug (that of recommencement, of difference), not the real text, but a plural text: the same and new."[14] This whimsical approach to reading, namely creative secondary narrativization, stands as the sole avenue through which narrative texts can attain their artistic prowess.

Interpretive commentary and discussion frequently become the chosen methods for revisiting challenging texts, such as competitions, games, and dreams, where the meaning may be ambiguous. The accumulation of ample repetitions of secondary narrativization, encompassing comments, criticisms, debates, arguments, and

[14] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans., Richard Miller, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 16.

commendations, has the potential to elevate a work to the status of a "classic", imbuing it with infinite meanings.

The absence of secondary narrativization would have precluded the cultural diversity evident in the aforementioned texts, and our current way of life would not have unfolded in the same manner. Therefore, exploring the role of secondary narrativization in shaping culture, and delving into the evolution of human capacity for secondary narrativization, are crucial subjects within the realm of general narratology.

Chapter 8
Revisiting *Fabula* and *Syuzhet*

8.1 The Trouble with Terms

Narratology's theoretical framework is largely built upon the dualistic model of *fabula* and *syuzhet*, a dichotomy that has served as both the cornerstone of narratological theory and a central tenet of critical theory for much of the past century. Despite its importance, this binary framework has proven to be a vulnerable point, or even the Achilles' heel, in the study of narrative. Barbara Smith has notably targeted this vulnerability, arguing that the dualistic model "is precisely such a conception of discourse that dominates contemporary narrative theory, and it is the dualism at the heart of that model of language that provides the scaffolding for the two-leveled model of narrative".[1] If this foundational model is indeed as unstable as suggested, it raises the concern that the entire theoretical structure might be flawed. Thus, a re-examination of these terms is not only necessary but could potentially renew and strengthen the field. It is conceivable that while the foundation itself remains indispensable, our understanding of it has been incomplete, and revisiting it may yield important insights for both narratology and the broader domain of critical theory.

The two-leveled model of *fabula*/*syuzhet* was initially proposed by the Russian Formalists,[2] with Viktor Shklovsky offering a foundational definition: *fabula* refers to the "latent structure" of events in their natural temporal and causal order, while *syuzhet* pertains to the author's arrangement of these events, which is where the

[1] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, p. 225.

[2] Because there are several transcription systems, "сюжет" could be Latinized as sjuzhet, sjuzet, suzet, sjuzhet, syuzhet (the last seems to be more common), whereas the transcription of фабула is quite stable—fabula.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_8

"literariness" of the narrative emerges.[3] Boris Tomashevsky further refined the distinction in his essay "Thematics": in the *fabula* "the events are arranged and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were present in the work".[4] Since the resurgence of Russian Formalism in the 1960s, the dual model has been central to the work of nearly all narratologists, including Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, Jean Ricardou, Claude Bremond, Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and Mieke Bal. Each has developed their own frameworks and terminology, yet none has entirely abandoned the *fabula*/*syuzhet* dichotomy. While their specific terminologies differ—Ricardou uses fiction/narration, Barthes opts for *récit*/narration, Todorov distinguishes between *histoire*/discourse, Genette uses *histoire*/*récit*, and Chatman adopts Todoro's story/discourse—most have continued to employ this foundational distinction. Notably, Mieke Bal diverges by using *fabula*/story, in which the "story" term occupies the opposing position in the binary proposed by Chatman: story/discourse.

The technical terms that arise in the field of narratology—whether the aforementioned English and French terminology or the Chinese *gushi* 故事 (story), *huayu* 话语 (discourse), *qingjie* 情节 (plot) and *sucai* 素材 (*fabula*)—also function in everyday language. The overlap between technical and everyday uses of these terms often leads to confusion. For example, the term "story" in narratological discourse should be distinguished from its common usage, ideally by placing it in quotation marks. However, even this precaution does not always eliminate ambiguity, particularly in interdisciplinary studies that intersect with fields such as stylistics or discourse analysis. The shared vocabulary between everyday language and specialized terminologies remains a barrier to clear communication and profound academic discussion.

To address this issue, some scholars have suggested returning to the original Russian terms. David Bordwell, for instance, uses the Latinized versions of the Russian terms in his film studies, and his Chinese translator follows suit by transliterating them as "*fabula*/*syuzhet*" (法布拉-休热特).[5] While this approach mitigates some confusion, expecting readers to become familiar with the pronunciation of foreign terms can be demanding. For clarity and convenience, this work adopts the terms "*fabula*/*syuzhet*", alongside the Chinese translation "底本/述本" (*Di Ben*/*Shu Ben*). In this system, *syuzhet* (or *Shu Ben*) refers to the narrated text, while *fabula* (or *Di Ben*) represents the pre-narrated materials.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many structuralists began distancing themselves from structuralism and criticized the *fabula*/*syuzhet* duality as a mere extension of structuralism's core ideas (i.e., the surface/deep structure model). However, contrary to these critiques, the *fabula*/*syuzhet* model is not derived from Saussure's

[3] Victor Shklovsky, "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary", *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays,* trans., Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, pp. 25–60.

[4] Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics", *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays,* trans., Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p. 67.

[5] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp. 49–50.

linguistic theory, nor is narratology a mere subset of structuralism. This model has endured for over three decades, even after the decline of structuralism. Notably, Mieke Bal's *Narratology* (1987) remains divided into two sections: the *Fabula* Section and the *Syuzhet* Section. Even scholars like Christian Metz and David Bordwell continue to employ this dualistic model, despite advances in film theory.

It appears that narratologists have reached a consensus that there is no immediate need to either refute the critics or modify the dualistic model. While "classical narratology" has evolved into "post-classical narratology", introducing many new ideas, few post-classical narratologists have sought to abandon the *fabula*/*syuzhet* model, nor have they sufficiently defended its continued relevance.

In the context of current interdisciplinary trends in critical theory, it is rare to see a scholarly community maintain such a resistant stance for decades. This conservatism, while maintaining stability, has also hindered the field's progress. Narratology now faces a developmental bottleneck, and revisiting its foundational concepts could be the key to moving forward. This chapter aims to critically examine the dualistic model and its viability in contemporary narratology. If narratology is to defend its relevance, it must confront these criticisms and be willing to adapt, even if it means fundamentally reassessing its core principles.

8.2 Can Several *Syuzhet*s Share a *Fabula*?

In her 1980 essay "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories", American critic Barbara Herrnstein Smith presents a systematic critique of the dualistic perspectives in narrative theory, particularly the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. Smith argues that the concept of *fabula* helps explain why "narratives are commonly said to be versions and conversely, to have versions".[6] She uses the example of Cinderella stories, collected by folklorists from around the world, to illustrate this point. These stories, while sharing a basic narrative structure, vary significantly in their details. For example, in an Icelandic version, a married couple "invite the wicked stepmother to a feast on board the ship at which they served her the salted meat from twelve barrels which contain the remains of the ugly stepsisters".[7] Smith also references Nai-Tung Ting's discovery that "the earliest complete version of Cinderella on record seems to have arisen in North Vietnam".[8] Furthermore, Smith recalls "a colleague who was able to demonstrate that all of Charles Dickens' novels are basically versions of Cinderellas".[9]

[6] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, p. 215.

[7] Ibid., p. 216.

[8] Nai Tung-Ting, *The Cinderella Cycle in China and Indo-China*, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1974, p. 40.

[9] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, p. 220.

Smith proposes that many stories are categorized as "Cinderella variants" "because we are so accustomed to performing certain kinds of abstraction, abbreviation, and simplification in the name of 'giving plot summaries'".[10] She suggests that we often take these abbreviated versions of narratives as representations of the "*fabula*" of a story, or the simplified plot summaries as the basic stories. In doing so, we treat these reduced versions as "basic" stories, but Smith argues that no narrative is "more absolutely basic than any of the others".[11] Instead, narratives are "covariants of each other in accord with some particular, but arbitrary, set of relational criteria".[12] "No narrative version can be independent of a particular teller and occasion of telling,"[13] meaning that stories with similar plots, regardless of their level of detail, are parallel, with none being more or less basic than another.

Smith also discusses how the concept of *fabula* allows for different narrative perspectives. In response to Chatman's view that *syuzhet* is a time-twisted narration of *fabula*, she challenges the assumption found in many dualistic models that a chronological order in basic stories is distorted in other narrative versions. Gérard Genette argues that "folklore narrative habitually conforms, at least in its major articulations, to chronological order, but our (Western) literary tradition, in contrast, was inaugurated by a characteristic effect of anachrony ('the beginning in medias res' of *Iliad*)".[14] However, Smith counters that "nonlinearity is the rule rather than the exception in narrative accounts".[15] She argues that there is no basis to assume the existence of an original chronological sequence of events, and the human experience or recollection of these events, as well as the author's process of narrative composition, are inherently fragmented and subject to distortion.

Smith concludes that no narrative version can be considered a "basic" story. She asserts that "Our current theories remain tied to dualistic models of language and confined to the examination of decontextualized structures, and they are deficient in descriptive subtlety and explanatory force".[16]

In the wake of the publication of Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse*, Smith primarily directed her critique against Chatman's defense of the dualistic model of *fabula* and *syuzhet*. Chatman, in turn, defended his position in an article, citing widespread support for the dualistic model—a stance that I think less than convincing. Smith's engagement with this discourse was further evident when, in 1983, she presented her ideas at the First China-U.S. Bilateral Comparative Literature Conference in Beijing, underscoring the significance of her arguments. After her presentation, I asked a straightforward question: "If Cinderella stories

[10] Ibid., p. 217.

[11] Ibid., p. 221.

[12] Ibid., p. 219.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans., Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 36.

[15] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 227.

[16] Ibid., pp. 235–236.

share no common elements, why are they all labeled as Cinderella stories?" Smith responded by characterizing this question as an example of "naive Platonism", a concept she attributed to Chatman's perspective. This question has lingered in my mind for three decades, and now, as I conclude this chapter, I seek to offer a clearer answer.

Smith provides a compelling argument, especially in one regard: she maintains that each narrative is independent and that different narrated texts do not share a singular pre-narrated text. She argues that no narrative should be considered the "basic" story for another, even in the form of a simplified plot summary. Chatman seems to agree with this viewpoint to some extent but adds another layer to his argument: that the same story may be represented in different forms across various media, such as "verbal tale, as ballet, as opera, as film, as comic strip, as pantomime, and so on".[17] This perspective suggests that a basic story might exist in different versions, mediated through diverse media and artistic expressions. This argument, which Smith did not explore, suggests that the issue remains open to further discussion and has yet to reach a definitive conclusion.

8.3 Is Plot Formed in *Fabula* or *Syuzhet*?

In his 1981 work *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, particularly in the chapter titled "Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative", Jonathan Culler critiques the dualistic model of narrative theory, as discussed in Mieke Bal's *Narratologie: essai sur la signification narrative dans quatre romans moderns* (1977).

Culler engages critically with the relationship between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, challenging the traditional assumptions that govern this binary framework. In the classical dualistic model, the *syuzhet* is viewed as a distorted or rearranged reproduction of the *fabula*. *Fabula* is considered to precede *syuzhet* logically, implying that the events within the *fabula* occur in a "true order", while the *syuzhet* represents a reshuffling of these events for narrative effect. According to this perspective, the narrative presentation, or the *syuzhet* is simply a reorganization of the *fabula*' s sequence, a modification of the order of events.[18]

To illustrate the complexities of the relationship between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, Culler turns to a well-known example: *Oedipus the King*. In the *fabula* of this narrative, the sequence of events follows a clear path: Oedipus is abandoned on Mt. Cithaeron, raised in Corinth, kills Laius at a crossroads, marries Jocasta, and embarks on a quest to find Laius's murderer. The revelation of his guilt and subsequent self-blinding and exile form the culmination of the story. This sequence,

[17] Seymour Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, p. 122.

[18] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, London: Routledge, 1981, p. 191.

Culler argues, represents the *fabula* as a linear progression of events, which, in theory, could be rearranged in the *syuzhet* for dramatic effect. The *syuzhet* unfolds much like a detective story, centered on the revelation of a pivotal event. The narrative focuses on the mystery of Laius's murder, which functions as a central enigma to be unraveled. Oedipus's investigation centers on uncovering the truth of this pivotal event.[19]

Culler points out a logical inconsistency in the *syuzhet*. Initially, when Oedipus inquires about witnesses to Laius's murder, he is informed that all died save one, who witnessed that the robbers, not one but many, fell in with the King's party and killed them. This account becomes common knowledge in the town. Subsequently, as Oedipus starts to suspect his own involvement in the murder, he tells Jocasta that everything hangs on the testimony of this witness, whom they await. Yet when this witness is finally introduced, Oedipus's questions shift to focus not on the murder itself but on his relation to Laius and his lineage. The witness is never asked whether the murderers were one or many.[20]

Culler highlights another significant issue in the *syuzhet*. "When the shepherd reveals that Oedipus is in fact the son of Laius, Oedipus leaps to the conclusion, and every reader leaps with him, that he is the murderer of Laius. His conclusion is based not on new evidence concerning a past deed but on the force of meaning, the interweaving of prophecies and the demands of narrative coherence…. Event is not as cause but an effect of theme."[21] Culler does not contend that Oedipus was actually innocent, having been falsely accused for over two millennia. Rather, his argument is centered on the idea that "Instead of the revelation of a prior deed determining meaning, we could say that it is meaning, the convergence of meaning in the narrative discourse, that leads us to posit this deed as its appropriate manifestation. Once we are well into the play, we know that Oedipus must be found guilty, otherwise the play will not work at all".[22]

Furthermore, Culler observes that the traditional understanding of the Oedipus complex may not align with the narrative, since Oedipus was unaware of Laius being his father, he "can scarcely be said to have an Oedipus complex".[23] Moreover,

> The convergence of discursive forces makes it essential that he become the murderer of Laius, and he yields to this force of meaning. Instead of saying, therefore, that there is a sequence of past events that are given and which the play reveals with certain detours, we can say that the crucial event is the product of demands of signification. Here meaning is not the effect of a prior event but its cause.[24]

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[19] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, London: Routledge, 1981, p. 192.

[20] Ibid., p. 193.

[21] Ibid., pp. 194–195.

[22] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, London: Routledge, 1981, p. 194.

[23] Ibid., p. 195.

[24] Ibid., p. 194

Culler employs the example of *Daniel Deronda* (1876) to further explore his idea that events within narratives are often "products of discursive forces or requirements".[25] In this narrative, Deronda is portrayed as the adopted son of an English nobleman and exhibits a profound interest in Jewish culture and religion. Deronda's journey of self-discovery culminates in the revelation that he is of Jewish descent. This narrative outcome, Culler argues, is not the inevitable consequence of prior events but rather the result of discursive forces within the text that guide the plot toward this conclusion. Just as in *Oedipus the King*, the events in *Daniel Deronda* are not determined by a fixed sequence of past actions but by the thematic needs of the narrative.

Culler's critique, in essence, highlights the contradictions within the dualistic model of narratology. He states, "They stage a confrontation of sorts between a semiotics that aspires to produce a grammar of narrative and deconstructive interpretations, which in showing the work's opposition to its own logic suggest the impossibility of such a grammar".[26] Here, the "Semiotics that aspires to produce a grammar of narrative" pertains specifically to the dualistic model within the field of narratology.

Culler's arguments suggest that the traditional dualistic model presupposes that *fabula* precedes *syuzhet*. Within this framework, the *syuzhet* is seen as a reorganization of the events of the *fabula*, rearranged in a way that can create a more engaging narrative. However, recognizing that the narrative inherently carries its own meaning leads to a critical insight: the structure of the narrative, its progression, the events it recounts, and the development of the plot are all contingent upon this intrinsic meaning. This raises a fundamental question: does the plot exist inherently within the *fabula*, or is it instead constructed through the unfolding of the *syuzhet*?

8.4 The Dual Axes of Texts and the Dualistic Model of Narratives

This chapter, so far, has engaged with the critiques of the dualistic model of narrative, which has dominated narratology for over a century, offering alternative perspectives that lean toward a monistic approach. Notably, scholars such as Shen Dan and Wang Liya argue that the *fabula* and *syuzhet* often align or even coincide in many narratives, thus supporting a monistic rather than dualistic framework.[27] Their stance, along with other critical voices, tends to challenge the logical and conceptual weaknesses of the dualistic model. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, for example, argues that no narrative version is more basic than another, asserting that each is an

[25] Ibid., p. 192.

[26] Ibid., pp. 195–196.

[27] Shen Dan and Wang Liya, *Western Narratology: Classical and Postclassical*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010, p. 23.

independent instance of narration. Similarly, Jonathan Culler underscores the point that the *syuzhet* does more than simply rearrange the events of the *fabula*—it actively generates meaning. Richardson also critiques the notion of reconstructing the *fabula* when narratives present significant contradictions, suggesting that this task may be impossible or at least highly problematic.

These critiques collectively expose the oversimplification inherent in treating the *fabula* as a straightforward, unmodified narrative. They refute the Russian formalist notion of the *fabula* as an objective, deformed story, Bal's view of it as a process that aligns with empirical logic, as well as Seymour Chatman's claim that it functions solely as the content conveyed through the *syuzhet*, which serves as its form. They also question the views of scholars like Richardson, who interpret the *fabula* as representing "what really happened", and Shen Dan, who sees it as a story aligned with reality. In terms of the question about "which is larger or smaller", raised by Derrida, these critics converge on a common conclusion: the *fabula* is smaller than the *syuzhet*, which with its intricate form, encompasses much more complexity.

Traditional narrative structures often foster the perception that the *syuzhet* is simply a rearranged version of the *fabula*. As a result, the *fabula* is regarded as more real, trustworthy, and natural, while the *syuzhet* is seen as merely a different form of expression. Christian Metz's analysis of "bourgeois cinema" notes "the classical narrative film is primarily voyeuristic, hence histoire, for it conceals its own discursive markers (the spectator's look)".[28] Metz argues that this assumption—that the *fabula* reflects the way things are in reality—is a hallmark of traditional narrative cinema. Similarly, David Bordwell's examination of classic Hollywood cinema suggests that these films create the illusion that the *fabula* logically precedes the *syuzhet*. Roland Barthes claims further that this illusion of a "natural" order pervades all narrative forms, serving as a hallmark of "bourgeois art". In this context, the inclusion of an extra narrative level in novels, such as the discovery of diaries, receipt of letters, or the unearthing of manuscripts, along with films commencing with episodes, all represent bourgeois attempts to naturalize the narrative. From their perspective, the dualistic model carries an ideological dimension, and it means to naturalize the narrative, reinforcing the notion that the content of the *fabula* corresponds directly to the real world.

It is crucial, however, to recognize the complexity inherent in the *fabula*, which exceeds the limits of our traditional understanding. This complexity necessitates a reassessment of the foundational principles of the dualistic *fabula*/*syuzhet* model. A semiotic perspective, I argue, offers a more nuanced approach to the *fabula*, particularly when viewed through the lens of semionarratology. A semiotic approach, which emphasizes the relationship between paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes, offers a valuable framework for rethinking the nature of the *fabula* and its interaction with the *syuzhet*. From this perspective, the *syuzhet* is understood as a syntagmatic relation, while the *fabula* is situated along a paradigmatic axis. The *syuzhet* is

[28] Warren Buckland and Daniel Fairfax, eds., *Conversations with Christian Metz: Selected Interviews on Film Theory (1970–1991),* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017, p. 29.

composed of alternants chosen from the paradigmatic axis, which are then structured to form the narrative. In this view, the *fabula* functioning along the paradigmatic, provides a trace of the narrative's formation. All unselected alternants, whether related to content (the events that comprise the plot) or form (the fundamental components of the *syuzhet*), remain within the paradigmatic domain. Thus, the transformation from the pre-narrated text (*fabula*) to the narrated text (*syuzhet*) is a process of selection and representation—essentially a process of mediation. Roman Jakobson's distinction between the "axis of selection" and the "axis of combination" is particularly relevant here. According to David Bordwell, "The *fabula* is thus a pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences".[29] In contrast to the *syuzhet*, the *fabula* departs significantly from the conventional understanding of "story". It is an assemblage of alternate materials that remain unmediated and unstructured, making it inherently more expansive than the *syuzhet*. Furthermore, the *fabula* is not a textual entity—it exists outside the text, as something that has not yet undergone any form of mediation or narrative shaping.

In narrative construction, the *fabula* does not precede the *syuzhet*; rather, the processes of selection and combination unfold concurrently. The positioning of any narrative element within the narrated text dictates its selection from a range of potential alternatives. Likewise, the act of selecting alternants from the paradigmatic axis shapes how these elements are combined to form the narrative. Once the text is formed, the combination of these alternants reflects the underlying selection process on the paradigmatic axis, which forms the context in which these alternants combine. Therefore, the *fabula* should be understood as a paradigmatic context created through the narrative operation—it functions as a collection of alternants on the waiting list, poised for inclusion in the narrative.

Every text, including narrative texts, is constructed through the interplay of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. This interplay results in an inherent bipolar structure within all texts, although the specific terms of *fabula* and *syuzhet* are reserved solely for narrative texts. Based on this framework, I propose several foundational principles for understanding the relationship between *fabula* and *syuzhet*.

First, it is important to recognize that the model of *fabula* and *syuzhet* can be found in any text, due to the partialization of representation. However, even among scholars who defend a dualistic model, there are differing interpretations. For instance, Shen Dan argues that theater does not adhere to this dualistic structure, asserting that "What happens on stage must be what really happens as long as the audience sees it".[30] In this view, the actual experience of a change in state represents the factual occurrence, the *fabula*. In contrast, the *fabula* of a novel remains obscured by the medium of words, requiring the reader to infer the sequence of events from the text. As a result, a visually-oriented narrative form such as theater contains only the *fabula*, while a text-based medium like a novel relies on a dualistic model. It is

[29] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 49.

[30] Shen Dan and Wang Liya, *Western Narratology: Classical and Postclassical*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010, p. 26.

worth noting that the analysis quoted earlier from Jonathan Culler regarding *Oedipus the King* pertains not to the literary text itself, but to the intrinsic "force of meaning" inherent in its stage performance. Similarly, David Bordwell emphasizes that the *fabula* of a film is a construct, emerging only through narrative representation, and does not exist independently prior to this process. Mieke Bal extends the applicability of the dualistic model beyond traditional narrative forms, arguing that it also applies to "folk tales, rituals, and common cultural practices such as table manners, recipes, and political programs".[31] This suggests that the dualistic model has a broader, almost universal relevance.

Second, it is essential to acknowledge that each fictional narrative possesses its own *fabula*, and that the creation of both the *fabula* and *syuzhet* occurs simultaneously throughout the narrative process. In line with Smith's perspective, it is clear that adaptations of ostensibly identical "stories" do not share a single *fabula*. For instance, Eileen Chang's novella *Love in a Fallen City* (1943) and Zou Jingzhi's 32-episode television adaptation (2009) each present different *fabula*s. The television series devotes several episodes to exploring Bai Liusu's family history and past experiences, elements unlikely present in the paradigmatic axis of the original novella. Therefore, any adaptation modifies not only the *syuzhet* but also the *fabula* itself. As a result, no adaptation can claim to share an identical *fabula* with the source text.

Third, the relationship between the *fabula* and the *syuzhet* is characterized by mutual interdependence. The *fabula* does not precede the *syuzhet* nor does it assume a dominant role. The assumption that the *fabula* can be inferred from the *syuzhet* arises not from the *fabula*'s prior existence, but because the *fabula* represents a pre-narrated text. Given that only the *syuzhet* is visible to the reader or viewer, any analysis of the narrative must begin with the *syuzhet*. In instances of "denarration", the narrative text contains multiple *syuzhet*s, each giving rise to distinct *fabula*s. For example, in Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" (1969), the juxtaposition of fourteen plots suggests the presence of fourteen *syuzhet*s, but no single, unified *fabula*. Richardson's argument that a unified *fabula* is impossible to reconstruct holds merit, primarily because there is no necessity for such a unified *fabula* to exist.

Culler has also highlighted the difficulties in interpreting the *syuzhet* as merely a rearranged version of the *fabula*'s "true order" in certain cases. This challenge is particularly evident in works such as Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* (1955), where the notion of a "true order" becomes unfeasible. Such complexity is often found in novels with multiple "denarrations", where the structure is so intricately woven that reducing it to a coherent narrative becomes nearly impossible. This difficulty does not arise from the *syuzhet*'s overwhelming complexity obscuring the *fabula*, nor from a "complete overlap" between the two. Instead, it results from the inherent complexity of both the *fabula* and the *syuzhet*. Richardson's observation that many

[31] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2nd Edition). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997, p. 178.

novels "cannot be reconstructed" should not be interpreted to mean that the *fabula* does not exist. Rather, it suggests that the *fabula* is not, at its core, a pre-formed story.

In light of the principles discussed above, I accept the valid aspects of the critiques offered by Culler, Smith, and Richardson. Recognizing the legitimacy of their criticisms calls for appropriate theoretical modifications within the field of narratology.

8.5 Generation of Narratives in Selection

Building on the previous discussion, the *fabula*/*syuzhet* model serves as a useful starting point for addressing several critical questions raised by narratologists. A key question, posed by Jonathan Culler, concerns the origin of the plot: as the primary vehicle for conveying a narrative's meaning, does the plot inherently reside within the *fabula*, or does it emerge from the "deformation and reorganization" enacted by the *syuzhet*?

This question has sparked considerable ambivalence among theorists. Seymour Chatman, for example, suggests that the *fabula* represents content and the *syuzhet* represents form, implying that the plot originates from the *fabula*. However he also references Hardison's argument: "Each arrangement produces a different plot, and a great many plots can be made from the same story".[32] This indicates that the plot is, in fact, a product of the *syuzhet*. David Bordwell, in his examination of classical Hollywood films, argues that "by virtue of its handling of space and time, classical narration makes the *fabula* world an internally consistent construct into which narration seems to step from the outside".[33] Bordwell's perspective suggests that while the *syuzhet* rearranges the events of the plot in a particular order, its manipulation (such as the "happy ending" in classical Hollywood narratives) can significantly shape the *fabula* itself, presenting an impression of "consistency". Both Chatman and Bordwell, therefore, argue that plot formation occurs within both the *fabula* and the *syuzhet*, albeit through different mechanisms.

Some Chinese narratologists have conceptualized the *syuzhet* as the "plot", contending that the *fabula* consists only of details and lacks a plot. In their view, it is the *syuzhet* that "emplots" (or gives meaning to) the events. Their translations of the terms *fabula*/*syuzhet* reveal a stance that aligns more closely with the framework of this book. For example, Tan Junqiang employs the terms *sucai* (素材, material)/*qingjie* (情节, plot) to represent the *fabula*/*syuzhet* distinction,[34] while Qiao Guoqiang uses

[32] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film,* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 43.

[33] David Bordwell, "Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed., Philip Rosen, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 24.

[34] Tan Junqiang, *Introduction to Narratology: From Classical Narratology to Postclassical Narratology*, Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2008, p. 7.

the terms "material/material-combination".[35] These conceptualizations treat the *fabula* as a "material store", with the plot being a feature of the *syuzhet*.

Shen Dan presents a different perspective, suggesting that the plot emerges from the reader's construction of the *fabula*. She argues that the plot "represents the construction of the story [*fabula*] itself, rather than a mere rearrangement of story events [*fabula*] at the level of discourse [*syuzhet*]".[36] In other words, the plot arises during the reader's construction of the *fabula*—a process I term secondary narrativization. Shen Dan's approach differs from mine in that she believes the plot emerges from the reconstruction of the *fabula* through the *syuzhet*, while I argue that the plot arises from the process of constituting the *syuzhet* from the *fabula*, highlighting different interpretations of the same process.

I argue that plot emerges through the process of selection, where narrative is conceptualized as a textual combination constructed via the operation of selection on the paradigmatic-axis. The plot materializes through the choices made in the selection of events and narrative elements.[37] Sometimes, this selection process is made explicit or manifested at the *syuzhet* level, where the process of selection on the paradigmatic axis becomes part of the narrative itself. This phenomenon becomes particularly evident in narratives that self-reflexively incorporate the act of writing the text itself or integrate the principles of selection from the paradigmatic axis into the syntagmatic axis. Such a phenomenon, often seen in metafiction, is characteristic of avant-garde fiction, but is not exclusive to it. For instance, in Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q" (1921), the narrative explicitly reveals its own selection process to illustrate why it is a true story, highlighting the workings of the paradigmatic axis within the narrative formation.

The visibility of the selection process in narrative underscores its critical role in the construction of the plot, as illustrated in the film *Run Lola Run*. In this film, Lola's repeated attempts to save her boyfriend—failing twice before succeeding on her third attempt—allow for multiple thematic interpretations. These themes, whether portraying a woman's bravery in love, the idea of starting life anew, or defiance against fate, each emerge from one of the three alternate selections. *Run Lola Run* serves as a metaphor for the process of selection itself, demonstrating how the *fabula*'s material is boundless. With an infinite number of possible actions available to Lola, no single narrator could exhaustively recount all potential scenarios. The film's decision to depict all three versions of Lola's attempt at saving her boyfriend is crucial to conveying the individual and collective meanings of the narrative, thereby emphasizing the blurring of distinctions between what is "real" and what is "illusory" in the narrative's construction.

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[35] Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition), trans., Qiao Guoqiang and Li Xiaodi, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011, p. 70.

[36] Shen Dan and Wang Liya, *Western Narratology: Classical and Postclassical*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010, pp. 34–35.

[37] See also Paul Cobley's *Narrative* for related arguments. Paul Cobley, *Narrative* (2nd Edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 3–6.

A similar use of alternate narratives to reveal the selection process is found in Liu Yichang's celebrated short story "Wrong Number" (2001). In this story, a man follows his routine, leaving home only to die in a car accident. However, in an alternate sequence, the same man receives a misdialed phone call just before his scheduled departure, an interruption that ultimately saves his life. This juxtaposition of two distinct narrative sequences, each with its own *fabula*, within a single text underscores the unpredictability of life as its central theme.

The defining characteristic of the *fabula* is its inherent "possibilities of selection", a feature often visible in narratives. For instance, historical texts frequently present multiple versions of events, leaving the reader to discern which account is most credible. Similarly, restaurant menus offer a range of dishes, and culinary guides describe various cooking methods. It is common for alternants, typically concealed within the paradigmatic axis, to become visible through the axis of combination.

The confusion or challenge surrounding the dualistic model in narratology often stems from the tendency to perceive the *fabula* as an "original" story or a story-like entity. Despite theoretical clarifications that distinguish the *fabula* from the narrative text, the persistent conceptualization of the *fabula* as a story continues to create misunderstandings. This is why I advocate for replacing the concept of "story" for "*fabula*".

Narratives unfold along two axes—the syntagmatic and paradigmatic—neither of which is subordinate to the other. Upon the completion of a narrative text, the syntagmatic axis becomes explicit within the narrative text, while the paradigmatic axis recedes into the background. The creative process, whether in poetry or performance, involves a simultaneous operation of these two axes. In poetry, word selection is essential, with each word needing to fit within its specific position in the verse. In the performing arts, decisions about which performances to include must align with the overall design of the piece. This trial-and-error process highlights the interdependence of the two axes: the syntagmatic cannot precede the paradigmatic, nor can the paradigmatic function without the syntagmatic. The act of selection is intrinsically linked to the act of combination. For example, the narrative structure of a Hollywood film, which often requires a "happy ending", necessitates the selection and combination of elements from the paradigmatic pool to meet this specific narrative demand.

8.6 Constituents of *Fabula*

A significant challenge for the dualistic model of narratology lies in determining which elements belong exclusively to the *syuzhet*, which ones are confined solely to the *fabula*, and which ones may appear in both. Seymour Chatman defines the *fabula* as "a story, the content or chain of events (actions, happenings)", while the *syuzhet* is "a discourse, that is, the expression, the means by which the content is

communicated".[38] However, the distinction between form and content is often blurred, which leads to potential confusion, as Culler rightly observes: in *Oedipus the King*, the *syuzhet* involves more than just form; it is a driving force behind the development of the plot.

So, what constitutes the key differences between the elements of the *fabula* and those of the *syuzhet*? According to Rimon-Kenan, "Story is an abstraction from: 1. the specific style of the text in question, 2. the language in which the text is written, and 3. the medium or sign-system".[39] In fact, style and medium are absent in the *fabula*, leaving only the events in their primordial state. Branigan, on the other hand, notes that elements like "mood music" are non-diegetic, directly addressing the spectator but remaining inaccessible to the characters within the narrative.[40] This seems to imply a general consensus that formal components of the *syuzhet*, such as punctuation and certain stylistic devices, do not originate from the *fabula*.

Shen Dan argues that formal elements, in most cases, reside solely within the *syuzhet*, not the *fabula*. She suggests, for instance, that "many avant-garde novels are pure wordplay without conveying meaningful content".[41] Nevertheless, she also acknowledges that " there are instances where elements belong to both the *fabula* and the *syuzhet*, resulting in a blurring of the distinction".[42] For example, indirect speech involves narrativizing the character's language; similarly, the character's point of view merges their perception (*fabula*) with the narrator's perspective (*syuzhet*). In first-person narratives, the narrator simultaneously functions as a character, further complicating the separation between the two levels. In stream-of-consciousness fiction, where the narrative is primarily constructed from a character's internal thoughts, the distinction between the *fabula* and *syuzhet* becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. Shen's argument suggests that when the narrator (element of *syuzhet*) adopts the role of a character (element of *fabula*), the lines between the *fabula* and *syuzhet* dissolve. Consequently, when *syuzhet* elements are directly sourced from the *fabula*, the two levels merge and become indistinguishable.

Shen Dan thus proposes that certain elements of the *syuzhet* have their origins in the *fabula*. However, I suggest that all elements of the *syuzhet*—whether formal or content-related—are derived from the *fabula*. Every element present in the *syuzhet* also exists within the *fabula*. In this view, the process of narration involves a selection of elements from the *fabula*, with the non-selected alternatives remaining latent within it, unmanifested in the narrative. The elements that are selected for

[38] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 19.

[39] Slomith Remmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2nd edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 8.

[40] Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 35.

[41] Shen Dan and Wang Liya, *Western Narratology: Classical and Postclassical*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010, p. 23.

[42] Ibid., pp. 27–29.

inclusion in the *syuzhet* are simultaneously represented in the *fabula*. The distinction between the elements in the two levels is determined not by the inherent nature of the elements themselves, but by whether they are selected for manifestation in the *syuzhet*.

Narration thus involves the selection not only of events and plot but also of formal elements such as what Branigan refers to as "mood music", all of which originate from the *fabula*. The *fabula* is not merely a repository of "content"; it provides all potential elements that could shape the *syuzhet*. When the *syuzhet* selects indirect speech from the *fabula* to express a character's words, other forms of quotation exist as alternants within the *fabula*. These alternants, while not selected for inclusion in the *syuzhet*, still remain as potential options, integral to the broader narrative potential of the *fabula*.

In narrative construction, every element chosen for inclusion in the *syuzhet* is already present in the *fabula*. For example, in *Oedipus the King*, both the "one" and the "many" exist within the *fabula*, but only the "one" is selected for the *syuzhet*. If we interpret this particular instance as Oedipus confessing his guilt, it suggests that the character of Oedipus indeed harbors an "Oedipus complex". This interpretation suggests that Oedipus has consciously chosen to forgo any defense and instead acknowledges a subconscious attraction to the sin.

8.7 The Boundary of *Fabula*

A further challenge to the dualistic model lies in the definition of the boundary of the *fabula*. While the boundary of the *syuzhet* is clearly demarcated—elements that are not narrated, or those that precede the beginning or follow the conclusion of the narrative, fall outside its scope—the boundary of the *fabula* remains ambiguous. This raises crucial questions: What elements are considered "potentially available (but not selected)" within the *fabula*? Additionally, how extensive must the *fabula* be to ensure a sufficient pool of elements for constructing a narrative?

Marie-Laure Ryan raises a compelling question concerning Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial* (1925): did Joseph K. ever have an appendectomy? While this detail is omitted from the *syuzhet*, it might still reside within the *fabula*, as it pertains to the character's physical and mental state. On the other hand, inquiries about Joseph K.'s grandfather's medical history seem irrelevant to the narrative, suggesting that elements unlikely to be selected for the *syuzhet* are placed at the periphery of the *fabula*. Thus, the boundary of the *fabula* can be seen as a dynamic zone, with elements that are available for selection at its core, and those with a very low probability of selection situated in the "border" regions. The relevance of Joseph K.'s grandfather's medical history to *The Trial* is minimal, illustrating that the *fabula*'s boundary

is indistinct, given the seemingly infinite alternants on the paradigmatic axis. Ryan's approach to the *fabula* is informed by Lewis's principle of minimal departure.[43]

This issue also touches upon the question I posed to Herrnstein Smith: why are different retellings of the Cinderella story, despite their independence, universally categorized as "Cinderella stories"? Intuitively, we perceive a shared essence between a novel and its various adaptations, such as plays, films, television series, comic strips, and abridged books. Herrnstein Smith argues that these adaptations do not share a direct relationship with the original, each potentially introducing new elements not found in the others. Yet, this raises the question: why do we continue to refer to these variations as "Cinderella stories"?

I contend that the *fabula*s of these narratives partially overlap. Smith's claim that they are unrelated to the original contradicts our general understanding. While it is clear that treating different versions as sharing a singular *fabula* leads to complex contradictions, it is more accurate to recognize that they share certain elements in terms of content, selection, media, and formal changes. For instance, a film adaptation's *fabula* must incorporate visual elements that are absent in the original, and a translation requires linguistic alterations. Thus, it is more appropriate to say that "adaptations" share certain parts of the *fabula* rather than possessing an identical one.

In light of this, both Herrnstein Smith and I held valid points during the 1983 Beijing conference: the various Cinderella stories do not share an identical *fabula*, but rather contain overlapping segments. The different versions' *fabula*s share certain elements—such as the basic plot structure—distinguishing them from other folktales, which leads folklorists to categorize them collectively as "Cinderella stories". Even when these shared elements are minimal and nearly imperceptible—such as a particular Japanese *Journey to the West* TV series (1978) in which a female Tang monk is romantically involved with the Monkey King—there remains a connection to the original *Journey to the West* (1592) *fabula*, especially in terms of its core storyline and characters.

This leads to the question: Is Herrnstein Smith's claim that "all Dickens novels are Cinderella stories" justifiable? Drawing on the earlier discussion of the grandfather's appendicitis analogy, if we classify all rags-to-riches or reversed-fortune narratives as variations of the Cinderella model, we risk extending the boundaries of this concept to an extreme. Dickens's novels, in fact, share very few elements with traditional Cinderella stories. While applying the Cinderella model to Dickens may not inherently contradict narrative theory, it pushes the principle of minimal departure to its limits. According to this principle, new narratives should deviate minimally from established norms or expectations. By extending the Cinderella framework to Dickens's work—given the slight overlap between the two—it challenges the validity of the principle within this context.

[43] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Fiction, Non-Factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure", *Poetics*, vol. 9, 1980，pp. 403–422.

A fundamental question then arises: is the *fabula* "more real" than the *syuzhet*? Many narratologists who support the dualistic model adopt an "empirical" viewpoint. Mieke Bal, for instance, argues that, "Certainly, the *fabula*s of most narrative texts do display some form of homology, both with a sentence structure and with 'real life'. Consequently, most *fabula*s can be said to be constructed according to the demands of human 'logic of events'…. 'Logic of events' may be defined as a course of events that is experienced by the reader as natural and in accordance with some form of understanding of the world".[44] Bal suggests that the *fabula* mirrors the basic structure of human experience. Chatman similarly argues that the dualistic model—*fabula*/*syuzhet*—represents a content-expression structure, or in semiotic terms, the signified and the signifier.[45] Shen Dan further asserts that, "To acknowledge the independence of the story is in effect to acknowledge the primacy of experience. No matter how it is expressed at the level of discourse, the readers construct a story independent of discourse according to their life experience".[46]

Whether framed as "reality" or as experience that approximates reality, the *fabula* is often perceived as being closer to the "real", to the essence of the thing or experience, than the *syuzhet*. This perception fosters the illusion that the *syuzhet* distorts the *fabula*. If the *fabula* is considered more real, more reliable, and more natural, then the parts of the *syuzhet* that are derived from it are similarly viewed as real and reliable. When the "unnatural" aspects of the *syuzhet* can be "naturalized", the *syuzhet* comes to be interpreted as being as real as the *fabula* itself.

This widely held belief—that the *syuzhet* distorts the *fabula*—deserves critical reevaluation. As Derrida humorously asks: "Which is larger and which is smaller?" My stance in this book is that the *syuzhet*, being the result of a selective process, should be considered smaller than the *fabula*. Narratively, this relationship can be likened to an iceberg, where only the tip is visible above the surface. The unselected portion, though unseen, can be inferred by its shape and size, but it is composed of the same material and is not "more basic" than the part that is revealed. Richardson's analysis of "The Babysitter", where he identifies fourteen distinct "tips", highlights the existence of multiple interconnected "icebergs" within a single novel. Similarly, the film *Cloud Atlas* (2012), directed by the Wachowskis, and Tom Tykwer, presents six separate narratives, each representing a distinct *fabula* but woven together within the same film. These six stories, unrelated in terms of their content, form part of a larger narrative structure, demonstrating the concept of multiple *fabula*s coexisting within a single narrative framework.

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[44] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2nd Edition), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997, p. 177.

[45] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 25.

[46] Shen Dan and Wang Liya, *Western Narratology: Classical and Postclassical*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010, pp. 21–22.

8.8 The Factual Narrative: With or Without a *Fabula*

The preceding discussion has primarily focused on fictional genres, including novels, and to a lesser extent, fictional cinema, encompassing both feature films and television. However, it is essential to recognize that the principle of narrative stratification extends beyond these genres. All narratives require some form of stratification, and this stratification is inherently biaxial in nature.

Smith argues that factual narratives consist solely of a *fabula*, without a *syuzhet*: "There are, of course, narratives (such as chronicles, news reports, gospels, and personal anecdotes) that are the accounts of events that have presumably already occurred in some determinate chronological sequence".[47] According to Smith, these genres, while certainly narratives, lack the typical *fabula*/*syuzhet* structure and are free from temporal distortion. As such, Bremond's concept of transposability between *fabula* and *syuzhet* does not apply to factual narratives, thereby highlighting the absence of this dualistic model in factual narratives. Smith seems to suggest that the concept of a *fabula* is irrelevant to factual narratives. However, this view overlooks the nature of the *fabula*: it is not merely "an account of events that have actually occurred", but rather a "material store of certain events". These two definitions are distinct and should not be conflated. Our understanding of any fact is inherently partial, as it is always mediated through the *syuzhet*. The so-called "facts" presented in various narratives can differ significantly from one another and are never entirely consistent. This discrepancy arises because semiotic representation is always partialized, and the alternants selected from the *fabula* will inevitably vary across different texts.

In the context of factual narratives—such as news reports, historical accounts, legal cases, and autobiographies—the *fabula* encompasses all the material related to a specific event. Our understanding of that event is contingent on our interpretation of the narrative, making it difficult to ascertain the absolute truth of what actually transpired. Narratives like history, biography, news, and legal judgments may appear to be grounded in empirical facts, seemingly recounting objective events that existed in ontological reality prior to the formation of the *syuzhet*. Indeed, the philosopher of history often reiterates the commonly accepted notion that "stories are lived before they are told—except in the case of fiction".[48]

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the *fabula* within a factual narrative is always reconstructed through a secondary narrativization. For example, two historical narratives about the same event—such as the War of Resistance—might differ significantly due to the discovery of new historical evidence, which alters the material store of the *fabula*. Similarly, in legal contexts, the accounts provided by the plaintiff's and the defendant's counsel regarding the same event are distinct,

[47] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, p. 228.

[48] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Third Edition), Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, p. 212.

often contradictory, because they draw upon different sets of evidence. From this perspective, it is both natural and rational for various historical accounts to offer divergent interpretations of events or figures. This divergence is a direct result of the selective choices made during the construction of the narrative.

Thus, we must recognize that the *fabula* within a factual narrative does not represent "real events" that are inherently difficult to verify. Rather, it constitutes a "collection of materials" from which the *syuzhet* is constructed. The *fabula* of a history detailing the War of Resistance is not the "reality" of the war itself; rather, it is the collection of historical sources that were consulted in writing that specific account. Consequently, each historical narrative of the war, based on a different set of historical materials, cannot be considered to share the same *fabula*. Similarly, while both the plaintiff's and defendant's lawyers may be discussing the same event, it is their differing interpretations of that event that are at issue. In journalism, the contention often revolves around the varying reports of the same event; if the reports were identical, there would be no dispute. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the material stores of these differing accounts frequently overlap, particularly in their core elements.

In contrast to factual narratives, illusions and dreams can be viewed as "quasi-fictional narratives", where the narratee is presented with a complex, often fragmented narrative that resists a coherent reconfiguration. Dreams, in particular, resemble the analysis of "digression" in postmodern fiction, as described by Richardson et al., where seemingly irrelevant or "superfluous" elements deviate from the development of the plot. In contemporary psychology, much effort is devoted to exploring the interplay between the conscious and subconscious realms by examining the process of narration within dreams. The study of the underlying *fabula* of dream narratives is central to many psychological fields. Whether these narratives are viewed as expressions of the subconscious, trauma, or the remnants of past experiences, they aim to explore the deeper layers of the *fabula*.

The approach presented in this book argues that when we broaden our scope to include multimedia narratives, it becomes evident that only a stratification model can adequately explain the recurring patterns in the diverse range of narratives found in human culture. Moreover, by conceptualizing the *fabula* as a reservoir of material, we can better understand why conflicting narratives can all hold some measure of truth, even as none can claim absolute authority over the "real" or the definitive version of events.

8.9 A Three-Leveled Model

It is important to recognize that the two-leveled model of narrative, which posits the *syuzhet* as constructed from the *fabula* through the processes of selection and transposition, encounters several complexities. These processes stem from both paradigmatic and syntagmatic operations, and their interaction can give rise to a range of intricate issues.

Some narratologists advocate for a three-leveled model of narrative structure, arguing that fictional narratives require an intermediary layer between the *fabula* and the *syuzhet*. Gérard Genette was the pioneer of this three-leveled approach.[49] Slomith Remmon-Kenan largely focuses on the interpretation of Genette's theory, as evident in her work *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*.[50] Similarly, Mieke Bal aligns with Genette's model, advocating for a three-leveled model as *histoire-récit-texte* narratives.[51]

In contrast, Shen Dan offers a critique of the three-leveled model, arguing that there is no need to distinguish between "narrative discourse" and the process by which it is produced, especially in the case of written works. Shen suggests that, for the reader, only the narrative discourse (i.e., the text) is accessible, rendering the writer's writing process irrelevant to the work itself.[52]

I maintain that a distinction does exist between the narrative itself and the process of its creation. In the framework of this book's three-leveled model, these three levels are conceptualized as "*fabula* 1", "*fabula* 2", and "*syuzhet*". These levels form a fundamental narrative framework, as demonstrated throughout this chapter. The transition from *fabula* to *syuzhet* involves two key operations: selection and representation. These operations are integral to the construction of the narrative text, and while it may be difficult to determine their precise chronological sequence, a logical ordering can be inferred:

Fabula 1: The collection of materials (paradigmatic relations, without plot)
↓ (material selection)
Fabula 2: The ways of representation (emplotted, i.e., a story formed)
↓ (selecting the way of representation)
Syuzhet: The textualization (the result of the two selection processes)

From my perspective, it is valuable to view the act of narration as an intermediary process that facilitates the understanding of stratification. However, it is crucial to avoid misconceptions that may arise from this three-leveled theory. First, the act of narration should not be understood as a "writerly process" but rather as an abstract act of narration, one that occurs instantaneously without consuming measurable duration of time. Genette, for example, in relation to *Tristram Shandy* (1759), writes "one of the fictions of literary narrating – perhaps the most powerful one, because it passes unnoticed, so to speak – is that the narrating involves an instantaneous action, without a temporal dimension".[53] In a fictional narrative, it is essential to distinguish the narrator from the writer. As Mieke Bal notes, the narrator is "that agent which

[49] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans., Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.

[50] Slomith Remmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, London: Routledge, 2002.

[51] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2nd Edition), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.

[52] Shen Dan and Wang Liya, *Western Narratology: Classical and Postclassical*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2010, p. 17.

[53] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans., Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980. p. 222.

utters the linguistic signs which constitute the text".[54] By recognizing the intermediate role played by the "act of narration", we can more clearly comprehend the connection between "selection" and the ways in which these selected are represented.

The *syuzhet*, as the only accessible or manifest part of the narrative, cannot autonomously choose its own modes of composition. This function lies solely within the domain of the act of narration. As a result, the three-leveled model offers greater clarity in explaining the relationship between the *fabula* and the *syuzhet*.

The three-leveled model helps to address several of the challenges discussed in this chapter. For instance, *fabula* 2 can be understood as the cause-and-effect sequence underlying the emplotted story, often described as "what really happens". This is constructed by the audience when engaging with a novel or a film, encompassing genres such as detective stories, puzzle films, and postmodern novels with denarration, among others. In cases where a story is adapted across genres or translated into different languages without introducing additional elements, the *fabula* 2 remains constant, as it has not yet undergone the process of textualization.

In metafictional works such as *Run Lola Run*, we can see symbolic representations of the selection process occurring at the first level, *fabula* 1. In this initial phase, the materials available for narration appear boundless, much like the multiple potential paths available to the protagonist. In *fabula* 1, one might argue that no distinct boundaries exist; instead, there are transitional zones where relevance gradually diminishes. *Fabula* 2, on the other hand, emerges as the result of this selection process. It operates within the constraints of the chosen materials but is unrestricted in its represented form. Essentially, the *fabula* that most scholars discuss aligns with what I refer to as *fabula* 2.

The narrative act encompasses two key operations: material selection and the ways of representing or combining those materials. It is important to note that these operations are not strictly sequential but are both facets of a biaxial operation. Nevertheless, both processes leave discernible traces, which I term as two distinct *fabula*s, in the final text. The selection process constructs the plot, while the process of recombination creates the text itself.

Thus, the three-leveled model offers a more comprehensive framework for addressing the intricate issues explored in this chapter. For instance, Smith's oversight becomes apparent when she fails to recognize that different narratives, such as various Cinderella stories or adaptations, may share some common parts in *fabula* 1—though they diverge in their *fabula* 2. Culler's rejection of plot production and *fabula* is essentially a rejection of *fabula* 1, since the plot has already been established in *fabula* 2, as seen in *Oedipus the King* with its "one" and "many" interpretations. Richardson's claim that there is no *fabula* if the narrative is too chaotic negates *fabula* 1 but not *fabula* 2. The perceived "chaos" in the text, however, is not a matter of how the materials are selected but a matter of how the materials are represented. Narratives, such as "The Babysitter" or *Run Lola Run*, engage in multiple processes

[54] Mieke Bal. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2nd Edition). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. p. 18.

of selection from *fabula* 1, demonstrating the complexity of the narrative construction.

In adopting this three-leveled model, the transition from *fabula* to *syuzhet*—through the critical stages of material selection and formal deformation—becomes clearer and more comprehensible.

Part III
Time and Plot

Chapter 9
The Problem of Time in a General Narratology

9.1 Categories of Time

The problem of time has consistently occupied a central position in narrative studies, presenting one of the most complex and contentious issues in the field. When applied across various narrative genres, the challenge of addressing time becomes even more pronounced, given the diversity and intricacies involved in different narrative forms.

The term "narrative time" serves as an umbrella concept encompassing four temporal categories: narrated time, narration time, textual-extratextual time gap, and temporal intentionality. It is essential to recognize that these four categories, though collectively referred to as "time", differ significantly from one another.

Despite being grouped under the term "narrative time", time within narrative can essentially be broken down into three distinct forms: moment, duration, and directionality. Each of these aspects differs markedly, but they all fall under the broader umbrella of narrative time. This can lead to challenges when trying to pinpoint the appropriate terminology for specific temporal phenomena. In this book, we will strive to maintain clear distinctions between "moment" and "duration", reserving the term "time" for situations where both aspects are involved simultaneously.

The interplay between these three forms, coupled with the four temporal categories, gives rise to a complex and multifaceted temporal relationship. Narrative, by its very nature, can be seen as a web of temporal consciousness. The narrative act across genres demonstrates unique temporal attributes regarding its starting point, progression, subject matter, and reception. Different narrative genres—and even individual narrative texts—engage with time in distinctive ways, forming varied networks of temporal relations. These differing temporal relationships are one of the defining features that distinguish various genres, and they warrant careful analysis and investigation.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_9

The significance of time in narrative is rooted in the fundamental nature of narrative as an activity of temporal signification. Narratives serve as the primary means through which individuals perceive, understand, and structure their temporal experiences. Without narrative, time cannot be fully apprehended. As Paul Ricoeur asserts in the first volume of his seminal work *Time and Narrative*, "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience".[1] Time, in its raw form—measured only physically—lacks meaning in the context of human existence. It is only through the narrative of events that we come to understand time's passage and gain a profound sense of temporal consciousness.

This is an intuitive concept: without a dream, the time spent in sleep is hard to perceive. We rely on external measures, like the sun or a clock, to gauge the passage of time. However, when a dream occurs, even though the exact duration of sleep remains uncertain, there is an increased awareness of time's passing. All narratives, in one way or another, revolve around events that unfold within a temporal framework, thereby enriching the human experience of time.

The temporality of all narrative genres, including those with explicit timelines such as historical accounts or diaries, diverges from the "strong encoding" of physical time. Ricoeur insightfully notes that, "Emplotment…replies to the speculative aporia with a poetic making of something capable, certainly, of clarifying the aporia, but not of resolving it theoretically".[2] The term "poetic" is fitting here, as the narrative mode of experiencing time is characterized by its poetic, sensory, uncertain, and fluid qualities. This mode is inherently human, offering the only means for humans to grasp time beyond its mere physical measurement.

This book explores the temporal dimension within "general narratology", aiming to investigate both shared and divergent temporal features across different narrative genres. It seeks to offer a set of analytical tools that will deepen our understanding of the fundamental nature of narrative. While previous studies on narrative time have predominantly focused on specific genres, particularly within fiction, there has been a notable gap in discussions of universal temporal principles that apply across a wide range of narrative forms. These include films, games, fortune-telling, murals, exhibitions, oral storytelling, and more. Single-genre analyses are insufficient for understanding the fundamental nature of narrative time as a whole. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive study of general narrative time.

While the novel is undoubtedly one of the most intricate narrative forms, there is a common misconception that a deep analysis of temporal aspects within novels can be easily extrapolated to other genres. This view overlooks the complexity and specific nature of general narrative time. It will become evident that the temporal challenges posed by other narrative forms differ significantly from those encountered in

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* Vol. I, trans., Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 3.

[2] Ibid., p. 6.

novels. A sole focus on the novel does not suffice to resolve the complexities of time in various narrative forms.

In recent years, "spatial narratology" has emerged as a fascinating field of study, garnering increasing attention among scholars. Traditionally, narratives are viewed as temporal constructs, but they can also undergo a process of "detemporalization", whereby they become "spatialized". For instance, mental images typically exhibit spatial rather than temporal characteristics. When a dream begins, it often presents itself as a scene, referred to as a "contextualizing image".[3] In these types of narratives, the plot progresses through vivid spatial markers, but with a less distinct sense of time. This suggests that time is a fundamental element of conscious narration. In written narratives, temporality predominates, given that words are primarily used to record events over time. However, in performative narratives—such as dreams and other "para-performative" forms—spatial qualities often take precedence. This distinction between temporal and spatial elements in narrative genres has largely been overlooked by scholars studying "spatialized narratives". For instance, when a dream is recounted as it happens, it typically adopts the present tense, much like how characters in real-time performances (on stage or in film) describe scenes. This reflects a spatial mode of narrative description.

The goal of this book is not to propose a comprehensive overhaul of the current narratological system. Rather, it seeks to present a new framework for general narratology, one that explores the intrinsic features of narrative time across a wide range of narrative genres.

9.2 Narrated Time

The term "narrated time", also known as "event time", "story time", "signified time", or "*fabula* time", refers to the temporal dimension conveyed by various signs within the narrative text. It is important to distinguish this from the actual "real-world" time in which the events occur, which can often be difficult to measure, as we will explore further in the following discussion.

Rimmon-Kenan has critiqued Gérard Genette's examination of fictional time, arguing that the concept of "narrative time" as presented by Genette is impractical due to the inherent difficulty of measuring it.[4] However, it is important to note that narrated time can indeed be measured, although the process may be complex. Within a narrative, there are three primary types of time markers. First, time can be quantified through the length of the text itself. Second, temporal gaps or omissions between events can be identified. Third, textual cues, such as phrases like "three

[3] Ernest Hartmann, "Contextualizing Images in Dreams: More Intense after Abuse and Trauma", *Dreaming*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2001, pp. 115–126.

[4] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2nd Edition). London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 53.

months have passed", can indicate specific temporal intervals. The combination of these elements constructs the temporal framework within the narrative.

Narratives often employ specific indicators, referred to as "designators" or "chronyms", to signal the narrated time. These can be classified into two categories: "chronological chronyms", which include temporal markers such as year, month, and day, and "image chronyms", which reflect the temporal context through cues like clothing styles, architectural features, customs, speech patterns or historical events. "Explicit chronyms" directly reference physical or historical time. In factual narratives—such as histories, diaries, and biographies—chronyms tend to be precise and closely aligned with empirical time. By contrast, fictional narratives, such as novels, often use more ambiguous chronyms. In genres like historical or realistic fiction, narrated time is often marked in ways that closely resemble historical recounting, while in many fictional novels and films, explicit temporal markers may be less emphasized. Nonetheless, very few novels can entirely forgo chronyms; they usually provide at least an approximate sense of temporal context. In performative or image-based narratives, image chronyms, such as those tied to clothing, are virtually always present.

The degree to which time is explicitly narrated varies significantly across genres and cultural contexts. Societies that place a high value on historical accuracy often prioritize temporal precision in all forms of narrative, including myths and legends. In contrast, cultures such as that of ancient India exhibit less concern for precise timekeeping in their narratives, reflecting a more fluid relationship with temporal markers. As a result, the methods used to denote time in narratives are heavily influenced by socio-cultural norms.

The noted American Sinologist Patrick Hanan observed that, "The (Chinese) vernacular fiction shows great concern for spatial and temporal setting. Elaborate calendars of events can be extracted from long works like the *Shui-hu chuan* [*The Water Margin* 1524] and the *Chin P'ing Mei* [*The Plum in the Golden Vase* 1610]; with their constant reckoning of time, they can even become wearisome".[5] This characterization of Chinese novels by foreign scholars, including Sinologists, may seem surprising to Chinese readers, who are accustomed to the explicit temporal markers in their narratives. The emphasis on time in Chinese fiction, common across a variety of genres, becomes particularly apparent when compared with works from other cultures. For instance, even fantastical Tang dynasty legends, such as *The Story of an Ancient Mirror* (*Gujing Ji*), demonstrate a commitment to precise temporal settings, similar to historical texts. This narrative begins by specifying the time as the fifth month of the seventh year of the Daye era, and each subsequent episode is similarly dated. The story concludes with the mirror's disappearance on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the thirteenth year of the Daye era, underscoring the importance of chronological accuracy.

[5] Patrick Hanan, "The Early Chinese Short Story: A Critical Theory in Outline", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 27, 1967, p. 176.

The degree of temporal clarity required in a narrative also varies across different media. In written fairy tales, for instance, precise timekeeping is often unnecessary. However, when the medium shifts, such as in adaptations of these tales into visual formats, the demand for temporal clarity often increases. This is evident in the fairy tale *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906), where the original text features vague chronological markers. Yet, in visual adaptations—such as illustrations and animated films—the temporal context becomes more explicit. The protagonist, Nils, is depicted wearing clothing that reflects the fashion of the era in which the author, Selma Lagerlöf, lived, thus anchoring the character in a specific time and place. Although the animated film is an adaptation of the original text, its transformation into a performative narrative necessitates the establishment of a new chronym. This shift highlights how different media impose varying degrees of temporal specificity on the narrative.

Similarly, the clothing of Greek gods in classical art often mirrored the attire of contemporary Greeks, and depictions of Indian gods were usually based on the garments worn by the Indian populace. Likewise, medieval Christian depictions of archangels often featured them dressed in the robes of the clergy. These instances represent what can be termed baseless "pseudo-chronyms", where divine or mythological figures are portrayed according to the fashions of the period. This approach humanizes these figures, situating them within a recognizable temporal and cultural framework, suggesting that myths themselves often function as historical narratives of human societies.

"Pseudo-chronyms" are also commonly found in novels that incorporate fantastical elements. A notable example is *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin and Gao E. In this novel, the protagonist Jia Baoyu inhabits a world described as "a place where flowers and willows flourish, the home of pleasure and luxury".[6] The narrative then shifts to an indeterminate future, when "no one knows how many generations" later,[7] a Taoist priest named Reverend Void records Baoyu's story at the foot of the Blue Ridge Peak. If we take this "narrated time" literally, it places Baoyu and his world far removed from the present. However, in fictional narratives, the accuracy of narrated time is not subject to verification. The primary authority is the narrative text itself. *A Dream of Red Mansions* deliberately avoids precise historical references, noting that, "There is no way of finding out the dynasty and the year",[8] challenging the historical precision often sought in Chinese novels. The novel, however, subtly conveys its temporal setting through details like customs, official titles, and clothing. It employs various ambiguous and fabricated chronyms, deliberately sidestepping direct references to the Qing Dynasty. In modern adaptations, such as illustrations and films, characters are often depicted in the style of the Ming Dynasty, in line with the aesthetic preferences of contemporary Chinese

[6] Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Volume 1), trans., Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, pp. 2–3.

[7] Ibid., p. 3.

[8] Ibid.

audiences. This example illustrates how chronyms are translated differently across media and how their application is not fixed but adaptable to the demands of the specific narrative form.

9.3 Narration Time

Narration time, also referred to as "discourse time", "*syuzhet* time", or "signifier time", represents a more complex dimension in the study of narrative time. While the concept appears straightforward at first—if an oral story lasts for 50 min, then the narration time is 50 min; if a movie scene lasts for 30 s, the narration time is 30 s—the complexity arises when we recognize that narration time refers to the act of narrating, which exists on a different temporal plane from the events within the narrative itself. This results in a complex relationship between narration time and the temporal structure of the narrative.

Across various narrative genres, we observe different ways these two temporal dimensions relate:

1. Isochronous Durations: In isochronous narratives, the duration of the narration time aligns exactly with the duration of the narrated time. This is often found in certain types of narrative forms, such as games, competitions, or exercises, where the time spent narrating corresponds directly to the time portrayed. Theater, at first glance, might seem to fit this model, as the performance time appears to match the onstage events. However, the pacing of theater can be manipulated through techniques such as lighting cues and costume changes, which allow the duration of narration to be shorter than the narrated duration, or time represented.

In film and television, the ability to alter narrative speed is even more pronounced. A striking example is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in which a bone—symbolizing the earliest human tool—is thrown into the air and transforms into a spaceship, covering millions of years in a single, seamless transition. Similarly, more humorous manipulations of time occur in films such as Paul Weitz's *Being Flynn* (2012), where a scene depicts a child repeatedly throwing a softball, only for each throw to be caught and returned by a different man, humorously implying the succession of the mother's various boyfriends.

2. Non-Isochronous Durations: In many films, the relationship between narration time and narrated time is highly variable. A brief moment in the film can encapsulate the history of thousands of years, while a lengthy film sequence, through the use of editing techniques and slow motion, can depict merely a fleeting instant. It is rare for these two durations to coincide exactly, except in specific instances where real-time events are crucial—such as a bomb countdown or a protagonist's race against time to avert a catastrophe.

In performative narratives, there are instances where narration time is synchronized with narrated time over specific intervals, during which the number of motifs match as well. In theater and film, basic units like an unedited shot or a live stage performance may be isochronous—such as when an actor pours a cup of coffee or walks five steps across the stage, actions that take as long in the narrative as they would in real life. However, because many narrative elements are omitted or accelerated, the overall pace of the narrative may be faster than empirical time. This acceleration is achieved through editing in film, theater, and even video games. As such, isochronous narrative durations are largely confined to the plane of individual motifs (e.g., the ape tossing a bone or the boy throwing a ball). Beyond this narrative unit, the transition to the next may create a substantial leap along the "narrated timeline".

3. Text Length as a Metaphor for Duration: In written narratives—whether novels, news reports, or other forms of written text—the unfolding of the story is inherently spatial, incapable of identifying a real narration time. While reading the text requires time, it does not directly correspond to the duration of narration. Nonetheless, the narration time of certain segments can be roughly aligned with the temporal progression of events. For example, direct speech within a narrative can be compared to actual conversation, thus making the narration time isochronous with the narrated time. Similarly, the narration of certain segments of mental activities in dream sequences may be seen as isochronous with the temporal development of the dreamed events, focusing more on "reception time" rather than the physiological time required for the events. Thus, in written narratives, the connection between the narration time and the narrated time is a connection between duration of the events or story sections and the pseudo-duration (in fact, length of text) of their telling in the narrative. In this sense, the contrast between narration time and narrated time is essentially a metaphorical relationship that reflects the interplay between the length of the text and the time that has passed in the narrative frame.

Narratives often create an illusion of time, making it seem as though the narrated event unfolds over a specific physical duration. In reality, however, narration time and narrated time are largely independent. One common technique for linking these two temporal dimensions is the use of "dead space" in the plot, which transforms narrated time into narration time. An illustrative example of this can be found in André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (1925), where the end of the second chapter demonstrates this separation: "Father and son have no more to say to each other. Let us leave them. It is nearly eleven o'clock. Let us leave Madame Profitendieu in her room… I should be curious to know what Antoine can have told his friend the cook. But it is impossible to listen to everything".[9] Here, narration time and narrated time are separate and operate on different planes. The narrator ("I" and "us") functions within the framework of narration time, while the events being narrated ("they")

[9] André Gide, *The Counterfeiters*, trans., Dorothy Bussy, London: Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 28–29.

unfold autonomously in the domain of narrated time. Crucially, the narrator is not constrained by the chronological progression of the narrated events and does not need to "find time" within the narrated timeline in order to speak.

A notable example illustrating the disjunction between textual length and narrated time can be found in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. In one instance, the protagonist's mother stands eavesdropping in the doorway. Sterne interrupts the narrative with the following remark: "In this attitude I am determined to let her stand for five minutes: till I bring up the affairs of the kitchen (as Rapin does those of the church) to the same period".[10] However, when the narrative returns to the mother, several pages later, it reads: "Then, cried my mother, opening the door".[11] Here, the 5 min indicated in the narrative span over ten pages of text, highlighting a clear disjunction between the proposed duration of events in the narrated world and the actual length of time taken by the narrator to recount them. This discrepancy serves as a humorous commentary on the way textual length functions as a metaphor for time within narrative literature.

1. Zero duration: In the realm of plastic arts, which includes static visual media like images, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, and objects, the narrated duration often equals zero. This is because these media capture a single moment, rendering their duration of narration effectively frozen in time. Unlike time-based narratives in literature or cinema, these visual forms lack inherent temporal flow.

As discussed in Part II, Chapter Two, the narration of a single image necessitates a specific secondary narrativization, or precisely in this context "durationalization". Narrative, by its very nature, requires the progression of characters over time. Yet, narratives within plastic media present a challenge: they do not exhibit any apparent change or temporal movement. Consequently, it is up to the viewer or reader to stretch the temporal scope of the "zero-durational text" to enable the narrative's progression.

There are two primary ways in which a recipient can extend the duration of a zero-durational narrative. One method involves seeing the static image as a condensed representation of a larger event—much like a "screenshot" in modern computer terminology. The recipient can perceive this still image as a snapshot of a dynamic narrative, often capturing a particularly significant or poignant moment. In this way, the image is imbued with a sense of temporality and dramatic intensity, as the viewer imagines the events before or after the captured moment.

Scholars often question the narrative capacity of a single image. For example, the photographer Li Yuan asserts, "A photograph is a record of the moment the shutter is pressed. Positively, it captures the significance of that instant; negatively, it reveals neither the cause nor the effect, making it inherently lacking in narrative

[10] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, London: Grant Richards, 1903, p. 327.

[11] Ibid., p. 339.

competence".[12] However, this perspective overlooks the important role of co-texts—such as the title of a painting or the product description in the corner of an advertisement—that can facilitate the process of narrativization and assist in transforming an image into a narrative. Lessing's analysis of the Laocoön sculpture, for example, draws upon the Greek mythological "pre-text", without which the narrative meaning would be absent. "Zero-durational" texts, including visual art forms such as painting and sculpture, can indeed portray temporal progression of events. Yet, they achieve this only indirectly, relying on the co-text to suggest unfolding events or narrative progression.

Another method of bringing dynamism to static imagery is by dividing the image into a sequence of pictures, which together form a cohesive narrative. A notable example comes from the Tang Dynasty, specifically in the work of Wu Daozi. His *Transformation Tableaux of Buddhist Hells* (*Diyu Bianxiang Tu* 《地狱变相图》, c. 730 CE) is believed to have dissuaded butchers in Chang'an from practicing their craft for 3 months. Although the original painting has not been preserved, later reproductions in various temples suggest it may have been composed of a sequence of images akin to a comic strip. When viewed together, these images would have conveyed a temporal progression of a cohesive narrative. Similarly, in European church frescoes, the narrative unfolds through structured spatial arrangements:

> as in the mosaics on the two nave walls of S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna with processional figures advancing to the East end, while the Gospel scenes above them proceed from East to West. Within each series left-to-right and right-to-left have an identical goal and connotation. One can find also representations in boustrophedon order, beginning left-to-right and returning in a second register from right to left (Vienna Genesis). Less a matter of convention is the sequence from top to bottom in series of extended horizontal scenes… In some works this order is motivated by the content; where the climactic scene in a vertical series is the final one, as in images of the life of Christ, it will be placed at the top.[13]

Narratives in plastic media solely provide the foundational conditions for potential extension of the duration, and their actualization as narratives hinges on the process of reception. A single image or sculpture, when considered in isolation, does not inherently function as a narrative text. Instead, it is more accurately categorized as a static object—a still life or sculpture. The shift into narrative form is contingent upon the recipient's narrativization of the work. It is precisely this ability of zero-durational texts to unfold through the act of reception that makes the distinction between a static object and a "plastic narrative" increasingly difficult to define. Moreover, the absence of co-textual elements, such as titles or captions, further complicates the process of extension of the zero-durational text during secondary narrativization.

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[12] Li Yuan, *On American Photography*, Beijing: China Photography Publishing House, 2001, p. 25.

[13] Meyer Shapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs", *Semiotica*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1969, p. 231.

9.4 Textual-Extratextual Time Gap

The third category, known as the textual-extratextual time gap, explores the intricate interplay between the narrated duration, the narrating moment, as well as the writing duration and the reading time (duration and moment) within a narrative text. This category introduces a more complex dynamic than the previous two because it extends beyond the confines of the narrative itself. While the first two categories focus on relationships within the textual timeline, the concept of textual-extratextual time gap concerns the interplay between the narrative and extratextual time.

In performative narratives, the act of narration and the unfolding of the narrated plot typically occur simultaneously. Unlike recorded narratives, performative narratives are conveyed through "non-specific" media, and a defining characteristic of such narratives is their presentation and reception in the immediate "here and now". There is no need for subsequent "post-processing" or storage for future consumption by a detached audience. The three primary categories of performative narratives—performance, competition, and games—share a fundamental feature: the narration time and the narrated time progress in perfect parallelism. In theater, for example, various techniques may be used to modulate the narrative speed. However, in competitions and games, the narrated time and the narration time are in complete synchronization.

In contrast, recorded narratives involve a temporal gap between narrated time and narration time. In such narratives, the narrated time typically precedes the narration time. Moreover, the narration time in recorded narratives is confined to a singular moment. As previously explored in earlier chapters, a distinction must be made between narration time in textual media—whether through words or images—and the actual writing time. While narration time refers to a particular narrating moment within the narrative world, writing time extends beyond the text itself, anchoring the narrative in real-world temporalities. These two temporal concepts—the narrating moment (within the text) and the writing time (extratextual)—are distinct and belong to separate dimensions: textual and extratextual.

In factual narratives, we can define the moment when the text is completed as the narrating moment, for the act of narration represents a real-world event. In these genres, the author functions as the narrator, and the conclusion of the writing process (the moment of narration) corresponds to a specific point in empirical time. Conversely, in fictional narratives, the narrating moment is inherently situated within the fictional realm, whether explicitly or implicitly. The explicit narrating moment arises when a first-person narrator, such as the protagonist "I", consciously chooses to recount their life, as seen in works like Lao She's *The Crescent Moon* (1935). This moment can also manifest when a character, such as Holden—a teenage boy—speaks to a psychiatrist about his experiences, for example, skipping school, in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The implicit narrating moment emerges when the narrative framework is established from a "third-person" perspective. Unlike factual narratives, fictional narratives cannot identify a precise moment

within the empirical timeline. Nevertheless, this fictional narrating moment remains an essential element of all fictional storytelling.

In the context of recorded narratives, the duration of writing time and the narrating moment are conceptually distinct. When a narrative references its writing time, it suggests the narrating moment, regardless of whether this aligns with the actual time the text was written. For instance, in Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary*, the extradiegetic narrator ends the story with the date "(the Republic of China) April 2, 7 (seven years after the 1911 revolution)", which corresponds to the date Lu Xun actually finished writing the story. From a narratological perspective, this overlap of textual "narrating moment" and extratextual writing time is coincidental; they do not inherently align. This highlights the distinction between the narrative's depiction of narrating moment and the actual temporal context in which the text was created.

Thus, the narrative time in recorded texts exhibits three key characteristics: First, the narrated duration of time always precedes the narrating moment. Second, in factual narratives, the narrative act is concrete, whereas in fictional narratives, it is abstract. Third, both types of recorded narratives—whether factual or fictional—share the common feature of possessing only spatial length. Words and images, as static signs, lack temporal extension. Consequently, the narrative act can only occur at a specific moment after the narrated events have been recounted. The act of narration, though it may take years to complete the writing process, is realized in an instant once the text is finalized. This marks the moment the implied author exists and signifies a narrative present.

Zhang Zhupo observed that *The Plum in the Golden Vase* distinguishes itself from other novels by encapsulating a story spanning three or four years within a single instant. Similarly, in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Melquíades, the author within the novel, encodes his work in a parchment inscribed with numerous ciphers. He "had not put events in the order of man's conventional time, but had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant".[14] In both examples, as with Zhang Zhupo's insight, the fictional narrative act occurs within an abstract moment.

The extent to which the narrating moment lags behind the narrated time is sometimes explicitly indicated within the narrative itself. In Lu Xun's story *Kong Yiji* (《孔乙己》, 1919), for example, shortly after the opening scene, the narrator, "I", remarks, "A bowl of wine for four copper coins – this was more than twenty years ago, and now each bowl costs ten coins".[15] This statement clearly establishes that the narrating moment occurs significantly later than the narrated time, creating a distinct temporal gap. Similarly, in Bai Juyi's poem *Pipa Xing* (《琵琶行》, 816), the episode in which the Secretary of Jiangzhou bids farewell to a guest and encounters a girl playing the *pipa* (a Chinese stringed instrument similar to a lute) who

[14] Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans., Gregory Rabassa, New York: Avon Books, 1971, p. 398.

[15] Lu Xun, *Call to Arms* (*Na Han*), Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1976, p. 27.

recounts past events, as the poem concludes with the lines, "Please do sit down and play another song, and I will compose a new poem, *Pipa Xing*, for you." Even if the poem was composed in the immediate aftermath of the encounter, it is presented as occurring after the entire narrative has unfolded. The sub-narrative recounted by the *pipa* girl reflects events from her life that predate her performance at the riverside. Notably, each narrative level thus unfolds progressively earlier in time, with each sub-level reflecting a moment further in the past.

In the realm of science fiction, which often explores future events, it is crucial for the narrating moment to be situated in the future relative to the narrative's events. A prime example of this can be found in Isaac Asimov's *The Foundation Trilogy* (1951–1953). The title page explicitly states, "All quotations from the Encyclopedia Galactica here reproduced are taken from the 116th Edition published in 1020 F.E. by the Encyclopedia Galactica Publishing Co., Terminus, with permission of the publishers".[16] Given that the final part of the novel takes place in the fourth century of the Foundation Era, it is clear that the narration occurs 600 years after the events described in the narrative.

The narrating moment in fictional works, much like the narrator, is a construct of the narrative itself, intrinsically tied to the fictional world rather than any specific real-world time. What can be definitively stated is that the narrating moment always follows the conclusion of the narrated events. When the time of narration is not explicitly stated within the text, it is reasonable to infer that the narrative act takes place at an unspecified point after the conclusion of the story. For instance, in Yu Dafu's *The Fallen* (《沉沦》, 1921), the narrative does not specify the time of the narrating moment. However, it is clear that the act of narration must occur after the protagonist's attempt to end his life by drowning in the sea. If, hypothetically, the protagonist had indeed drowned, leaving the outcome ambiguous as it is in the novel, one might question where the narrating moment would occur. This presents no real dilemma, as the narrator, as a fictional construct, can transcend conventional temporal boundaries, even extending beyond death. Similarly, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the narrative can be situated in a distant future where a Taoist figure named Reverend Void transcribes the story from stone after countless generations and aeons have passed. While this source may be considered unreliable, it remains valid within the framework of the narrative itself.

A particularly intriguing temporal ambiguity arises in the final chapter of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, where the Taoist revisits Qinggeng Mountain and discovers a new segment of the story inscribed on a stone. He then proceeds to transcribe this new content, which forms the basis for the last forty chapters of the novel. This introduces two distinct temporal frames:

> The first narrated duration corresponds to the events of the first eighty chapters.
>
> The first narrating moment occurs "after no one knows how many generations and aeons", when the story is narrated.
>
> The second narrated duration corresponds to the events of the final forty chapters.

[16] Issac Asimov, *The Foundation Trilogy: Foundation, Foundation and Empire, Second Foundation*, New York: Doubleday,1982.

The second narrating moment occurs "on this day", when the Taoist transcribes the new segment of the story.

Ideally, there should be no significant temporal gap between the last forty chapters and the first eighty chapters of the novel. However, since the last forty chapters were completed by a different author, he might have sought to acknowledge his own contribution by including this section of extradiegetic narrative, thereby inadvertently creating a considerable temporal gap, described as spanning "many generations and aeons".

9.5 Two-I's Difference

The phenomenon of the two-I's difference arises due to the temporal gap between the narrated time and the time of narration in recorded narratives. As the narrative unfolds, the duration of the narrated time gradually converges with the narrating moment, diminishing the gap between the two. While this temporal overlap is common in recorded narratives, its effects are more pronounced in first-person narratives, such as autobiographies, diaries, and first-person novels. In these works, the narrator "I", referred to as "narrating I", recounts the story of the character "I", or denoted as "experiencing I". As the narrative progresses, the distance between the narrator "I" and the character "I" narrows, leading to a conflict between these two narrative subjects, competing for the right to speak.

From a narratological perspective, it is crucial to recognize that the narrator "I" and the character "I" are, in essence, the same individual but represent distinct narrative roles. The narrator "I" appears at the "narrating moment", assuming the position of the narrative voice. In contrast, the character "I" exists within the "narrated time", where the narrator recounts the story from the perspective of this character. In Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* (1986), the narrator "I" recounts the history of his grandparents' generation. Whether the character "I" existed during that period is irrelevant to the narrative's structure, as the novel itself suggests: "Some people say that this boy who herds sheep is me, but I don't know if it's me".[17]

Thus, within a first-person narrative, there are two distinct "I"s. It appears that the narrator "I" does not necessarily recount his own life, but rather a series of stories of another "I", often a character "I" who occupies a different temporal position within the narrative. At times, the language of narration may even shift from the narrator's to that of the character, suggesting that the character "I" is gradually usurping the narrative authority of the narrator "I". The progression of the character "I" through the narrative naturally leads to the diminishing of the gap between these two selves, in line with a central tenet of the *Bildungsroman*. In this genre, the mature "I", reflects on the trials and lessons faced by the naive "I", ultimately coming to understand the true nature of existence. The mature narrator "I", in this case,

[17] Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, Beijing: China Youth Publishing House, 2008, p. 4.

has the authority to comment on, intervene in, and guide the development of the character "I", who is subject to critique and even ridicule during their journey of maturation.

In novels following an enlightenment trajectory, the two-I's difference tends to diminish over time as the character matures and their experiences increasingly align with those of the narrator "I". In the latter part of Lao She's *The Crescent Moon*, for example, the narrator "I" assumes the perspective of a prostitute who despises the harsh world she inhabits and finds herself imprisoned. As the character "I" becomes further entrenched in this unforgiving world, the distinction between the two "I" s narrows, since the character's evolving experiences bring her closer to the outlook of the narrator "I".

In this way, the act of narrative retrospection can be understood as the character's attempt to align themselves with the narrator's perspective, gradually bridging the gap between the past and the present within the narrative framework. A striking example of this phenomenon is found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Dr. Jekyll in an attempt to separate his benevolent and malevolent sides, concocts a potion that allows him to transform into his sinister alter ego, Mr. Hyde. However, as the story unfolds, Jekyll loses control of the transformation, and Mr. Hyde begins to emerge without the aid of the potion. As Hyde commits murder, Jekyll realizes he must take large doses of the potion to prevent further transformations. When Jekyll writes a confession, exposing the secret of his dual identity, he inadvertently reveals the malevolent Hyde, who, with a different moral compass, would destroy the confession to protect his existence. In this narrative, the two "I"s must exist within distinct temporal and spatial realms to maintain the viability of the story. The character of Mr. Hyde continually strives to catch up with Dr. Jekyll, the one composing the confession, even though both figures originate from the same divided subject. The narrative can only endure as a recorded text if the narrated time is kept separate from the narrating moment. Jekyll's final act of suicide in the novel serves as a safeguard, preventing his transformation into Hyde and ensuring that the narrative text remains intact, free from the destruction that Hyde would wreak.

In the German film *The Door* (2009), the protagonist, a successful painter, grapples with profound despair after his negligence leads to the tragic drowning of his 7-year-old daughter in a swimming pool. However, he discovers a magical door that allows him to travel 5 years back in time. Upon entering this door, he rescues his daughter but encounters another version of himself from the past. This film presents a scenario in which the same narrator embodies two distinct selves: the younger version of himself cannot bear witnessing the impending mistakes of his older self, ultimately deciding to take his own life to prevent his future self from repeating those errors. Mark Currie discusses a similar concept, noting that, "Identity is only identity when narration is in process, so that there is a sense in which Jekyll (the character) has no existence beyond the end of the writing".[18] This idea is mirrored

[18] Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1998, p. 124.

in the film *Looper* (2012), where the older Joe travels back in time to prevent his wife's death by targeting the young Rainmaker. This leads to an encounter with his younger self, creating a unique scenario in which two versions of the same character—each with distinct temporal identities—engage in what could be described as a two-I's conflict. Such temporal interplay is also a recurring motif in the *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985, 1989, 1990).

It is crucial to recognize that the age gap between the narrator "I" and the character "I" does not inherently result in a conflict between the two. The two-I's difference introduces complexity and polyphony to the narrative. These two selves communicate, complement each other, and contribute to the dynamic tension within the narrative. Neither the narrator "I" nor the character "I" has complete control over the narrative. When the narrator "I" dominates, the language may become excessively sophisticated or detached, potentially sacrificing the authenticity of the character's experience. Conversely, when the character "I" takes precedence, the language may appear overly naive or simplistic, thereby diminishing the depth of self-reflection and the dramatic weight of the narrative.

Several strategies can be employed to address the temporal challenges posed by the two-I's difference. One method is to minimize the gap between the narrating moment and the narrated duration. For example, in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the narrating moment occurs shortly after the teenage protagonist's adventures, rather than many years later in his adulthood. This choice allows the youthful, streetwise language of the teenager to be seamlessly attributed to both "I"s, bridging the gap between the narrator and the character.

Another approach to eliminate the two-I's difference is to suggest that the narrator and the character share the same perspective on certain issues, thus blurring the distinction between the two. A notable example can be found in Lin Bai's *A War of One's Own* (1994):

> Auntie raised her hand and pulled the mosquito net down. It fell away, transforming the bed into a small room, complete with a roof and a door, where no one could enter. When the lights dimmed, the walls seemed to thicken, concealing everything from view. Securely within, she turned herself into water, her hand turning into a fish, which slid away. The birds took flight, and as long as she remained silent, no one would approach. **This practice has endured to this day**. Through the long, quiet days, the mosquito net was the only means to shield her from others and preserve her sense of safety.[19]

In this novel, the narrator "I" and the character "I" exhibit a consistent stance regarding their affection for mosquito nets. This alignment temporarily ceases the struggle for narrative control between the two selves. However, if the narrative had adhered to this harmonious dynamic throughout, it would have lacked the plot conflict essential for driving the story forward.

A third strategy involves the mature narrator "I" correcting or reflecting on the naive "I", emphasizing the unreliability of the younger character's perspective. This technique is notably illustrated in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), where

[19] Lin Bai, *A War of One's Own*, Beijing: The Writers Publishing House, 2009, p. 2.

the adult Ma Xiaojun, a voice-over, narrates the events of his youth. Throughout the narrative, he frequently interjects, reminding both himself and the audience of the fallibility of his memories. For instance, when the film depicts an incident where he punches Liu Yiku, the narrator immediately qualifies it by stating, "Don't believe this, I've never been so brave, so heroic… I sadly found that it was impossible to restore the truth, and that memories were always being altered by my emotions." In this way, the adult "I" disavows the youthful "I", erasing the two-I's difference.

Alternatively, a stark differentiation between the two selves can be achieved by adopting distinct personas within the narrative. In Wang Shuo's *Little Red Flowers* (1999), the first-person narrative recounts the protagonist's childhood experiences, but the childhood "I" is given a separate name—"Fang Qiangqiang". This distinction transforms the two selves into a composite where a present "I" narrates the story of a past "he". The narrative shifts between "I" and "he", as the present self objectively recounts the actions and thoughts of the childhood self, as seen in passages like, "I didn't figure out what he was thinking about at that moment".[20] This "he" represents the "I" of the past rather than the "I" of the present.

The writing time and reading time both exist within the timeline of the experiential world, directly related to events in factual narratives, but unrelated to that of the fictional narratives. Both the writing time and reception time are situated within the realms of the author and reader, existing outside the boundaries of the text itself. In the case of recorded narratives such as written text or images, the writing time necessarily precedes the reading time. Both are rooted in the real, experiential world rather than being products of fictional imagination.

In the cultural study of a work, the gap between writing time and reception time is of central importance. When the time of writing is significantly distant from the time of reception, the text is often elevated to the status of a classic, with history playing a role in enhancing its significance. Works that have persisted for over a thousand years are typically regarded as free of inferior examples. Conversely, when the time separating writing and reception is shorter, the level of reverence tends to decline, and it is often through the passage of time that great authors gain recognition from subsequent generations. This phenomenon explains why the process of reception itself is worthy of scholarly attention. When both the writing time and reception time are far removed from the present moment, it becomes increasingly clear that the mode of reception has the power to reshape and redefine the "quality" of a text.

[20] Wang Shuo, *Little Red Flowers*, Beijing: Huayi Publishing House, 1999, p. 151.

9.6 The Problem of Time in Performative Narrative

The proliferation of performative media in modern culture has led to the development of distinct temporal characteristics within performative narratives. This section delves into these time-related features, with particular emphasis on their application in such media.

A key characteristic of performative narratives is the alignment of the duration of narrated time with both the duration of narration and the duration of reception. In the context of fictional performances—such as theater—this concept of narrative chronym pertains to the narrated time of the plot, which differs from the unfolding of the narrative text during the performance itself. For example, a period drama set in the eighteenth century might depict historical events, but the performance itself occurs in real time, as a live demonstration. In this case, the narrative text unfolds synchronously with the act of viewing, distinct from the retrospective nature of recorded narratives. Thus, the narrated time, narration time, and reception time coincide during a live performance.

Kant referred to this sense of immediacy as "the present presence", while Heidegger expanded upon this notion with the term "the site of the moment".[21] From a phenomenological perspective, this immanent time is not an inherent feature of the object being considered, but rather a temporality intrinsic to consciousness itself. It's important to note that this "presentness" in narrative is not an essential quality of all narratives; rather, it represents a receptive mode specific to certain narrative genres. In other words, it reflects a cultural convention governing how a text is engaged with by an audience.

The complexity of performative narrative emerges as new methods of preserving these performances have evolved, especially in the electronic age, through media such as film, video, and audio recordings. Modern storage technologies enable the preservation of these performances in various formats, which results in the loss of their inherent "presentness", transforming them into what is commonly referred to as "recorded performative narratives".

However, the primary focus here is on the narrative medium itself, which serves as the vessel for these genres. More specifically, we are concerned with the expected mode of reception for the original narrative genre—the way in which the audience is meant to experience it. Even when performances are captured and recorded by a camera, creating a temporal and spatial separation between the act of performance and its reception, the performative narrative continues to maintain its sense of presence for the audience.

Films, whether recorded on film stock or in digital formats, present a different temporality compared to live theater performances, which raises significant challenges for film scholars. From my perspective, both film and live theater can be classified as performative narratives, and they share a fundamental distinction from

[21] Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, tans., Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012.

other recorded media—especially novels—regarding their temporal directionality. Notably, the temporality of a videotaped theater performance may align more closely with that of a film in terms of how the narrative is received by the audience.

Proponents of the idea that film is fundamentally distinct from theater argue that live performances, much like oral narration, retain the potential for improvisation. This improvisational element introduces an element of uncertainty into the narrative, making the progression of performance unpredictable in nature. In contrast, film is typically regarded as a finished product, carefully constructed with no room for such spontaneity. In contemporary culture, television and film have become the dominant narrative genres. The "presentness" inherent in these forms, which I extensively emphasize in this book, aligns with the perspectives of numerous scholars, such as Metz and others, as discussed in Part I, Chapter Two. Nonetheless, Gaudreault and Jost argue that film is pre-produced (stored on film or DVD) and, therefore, "film represents a finished action, a representation to the audience of what has happened in the past", and they argue that "(only) theatre is always in phenomenological simultaneity with the spectator's reception".[22]

However, it is important to note that the distinction between theater and film as described by Gaudreault and Jost is more relevant within the context of production than it is for the audience. From the audience's perspective, both film and theater share a fundamental experience of presentness, even if the medium itself is pre-recorded. André Bazin, an advocate for the long take in cinema, offers an intriguing perspective on this matter. He suggests that, "essential cinema, seen for once in its pure state, on the contrary, is to be found in straightforward photographic respect for the unity of space".[23] While Bazin's viewpoint remains influential, it may not fully capture the current practices of contemporary film narration.

The comparison between theater and film can be likened to the dichotomy between oral narration and broadcasting. The immediacy inherent in oral narration constitutes a multifaceted mode of communication. Historically, live performative narratives, such as *Pinghua* (平话), popular oral stories in Song and Yuan dynasties, or fiddle ballads during the Ming and Qing, as well as contemporary forms like storytelling and cross-talk, incorporate various paratextual elements (e.g., posture, vocal tone, and accompaniment). These performances facilitated interaction between the narrator and the audience, granting the performer the freedom to improvise. Experiencing oral narration, much like that of listening to a radio broadcast, carries a strong sense of immediacy. Even though an informed listener might recognize that a radio broadcast is pre-recorded, the average listener may still experience it as happening in the present.

The defining feature of many performative narratives is their inherent "uncertainty". Performance inherently implies that the progression of the narrative is not predetermined, and thus, all meanings are established in the present moment and

[22] André Gaudreault, François Jost, *Le récit cinématographique*, trans., Liu Yunzhou, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2005, p. 45.

[23] André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Volume 1), trans., Hugh Gray, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p. 46.

subject to potential revision by subsequent events. This uncertainty often gives rise to dramatic irony, a narrative device in which the audience possesses more knowledge than the characters, creating tension and emotional engagement. A well-known example of this is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), in which Romeo's tragic suicide is caused by his mistaken belief that Juliet is dead. The audience experiences a deep sense of distress as they watch the characters err due to their lack of knowledge. Dramatic irony is made possible by the "presentness" of performative narratives, which gives the audience the feeling that the tragic events have not yet occurred. This sensation of immediacy allows viewers to feel as if their intervention (such as shouting at the stage) could alter the course of events. This dynamic creates a remarkable tension between the act of narration on stage and its reception off stage.

This dynamic is similar to watching a live sports game or playing a video game—both are forms of performative narrative in which the appeal lies in the uncertainty of what will happen next. While fictional narratives and historical accounts may also contain suspense, their inherent temporality is retrospective: the events have already occurred, and the narrative is fixed. Readers may eagerly anticipate the outcome, yet they do not feel an impulse to intervene in the plot. In contrast, while film audiences may not feel the same "impulse to participate", interactive video games have greatly heightened the unpredictability of narrative outcomes. In these environments, players actively shape the story through real-time decisions, making the sense of "ongoingness" not merely a perception but an essential element of participation in the unfolding narrative.

Chapter 10
The Problem of Plot

10.1 Plot and Event

Plot, or action, stands as the cornerstone of narrativity, serving as the defining feature that distinguishes a narrative from other forms of discourse. In any theological or philosophical exploration of narrative, plot remains the central concern. Renowned philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle placed equal emphasis on the study of mythos (the narrative plot) alongside logos. Influential works in twentieth-century narratology, including Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, Tomashevsky's "Thematics", Greimas's *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, Barthes's *S/Z*, Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, and Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* all predominantly focus on plot.

Despite its centrality, plot remains one of the most complex and debated issues in narratology. There is still no universally accepted definition of plot, nor is there consensus regarding its scope within the field. The study of plot is often metaphorically described as akin to a "castle in the clouds": impressive from a distance, yet difficult to approach with precision. Nevertheless, grappling with the concept of plot is essential for any comprehensive theory of narratology, as it is an inherent and defining feature of narrative texts.

Plot, fundamentally distinct from both "story" and "event", occupies an intermediate position that requires clear identification. Plot is often conflated with story, as evidenced by the term "story-plot" in Chinese; however, such a simplistic identification falls short when applied to broader narratological study, which extends beyond literary narratives. In Western languages, the term "story" introduces additional complexity compared to Chinese. In English, for example, the term "story" can be used to describe news events or historical occurrences. Similarly, French uses "histoire" interchangeably for both "story" and "history". By contrast, the Chinese language does not typically categorize factual narratives—such as history or news—as "stories", although they are recognized as narratives with a plot. This distinction is

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_10

crucial: factual narratives in Chinese may possess a plot without necessarily being classified as stories, whereas fictional narratives typically include both a plot and a story. For instance, in a courtroom setting, a judge might not describe a statement as a "story", but will still acknowledge it as a narrative with a plot. In Chinese, a "story" is traditionally understood to have both a beginning and an end. However, many factual narratives deviate from this structure of a "complete" plot, as exemplified by forms such as dreams, diaries, letters, competitions, video games, or image narratives (such as the advertising from courier companies referenced in the previous chapter). These forms of narratives do contain plots, but it is challenging to classify them as "stories" in the traditional sense.

The scope of plot is significantly broader than that of story. Plot refers to the foundational material from which a story is constructed. A story, in turn, is a structured form of the plot, marked by a clear beginning, development, and conclusion. It is important to emphasize that while a narrative text must contain a plot to be classified as a narrative. It is not necessarily required to have a story. This distinction is especially prominent in the Chinese language, where the term for "story" is more closely associated with fictional narratives compared to its English or French counterparts. Consequently, this book focuses primarily on the concept of plot, rather than using the term story. The differences in the denotative meanings of "plot" and "story" across various languages highlight the broader applicability of the term plot in narrative theory, establishing it as the most fundamental characteristic of narrative texts.

There exists a fundamental distinction between the concepts of plot and event. As established in the introductory section of this work, the minimal definition of plot is narrated events involving characters. A text is classified as a narrative to the extent that it recounts such events, with events thus forming the most basic unit of a plot. The key distinction between an event and a plot lies in the fact that events do not necessarily need to occur within the narrative itself; they may transpire in the realm of experiential reality. Thus, events alone do not constitute the foundation of a narrative plot. Rather, it is the mediated representation of events that forms the core of the plot. A plot, therefore, is exclusively contained within the text and does not extend into the realm of experiential reality.

The distinction between these two concepts can be readily illustrated: events typically involve changes in the state of affairs. When left unmediated, they are mere occurrences within experiential reality and do not, in isolation, form the essential components of a narrative plot. Thus, the concept of plot incorporates two fundamental elements: first, the selection of events (i.e., what is chosen to be narrated), and second, the manner in which these events are narratively presented (i.e., how they are articulated). The synthesis of these two components gives rise to the concept of a "plot".

Many theorists assert that every narrative text inherently possesses a plot, considering plot as an essential and intrinsic characteristic of narrative itself. For example,

Ricoeur argues that "emplotment" represents a manifestation of "narrativity".[1] As noted in the initial section of the book, changes in events that do not involve characters are not considered the focus of narrative, and do not constitute the plot. Texts documenting such changes—such as laboratory reports, chemical formulae, or geological descriptions—are not classified as narratives; instead, they are regarded as statements about the progression or evolution of entities or phenomena. This categorization, established earlier, underscores that these texts do not qualify as narratives according to the minimal definition of narrative presented in this book.

The current book draws on a wide range of narratologists, preserving their distinct terminologies to faithfully represent their perspectives. However, it highlights that much of the discourse within the field tends to focus more on terminological variations rather than on fundamental disagreements. The central argument of this book is that events serve as essential components of the plot, which is conceived as a sequential arrangement of events selectively chosen by the narrator for inclusion in the narrative text. As such, this work contends that all narratives inherently possess a plot, and that there are no truly "plotless" narratives; rather, narratives exhibit varying degrees of "plotness". To clarify this concept, it is necessary to offer a precise definition of "plot" that can accommodate this broad scope. While some theorists may offer differing perspectives, a clear and well-defined concept of plot can resolve many of the complexities and ambiguities that have historically plagued narratological discourse. Through this framework, the book aims to illuminate numerous intricate questions that have remained challenging within the field.

10.2 "Narratability" and "Narrativity"

A key aspect of the plot debate concerns the nature of events that possess narratability, specifically what makes an event meaningful enough to be selected by the narrator for inclusion in the text and engaging enough for the reader. In this context, narratability refers to the inherent potential of an event to be narrated—what makes an event worth telling, based on its intrinsic qualities. Conversely, whether a text possesses "narrativity" is determined by the degree to which it has been successfully narrativized. This reflects the level at which the process of narrativization is effectively realized in different narratives. While narratability is a characteristic of the event itself, narrativity refers to the quality of the narrative text. The plot acts as a bridge between these two aspects: simply stated, the narratability of an event allows its inclusion in the plot, while the narrator's orchestration of the plot imparts "narrativity" to the text. In essence, the emplotment functions as the mechanism that transforms the narratability of events into the narrativity of the text.

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Volume 1), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 31–52.

It is important to recognize that the assessment of "narratability" is highly subjective; what one author considers worthy of narration, and what one reader finds engaging, may not resonate with others. However, some universal principles of narratability do exist, applicable to different individuals. This necessitates revisiting the notion of the interpretive community, a theme frequently emphasized in this book. Narratability is thus an attribute ascribed to events that hold potential interest for a particular interpretive community.

Aristotle identified three key elements in the complex plot structure of tragedy: "reversal", "recognition", and "suffering". However, these components are not essential to the minimal narratability that underpins all narrative genres. This section explores the notion of minimal narratability, outlining the criteria that events must meet to constitute a "minimal plot". The concept of minimal narratability stands in contrast to events deemed "unworthy" or "unnarratable". An event is ineligible for inclusion in a narrative if it does not possess this minimal narratability. Without such a criterion, narrators would be faced with the overwhelming task of selecting from an infinite array of events. Hence, any event that is chosen for inclusion in a narrative inherently possesses the quality of narratability.

While narratives serve to represent the events of the world, Bruner argues that, "Narratives do not exist, as it were, in some real world, waiting there patiently and eternally to be veridically mirrored in a text".[2] And "the events themselves need to be constituted in the light of the overall narrative—in Propp's terms, to be made 'functions' of the story".[3] "The telling of a story and its comprehension as a story depend on the human capacity to process knowledge in this interpretive way", which refers to "hermeneutic composability".[4] Plot, as the meaningful arrangement of events, only comes into existence within the narrative text. Texts inherently possess narrativity, whereas life itself does not, a point echoed by Robert Scholes, who asserts that "Life resumes when narrativity ceases".[5]

It could be argued that narratives do not inherently exist within the world; rather, it is the narrative-oriented human mind that actively shapes worldly experiences into narrative forms, thereby rendering them intelligible. This inclination to narrativize is the driving force behind the creation of myths, historical accounts, stories, and news. As Ivy Compton-Burnett observes, "As regards plots I find real life no help at all. Real life seems to have no plots. And as I think a plot desirable and almost necessary, I have this extra grudge against life".[6]

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[2] Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality", *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 18, no. 1, 1991, p. 8.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982, p. 64.

[6] "A Conversation Between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jourdain", *Orion: A Miscellany*, vol. 1, 1945, p. 2.

So, what types of events are narratable? Herman categorizes events into different event-types,[7] each eligible for narration but varying in their degree of narratability. Type I events represent an unplotted "history of life", exemplified by a hypothetical book titled *Women's Lives in the Tang Dynasty*. In contrast, Type II events constitute a plotted "history of events", such as those described in a hypothetical book titled *The Xuanwu Gate Incident*. Herman's framework essentially addresses the degree of narratability, suggesting that extraordinary or singular events are inherently more narratable. However routine events, such as the habitual influence of eunuchs over the Tang emperor may also be worthy of telling, though with a low degree of narratability.

The examination of event-types necessitates an understanding of narrative genres, as different genres—each with its unique conventions—privilege certain event types over others. It is impractical to impose a single standard of narratability across all genres. For example, the criteria for narratability in casual conversation differ significantly from those in a comic opera, and the narratability of events in a journal documenting customs contrasts with that in a highly dramatized piece of flash fiction. Moreover, the same standard cannot be applied to an artwork such as the painting of "Along the River During the Qingming Festival", which depicts everyday life, and to an advertisement. In the context of a general narratology, an event involving characters has the potential to form a plot. However, the compelling nature of the narrative does not rely solely on the events it portrays. Thus, narratability represents only one aspect of the larger narrative structure.

Many scholars maintain that narratives should primarily feature "extraordinary" events. Jerome Bruner posits that, "For to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated, or deviated from".[8] Polanyi further argues that only "the violation of a norm is a narratable topic".[9]This perspective suggests that the development of a plot hinges not on adherence to the conventions of the empirical world but on its deviation from those conventions. The extent to which these norms are breached thus becomes a measure of the plot's narratability or excellence.

This view positions all narrative events as marked, with narratability being synonymous with markedness. In this perspective, a narrative event must possess a degree of exceptionality, often exemplified by a man-bites-dog situation, in which the narrative defies established conventions and expectations. However, aside from genres like fiction, film, news, and history—narrative forms that deliberately seek exceptional moments—many narratives do not strive for exceptionalism. Examples of such include courtroom arguments, prayers, and rituals. Even seemingly "creative" narratives like novels and films often adhere to established conventions. This is evident in traditional novels and Hollywood films, where plots may appear to

[7] Herman, David. "Events and Event-Types," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds., D. Herman et al., London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 151–52.

[8] Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality", *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 18, no. 1, 1991, p. 11.

[9] Livia Polanyi, "So What's the Point?" *Semiotica*, vol. 25, no. 3–4, 1979, p. 212.

break the rules, yet their resolutions typically revert to the norm, offering clear moral lessons. Therefore, the narrative plot oscillates between the extraordinary and the ordinary.

Thus, narratability cannot be solely determined by a breach of conventions, as seen in the continuing convention of the "Hollywood happy ending". While the narratability of a plot is ultimately contingent upon the specific interpretive community, the narrativity of a text is relative to the "interpretive context" of the reader. The narrator retains the prerogative to decide what events will capture the recipient's interest, but the recipient is not necessarily in search of novelty. Instead, they may expect the narrative to follow a genre's socio-culturally prescribed patterns of signification, which provide conventional forms of psychological satisfaction.

It is evidently problematic to frame narratability solely in terms of rule violations or breaches of convention, as this risks standardizing the form of plot development. For instance, a reader interested in the lives of women in the Tang Dynasty may not find the court coup of Emperor Tang Taizong inherently engaging. The appeal of a narrative depends on a composite interplay of three factors: first, the inherent interest of the event itself, as previously underscored by various scholars; second, the manner in which the narrative unfolds, generating narrativity within the text; and third, the cognitive satisfaction of the reader within the interpretive community. These three factors are inherently dynamic and relative, working together to form a continuous chain of signification.

Some historians distinguish themselves by employing unconventional methods in this regard. A notable example is the esteemed sinologist Jonathan D. Spencer, whose influential work *The Death of Woman Wang* (1978) offers a detailed exploration of early Qing China in 1688. Spencer draws on local sources, including the Tancheng County Gazetteer from Shandong, to depict the society and daily life of ordinary people. Yet, within this seemingly mundane portrayal, Spencer masterfully brings to the forefront exceptional events—such as earthquakes and the widow's elopement with another man. By examining the ordinary through the lens of the extraordinary, Spencer's work weaves these remarkable occurrences into the fabric of everyday life. Indeed, Spencer's unique approach marks him as a historian with an exceptional perspective.

10.3 Criteria for Plot Selection

Selection arises from a process of "deselection", with the latter logically preceding the former. Not all events in the *fabula* qualify as "plot events". The types of events that are eligible for selection vary widely depending on the genre, style, and subject matter of the narrative. Each text establishes its own set of criteria for selection, making it nearly impossible to define a universal standard. However, in order to accommodate the diverse range of narratives, a theory of general narratology must propose a "minimum threshold standard", below which all events, regardless of

their nature, are considered not qualified for selection and inclusion in the plot. Without such a criterion, any discussion of "plot construction" becomes untenable.

This section addresses the concept of narratability, which determines an event's potential for selection within a narrative. Ultimately, the selection of events depends on the narrator's method of storytelling. The four types of narratability discussed here represent the limits of what can be selected for inclusion, not the restrictions of textual composition. It is crucial to distinguish this from "narrativity", which pertains to the quality that renders a text narrative or, as some scholars interpret it, the quality that infuses a narrative with vitality. In essence, narratability refers to the attributes of the event itself, while narrativity relates to the qualities of the plot.

The principle of "not telling what the recipient prefers not to hear" is inadequate as a criterion for event selection in narratives. As discussed earlier, some scholars argue that the "violation of convention" is the only criteria for selecting events, which seems to suggest that the most unconventional events are the most worthy of narration. However, this view is somewhat impractical, as cultural contexts generally employ a range of criteria in narrative selection. Robyn R. Warhol distinguishes between events that "cannot be narrated" and those that are "not worth narrating", categorizing unnarratable forms into four types, which, he acknowledges, are not exhaustive[10]:

> Subnarratable: that which, according to a given narrative, need not be told, because it is so "normal" as to go without saying.
>
> Supranarratable: that which, according to a given narrative, cannot be told, because it is ineffable or inexpressible.
>
> Antinarratable: that which, according to a given narrative, should not be told, due to social convention or taboo.
>
> Paranarratable: that which, according to a given narrative, would not be told, due to literary convention.[11]

The criteria for selecting or deselecting plot elements vary significantly across different social cultures and narrative genres. Some narrative genres, such as fiction, offer a broad array of alternants for selection along the paradigmatic axis due to their more flexible criteria. In contrast, factual genres tend to present a narrower range of options because they are governed by stricter standards. The plot construction and the evolution of the narrative are influenced by the interplay of the four unnarratable forms described earlier. Clearly, the criteria for selection are diverse and multifaceted. Many "antinarratable" events are considered unsuitable not only because of social taboos but also because of genre-specific conventions. For example, nudity is prohibited in documentary films but may be acceptable in other contexts, such as sculpture, pornography, or Cinéma de la Cruautéc. Conversely, events typically considered mundane and excluded from mainstream films are often

[10] Robyn R. Warhol, "Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film", *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, eds., James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 222.

[11] "Glossary", *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, eds., James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 542–550.

deliberately incorporated into naturalistic novels (such as Émile Zola's *L'Assommoir*, 1876, which devotes extensive attention to describing a laundry room for about 10 pages) or in neo-realist films, which may feature long shots lasting up to 10 min to cultivate a sense of realism.

In the 2005 film *War of the Worlds*, the narrative is primarily told from the perspective of a father, portrayed by Tom Cruise, whose primary concern is the safety of his daughter. At a critical moment in the film, the narrative point of view shifts when they are taken in by a benevolent man who decides to confront the Martians. Fearing that this action could expose their location to the aliens, the father kills the man. It is at this moment that the narrative perspective then transitions to the daughter, who seeks refuge and begins to sing a lullaby, thus shielding herself from witnessing the act of violence. This narrative strategy effectively omits the depiction of the killing, presumably to avoid portraying morally questionable violence.

Even highly narratable events can be excluded from a narrative if their repetition diminishes their narratability or paranarratability. This contrasts with traditional Chinese novels, which often adopt a different approach to repetition. These narratives typically emphasize a structured format with a clear beginning and ending, where conflicts or issues introduced in the story are expected to be resolved. For example, in chapter fifty-two of *Water Margin*, the character Zhu Tong is forced to travel to Mount Liang, and he's worried about the safety of his family during his journey. On the way, he learns from someone that his family has already been safely escorted there. Upon arrival, this information about his family is conveyed to him once again, demonstrating a narrative style that embraces repetition for emphasis or clarification. Similarly, in chapter forty-five and forty-six, the novel delves into the adulterous relationship between the Monk Hai and Pan Qiaoyun. They conspire to create a situation where Ying'er sets up an incense table to signal Yang Xiong's absence, and Dhuta Hu plays a wooden fish to announce the monk's return to the temple. This event is reiterated seven times over the span of seven pages:

> The first instance occurs when Monk Hai explains the detailed plan to Dhuta Hu.
>
> The second instance involves Dhuta Hu implementing the plan as instructed.
>
> The third instance features Shixiu discovering the conspiracy and its specific procedures.
>
> The fourth instance shows Shixiu informing Yang Xiong about the conspiracy and its steps.
>
> The fifth instance involves Shixiu coercing Dhuta Hu with a knife to reveal the details of the conspiracy.
>
> In the sixth, Yang Xiong similarly forces Ying'er, using a knife, to admit the specific steps involved.
>
> Finally, in the seventh instance, Ying'er, under duress, reveals the full details.

Contemporary readers might find it surprising that this particular event is repeated seven times within the narrative. Repetitions like this may be deemed unsuitable in modern narratives due to their limited capacity to advance the plot. However, in this case, the repetition likely reflects the significant transgression represented by the plot, a serious breach of traditional Chinese social norms. The repetition heightens the tension and anticipation, as characters are compelled to confess under the looming threat of a knife. This use of repetition, rather than detracting from the narrative,

continues to engage readers and audiences, demonstrating the enduring power of the story.

It is essential to clarify that the use of repetition in contemporary fiction does not automatically render events paranarratable. In fact, a deliberate and strategic use of repetition can enhance narratability. For example, in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), the repeated depiction of the protagonist's actions and emotions contributes to the work's captivating style. Similarly, in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), the scene in which the bombardier Snow suffers a severe injury is revisited five times in the narrative, heightening its emotional impact.

The key takeaway from this analysis is that the plot is constructed through the narrator's deliberate selection of events from a vast pool of possibilities. This selection is influenced by prevailing social norms and the specific demands of the narrative genre. The primary aim of the selection process is twofold: to capture the audience's interest and to fulfill the social functions inherent in the chosen genre.

Chapter 11
The Negational Dynamics of Plot Development

11.1 The "Tetralemma" Mode

The concept of plot in narrative theory pertains to the change of the state of affairs. These changes are triggered by the negation of an existing state, which then opens the path for a new state to emerge. The negation of the prior state is, therefore, the fundamental driving force behind the development of plot. Grasping the nature of this negational dynamics is crucial for understanding the structure of a plot. In this chapter, I explore the concept of "negational dynamics" from both Eastern and Western literary traditions. My goal is to identify the shared dynamics that underlie the progression of a narrative's plot across these diverse cultural contexts.

Wang Xiaobo's *Golden Age* (1991) can be divided into two distinct sections. The first half focuses on the romantic relationship between Wang Er and Chen Qingyang, while the second half shifts to the consequences they face after being accused of their transgression by the military authorities of the farm and the "revolutionary masses". They are forced to write a confession, and this latter section explores the intricacies of that process. Although these two sections are intricately woven together, we can analyze the plot's underlying logic and structure by considering them separately.

Wang Er narrates the story in the first person. The narrative begins with Chen Qingyang visiting Wang Er. Although married, Chen Qingyang lives separately from her husband and has earned a reputation in the neighborhood as an "old shoe".[1] In their initial encounter, Chen Qingyang seeks Wang Er's help to clear her name, trying to prove that she is not deserving of the "old shoe" label. However, Wang Er would rather prove that she is not innocent, and that she does, in fact, fit the "old shoe" characterization. This discord sets the stage for a shift in their relationship,

[1] A colloquial term in the novel for a woman with a reputation for being promiscuous. Translator's Note.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_11

which eventually leads to sexual intimacy and frequent encounters. "Once it was revealed that she really was an old shoe and that I actually was her wild lover, people stopped calling her anything… People were so afraid of loose old shoes that they did not even dare to talk about them."[2] Eventually, Even Chen Qingyang herself felt relieved that there was no need to think about why she was labeled an "old shoe".

In the novel's fifth chapter, Wang Er and Chen Qingyang are imprisoned. An army officer demands that Wang Er write a confession, accusing him of failing to provide sufficient detail and only focusing on their wrongdoing. Wang Er is coerced into writing a detailed account of their "illegal intercourse", a narrative that unexpectedly piques the interest of the authorities. As a result, they undergo several rounds of struggle sessions during which various authorities attempt to get to the bottom of this "old shoes" affair. Throughout this ordeal, Chen Qingyang remains indifferent and ignorant of the alleged crime. Despite Wang Er's extended efforts to craft a confession, the authorities insist that his accounts lack thoroughness, making Wang Er feel trapped in an endless cycle of confession writing. Ultimately, it is Chen Qingyang who writes a confession in which she acknowledges her love for Wang Er, asserting, "It's the truth, and not one word can be changed". As falling in love is "worse than anything else she had ever done",[3] the authorities, unable to devise an appropriate punishment for such a severe offense, were left with no choice but to release the two.

One of the most engaging aspects of Wang Xiaobo's writing is his willingness to expose the narrative logic that underpins his stories. In his novels, he openly reveals the structural principles that guide the plot's progression. Boldly speaking, his works can be seen as "narrative theory novels", a genre that, in the hands of other writers, might be viewed as showcasing technical skill or as unnecessary embellishment. However, in Wang Xiaobo's work, the pleasure of storytelling lies not only in the content of the plot but also in the deliberate and methodical construction of that plot. In his novels, life is fragmented into various constituent elements, skillfully connected through a series of acts of signification.

These works are often labeled metafiction, referring to fiction about fiction, where the conventions of storytelling or the act of writing itself become part of the narrative. However, Wang Xiaobo's writing transcends traditional metafiction that merely "exposes narrative forms"; instead, it serves as a metaphor for the conventions of storytelling. Like all metaphors, when the subject of the metaphor becomes overly explicit, it risks becoming tedious and abstract. In Wang Xiaobo's works, the metaphor itself is what makes the narrative compelling, with the theme of metafiction subtly woven into the plot. It is surprising that there has been little discussion regarding the "narrative allegory" in Wang Xiaobo's works. Without understanding the significance of this allegory, one cannot fully grasp the essence of his writing, nor can one appreciate why *Golden Age* holds such an esteemed place in his oeuvre.

[2] Wang Xiaobo, *Golden Age: A Novel*, trans., Yan Yan, New York: Astra House, 2022. p. 31.

[3] Wang Xiaobo, *Golden Age: A Novel*, trans., Yan Yan, New York: Astra House, 2022. p. 81.

The novel can be read as an exemplary narrative fable, and this book builds upon this novel to analyze the motivations driving the narrative forward.

From a brief summary of the story, it becomes clear that both parts of the narrative are defined by sequences of negations, with the plot evolving through the accumulation of these negations. The Hegelian model of "thesis-antithesis-synthesis", where the negation of a negation leads to an affirmation, does not seem to apply to *Golden Age*. In this narrative, there is no discernible affirmation emerging from the plot; instead, we observe a continuous unfolding of narrative logic through negations.

To analyze this negational development of plot in narrative appropriately, I turn to the concept of the "tetralemma", proposed by Nagarjuna, a key figure in the Philosophy of Madhyamika. The tetralemma, or *catuskoti* in Sanskrit, is a concept that has been translated in various ways in Buddhist scriptures but is commonly referred to as the tetralemma in English. This framework diverges from traditional binary oppositions by using a fourfold negation that encompasses: "affirmation, negation", "both affirmation and negation", and "neither affirmation nor negation":

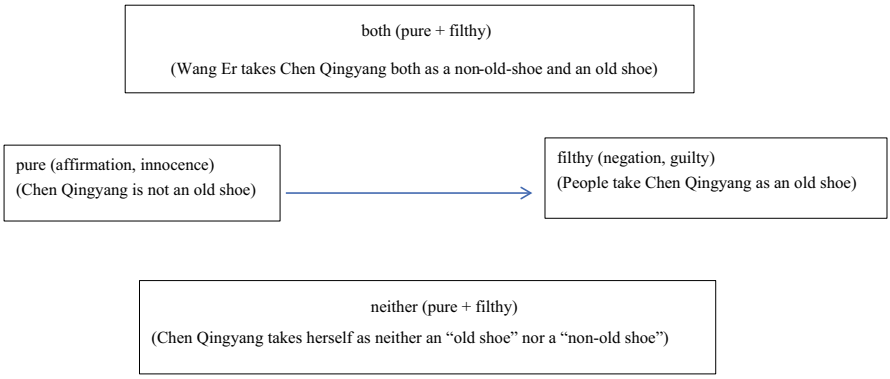
$$\mathrm{A}\left(\text{affirmation}\right)\xrightarrow[\left(-\mathrm{A}+-\mathrm{B},\text{non}-\text{affirmation}+\text{non}-\text{negation}\right)]{\left(\mathrm{A}+\mathrm{B},\text{affirmation}+\text{negation}\right)}\mathrm{B}\left(-\mathrm{A},\text{negation}\right)$$

The "tetralemma" transcends conventional formal logic and has the potential to redefine various dichotomies central to Buddhist doctrine, such as existence and emptiness, permanence and impermanence, and self and other. An instructive example of the tetralemma is found in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which illustrates how this fourfold negation can be applied to fundamental Buddhist concepts: "What are pointless issues? Whether the world is finite or infinite, or both, or neither; whether the world is permanent or impermanent, or both, or neither; whether a Buddha exists after nirvana or not, whether a Buddha both does and does not exist or neither does nor does not exist after nirvana".[4] This passage encapsulates the essence of the tetralemma. The Buddha's existence after nirvana can be both affirmed and negated, but more accurately, it can be said that the Buddha neither exists nor does not exist—because, as the Sutra notes, "These all are called pointless issues".[5]

The dynamic between Wang Er and Chen Qingyang in the first half of *Golden Age* closely mirrors a near-perfect example of the tetralemma in practice. Wang Er's thinking is rooted in a rational, Aristotelian mode of formal logic. When Chen Qingyang asks him to "prove that she was not an old shoe", Wang Er attempts to do so through logical reasoning. However, as they become more entangled in the complexities of their relationship in real life, formal logic proves inadequate, and four distinct perspectives on their relationship emerge. Each group of people in the novel holds a different view on the matter:

[4] "Ten Inexhaustible Treasuries," *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, trans., Thomas Cleary, Shambhala, Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 1993, p. 489.

[5] Ibid.



In contrast to Hegel's idea of the "negation of the negation", the tetralemma introduces a much more complex framework. Not only does it free itself from the traditional binary oppositions, but it also presents a structure that incorporates not just the synthesis of opposing forces but also the possibility of a double negation that transcends both affirmation and negation. This fourfold negation, where neither affirmation nor negation fully encapsulates the truth, moving beyond notions of right and wrong, allows for a more nuanced exploration of reality. For instance, the conventional label of "old shoe" refers to a woman who engages in extramarital affairs. However, if a woman enters into a romantic relationship openly and without deceit, she ceases to fit neatly into the categories of purity or impurity. In this case, Chen Qingyang finds relief in the absence of the need to defend or explain why she has been labeled as an "old shoe". Regardless of how others might define or disparage her as such, once she negates both the existence and non-existence of this definition, she transcends the confines of this definition, no longer defined by it.

The tetralemma thus introduces a dynamic involving partial negations, where Wang Er's perspective shifts between affirmation and negation. While he personally believes that Chen Qingyang is not an "old shoe", he is simultaneously compelled to acknowledge the prevailing societal view that categorizes her as such. As the plot of *Golden Age* unfolds, it becomes clear that the potential for further development of affirmation and negation is limited, as the four terms (affirmation, negation, both, neither) lack the necessary conditions to transform into one another. Without the interaction and interplay between these elements, the narrative lacks the momentum required for it to progress cohesively.

Later Buddhist doctrines evolved far beyond Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka philosophy, yet Nāgārjuna himself consistently emphasized that the tetralemma is inadequate for fully apprehending ultimate truth. For truth resides not in presence but in absence, not in form (rūpa) but in emptiness (śūnyatā). The emptiness cannot be grasped solely through these four logical propositions precisely because emptiness is beyond conceptual grasp. This insight led Asvaghosa to introduce the concept of the "hundred negations" (śata-nirākāra), a more expansive framework that incorporates notions such as non-being, non-emptiness; non-non-being and non-non-emptiness.

If everything originates from "non-being", it follows that there is neither affirmation nor a clear starting point. Without an affirmative foundation, such as the

assertion that "Chen Qingyang is pure", negation loses its grounding, and further negation risks descending into a state of nothingness. Without this foundational starting point, the narrative structure lacks a starting impetus, a point of departure that would propel the development of the plot. In narrative terms, every story requires an initial premise, a foundation upon which the plot can develop. Without such a foundation, the process of negation may lose the necessary motivation to move the narrative forward.

11.2 Significance of Negational Plot Development

The negative progression of the plot can be understood as a series of schemas, with the Tetralemma being a prominent example. Drawing on the *Bible*, Northrop Frye suggests that its narrative structure follows a broadly U-shaped pattern, "The apostasy being followed by a descent into disaster and bondage, which in turn is followed by repentance, then by a rise through deliverance to a point more or less on the level from which the descent began".[6] This U-shaped structure serves as a clear example of the negative progression of the plot.

This raises the question of whether *Golden Age* is a commentary on the Cultural Revolution. In the novel, the portrayal of educated youths engaging in "affairs", fleeing to the mountains, outwitting authority figures, composing endless confessions in a way akin to a professional writer, and continually making mistakes even under the scrutiny of struggle session, presents a picture of sexual freedom that seems highly implausible during the Cultural Revolution, especially for those under criticism. Thus, Wang Xiaobo's depiction of this era is argued to be a significant historical distortion.

Wang Xiaobo himself remains a perplexing figure: he displays a marked indifference toward "reality" and even scorns the notion of "historical facts". Yet, his insights into the complexities of Chinese culture and history are unparalleled. *Golden Age* is characterized by its absurdity and unrestrained language, but these qualities extend beyond mere narrative appeal. In his satirical works, Wang critiques certain deeply ingrained narrative principles within Chinese culture.

The first half of the novella focuses on the protagonist's transgression against societal norms, particularly his "love affair", which serves as a commentary on the potential to challenge conventional values. The second half, revolving around the processes of confession and criticism, represents a struggle for the authority to narrate and the power to adjudicate. It culminates in an understanding of the nature of the transgression, illustrating that while it may be possible to take action to defy societal norms, challenging the authority of discourse is categorically forbidden. For the authorities, their power to narrate events, adjudicate morality, and define concepts remains inviolable.

[6] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1982, p. 169.

In *Golden Age*, the transgression of social morality, represented by sexual indiscretion, is portrayed as a celebration of life. Similarly, verbal expressions that defy social norms are depicted as a carnival of narration. The novel transitions from the tetralemma to a state of "hundred negations", embracing unrestrained challenges and boldly unveiling not just actions of defiance but also an articulation of subversive words.

The preservation of social norms typically requires harsh measures against transgressions, with punishments designed to prevent systemic collapse. However, *Golden Age* draws a distinction: "Doing something and enjoying it were different. The first crime deserved a criticism session. The second deserved quartering and death by a thousand cuts".[7]

The act of transgression, symbolized by the "love affair", is subject to punishment through criticism, physical sanctions, and social ostracism. However, the novel's deeper significance lies in its exploration of narrative transgressions through negations, ultimately subverting societal norms by reinterpreting the concept of "having an affair" as "love." This subtle shift unveils the true thematic essence of *Golden Age*.

Chen Qingyang embodies defiance against societal expectations, undeterred by the label of "old shoe". Her actions—particularly in the face of Wang Er's endless confessions—challenge societal norms and boldly express her love. This dichotomy echoes the Buddhist distinction between "doing but not sinning" and "not doing but sinning". On a deeper level, Chen Qingyang affirms her innocence by negating not only the label of the "old shoe", but also the very concept of "old shoe-ness" itself. To prove her innocence in this manner represents a profound negation of widely accepted ideology. This is akin to the Buddha, who, after liberating all sentient beings from suffering, returns to the state of non-birth and non-death. Such an act not only offers a radically new interpretation of holiness but also subverts the conventional understanding of birth and death, challenging the very foundations of secular thought. The narrator's comparison of Chen Qingyang to Socrates, who claimed to know nothing of everything, suggests her ability to see through the evils of society, but simply refrains from openly revealing it to the ignorant. Wang Xiaobo's works often depict women in a positive light, not for their qualities as seen through a male perspective, but for their greater liberation across various spheres. In the dynamic between Wang Er and Chen Qingyang, as in other works by Wang, women are portrayed as wiser than men, possessing an innate ability to liberate themselves from their obsessions and attain a state of "double negation".

Golden Age argues that the essence of narration is inherently a process of negation: to narrate is, in effect, to negate. As the novella reaches its conclusion, Chen Qingyang's confession of love for Wang Er coincides with her growing detachment from him, illustrating how love transcends mere sexual desire. This dynamic effectively brings the narrative's depiction of a utopian sexual carnival to a close. The interplay of negations in *Golden Age* goes beyond historical representation; it underscores the inherent limitations of representational accuracy. The narrative tension generated by these multiple negations ultimately reveals the indelible marks left by the wheel of history.

[7] Wang Xiaobo, *Golden Age: A Novel*, trans., Yan Yan, New York: Astra House, 2022. p. 81.

Part IV
Conflicts Between Subjects in Narrative Text

Chapter 12
The Omni-text and the General Implied Author

12.1 The Integrity of the Text

The concept of text, deeply rooted in the history of critical theory,[1] encompasses several fundamental questions that have not been thoroughly explored. When semiotics is employed as a methodological framework for analyzing general narratology, previously accepted resolutions of various issues begin to reveal themselves as potentially complex or unresolved matters. One of the critical questions in this context pertains to the "integrity" of the text, specifically how the various signs can be synthesized to construct a cohesive narrative structure.

To begin with, the boundaries of the text, which generally do not present challenges within the diverse genres of written narratives where textual boundaries are clearly established, become a critical concern in contexts beyond written media. This ambiguity surrounding textual boundaries results in a substantial shift in the interpretive scope of objects, thereby leading to the exploration of the central concept of the "omni-text" in this chapter.

The second issue pertains to the concept of the implied author, which serves as a pivotal idea in narratology. When examined through the lens of general narratology, the notion of the implied author extends well beyond the confines of the novel and even the study of narrative itself. Every text possesses an implied author who embodies its meaning-values. Consequently, identifying the implied author becomes an essential prerequisite for interpreting all texts.

The implied author is not to be conflated with the real author; rather, it represents a quasi-personality that encapsulates the values inherent in the text. A notable example can be found in the tradition of "male writers adopting the identity and voice of women to compose poems" in Song Ci, which exemplifies a significant distance between the author and the implied author: most authors in this context are male

[1] See Gianfranco Marrone, *The Invention of the Text*, Mimesis International, 2014.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_12

scholar-officials, whereas the implied authors are portrayed as female figures. *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin Diaolong*, 《文心雕龙》) states: "People whose minds are completely dominated by worldly ambition sing vaguely of the blissful state of retirement, while people whose hearts are wholly entangled in the business of the day purposelessly paint a life beyond this workaday world. These people have lost their souls, and live lives of contradiction".[2] Consequently, the implied author of a work may often be diametrically opposed to the actual personality of the author.

In many instances, the implied author is perceived as nobler than the author him/herself. A notable example occurs in the second year of the Zhenguan era when Emperor Taizong of Tang remarked on the writings of Emperor Yang of Sui during an imperial court session: "I observe that Emperor Yang's writings are characterized by profound insights and extensive knowledge. While he praised the virtues of Yao and Shun and condemned the misdeeds of Jie and Zhou, his actions in governing the country were quite the opposite." Here, the implied author reflected in Emperor Yang's writings aligns with "Yao and Shun", while Emperor Yang himself embodies "Jie and Zhou". Qian Zhongshu, in *Talks on Art* (*Tanyi Lu,*《谈艺录》), observes that, "It has been challenging to assess a person based solely on their writing throughout history. For instance, the third century poet Ji Kang's *Family Commandments*, a text he wrote instructing his son on family matters, and his letter severing ties with his friend appear to have been authored by two entirely different individuals".[3] This indicates that both the personal self of the real author and the implied author of the text exist in a constant state of flux.

The meaning of a text is contingent not only upon its intrinsic structure but also on the manner in which the recipient interprets it. The text functions as a relatively independent entity situated between the sender and the receiver; it is not necessarily a physical entity but rather a relationship formed through the communication of meanings. The meaning of text is constructed through a process in which the signification of signs transcends the limitations of time and space, taking shape through the receiver's act of interpretation.

As a result of this processing, the combination of signs acquires what is termed "textuality". According to Beaugrande, "textuality" encompasses the following "standards: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, situationality, intertextuality, and informativity".[4] By presenting these "seven standards" in a single enumeration, he emphasizes that the focus of semiotics should not be any single sign in isolation, but the text.

The first of these standards, "cohesion", serves as the foundation for the other six. However, can the remaining six guarantee cohesion? Eco's theory of "pseudo-combination" posits that some texts are assembled without coherence or integrity,

[2] Liu Hsieh, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (New Revised Edition), trans., Vincent Yu-chung Shih, Sha Tin and New York: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2015, p. 232.

[3] Qian Zhongshu, *Tan Yi Lu* (Revised Edition), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1984, p. 162.

[4] Robert de Beaugrande, *Text, Discourse, and Process: Toward a Multidisciplinary Science of Texts,* Norwood NJ: Ablex Publishing House, 1980, pp. 19–20.

resulting in ambiguous relationships among their parts. He cites examples such as Mondrian's Neoplasticist paintings and Schoenberg's dodecaphonic music. Indeed, many combinations of signs raise questions about their "integrity": Can particular segments severed from a long-scroll landscape painting or a photo be considered as an independent text? Can a film be reedited into various versions? In the 1960s, a form of experimental theater known as "Happenings" emerged, characterized by the absence of a predetermined plot and a completely impromptu performance, which intentionally undermined the "integrity" of the text. But does this mean it is not a text at all?

I assert that a text must possess "integrity", but this integrity is not an inherent quality of the text; rather, it is constructed by the receiver. When interpreting the combination of signs, the receiver must take the sender's intentions and the cultural conventions of the genre into consideration. Ultimately, the interpretation should form a coherent understanding of the text as a whole. For instance, an entire travel route constitutes a text for a traveler during their journey, while a specific landmark along with its surrounding road conditions also functions as a text. An entire novel serves as a text for those who choose to read it in its entirety, while any chapter may function as a text if the reader decides to stop midway. A poem can range from ten thousand lines to a single line or even a single word, as long as the reader perceives it as a cohesive entity. Therefore, it is clearly inappropriate to assert that integrity is an intrinsic quality of the text itself.

12.2 The Co-text of Narrative

Since the text emerges from the process of textualization conducted by the receiver, and since textualization serves as a necessary means of signification, the way in which textual units are combined is determined by the act of interpretation. A traffic policeman, a bank robber, and a sightseer may perceive entirely different texts within the same street scene, as they perceive and interpret the scene in different ways. Consequently, they will select some certain signs while disregarding others that are less relevant, thereby forming a meaningful combination. The act of textualization—interpreting meanings from perceptions—involves a process of "partialization", consisting of a collection of these partialized perceptions: the receiver not only selects from the various perceptible aspects of signs but also filters elements of perception itself. A soccer player must be highly observant and alert, considering the positions and movements of both teammates and opponents, and quickly interpreting the meaning of this "text". When we state that a top athlete excels at "reading" the game, this terminology aligns closely with semiotic principles. It is evident that a defender and a forward must interpret the same situation as entirely different "texts".

So, where exactly should the boundaries of the text be drawn? Which elements should be considered part of the text, and which should be excluded? The answer appears straightforward: if something is present in the text, it is part of it. However,

in practice, the boundaries of texts are not always clearly delineated. Many elements that may not initially seem to belong to the text must actually be "read" into it. Therefore, the boundaries of the text ultimately depend on how the receiver interprets it.

As previously mentioned, a completely isolated sign cannot convey meaning. And a sign must be combined with other signs (e.g., the positioning of the intersection and the traffic signal pole) to express meaning. For instance, a traffic light must integrate with additional signs to form a coherent traffic signal. Similarly, a smiling lip must be connected with the other features of the face to form a "genuine smile" or a "false smile". Moreover, a gesture signaling a request is inherently combined with facial expressions, posture, and demeanor to form either a resolute command or a final plea. This brings us to the issue of the distance between the text and its "co-texts", as well as the dynamics of their division and combination in interpretation, ultimately leading to the key concept of "omni-text". The text encompasses numerous additional elements that significantly influence our interpretation, yet these elements are often not considered part of the text itself and can be classified as co-texts. The text can be likened to a comet, trailing a tail of numerous supplementary factors; some of these factors are nearly indistinguishable from the text itself, while others are quite distant. The relationship between the text and its co-texts has not been sufficiently explored, and the issue of co-texts remains an underexamined area in the fields of semiotics, hermeneutics, and communication studies.[5]

Co-texts should not be regarded as mere scattered "peripheral signs"; rather, they serve as crucial connections between the text and the world. Every text is inherently imbued with a multitude of social conventions and cultural associations, which may not be explicitly manifested within the text itself. Instead, these elements often reside hidden behind, outside, or at the periphery of the text. Nevertheless, these elements are invariably brought to the forefront by the text, actively contributing to the formation of its meanings. In various interpretations, certain co-texts may even convey greater significance than the text itself. Consequently, any text can be understood as a synthesis of text and co-texts, transforming it into a complex construct that is deeply permeated by socio-cultural factors. Many scholars recognize this intricacy, frequently addressing it within the broader framework of Kristeva's "intertextuality" theory. However, the "co-text" theory articulated in this volume specifically grounds this discussion in the domain of semiotic forms.

In terms of form, co-texts are not necessarily "latent" or "hidden". The first category of co-texts is the para-text, which is fully "revealed" at the surface level of the text and often appears even more prominently than the text itself. Para-texts typically reside at the "threshold" of the text, encompassing elements such as the title, dedication, preface, illustrations, the mounting and seal of a work of fine art, the container of an installation, the opening and closing credits of a film, the product featured in an advertisement, the pricing of that product, and the authorship and title

[5] See Zhao Yiheng, *Semiotics: Principles & Problems (Revised Edition)*, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2016, Chapter Six, "Co-text", pp. 139–155.

of a song or symphony, among others. It is evident that some para-texts may be distanced from the main text and rely on other media—such as labels, playbills, or record sleeves—to provide additional context. Regardless of how para-texts are presented, they can significantly influence the reception of the text. For instance, a film promoted as having "cost over 100 million dollars" is likely to attract a larger audience, while products with lower price tags may be perceived as "low-class". However, an excessive focus on para-textual elements can lead to situations where the para-text overshadows the meaning of the main text, causing the audience to forfeit independent interpretation and objective judgment. For example, upon encountering the name of a renowned director, one might assume that the film is worth watching, thus relegating the text itself to a secondary status.

The archi-text is an integral component of a text, defining the culturally prescribed methods for its "categorization". This includes classifications such as genre, period, subject matter, style, and so forth. Modern media are continuously generating new clusters of archi-texts, exemplified by works featuring the same protagonist or being showcased at the same film festival.

The archi-text specifies the type of the text, serving as a primary means of connecting it to its cultural context. The most significant archi-text is genre, which is often indicated through para-textual elements such as line breaks and punctuation in poetry, stage settings in plays, or the draw of a contest. Genre not only situates medium within a specific framework (for instance, framing an image within the lens) but also determines the fundamental framework for interpretation. Every text exists within a specific genre, which functions as a culturally programmed classification. When a receiver perceives a sign, such as witnessing footage of a shooting, they must quickly ascertain the genre of the work—whether it is a feature film, a documentary, live television, or closed-circuit footage—before they can accurately interpret its meaning. Judging solely based on the "text" itself may lead to misunderstandings, rendering the interpretation invalid and potentially resulting in significant errors. The archi-text serves as an intrinsic element of genre, a necessary factor in the interpretation of the text. For instance, as discussed by Barthes in *Mythologies*, "In America wrestling represents a sort of mythological fight between Good and Evil", fundamentally an "open-air spectacle".[6] This exemplifies the consequences of an intentional blurring of archi-texts.

The traces left by the influence of various cultural factors during the production of a text are significant components of co-texts. The pre-text refers to the impact that earlier texts within a culture exert on the creation of a new text. This concept closely aligns with the general understanding of "intertextuality" and is termed pre-text to highlight that only those texts that existed prior to the production of the current text can exert meaningful pressure on it. The narrower interpretation of pre-text is more readily identifiable, encompassing various quotations, allusions, parodies, instances of plagiarism, and implicit references within the text that indicate this influence. In

[6] Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling", *A Barthes Reader*, ed., Susan Sontag, New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, pp. 27–28.

a broader sense, pre-text refers to the entire cultural context that forms the network surrounding the text. The emergence of a news article may appear to be a spontaneous creation as a result of the journalist's talents and sensitivity; however, it is fundamentally shaped by the significance of the entire history of communication and, indeed, the entirety of human cultural history that precedes its creation.

After a text is produced, it can be accompanied by new co-texts. A "commenting-text" is defined as "a text about a text", referring to the commentary that emerges following the production of the text and prior to its reception. This includes various forms of commentary such as news articles, reviews, gossip, rumors, accusations, and moral or political labels concerning both the text itself and its author.

Link-texts refer to other texts that are actively or passively "linked" to a given text during the process of interpretation by the receiver. These may include extended texts, reference texts, web links, and similar elements. Link-texts are most vividly exemplified in the context of the internet, where many individuals engage in online reading by navigating from one text to another through hyperlinks.

Preceding-ensuing texts refer to the syntagmatic relationships among multiple texts. For instance, each movie has a screenplay as its preceding text, and each sporting event has a previous record for reference. The paradox lies in the fact that a text is often influenced by subsequent texts; for example, when a court rules on a case, it must consider the potential for an ensuing appeal. In the realm of literary art, which often prioritizes originality, the relationship between preceding and ensuing texts may sometimes be less evident. However, when one broadens the examination beyond the confines of literary art to include all narratives, preceding-ensuing texts become nearly ubiquitous. For instance, a newly composed song must take into account how it will be received by the public, while the songs that people sing are inevitably those that have already been popular in circulation.

"Preceding-text" differs from "pre-text" in that the former is very specific (e.g., the previous game, which directly affects whether we will advance in the group stages), while the latter refers to the entirety of human cultural history woven into a "network of texts". The most significant characteristic of phenomena such as "impersonator", "spoof", and "parody" is the existence of a clear and publicly recognizable "preceding-text". For example, an impersonator must closely resemble a popular celebrity, and when positioned within the same para-text (e.g., similar clothing) and link-text (e.g., in a public setting), must produce an effective likeliness. Conversely, spoofing employs certain features of the preceding text to creatively rewrite it. For instance, the steamed bread featured in the movie Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (2005) has been spoofed in the short video titled "The Murder Case Caused by a Steamed Bread".

Clusters of co-texts are frequently referred to as the "context" of signification. However, the term "context" is often too broad and can lead to misunderstandings, as it encompasses all factors influencing interpretation and is used imprecisely in non-academic contexts. The primary function of co-texts is to connect the text to a broad cultural background. From this perspective, no text can escape cultural conventions; rather, texts can only exist within the diverse co-texts provided by culture.

All texts inherently carry the aforementioned co-texts, and conversely, each text relies on a group of co-texts to manifest as a coherent text. Without the support of these co-texts, the text would exist in a vacuum; what may appear to be a tangible text becomes "purified" to such an extent that it cannot be comprehended. Co-texts govern both the production and interpretation of narratives. Whether we are aware of it or not, we cannot understand a text without relying on co-texts. Once all co-texts associated with the text are stripped away, the connection between the text and culture is severed, causing the narrative to disintegrate into a collection of unintelligible perceptions. It is impossible to perceive a narrative with a pure mind free from cultural constraints; and there is no such thing as a pure narrative, nor is there a pure interpretation. Consequently, human life is not only surrounded by narrative texts but is also immersed in a deluge of co-texts.

The existence of co-texts goes beyond the synchronic-diachronic boundary and the function of the co-text in signification arises from their ability to provide a broad cultural context for the interpretation of the text. I define culture as the total set of socially relevant semiotic behaviors. Co-texts serve as the means through which the text establishes a connection with culture.

12.3 The Omni-text

The discussion of co-texts leads to the concept of the "omni-text": texts of different genres exhibit varying capacities for the "integration" of co-texts. In certain "traditional texts", where boundaries are clearly delineated by cultural conventions—such as literary works—elements like titles, author names, inscriptions, and prefaces are not regarded as part of the text itself. In text-based analysis, such as the "close reading" method employed by the New Critics, paratextual elements are usually excluded, as they are perceived to be significantly less important than in-text elements and may even introduce "noise" in the reading and interpretation of the text.

Once we extend our examination beyond literature to encompass texts in various media, we find that some texts are so tightly integrated with their co-texts that it becomes impossible to separate the two during interpretation, thereby leading to the emergence of a new textual form. I refer to this phenomenon as the "omni-text": all co-texts that contribute to interpretation are considered integral parts of the text and possess equal value to in-text elements. Naturally, interpretation is a highly personal endeavor, with individuals focusing on different factors even when analyzing the same text. A pertinent example is the Buddhist story of "The Buddha Holding up the Flower, and Kasyapa Smiling": At that moment, the Tathagata sat upon the jeweled throne and received the lotus flower. Without speaking a word, he simply held it up before the great assembly of 84,000 celestial and human beings, who all remained in silent contemplation. Then, the venerable elder Kasyapa, recognizing the Buddha's gesture as a profound revelation of the Dharma, suddenly attained enlightenment and responded with a subtle, knowing smile. In this story, Shakyamuni Buddha holds up a flower during a teaching session, and while everyone else is

puzzled, only Kasyapa smiles. To interpret the Buddha's action accurately, one must consider all relevant contextual elements, including the broader setting of the teaching session and the questions posed by the Buddha.

The concept of the omni-text is defined by a different criterion—the "interpretive community". This community employs specific interpretive conventions for texts within a given genre, shaped by cultural norms that dictate standards of reception. Interpretive communities, even within the same cultural context, evolve over time; however, interpretations that are more individualized tend to demonstrate a greater degree of stability. For instance, the cave paintings of the Old Stone Age are on an unprepared ground, the rough wall of a cave; the irregularities of earth and rock show through the image. The artist worked then on a field with no set boundaries and thought so little of the surface as a distinct ground that he often painted his animal figure over a previously painted image without erasing the latter, as if it were invisible to the viewer.[7]

Similar omni-textual phenomena can be observed in contemporary frameless graffiti art. Another example is "Ambient Ads", such as an outdoor billboard advertisement that features a cut-out section where the hair would be, allowing the natural backdrop—whether the blue sky, a vibrant sunset, or the starry night—to seamlessly "dye" the hair in shifting colors. In this way, the surrounding environment becomes an integral part of the overall textual composition or an integral part of the omni-text.

The titles of musical compositions are often crucial for interpretation, primarily due to the "clarity" afforded by language as a medium. Even when musical compositions vividly mimic "natural sounds", as in Debussy's symphonic poem "La Mer" or Holst's suite "The Planets", or incorporate explicitly meaningful musical elements—such as Smetana's "Má Vlast", which draws on Czech folk melodies, or Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture", which directly quotes La Marseillaise—they still depend on their titles to make their "narrative" comprehensible to listeners. For instance, when Beethoven, in a fit of rage, removed the dedication to Napoleon from his "Eroica Symphony", the musical "text" remained unchanged, yet its narrative no longer served to glorify Napoleon.

Another illustrative example can be found in the narrative structure of advertisements, where the inclusion of the products is imperative. Altering the products results in a complete change of the text's meaning. A layup shot of Michael Jordan playing basketball could serve to promote basketballs, sneakers, tickets to a game, gym services, or a preview of an upcoming game. While commodities and services may seem to lie outside the narrative text, they are, in fact, an integral part of the omni-text. This interpretive framework is culturally prescribed and cannot be substituted by any individual's particular interpretation.

The omni-text is constructed by integrating certain co-texts into the core text. The decision regarding which co-texts will be incorporated into the omni-text must

[7] Meyer Shapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs", *Semiotica*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1969, p. 223.

be considered individually for each genre and mode of expression, as it is also influenced by the inherent characteristics of the co-texts themselves. For example, commenting-texts found in online reviews or through "word of mouth" can produce significantly different effects. The presence of a phrase such as "Nobel Prize winner's classic" in film credits or on the cover of a book may render that co-text more influential than any part of the text itself.

Generally speaking, co-texts that are directly manifested and visible are most readily integrated into the omni-text. Certain co-texts—such as headings, subheadings, inscriptions, and so on—are nearly impossible to exclude from the text. In narrative genres that involve contests and competitions, not any single text or performance can function on its own or can be interpreted independently; instead, the outcome, who wins, is determined by the comparison between the preceding and ensuing texts that must be considered together. For example, in the European Cup, if there is a tie during the group stage, the outcome is determined by the "win-lose relationship" from previous tournaments. These co-texts may fall outside the traditional conception of a text; however, in some instances, they may hold greater significance than the text itself. A notable example is the London 2012 Olympics, where the Yu Yang-Wang Xiaoli badminton doubles team were said to have thrown a match because it would increase their chances of victory later in the tournament.

The "omni-text" encompasses the text in its narrow sense along with the co-texts that are essential for its interpretation. Although the term "omni-text" is new, the practice it describes is deeply embedded in human culture. Theatre and film have historically functioned as multi-channel and multimedia forms of signification, while traditional Chinese painting often includes not just the visual elements (the text in the narrow sense) but also accompanying poems, inscriptions, and seals. In the current electronic and digital landscape, the omni-text has become so ubiquitous that it necessitates our recognition and precise definition of this phenomenon.

12.4 The General Implied Author

While considerable attention has been devoted to the discussion on the omni-text, the primary focus of the current chapter is to address the concept of the general implied author. The preceding discussion of the omni-text serves as an essential groundwork for the subsequent exploration of this concept. The implied author refers to the set of meanings and values that readers from a specific interpretive community extract from the text. Importantly, the scope and boundaries of the text directly affect how the implied author is inferred, as different texts, including omni-texts with varying boundaries, result in different implied authors. Referring to this concept as the "implied author" is merely a matter of convenience; similarly, there could be "implied composers" in music, "implied painters" in visual art, or "implied directors" in film.

The implied author represents a "quasi-personality" that embodies the meaning and values of the text. Some scholars argue that the implied author should reflect

both "facts and values". However, this book contends that texts contain only "meaning and values". These interpretations of meaning and assessments of value are often difficult to distinguish, which is why a single term, "meaning-value", is used to capture both. What can be found within a text is rarely factual; facts must be verified outside of the text. Nevertheless, the text must convey meaning and value, and it requires a quasi-personality, or implied author, to express them.

Before delving into this issue further, it is necessary to clarify that the concept of the implied author was originally confined to fictional narratology. However, I argue that all texts—whether declarative or narrative—contain meaning-values and, therefore, possess a quasi-personality that embodies this set of meaning-values. In this context, meaning refers to the expectation of a particular mode of cognition and understanding, while value pertains to moral judgments that the text implies. These elements correspond to the latter part of the definition of narrative presented in the introduction, specifically having a "unified temporal and meaning dimension". The concept of the implied author is not restricted to narratives. Any text, regardless of type, carries various textual identities that must be synthesized into what can be called a "quasi-subject". Thus, any text that conveys meaning must include a collective textual identity, and this identity requires the construction of a "quasi-subject" to embody the meaning-values it conveys. This "quasi-subject" is what we refer to as the "implied author", and in this broader context, it can be termed the "general implied author".

To identify the "implied author", one must extract the meaning-values embedded in the text and construct a "quasi-subject", that resembles an author-like self—an assumed entity capable of integrating various textual identities. Naturally, the boundaries of the text must first be defined, as the scope of the text can significantly affect the construction of the implied author. For instance, Gloria Naylor, a contemporary African American writer, won the American Book Award for her debut novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). Sixteen years later, she published *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). In the earlier novel, men are predominantly portrayed negatively, often as the source of women's suffering. However, in the latter work, many of the previously flawed male characters are reimagined as positive figures. Consequently, reading *The Women of Brewster Place* by itself, *The Men of Brewster Place* by itself, or reading both together as a single "omni-text", results in three distinct implied authors.[8] A similar situation arises with the different versions of the Chinese classic *Water Margin*. The 70-chapter version presents an implied author different from that of the 120-chapter version. In the 1970s, a prominent political directive noted that the merit of *Water Margin* lies in its portrayal of surrender, serving as a cautionary example for the people to understand the danger of capitulation. This comment specifically refers to the implied author of the 120-chapter version.

When focusing specifically on novels, despite the variations discussed in the previous section, delineating the boundaries of the text is relatively straightforward.

[8] Fang Xiaoli, "The Twin Implied Author in the Opponent Companion Volumes: The Power of Voice in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place*", *Foreign Literatures*, no. 2, 2012, pp. 125–131.

However, when we expand our consideration to encompass narrative texts in a broader sense, the definition of textual boundaries becomes significantly more elusive. In this context, the omni-text lacks a clear distinction between the core text and the co-text; rather, it constitutes a "bound text"—a bundle of elements tied together by the interpreter into a unified textual entity. For instance, a color-printing design company uses neon tubes to spell out its name, "XX Color Printing & Design". Here, the omni-text encompasses not just the characters, but also the vibrant hues and the dynamic flashing effects after dark. Another paradigmatic case is the legendary liquor merchant who placed a giant vat outside his shop, labeled "Trade Secret – Do Not Peek". Naturally, passersby peeked, and those who caught a whiff of the aromatic brew were tempted to buy. In this scenario, is the "text" merely the warning sign? Clearly not—it is the entire advertising apparatus: the vat, the label, the act of peeking, and the sensory allure of the liquor. The written notice (a literal deterrent) ironically functions as a reverse-psychological lure, while the true meaning is anchored in the product's value.

Branding and signage must be tightly integrated with the products and packaging of a store, functioning together as a cohesive omni-text. This integration allows considerable freedom in the names of both the brand and the store. A product and its narrative can sustain maximal semantic distance—because the eventual appearance of the commodity or service will inevitably "correct" the meaning. The greater the distance between the narrative and the actual product, the more profound the impression it leaves on consumers. A notable example is an advertisement for a bandage brand, featuring Bill and Hillary Clinton gracefully dancing, with a lightning bolt creating a rift between them. The accompanying tagline states that sometimes even a bandage cannot help. While the wording appears modest and understated, it cleverly employs significant exaggeration: aside from romantic relationships, the bandage is suggested to be capable of healing any wound.

The implied author, as a quasi-personality that embodies the implied meaning-values, depends on the receiver to deduce these elements from the omni-text of the narrative. As a result, this concept can be generalized based on textual signification. For instance, upon entering a luxury department store, one can distinctly perceive this implied subject engaging with us through various elements: the all-glass facade, the strategically arranged greenery, the thoughtfully curated ambient music, and the neatly tailored uniforms of the staff—all of which coalesce to form a cohesive omni-text. The "implied author" with this collection of values signifies a devotion to catering to the "contemporary societal elite".

The implied author, a quasi-subject inferred from the omni-text, may or may not have any relation to the owner of the department store. Regardless, there is no necessity to establish a connection between the implied author and the "real author"; this connection is of concern only to biographers of the latter. In the realm of literature and art, despite scholars repeatedly proclaiming the "death of the author", the implied author remains vibrantly alive and active in contemporary society. Indeed, within literary art, it is quite challenging to sever the link between the author and the implied author. This difficulty stems from the intrinsic nature of literary art, which highly values originality, allowing artists to leave a distinct imprint of their

personalities on their works. However, for most narrative texts within a given culture, the implied author remains significantly distanced from the actual author of the text.

The two issues addressed in this chapter—omni-text and the general implied author—are pertinent to the analysis of any text. With the introduction of the concept of the "omni-text", the notion of "general implied author" is established with a solid foundation, thereby providing boundaries for meaning-value attribution.

Chapter 13
"Unreliability" of Narrative

13.1 Defining Unreliability

The relationship between the various parts of the narrative subject forms the central framework for the study of narrative texts. Upon closer examination, we find that in most narrative texts, the narrative subject is expressed through different "personalities" that refuse to cooperate with one another. This resistance makes it difficult for these personalities to present themselves according to a unified system of meaning and values. As a result, each word and phrase in the text becomes a battleground where they vie for discursive power. The focus of this chapter, however, is not on the real-world subjects of empirical experience, such as the author or reader. Instead, it is concerned with the implied author and the various personalities that collectively share the narrative subjectivity within the text. While there are significant connections between the real-world subject and the textual subject, the real-world subject has to be excluded from the analysis of the text itself.

Any text inherently possesses a certain identity—one that is distinct from the identity adopted by the individual who produces the text (such as the writer or director). Instead, this identity is the "textual identity", which all texts necessarily embody. Textual identity forms the most critical social and cultural dimension of texts, significantly influencing their meaning and interpretation. The identity of a text—whether it be a government notice, a propaganda slogan, a dialogue in a novel, or a post on the internet—has a profound effect on the signification of the text. Even if different texts share similar language or content, their meanings can diverge drastically based on their textual identity. Textual identity functions as a communicative contract between the sender and receiver of the text, specifying the framework or paradigm that governs the interpretation of the text.

Conversely, without textual identity, a text can scarcely convey meaning: a scripture without its sacred identity ceases to be the *Bible*; without the identity of the "The Four Books and Five Classics", the *Spring and Autumn Annals* would no

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_13

longer embody "subtle words with profound meaning", but would merely be reduced to "fragmented and decaying court records". Similarly, without the identity of an imperial tombstone, the "Stele Without Inscription" is nothing more than a stone tablet left uninscribed, devoid of any hidden, unfathomable intent. The diversity and complexity of textual identities within a culture far exceed those of the personal identities assumed by individuals within that same culture.

The two critical textual identities to be examined in this book are the implied author and the narrator. The concept of narrative unreliability should more accurately be referred to as "narratorial unreliability". To whom is the narrator unreliable? The answer lies solely with the implied author. The coexistence of various voices and value systems within the same text accentuates the discordant relationships among these different identities. Among them, the narrator is often the most likely to be deemed "transgressive", as this persona controls the "source" of the entire narrative text. Therefore, the key to narrative analysis lies in determining whether the narrator's voice is "reliable"—that is, whether there is a distance between the values embodied by the narrator and implied author. When the narrator's stance diverges from that of the implied author, resulting in a conflict between the two, the narrator is considered unreliable to the implied author.

James Phelan argues that "unreliable narration, like character narration more generally, is a mode of indirect communication. The implied author – or if you prefer, the author – communicates with his or her audience by means of the voice of another speaker addressing another audience".[1] Prince also asserts that unreliable narrator is "a NARRATOR whose norms and behavior are not in accordance with the IMPLIED AUTHOR's norms; a narrator whose values (tastes, judgments, moral sense) diverge from those of the implied author's".[2]

It is essential to emphasize that narratorial unreliability represents a formal characteristic of narrative; it pertains to the mode of expression and arises from a discrepancy between the meaning-values of the narrator and those of the implied author. This notion should not be conflated with the idea that the content of the narrated story is unreliable for the reader (such as instances of lying, falsifying, bragging, or engaging in unethical behavior). Therefore, the reliability of the narrative is distinct from the credibility of the story itself. While these two concepts often overlap, it is crucial to differentiate between them, as many unnecessary disputes stem from their conflation. The concept of an unreliable narrator is defined in relation to the implied author—it is fundamentally a relationship between two textual personas. This serves as the starting point of our entire discussion and the foundational definition that must be revisited throughout the text.

The concepts of the implied author and the unreliable narrative are among the most critical issues in narratology, a debate that has persisted for over 60 years without a definitive resolution. Within the broader context of narratology, one of the

[1] James Phelan, "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*", *Narrative*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2007, p. 224.

[2] Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition), Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, p. 103.

most perplexing questions concerns whether "factual" narratives—such as history, journalism, advertising, and prophecy—can be deemed unreliable. It is important to reiterate that narratorial unreliability results from the distance between the narrator and the implied author regarding their respective meaning-values, rather than from any discrepancy between the narrative and "empirical facts". Furthermore, the implied author serves as a substitute for the author's persona, and in factual narratives, the narrator and the implied author effectively merge into one identity. Therefore, a factual narrative can only be regarded as untrustworthy, untrue, unethical, or below expected standards, but it may not be classified as "unreliable".

The German "post-classical narratologist" Ansgar F. Nünning is widely recognized as an expert in the field of narrative unreliability. In a seminal article published in recent years, he posits that, "Unreliable narration as a phenomenon is, of course, not confined to narrative fiction, but can be found in a wide range of narratives across the genres, the media, and different disciplines".[3] Furthermore, he specifically highlights "the use of the unreliable narrator in genres other than narrative fiction – for instance in dramatic genres like the memory play or in the dramatic monologue – as well as in other media and domains (including law and politics) deserves more attention than it has hitherto been given".[4] In essence, Nünning contends that the notion of "unreliability" is also applicable to factual narratives.

Since the publication of Nünning's work in 2005, it seems that the narratological field has generally accepted his notion of "pan-unreliability". This idea, though longstanding, had not previously been expressed so decisively.[5] Following Nünning, numerous narratologists have concurred with his viewpoint. For example, in her extensive entry on "Unreliability" in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, hosted by the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology, Shen Dan notes, "In literary narratives, narratorial unreliability is usually encoded by the author as a rhetorical device. Only occasionally is this due to the author's own slips or failings in contrast to non-literary narratives, where narratorial unreliability is more often a result of the author's own limitations".[6] This view aligns with Nünning's: unreliable narration can also occur in nonfictional or factual narratives, but the cause differs—it stems from the author's incompetence rather than intentional literary design.

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[3] Ansgar F. Nünning, "Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches", in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds., *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 90.

[4] Ansgar F. Nünning, "Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches", in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds., *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 105.

[5] The literature cited by Shen Dan in support of Nünning's view: Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.1999; Gregory Currie, "Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* vol. 53, no. 1, 1995, p. 19; Monika Fludernik, "Fiction vs. Non-Fiction: Narratological Differentiation," in J. Helbig, ed., *Erzählen und Erzähltheorie im 20. Jahrhundert: Festschrift für Wilhelm Füger*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C., 2001, pp. 97–98.

[6] Shen Dan, "Unreliability", *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/66.html, retrieved on May 4, 2025.

The term "unreliable narrative in news reporting" has, in fact, become a common topic in our cultural life. A prime example is found in a serious argumentative piece titled, "Earthquake Reports: Who Are the Unreliable Narrators?" The article asserts, "As the Wenchuan earthquake has continued to this day, I am increasingly convinced that truly reliable earthquake reports have never existed. They simply do not exist, and the reason lies in the presence of unreliable narrators… Due to these unreliable narratives, we are excluded from the history of the Wenchuan earthquake".[7] In such discussions, "unreliable narrative" has emerged as a key term in debates concerning "the problem of truth in journalism". It appears that perspectives on the unreliability of factual narratives have permeated both Western and Chinese narratological circles, and have even extended beyond academia, evolving into an urgent issue that requires clarification.

Unreliable narration is a central concept that propels the development of contemporary narratology. Throughout the century-long history of narratology, each stage has evolved around fundamental concepts. The early and middle Russian and French schools, from Propp to Todorov, Barthes, and Greimas, concentrated on the "grammar of plot", while the early Anglo-American school, spanning from Henry James to Forster, focused on the issue of "perspective". In the late 1950s, Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* introduced the pivotal concepts of the implied author and unreliable narrator, marking a new focal point in narratology.

Although Booth introduces these two concepts as issues of narrative rhetoric, French narratologists argue that they are fundamentally pertinent to textual interpretation. Their focus is directed toward the internal construction of the text, rather than engaging with the overly open-ended questions of textual interpretation. They maintain that narratology, like any poetics, is a descriptive science rather than an interpretive one. Genette, the prominent figure in classical narratology, retains the French tradition in his seminal three-volume work *Figures* from the 1970s, where he declines to address the issue of unreliable narration as proposed by the Anglo-American school.[8] Since their introduction in the 1950s, these two concepts have emerged as crucial to narrative studies in other countries during the 1970s and 1980s.[9] Narratology cannot genuinely progress without engaging with the concepts of the implied author and unreliable narration. The limited progress in French narratology in later years is, to a significant extent, attributable to this very stance. In contrast, the German and Nordic narratological communities have become strongholds of "post-classical narratology", at least in part because they have placed considerable emphasis on these two issues.

The current book addresses the general field of semionarratology, and when we consider all narrative texts, we discover that the longstanding issue of narratorial

[7] Shangguan Benji, "The Reports of Earthquake: Who is the Unreliable Narrator?" *Nanfang Media Research*, vol. 13, 2008, p. 185.

[8] Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Mueller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy*, Berlin and New York: Gruyter, 2006, p 119.

[9] See Richard J. Watts, *The Pragmalinguitic Analysis of Narrative Texts: Narrative Co-operation in Charles Dickens's Hard Times*, Tuebingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1981.

reliability, which has been examined for over half a century, presents unexpected new dimensions. Some aspects may emerge as remarkably clear, while those initially perceived as straightforward can prove to be quite complex. However, it is essential to remind ourselves of a fundamental starting point in this discussion: the purpose of unreliable narration is not to deceive readers, but rather to engage readers.

13.2 Identifying the Narrator and the Implied Author

Narrative unreliability pertains to the distance between the narrator and the implied author. Although the previous section elucidated this concept, it did not address all related issues. To fully understand whether a conflict exists between the two, it is essential to ascertain how to identify both the implied author and the narrator.

Let us first explore how to identify the narrator. In the framework of semionarratology, the narrator is not necessarily personified; rather, it can be presented as a structural framework, giving rise to the concept of the "person-frame duality". The way these two elements are paired differs across specific narrative genres, as the frame invariably requires the filling of personality.

In various narrative genres, two main categories of narrators can be identified. The first category is "person-narrative": all "factual" narratives (including history, journalism, debriefings, confessions, etc.) and "quasi-factual" narratives (such as promises, propaganda, advertisements, etc.) exhibit the strongest sense of personality, as the narrator and the "executive author" are essentially unified. The second category involves frames filled with various personalities. The "frame-narrative" is often referred to as "third-person narration", while "person-narrative" is commonly known as "first-person narration". In fact, each text intertwines these two elements in different ways. In recorded performative narratives (such as films and television), the narrator embodies a duality of "frame-person", with the frame being the primary focus. In contrast, live performative narratives (including drama, online fiction, games, competitions, etc.) present the narrator solely as a frame, while requiring the participation of the narratee to collaboratively fill the frame with personality.

The narrator, however, consistently serves as the source of the narrative discourse, navigating a scalar duality between framing and personification while seamlessly integrating both dimensions. This foundational scheme for identifying narrators—ranging from extreme personification to extreme framing (as discussed in Part II, Chapter One)—determines the trajectory of this book's argument: different types of narrators can either align with or conflict with the implied author in markedly different ways. Even those narrators that appear as "totally depersonalized frames" can distance themselves from the implied author, thereby resulting in unreliable narration.

Identifying the implied author can be somewhat more challenging. The implied author embodies a textual persona that reflects the meanings and values of the narrative text. The debate within narratology regarding this concept centers on whether

this persona is created by the author or inferred by the reader from the work. This has led to the emergence of two schools of thought: the "rhetorical school", developed by North American narratologists who adhere to the "Boothian direction", and the "cognitive school", represented by German scholars such as Tamar Yacobi, Vera and Angsar Nünning, and Monica Fludernik, who focus on the concept of unreliable narration. As will be discussed further, these two schools approach the same issue from opposite directions. The rhetorical approach identifies what it calls the "executive author" in the intentions of the author during the writing process, while the cognitive approach theorizes a "deduced author", who/which emerges by way of the values inferred from the text. However, in practical analysis, the question of whether to consider both perspectives and how to reconcile these two approaches remains challenging.

Booth clearly views the implied author as the "executive author" of the creative process. He argues, "As he writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works. To some novelists it has seemed, indeed, that they were discovering or creating themselves as they wrote".[10] Booth further explains, "The 'implied author' chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices".[11] Such an implied author represents an actual persona that the author employs as a substitute for themselves, serving as a "second self" of the author.

Booth has consistently upheld the implied author as the author's second self. The implied author represents the author's subjective consciousness (referred to as the "executive author") during the production of the text. In other words, the implied author embodies a complete and authentic subjectivity, even if it is temporary, during the process of textual creation. Consequently, the implied author has a real self as its source and is not simply a "textual being", but rather a component of the author's second self-expressed within the text.

Booth's remarks also indicate that the same author can create different implied authors for various narratives; the author generates a specific implied author for each narrative, which serves as a process of "self-recognition". The author may change his views and "regret the mistakes made in earlier works", or even claim to have been "blinded by selfishness". However, the personality that the author embeds in the text during the writing process—the personality that supports the overall values of the text—reflects his actual self at that time, or a part of it. Consequently, once the text is produced, it is impossible to alter the implied author.

The theory concerning implied author and unreliable narration, originating in Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, has been further developed by Booth's student, the American narratologist James Phalen, and is now referred to as the "rhetorical

[10] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2nd Edition), Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 70–71.

[11] Ibid., pp. 74–75.

approach" to identifying the implied author. Consequently, unreliable narration has emerged as a particular rhetorical device employed by the author to render the narrative more distinctive and engaging for the reader.

Booth also recognized the possibility of an alternative method for identifying the implied author, a method that would later be termed the "cognitive approach". He stated, "Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters".[12] In this context, the "our" here refers to the readers, who can "extract the meaning, the moral and emotional elements" from the narrative to construct this persona. However, Booth does not favor this second approach and does not elaborate on the specific method of "extraction".

Nünning, who advocates for the "cognitive approach", considers Booth's definition ambiguous, "Such observations, though vivid, fail to shed much light on how a narrator's unreliability is actually determined by the reader".[13] He further suggests that "unreliability is not so much a character trait of a narrator as it is an interpretive strategy of the reader".[14] In this context, the implied author embodies the values that readers extract from the text. Consequently, different versions of the narrative are likely to yield distinct implied authors. Chatman has termed this implied author the "inferred author".[15] Since the 1990s, scholars in post-classical narratology expanded this study through the lens of cognitive narratology, and this method of constructing implied authors became known as the "cognitive approach". In this light, the conflict between the values of the narrator and those of the implied author shifts from being a matter of the author's rhetorical devices to reflecting the reader's interpretive engagement with the work. The implied author is thus contingent upon the text and represents a collection of diverse textual identities. It refers not simply to an "existence" but a "texistence"[16] of a quasi-subject.

This situation appears to indicate a circular reasoning, since the implied author is deduced by the reader from the narrative text, and this deduction can occur only after the text has been understood. The attitude of the narrator is also embedded within the text: the narrator's reliability must be "verified" and his unreliability must be "seen through" by the interpreter; meanwhile any partial unreliability must be "corrected" by the text—each of these actions relies on a comprehensive understanding of the text itself. In other words, understanding the reliability of the narration relies on comprehending the implied author, which is essential for determining

[12] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Second Edition), Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 73.

[13] Ansgar F. Nünning, "Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches", in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds., *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 93.

[14] Ibid., p. 95.

[15] Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative Fiction and Film*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 77.

[16] William Lowell Randall & A Elizabeth McKim, *Reading Our Lives: The Poetics of Growing Old*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p 95.

the text's meaning and values. This approach is akin to Peirce's semiotic method of "trial-and-error", which requires iterative exploration to uncover the implied author and the relationship between the implied author and the narrator.

In recent years, Chinese scholars have developed varying interpretations of the concept of the implied author. Hu Yamin aligns with the cognitive approach, asserting that the implied author "emerges during the author's creative process, but constructed by the reader from the text, and thus a product of the reader's comprehension and interpretation of the work."[17] In contrast, Luo Gang attempts to find a middle ground by stating that the implied author is "constructed by the reader during the reading process", while also asserting that the implied author "reveals his existence through the overall conception of the work, the narrative strategy, and the ideology and values presented in text".[18] Shen Dan has addressed the issue of the implied author in several articles, advocating for a dual approach: to uphold both the subjectivity of the implied author and his textuality by examining the real author during the creative process alongside the textual implied author.[19]

From the perspective of general narratology, it is important to recognize that we adopt different strategies for texts of various genres. For some texts, it is easier to identify an "executive author" in rhetorical analysis, while for others, an "inferred author" may emerge during reading; both serve as valid implied authors. For instance, when analyzing factual narratives such as news articles or historical accounts, it is relatively straightforward to identify the "executive author". In contrast, when examining fictional genres like novels or narrative films, the cognitive approach for an "inferred author" proves to be more effective. Once we adopt the "cognitive approach", the unreliability of the narration shifts from a focus on the relationship between the narrator and the author to one concerning the values of the narrator and the reader's understanding of the "normalcy" of the empirical world. Consequently, identifying reliability of the narration is crucial for the readers' understanding of the text, which raises the question of how to identify the "reader".

The theory of the "interpretative community" presents a reasonable framework for identifying the reader, as it is detached from both authorial intention and the absolute status of "textual meaning". Additionally, it moves beyond the anarchic relativism that relies solely on individual interpretation. In contemporary discourse, deconstructionism prevails, advocating the absence of a fixed meaning. However, if the possibility of achieving a relatively fixed meaning is entirely dismissed, the discussion of meaning itself becomes fundamentally impossible.

For instance, the "gothic romance" of the eighteenth century clearly reflects a stable ideology, characterized by a celebration of chivalry for men and the depiction of women in passive waiting roles. However, Susanne Becker approaches these gothic novels through the lens of contemporary gender studies, comparing the

[17] Hu Yamin, *Narratology*, Wuhan: Central China Normal University Press, 2004, p. 38.

[18] Luo Gang, *An Introduction to Narratology*, Yunnan People's Publishing House, 1994, p. 214.

[19] Shen Dan, "What is 'Implied Author'?" *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, no. 2, 2008, p. 141.

historical genre to modern television series. She highlights that its patterns—whether they reflect machoism, covert eroticism, or the theme of women waiting for love to be bestowed—continue to resonate in contemporary popular narrative art. Becker also points out the ideological contradictions present in gothic romances and suggests that women have the potential to adopt indirect strategies to assert their agency and resist. While this "subversive" critical approach is illuminating, her argument must be grounded in extending the notion of "feminist reading" to encompass a "contemporary female reading community", which serves as a relatively stable interpretive community. Gothic romance has become a rigid genre, with most works having fossilized within certain historical contexts. Today's readers are hardly to derive any new insights from it unless they are approaching it from a cultural studies perspective. Ultimately, it is easier to identify the interpretive community than to pinpoint an individual reader.

13.3 Is It Possible for Factual Narratives to Be Unreliable?

Unreliability arises from a conflict between the narrator and the implied author. Both factual narratives—such as histories, news reports, court testimonies, and confessions—and quasi-factual narratives—such as advertisements, promises, predictions, and fortune-telling—exhibit a complete integration of the narrator and the "executive author". Consequently, there is no distance between the two, rendering it impossible for a factual narrative to be deemed unreliable. In essence, every narrator of a factual narrative must be "accountable" for their narrative, meaning they must permit the recipient to question the "factuality" of the account, as they occupy both roles of narrator and author. For instance, the narrator of a documentary embodies the cameraman's second self, the narrator of a news report acts as the second self of the reporter, the narrator in a court testimony reflects the witness's second self, and the narrator of an advertisement represents the second self of the production and broadcasting team.

Factual narratives necessitate a specific mode of reception. Legal, political, and historical narratives, irrespective of their inaccuracies or even falsehoods, are constructed by the narrator and interpreted by the audience according to the conventions of factual narration. Caesar's memoir-like historical work, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (58–49 BC.), refers to himself in the third person, thereby creating an impression of objectivity and achieving nearly absolute "reliability". In reality, these accounts were initially reports intended for the Roman Senate, which were later compiled into a cohesive history. This does not imply that Caesar's use of the third person guarantees he will fully convey the truth or avoid embellishing his image as a conquering hero; rather, the genre itself requires that the narrative be perceived as "reliable". The narrator's statements reflect the meaning and values of the implied author. Caesar was prepared to respond to inquiries from the Senate regarding these reports and intended to use them to consolidate his power in Rome. Similarly, in the presence of a priest, one cannot assert, "I confess on behalf of

someone else". In exceptional cases, an informant may fear reprisals and opt to "anonymously report", yet they still function as both narrator and author.

Undeniably, numerous confessions are falsified, a substantial amount of historical and journalistic accounts are fabricated, and many promises are deceitful. This is precisely why many individuals perceive factual narratives as potentially unreliable. Indeed, the factual nature of these narratives often functions as a disguise for dishonesty; without the inherent requirements of reception associated with the factual genre, lying would be far more challenging. Lies can be labeled as such precisely because they are presented in a "factual" mode, and even when deceit is involved, the narrator remains reliable to the implied author. In fact, it is the "narratorial reliability" of factual narratives that ultimately enables a lie to be recognized as a lie.

How, then, should we interpret a prisoner's "retraction of testimony" or a witness's "admission of falsification"? The key lies in the fact that the narrator of the testimony is considered reliable, and the original testimony that was retracted is also deemed reliable, as it reflects the deceitful intent of the "executive author" at that moment. Thus, the individual can "retract" their testimony; otherwise, there would be nothing to retract. For instance, if the individual were writing a fictional novel, the issue of "retracting the novel" would not arise. In such a case, they could only write another book after changing their perspective, but they could not claim that the original was "a forgery".

The news should be considered a reliable narrative, as the narrator is the author, and the meaning expressed by the narrator corresponds with that of the implied author. The credibility of the news arises from the reader's scrutiny of the news writer regarding their morality, character, and honesty. In factual narratives, the narrator and the implied author are synonymous, with no discernible distance between these two. We can only assert that the entire narrative is false, intentionally fabricated, or even morally compromised; however, these qualities reflect the values of the implied author, who embodies a morally (or intellectually) questionable persona. In this context, falsification and deception represent the shared meaning and values of both the narrator and the implied author, ensuring reliability of the narrator.

Taking autobiography as an example, Shen Dan argues that the unreliability of non-literary narratives often arises from the author's "own limitations", which can result in misreporting or underreporting of facts within the narrative. Consequently, the unreliability of non-fictional narratives necessitates "extratextual" comparisons—specifically, comparisons with objective facts or other texts—to be identified. What she means is that if the author of an autobiography intentionally "fictionalizes their experiences" contrary to the facts, the narrative becomes unreliable because it does not represent "objective facts". Shen Dan posits that many narratologists agree that once fictional elements enter a factual narrative, the narrative can become unreliable. She further cites Phelan's assertion that "in autobiography, the (implied) author and narrator often collapse into one, since it is usually 'an

art of direct telling from author to audience' where the author is the narrator".[20] However, in the same text, she maintains that the unreliability of the narrative arises from the distance between the narrator and the implied author. So, how can autobiography be considered unreliable?

This may sound complex, but it is actually quite simple: what Nünning refers to as the unreliability of factual narratives should be understood as "untruthful" or "untrustworthy", representing the reader's assessment of the content. The notion of narrative unreliability indicates that the text enables readers to penetrate the meaning of signs and uncover the true meaning of the text. The same approach can be applied to documentary films, live television broadcasts, and other factual narratives: these can distort the truth, as exemplified by Leni Riefenstahl's documentary *Triumph of the Will* (1935) about the Nazi Party's Nuremberg rallies. While this film is not credible, it cannot be deemed unreliable because both the narrator (the film's narrative frame) and the implied author share the value of "glorifying Nazism".

A similar pattern applies to quasi-factual narratives, such as fortune-telling, predictions, and promises. These narratives concern future events that have yet to occur, so their plot can hardly be considered "factual" at the time of reception. For these narratives to be credible to the audience, they must be framed as factual narratives where the narrator is the executive author. In this context, the narrator and the implied author are unified, with no discernible distance between them.

Returning to Shen Dan's observation: "In literary narratives, narratorial unreliability is usually encoded by the author as a rhetorical device. Only occasionally is this due to the author's own slips or failings in contrast to non-literary narratives, where narratorial unreliability is more often a result of the author's own limitations".[21] This book concludes, through its examination of various unreliable narratives, that "unreliability" is a deliberate narrative strategy within fictional contexts. In contrast, factual narratives demonstrate a unity between the narrator and the implied author, indicating that they cannot be unreliable. A text authored by an incompetent journalist or unethical historian may be labeled as "untrustworthy". However, regardless of how poorly their narratives are constructed, they remain reliable because there is no conflict between the narrator and the implied author. Similarly, consider a person testifying in court: if that individual lacks an understanding of legal principles or a moral stance, their testimony may indeed be false. Yet, irrespective of the truthfulness of the testimony, the narrative can only be categorized as "untrustworthy", not "unreliable"; otherwise, it would fail to qualify as testimony. The meaning and values of the narrative are inherently aligned with the individual's intent.

Factual narratives must adhere to this principle due to the genre's specific cultural conventions, with no exceptions to this rule. At the beginning of this section, I referenced Nünning's suggestion to investigate the phenomenon of unreliable narrators in law and politics; however, this task may prove impossible. My assertion is

[20] Shen Dan, "Unreliability", *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/66.html, retrieved on May 4, 2025.

[21] Shen Dan, "Unreliability", *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/66.html, retrieved on May 4, 2025.

not a moral judgment regarding the character of lawyers and politicians, as habitual liars may be more prevalent in these groups than in others. They are capable of lying precisely because promises and courtroom arguments are framed as factual narratives, much like how autobiographies often embellish the self. I am not implying that they cannot lie; rather I suggest that the act of lying involves both the author and the narrator in a shared persona: the implied author of a factual narrative aligns with the author's persona at the moment of the text's creation. How, then, can there be any distance between these two unified personas?

To reiterate, in any "factual" narrative, the author and the narrator are essentially the same at the moment of creation, regardless of any limitations in the author's abilities or ethical standards. This unity precludes any possibility of conflict between them. Consequently, while the narrative may be deemed "untrustworthy", "untrue", or "unacceptable", it cannot be categorized as an "unreliable narrative".

13.4 Partial Unreliability and Its Correction

Reliability is unrelated to "facts" but pertains to the meanings and values derived from the text. In traditional Chinese society, popular fiction held too low a sociocultural status to challenge the dominant ideology. Therefore, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (1522) is reliable because the values of the narrator and the implied author are identical, even if we no longer consider Liu Bei's legitimacy worth defending. This alignment of values between the narrator and the implied author is a fundamental feature of Chinese popular literature. Due to the vernacular novel's low status within the hierarchy of literary genre in Chinese culture, narrators were under pressure to align with the implied author, thereby signaling its "ideological correctness". In *A Dream of Red Mansions,* when the text states, "like the thunderous collapse of a great mansion",[22] it is not only referring to the collapse of the two houses of Rong and Ning, nor merely the fall of the imperial structure. In this context, it signifies that the narrator can no longer maintain a unified value system within the text, and the structure that upholds the reliability of the narrative is falling apart, marking the early signs of the modern transformation of Chinese society.

The previous section explored the overall unreliability/reliability of narrative texts. The issue becomes more complex when considering that a narrator's unreliability does not necessarily extend to the entire text. It is common to find certain words, sentences, or specific passages unreliable within an otherwise reliable narrative, which exhibits what is referred to as "partial unreliability". In such cases, the narrator may generally align with the implied author's values, yet deviate in particular sections where their values diverge. Compared to earlier discussions, the

[22] Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Volume 1), trans., Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, p. 82.

unreliable elements in these instances are more confined. This study defines such cases as examples of "partial unreliability".

Partial unreliability significantly complicates the concept of unreliable narration; however, narratologists have yet to explore this issue in depth. Although some scholars address unreliable narration in contexts that clearly involve partial unreliability, such as James Phelan's analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), where he categorizes unreliability into three axes—the "event/fact axis," the "ethics/evaluation axis," and the "knowledge/perception axis"[23]—the examples of unreliability he identifies are confined to individual words or phrases. Similarly, the narrator of *A Dream of Red Mansions* is primarily reliable, reflecting the implied author's values, particularly the belief in the impermanence of wealth and status. However, the frequent presence of partial unreliability—often left uncorrected—has the potential to jeopardize the overall reliability of the narrative. This highlights the necessity for a systematic classification of partial unreliability.

The first type of partial unreliability is commentary unreliability. For example, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the narrator is generally reliable, as the values of the narrator align with those of the implied author. Both stand in opposition to the prevailing Confucian ideology of feudal society and aspire to transcend worldly concerns. However, the novel contains numerous instances of partial unreliability, particularly in comments that conflict with the values of the implied author, which can be described as ironic commentary. While general commentary functions to clarify meanings and values, ironic commentary exposes a deeper internal tension within the narrative voice, transforming divergence into a more pronounced split. When the frequency of these instances of partial unreliability reaches a certain threshold, the narrator can be considered, to a certain degree, unreliable.

As an example, we can consider a paragraph from Chap. 29 of *A Dream of Red Mansions*:

> Now Baoyu had always been deplorably eccentric. Since childhood, moreover, he had been intimate with Daiyu, finding her a kindred spirit. Thus now that he knew a little more and had read some improper books, he felt none of the fine girls he had seen in the families of relatives and friends fit to hold a candle for her. He had long since set his heart on having her, but could not admit as much. So whether happy or angry, he used every means to test her secretly.[24]

The implied author of *A Dream of Red Mansions* adopts a sympathetic stance toward the romance between Baoyu and Daiyu, whereas the narrator frequently employs numerous "ironic" comments to underscore the tensions arising from social conventions and norms. The novel's portrayal of Baoyu's hesitancy in matters of love remains largely uncorrected throughout the text, which adds to the narrative's complexity. It is this density of partial unreliability that engenders a significant degree

[23] James Phelan and Marry Patricia Martin, "The Lessons of 'Weymouth': Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics, and *The Remains of the Day*", in David Herman et al., eds., *Narratologies*, Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 1999, p. 91.

[24] Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Volume 1), trans., Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, p. 434.

of narrative unreliability, rendering *A Dream of Red Mansions* both profound and thought-provoking.

The second type pertains to instances where the unreliable segments of the narrative can be rectified by the reliable sections. A classic example of this phenomenon can be found in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), which features four narratives delivered by four distinct narrators. The first three sections consist of confessions from narrators who exhibit traits of suicidal tendencies, mental impairment, or extreme selfishness. In contrast, the fourth narrative shifts to a third-person perspective, providing a recollection and observation of events from the viewpoint of a black maid. This section adopts a calm tone, and her observations prove to be significantly more reliable than those offered by the previous three narrators. Consequently, the unreliable narratives presented in the first three sections are effectively corrected by the reliable perspective provided in the fourth.

The "Head of the Phoenix" section of Mo Yan's novel *Sandalwood Death* (2001) is composed of narratives from four distinct narrators: Meiniang, Zhao Jia, Xiao Jia, and Qian Ding, each exhibiting a different narrative tone. Among these, the first three narrators are deemed unreliable: Meiniang is a rural woman, with limited knowledge; Zhao Jia, a perverted professional executioner, displays questionable morals; and Xiao Jia, possessing minimal intelligence, offers an unreliable perspective. In contrast, the fourth narrator, Qian Ding, is an official who presents a relatively objective and calm narrative, rendering him more reliable than the first three narrators. His account functions as a correction within the broader narrative framework. Another example is the South Korean romantic film *A Story Sadder Than Tears* (2009), in which the narrative alternates between the perspectives of the two lovers. While the male protagonist's perspective is inherently one-sided and unreliable, the female protagonist's viewpoint serves to effectively "correct" the unreliability of his narrative.

The third type of partial unreliability pertains to instances where the unreliability is ultimately corrected by a strong conclusion of the text, causing the overall narrative to retain its reliability. This phenomenon is often illustrated through contrasts in narrative tone. In *Bildungsroman* or novels centered on personal awakening, the earlier sections frequently contain elements of unreliability that are subsequently rectified as the characters grow and mature. For instance, in Laoshe's *The Crescent Moon*, the portrayals of the protagonist's romantic experiences during her youth come to appear naive and even ridiculous, as the first-person narrator gains a deeper understanding of the complexities of life. A similar dynamic can be observed in the film *Truman Show*. The film depicts the story of Truman, a man who is unaware that he is living his entire life on a colossal stage, and that it is being filmed and broadcast as a reality television show. The story ends with Truman's sailing away through the storm and escaping the cameras, rejecting the false reality he has known all his life. In *Primal Fear* (1996), following the murder of a bishop, a self-righteous lawyer, who is defending a church choirboy accused of the crime, consistently perceives the teenager as naive and innocent. However, after successfully securing a not guilty verdict, the teenager reveals that he has been feigning ignorance, taking advantage of the lawyer's vanity. As a result, the entire narrative, conveyed from the

lawyer's perspective, is rendered entirely unreliable. Furthermore, in the film *J. Edgar* (2011), which chronicles the notoriously controversial life of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, it is not until the film's conclusion that viewers come to realize that much of the preceding content has been framed as Hoover's "autobiography", deliberately distorting facts to embellish his own image during critical moments.

Instances of partial unreliability that span most of a narrative text but are strongly corrected by the conclusion are frequently seen in advertising. Many advertisements deliberately use exaggerated, even outlandish or humorous scenarios—claiming, for example, that driving a particular sports car will attract beautiful women, or that wearing sneakers endorsed by a famous athlete will instantly elevate one's athletic abilities to match those of the star. Audiences, however, are not so naive as to believe these claims literally. Instead, they view these exaggerations as playful, harmless embellishments. The audiences accept such rhetorical flourishes because it does not conflict with the values ultimately conveyed by the narrative—namely, the intended message of the advertising agency as the executive author. While audiences may dismiss these exaggerated claims or even find them excessive, they do not assume that the narrator is undermining the product being promoted. In other words, advertisements never engage in unreliable narration: it would be unthinkable for an ad to make grandiose claims about a product while subtly implying their falsity. Thus, the exaggeration in advertisements always works in tandem with the intended message, reinforcing the desired persuasive effect. The earlier example of the Kohler toilet ad is a prime illustration of this strategy.

Advertisements, by nature, have a constrained degree of interpretative flexibility: their primary goal is to ensure that the audience comprehends the underlying intent—to persuade them to buy a product. The values conveyed by the creator of the advertisement remain constant, and any potential misinterpretation is rectified by the "end title".[25] This refers to the product logo or trademark that typically appears at the end of video or radio ads, or in a consistent position in print ads. The end title possesses the definitive power to clarify the intended message, functioning as the pivotal element that reinforces the advertisement's purpose. As a result, advertisements are able to employ extensive sections of unreliable narration while still maintaining overall reliability. The promotion of the product serves as the most secure factual foundation. Large portions of the text may adopt a seemingly semi-fictional tone, spreading unreliability throughout, but this stops short at the critical product-related information. Despite these unreliable elements, the advertisement remains a factual narrative—one that, due to its inherent nature, cannot ultimately be unreliable. For instance, an English advertisement might warn travelers against visiting Kauai Island by stating: "Kauai Island only offers beautiful nature, without luxury hotels or shopping malls." However, the implied message here is that Kauai is, in fact, an attractive destination. The advertisement can safely employ irony or a "reverse" messaging style because the tourism advertisement genre inherently

[25] See Rao Guangxiang, "In Pursuit of Attractiveness: A Semio-naratological Approach to the Plot Structure of Advertisement", *Journal of Sichuan University (Social Science Edition)*, no. 3, 2013, pp. 112–117.

contains corrective mechanisms that ensure the intended meaning is clearly communicated.

Partial unreliability is arguably the most prevalent form of narrative unreliability, far more frequent than overall unreliability. While overall unreliability is mostly found in modern novels and films, partial unreliability can emerge not only in these premodern artistic works but even in genres like advertising. The crux of partial unreliability lies in the identification of a “point of correction”, which may sometimes arise from the deliberate structuring of the text or, in other cases, from the conventions of the genre itself, as seen in advertising. Despite the complexity involved in determining how this “point of correction” operates, the academic community has yet to fully address this issue.

Chapter 14
Personality-Filling in Narrative Frame

14.1 Assessing Potential Unreliability in "Third-Person" Narratives

Both classical and post-classical narratologies consider the issue of unreliability as pivotal to narrative research, and this principle applies equally in general narratology. Nevertheless, there remains a significant question that has yet to be clearly articulated: how can we assess the reliability of the narrator in a "third-person narrative" where the narrator is neither present nor directly involved? Alongside this arises the related question of whether characters themselves can exhibit unreliability. These two inquiries are, in fact, interrelated, as they both pertain to what I refer to as the phenomenon of "filling the narrative frame with personality."

Wayne C. Booth recognized early on that his theory is "best suited" for first-person narratives. He posits that third-person narratives are often deemed reliable due to the "undramatized" nature of their narrators, who function as the author's "second self". This perspective suggests that the narrator and the implied author are fundamentally identical, indicating a complete unity between the two. An "undramatized" narrator, as Booth defines it, is one who rarely, if ever, makes an appearance or refers to themselves, whereas only a first-person narrator can be "dramatized" (i.e., characterized). It is important to note that while Booth does not entirely dismiss the possibility of unreliability in third-person narrators, he fails to elucidate how a covert narrator can be considered unreliable given their absence within the narrative.

In the article "What Is Unreliable Narrative?", Shen Dan points out that, "It is worth noting that unreliable narrators tend to be first-person, (because) in reality, readers can only infer the norms and conceptual framework of the implied author through the narrator's own words".[1]Additionally, Shen Dan suggests that the

[1] Shen Dan, "What Is Unreliable Narrative?", *Foreign Literature Review*, no.4, 2006, p. 138.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_14

mechanism of unreliability of third-person narration is so far unclear.[2] Although nearly half a century has passed since Booth first raised these concerns, the issue remains unresolved.

The unreliability of a narrative stems from the conflict between the two personalities of the narrator and the implied author, highlighting a fundamental opposition of values between them. If the narrator does not reveal himself, he is unlikely to possess a personality that readers can recognize as conflicting with that of the implied author. This book argues that the covert narrator is represented as a narrative frame. However, this frame is not entirely "impersonal"; instead, it encompasses various textual subjectivities. Narrative texts inevitably incorporate elements of personality, which can manifest in numerous forms, including the narrator, sub-narrator, narratee, commentator, speech characters, and focal characters. Consequently, this frame is filled with diverse personalities, forming a personified structure. While this frame serves as the foundation of narrative discourse, its personification enables the possibility of conflict with the implied author concerning meaning and values, ultimately resulting in unreliable narratives.

The novel, as the most familiar narrative genre, in all its variants exemplifies the different manifestations of the narrator's "person-frame duality". In novels that utilize first-person narration, the narrative becomes personified, with a specific personality (i.e., the narrator's personality) nearly monopolizing the frame. Conversely, third-person narratives lack a singular, independent personality; instead, they incorporate various degrees and modes of "personality-filling", which results in a framework filled with multiple personalities. This observation serves as the starting point for addressing the question: "How can third-person narratives be unreliable?"

14.2 Personality-Filling (I): Comments or Refusal to Give Comments

Building on Booth's argument, an "undramatized" narrator has minimal potential for unreliability. The crucial factor, however, is not whether the narrator is "dramatized", but rather whether the narrator and the implied author are entirely aligned in terms of meaning and values. When this alignment is achieved, the narrative can be considered absolutely reliable. A prime example can be found in traditional Chinese historical novels, such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, where extensive commentary consistently reinforces Confucian philosophy, ensuring that the narrator and the implied author remain at a minimum distance.

Nevertheless, this is not always the case. Various personalities frequently fill the narrative frame in diverse forms, and their words and actions often cause a dissonance between the narrative frame and the implied author in terms of meaning and

[2] Shen Dan, "Unreliability", *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/66.html, retrieved on May 4, 2025.

values. This section explores the different identities these personalities adopt and their influence on narrative reliability. The intricate relationships between these personalities and the narrative frame can unfold in various ways.

The first method involves narratorial comments, which provides the simplest means for the covert narrator to manifest himself or for the narrative frame to take on a personified form. As discussed in the previous chapter, the partial unreliability that arises from such comments is a common phenomenon in novels, and such comments function as typical methods for constructing unreliable personalities within the narrative frame. A clear example can be found in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, where numerous assessments of characters are demonstrably unreliable. For example, the narrator makes dubious remarks about Jia Zheng's "expertise in raising his children and managing his household", as well as Mrs. Wang's alleged "benevolence". In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), the narrator offers extensive commentary that, while fundamentally reliable, often conveys a tone of insincerity. Regarding the heroine, Becky Sharp, the narrator asserts: "Miss Sharp would never have committed herself so far as to advance opinions, the untruth of which would have been so easily detected. But we must remember that she is but nineteen as yet, unused to the art of deceiving, poor innocent creature! and making her own experience in her own person".[3] This characterization implies that Becky Sharp is neither innocent nor a victim; rather, the narrator insincerely passes comment on her imperfections in the art of deceiving. The contrast between this insincere commentary and the implied author's underlying moral perspective, which critiques the corrupting power of a society driven by materialism, creates a tension that renders the narrative unreliable.

In contrast, when a narrator entirely refrains from offering commentary and remains silent on interpretation or evaluation, a specific form of narrative unreliability may arise. This understated style of narration, marked by its cold detachment, often directly opposes the values held by the implied author. A clear example of this is found in Maupassant's "The Necklace" (1884). Here, the third-person narrator adopts a strikingly composed and dispassionate tone, even during the most heartbreaking moment of the story—when the characters realize that more than 10 years of labor were spent repaying a debt for a fake necklace. Upon the sudden revelation that the necklace was, in fact, a fake, the narrative abruptly concludes without leaving room for any emotional reflection. This seemingly indifferent narrative persona, concealed within the framework, is in direct conflict with the implied author's perspective, which conveys deep sympathy for human folly and critiques the ruinous effects of vanity. This discord between the narrator and the implied author creates an unreliable narration.

When the narrator remains entirely implicit and refrains from clarifying the enigmas inherent in the plot, the narrative becomes fundamentally unreliable. In Kafka's works, including *The Metamorphosis* (1915), *The Trial,* and *The Castle* (1926), narrators avoid providing any explanatory commentary on the events that befall the

[3] William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Planet eBook, p. 30.

protagonists, rendering them seemingly incapable of offering any meaningful insights. This absence of clarification creates substantial gaps in the causal relationships among events, which ultimately compromises the narrative's reliability. The narrator is expected to provide explanations, and the persistent refusal to do so signifies a deliberate stance taken by the narrator.

The most extreme form of a narrative characterized by the complete implicitness of the narrator can be referred to as the "fly on the wall" mode of storytelling. Booth argues that such narratives are "absolutely reliable" due to the absence of any trace of the narrator's personality. He cites Hemingway's short story "The Killers" as a quintessential example of what he considers a "rigorously impersonal" reliable narrative.[4] However, I contend that "The Killers" serves as a compelling illustration of narrative unreliability. The protagonist, Nick Adams, is deeply impacted by the ruthlessness of the world, prompting him to decide to leave his current environment. Concurrently, the implied author shares this emotional turmoil and expresses distress over humanity's widespread indifference. In stark contrast, the narrator steadfastly refuses to exhibit any attitude or emotion, creating a disconnect with the values and meanings conveyed by the implied author. Thus, the narrator's refusal to comment on the narrative itself can be seen as an "abnormal" manifestation of personality.

The technique characterized by the "narrator's refusal to comment" bears a notable resemblance to certain avant-garde experimental films. Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* serves as a compelling example, presenting a haunting narrative in which two high school students perpetrate murder on an otherwise uneventful autumn day. The film intricately explores the complexities of the characters' relationships through seemingly mundane details. What makes it particularly striking is the utter absence of the anticipated "sympathetic" perspective within the narrative framework, a decision that stands in stark contrast to the film's underlying value system, which emphasizes the profound significance of human life.

Even a typically implicit personality, such as the narratee, can serve as an active subject within the narrative frame. In the genre known as "second-person fiction", the narratee is addressed as "you" and functions as the protagonist, akin to a letter directed at a specific recipient. These narratives give the impression of harboring intimate secrets that the narrator intends to conceal from a third party. Thus, second-person narrative can be understood as a narrative framework filled with the personality of the narratee. In this particular type of novel, the narrator often grapples with uncertainty regarding the protagonist's decisions, as the narrative solely captures the protagonist's fleeting thoughts. As a result, the narratee's personality occupies the narrative frame, creating a tension between its meaning-values and those espoused by the implied author.

[4] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Second Edition), Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 151.

14.3 Personality-Filling (II): Sub-Narrators

A narrative text can feature various personified narrators. Whether it employs a first-person "personal narrative" or a third-person "frame narrative", sub-narrators—characters tasked with telling their own stories—can emerge. When an overt narrator addresses the narratee directly or gives some comments, they must use first-person pronouns, as any speaker refers to themselves in the first person. The narrator is initially a "textual" personality, a notion Barthes describes as "être de papier". Yet, within the narrative world, certain characters at a sub-narrative level, may assume the role of sub-narrators and thus possess clearly defined identities. This interplay creates the illusion that the sub-narrator is "substantialized" within the fictional universe.

This leads to the stratification of narrative: narration at a higher level introduces narrative entities, including the narrator and the narratee, while simultaneously establishing a new "sub-narrative frame". Within this framework, the processes of creating and transmitting narratives become increasingly transparent. However, no matter how many levels are introduced, this structuring merely offers the illusion of resolving the underlying challenge. Both the character and the narrator exist merely as "être de papier" within the text. Moreover, regardless of the number of narrative levels added, the narrator at the highest level remains an impersonalized narrative frame, without a defined "background" or origin.

The stratification of narratives often results in conflicts among narrators at different levels, necessitating a determination of which narrator is regarded as reliable—one that aligns with the implied author's values—and which is deemed unreliable. In Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman*, the narrator at the primary narrative level claims that the diary reveals "the nature of his brother's disorder during those fearful days".[5] Conversely, the narrator and protagonist at the secondary level, known as the "Madman", offers his own interpretation of Chinese history: "I started leafing through a history book to look it up. There were no dates in this history, but scrawled this way and that across every page were the words benevolence, righteousness, and morality. Since I couldn't get to sleep anyway, I read that history very carefully for most of the night, and finally I began to make out what was written between the lines; the whole volume was filled with a single phrase: EAT PEOPLE!".[6] From his perspective, truth exists not within the realm of history but beyond it, transcending the limitations of historical language and residing on the opposite side of the historical text. It was not until half a century later that French Marxists Althusser and Macherey made a similar observation: "The reverse side of what is written will be

[5] Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans., William A. Lyell, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 29.

[6] Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans., William A. Lyell, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 32.

history itself".[7] This perspective aligns with the implied author's position in *Diary of a Madman*, positioning the narrator at the secondary narrative level as the reliable voice while casting the narrator at the primary narrative level as unreliable.

Conversely, there are numerous instances where reliable narrators are positioned at higher levels, while unreliable narrators are found at lower levels. In Gide's *The Immoralists*, a conflict arises between different narrative levels: the narrator, "I", writes a letter to an official reporting that the protagonist has invited them to his villa in Africa and recounted the events of his marriage to them. The contrast between this extradiegetic narrator's formal and traditional tone and the protagonist's narrative—characterized by arrogant language, logical confusion, and moral transgression—serves to intensify the ethical dilemma the protagonist faces, rendering it even more thought-provoking.

14.4 Personality-Filling (III): Point of View and Perspective

Beyond the roles of the narrator and the narratee, characters also possess the capacity to develop their own subjectivity within the narrative framework, allowing them to exert partial control over the narrative. The concept of the "focal character" is particularly noteworthy, as this character can impose his or her consciousness on the narrator, effectively placing the entire narrative under the influence of that individual's perspective.

Point of view is among the most extensively discussed topics in the study of twentieth-century fiction, and the modern narratological tradition has largely evolved from explorations of this issue. During the first half of the twentieth century, point of view was regarded as the foremost challenge in comprehending fiction, perceived as the essential key to deciphering its complexities. Indeed, the techniques of fiction were often considered intrinsically tied to the question of point of view. Lubbock, for example, claimed that "the whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of the point of view".[8] Due to the particular historical context that has shaped this area of study, the term "point of view" has largely lost its neutrality, now specifically denoting the "restricted point of view bound to characters" as opposed to the "omniscient point of view".

The issue of point of view is not exclusive to novels; nearly all forms of narratives—particularly those that are vision-oriented—entail the question of "guiding the receiver to see from a particular perspective". This applies to theater, television, film, exhibitions, tourism, and sports, all of which involve perspective-related decisions, such as where to place a viewing platform or how to design a tour route. Once

[7] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, London, Henley and Boston: Routledge, 1978, p. 94.

[8] Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, London: Cape, 1921, p. 251.

a character occupies the narrative frame, the point of view is bound to characters. For instance, in a stage performance, while the audience may appear limited in their ability to change their viewpoint due to their seating, the issue of information orientation remains highly significant. The gestures and postures of the characters serve as guiding elements that shape the audience's perception. Similarly, in film, the character's point of view plays a vital role in determining the camera angle.

In first-person fiction, the narrator typically recounts personal experiences, inherently adopting the narrator's point of view. However, it is also possible to incorporate extensive passages or even entire sections that detail the perceptions of others, as demonstrated in Balzac's *Sarrasine* (1830) and Lu Xun's *The New Year's Sacrifice* (1924). In the context of third-person narratives, the consciousness of the focal character naturally occupies the narrative frame. In both instances, conflicts between the narrator and the focal character may arise. For example, in Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy*, the narrator is completely absent, remaining almost entirely covert, with the narrative focused solely on what the husband observes while spying on his wife from behind a window. The narrator offers no commentary or insight into the character's feelings of jealousy, thereby allowing the focal character's consciousness to dominate the text. By refraining from reporting the character's inner thoughts, the narrator effectively withdraws, enabling the character's perspective to directly confront the implied author's moral stance—that "jealousy is a terrible feeling". This novel serves as a quintessential example of the "unreliability of character".

The preceding example highlights that, by definition, the narrator is omniscient; however, he variously limits his perspective to the viewpoints and perceptions of specific characters. I propose the concept of "narrative perspective", which refers to the interaction between the narrator's subjectivity and that of the characters. Narrative perspective delineates the particular way in which events are perceived, with the narrator serving as the sender of the narrative message. Thus, "character unreliability" can emerge only when the narrator intentionally allows the character's consciousness to dominate the text.

The first chapter of Mao Dun's *Midnight* (1933) is predominantly narrated from the perspective of Old Mr. Wu. While the narrative generally adheres to his point of view, there are moments when he loses consciousness, which temporarily precludes him from serving as the focal character. It is important to recognize, however, that the narrator in this chapter is not Old Mr. Wu himself. For example, consider the following excerpt: "He saw the entire living room awash in swirling, multicolored lights, spinning, spinning – faster and faster. Near him loomed a strange object, a sphere of golden brilliance, humming in a low, throaty murmur as it drifted slowly from side to side, exhaling gusts of wind so fierce that they stole his breath away… The silk gauze could not obscure the sculpted contours of their bodies, the swell of their breasts, the tender pink of their nipples, the fine down beneath their arms! Countless breasts, rising, trembling – quivering peaks fluttering in a dizzying, weightless dance!"[9] This passage clearly reflects the perceptions, awareness, and even illusions experienced by Old Mr. Wu; however, it does not employ his own vocabulary.

[9] Mao Dun, *Midnight*, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2021, p. 14.

The first chapter of *Midnight* effectively pairs a well-chosen focal character with an equally appropriate narrator, establishing a well-synchronized relationship between narrative voice and point of view. This deliberate choice leads to a precisely constructed narrative perspective. Meanwhile, the narration is unreliable, as it conveys the implied author's belief that "the traditional patriarchal society is disintegrating amidst the forces of urbanization." However, the passage reflects a strong emotional response, critiquing the depraved metropolitan lifestyle and expressing particular disdain for the "decadent extravagance" of modern Shanghai.

The conflict between narrative voice and point of view is a defining feature of recorded narratives. In *What Maisie Knew* (1897) by Henry James, the world is presented through the eyes of a six-year-old girl, articulated in James's elegant prose. Although this perspective creates an engaging narrative, it can feel somewhat artificial. In contrast, the story's point of view becomes more naturalized in the 2012 film adaptation directed by Scott McGehee. This change arises from the inherently "neutral" nature of visual imagery, which, unless intentionally crafted to reflect the character's subjective experience through point of view shots, remains detached from the age of the focal character.

The technique of having a narrator adopt a character's point of view while adjusting his language is particularly common in factual narratives. In courtroom proceedings, lawyers are required to use language that conforms to the legal context while incorporating their clients' point of view during the argument. Take, for example, the well-known 2006 case in Chengdu, where citizen Zhang Dejun intervened to stop two robbers, resulting in the death of one perpetrator. He was ultimately acquitted. Reflecting on the case, his defense attorney later explained that the key argument for his acquittal rested on the justification of self-defense. The defense emphasized that the robbers' aggressive attempt to flee and their immediate unlawful possession of stolen property created an urgent situation in which Zhang's actions fell within the limits of justifiable defense. Thus, the argument was firmly rooted in Zhang Dejun's point of view, yet articulated through the skillful language of the lawyer-narrator.

Shen Dan provides a keen observation when she states that "unreliable narratives stemming from a character's vision often manifest in third-person narratives".[10] The central question now is how to theorize and synthesize this observation into a general principle that can effectively address her own inquiry which "the mechanism of unreliability in third-person narratives remains unclear". A character's point of view inherently conveys values and moral ethics, and this personality can fill the narrative frame of third-person narratives.

The notion of "character unreliability" seems to challenge the most fundamental definition of unreliable narratives, which centers on the distance between the values and meanings held by the narrator and those of the implied author. However, it becomes clear that when the personality of the focal character fills the narrative frame, the narrator yields to the character's consciousness, thereby establishing a distinct narrative perspective. This transition can also give rise to a conflict between the narrator and the implied author, ultimately leading to an unreliable narrative.

[10] Shen Dan, "What Is Unreliable Narrative?", *Foreign Literature Review*, no.4, 2006, p. 142.

14.5 Personality-Filling(IV): Characters

There is another way that characters can fill the narrative frame with their personalities: the text can directly quote their speech or thoughts, including their "inner voices". In this light, a first-person narrative can be understood as one where the character's speech fully occupies the narrative frame, whereas in third-person narratives, the character's speech is often presented only in fragments. In recorded narratives, character speech can take various forms: direct speech, indirect speech, free direct speech, free indirect speech, as well as many possible combinations and modifications of these forms. In performative narratives, sub-narrators' voices (such as a storyteller, monodrama performer, or orator) can occasionally occupy the narrative frame, but more frequently, it is the speech and actions of the characters themselves—whether actors in a play or athletes in a competition—that take precedence. These characters often interact with the narrative frame and play a significant role in shaping its meaning and value systems.

In Chap. 34 of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Lady Wang catches Jinchuan and Baoyu in a flirtatious moment, leading her to reprimand Jinchuan physically and expel her from the Rong Mansion. Consumed by shame, Jinchuan ultimately takes her own life. During a discussion with Baochai, Lady Wang asserts, "The other day she broke something of mine, and in a fit of anger I struck her and sent her away. I was meaning to punish her a couple of days and then to have her fetched back. I'd have no idea she'd fly into such a passion she'd jump into the well. This is all my fault".[11] This direct speech exemplifies the character's control over her words. However, within this quotation lies a notable degree of unreliability: Lady Wang seeks to rationalize her cruelty while shifting blame onto the deceased. Significantly, the narrator refrains from commenting on this character's speech, thereby highlighting the intrinsic unreliability of her account, specifically, its conflict with the overall values conveyed by the narrative.

In another passage of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, when Xiren's mother and brother seek to redeem her in order to arrange a marriage for a dowry, Xiren resolutely refuses their proposal:

> Her mother and brother realized that she was adamant and would never leave. In any case she had been sold for life and although they thought the Jia family might be generous enough to let her go without asking for any money, they also knew that the servants there were not ill-used but shown more kindness than severity. Indeed, the girls who were personal attendants of members of the family, old or young, were generally treated more handsomely than servants in other jobs. In fact, they were even better off than daughters of ordinary human households. So Mrs. Hua and her son did not press the point.[12]

[11] Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Volume 1), trans., Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, p. 474.

[12] Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Volume 1), trans., Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, p. 276.

This passage represents an instance of indirect speech, raising the question of whether these thoughts belong to the characters themselves or are merely reported by the narrator. It is challenging to determine. Nonetheless, the portrayal of the Jia family as "kind and generous" stands in stark contrast to the implied author's viewpoint, thus creating a sense of partial unreliability.

Bakhtin argues that "confessional self-utterances" function as dialogues; in other words, first-person narratives—where only one character speaks throughout the text—can actually be regarded as character speeches. He illustrates this point with a passage from Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* (1846):

> I live in the kitchen, or rather, to be more accurate, there is a room near the kitchen (and our kitchen, I ought to tell you, is clean, light and very nice), a little room, a modest corner… or rather the kitchen is a big room of three windows so I have a partition running along the inside wall, so that it makes as it were another room, an extra lodging; it is roomy and comfortable, and there is a window and all – in fact, every convenience.[13]

Bakhtin advocates: "Confessional self-utterances are permeated with an intense sensitivity toward the anticipated words of others about them, and with others' reactions to their own words about themselves".[14] Consequently, the quotation presented here exemplifies a form of partial unreliability in the narrative. This is because the speaker, in an effort to create a particular impression, intentionally alters their choice of words.

The meanings and values conveyed through character dialogues do not inherently compromise the overall reliability of the narrative. However, such dialogues often function as partial narratives; when they reach a certain length, they may be categorized as sub-narratives, though the distinction between the two can be quite blurred. Consequently, this can give rise to instances of partial unreliability within the narrative structure.

All of the aforementioned personalities—sub-narrators, commentators, narratees, character's point of view and speech—are able to fill the narrative frame in specific ways, allowing them to exert partial dominance over the narrative. Their meanings and values can therefore be revealed autonomously, potentially leading to inconsistencies with those of the implied author, which results in a sense of partial unreliability. This analysis represents an idealized form of each case, as the actual dynamics within a narrative text often involve various personalities competing for the authority to articulate their perspectives. In such instances, while we can identify certain segments of the narrative as unreliable, it becomes much more difficult to pinpoint precisely which type of unreliability is at play.

Thus, the concept of "unreliable characters" can be substantiated through the lens of "personality filling" within the framework of third-person narratives. This process of personality filling can involve a diverse array of subjects, resulting in an

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[13] Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *Poor Folk or Poor People*, trans., Constance Garnett, in *Three Short Novels by Fyodor Dostoyevsky: Notes from Underground, Poor People*, *The Friend of the Family*, New York: Dell, 1960.

[14] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans., Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 205.

exceedingly complex situation of unreliability. Furthermore, if we expand our consideration to include the narrative frame of films, theater, competitions, and games, the variations in personality filling become even more pronounced and intricate, warranting thorough examination. In this broader context, the issue of unreliability emerges as a much larger and more complex field than the one typically addressed by narratology, which often focuses on the unreliability of the narrator in first-person novels.

14.6 Voice-Snatching

No narrative exists entirely under the control of a single voice; even in factual or mental narratives where an author or receiver may appear dominant, the influence of other subjects is ever-present. Narrative texts operate as arenas where multiple voices vie for discursive authority. This dynamic is rooted in the concept of "subjectivity"—defined as the source of discourse and values—where multiple voices contend to shape meaning. Consequently, this competition for discursive power serves as both the origin of the distinct characteristics of narrative texts and a highly expressive technique of narration.

The technique of character's "voice-snatching" is a distinct narrative device often employed in fiction, yet it remains largely unexamined within both Chinese and Western narratology. This phenomenon occurs when, in the course of narration, the narrator unexpectedly shifts to using certain vocabulary—such as adjectives or adverbs—that belongs uniquely to a character. This effect is subtle, making voice-snatching notably different from narratorial commentary or descriptions shaped by a character's point of view. It can, therefore, be considered a brief use of free indirect speech. In this way, voice-snatching enhances the diversity and polyphonic quality of the narrative text, introducing a multiplicity of voices within the single narrative flow.

Most narratives adopt a linear structure, permitting only a single narrative agent (or collective entity) to direct the narrative flow at any specific moment. This dynamic resembles a sports game, where the "ball" is exclusively controlled by one player at a time. Within the text, different narrative voices continuously contend for the opportunity to speak, indicating that the narrator lacks full authority over the text's progression. As the narrative unfolds, characters often endeavor to seize control of the storytelling voice. This struggle for discursive authority generally emerges through distinct modes of reported speech: direct and free direct speech, which distinctly separates the narrator's voice from that of the characters, and indirect speech, which allows the narrator to modify characters' words while still framing them within a controlled discourse. Only free indirect discourse (FID) blurs the lines between the language of the narrator and that of the characters, frequently creating interpretive ambiguity. Among these narrative forms, an especially nuanced variant of FID known as "voice-snatching" appears, a technique that has so far received limited scholarly attention.

Within an otherwise "objective" third-person narrative, certain words—often adjectives or adverbs—occasionally shift to reflect a character's voice, a phenomenon I describe as "voice-snatching". This technique allows the character's specific experiences and linguistic choices to be delicately woven into the narrator's discourse, enabling the character to momentarily assert narrative control through these strategically chosen words.

Though this technique might seem rare at first glance, it is actually a frequent phenomenon across both Chinese and Western literature. Surprisingly, this subtle narrative technique—where a character briefly seizes control of the narrator's discourse—remains largely unexamined within narratology. This omission is prevalent in both Chinese and international scholarship, resulting in the absence of a standardized term in English or other languages. I thus suggest adopting the term "voice-snatching" to describe this effect, and I will present a range of illustrative examples below.

In the sixteenth chapter of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, titled "Cao Mengde's Defeat at the Yu River", the narrative recounts how Zhang Xiu ambushed Cao Cao in Wancheng, leading to the utter rout of Cao Cao's forces. It states, "Here some of the pursuers [scoundrels] came up, and Cao Amin was hacked to pieces. Cao Cao dashed into the river and reached the further side, but there an arrow struck his steed in the eye and it fell".[15] Notably, the term "scoundrel" carries a negative connotation here, and the narrator's bias is unmistakable, as seen in his consistent use of "scoundrels" when referring to the Yellow Turban rebels. In the context of the conflict between Cao Cao and Zhang Xiu, the narrator appears to sympathize with Zhang Xiu, suggesting that the term "scoundrels" would more naturally apply to Cao Cao's troops. However, in this particular passage, it is Zhang Xiu's men who are labeled as "scoundrels". This discrepancy can best be understood as an instance where Cao Cao's voice subtly overrides the narrator's, briefly shifting the narrative voice.

In the final scene of Lu Xun's short story "Forging the Swords", the narrative describes, "The people knelt down, revealing rows of tables with offerings. Some loyal subjects gulped back tears of rage to think that the spirits of the two regicides were enjoying the sacrifice now together with the king".[16] In this passage, the implied author critiques the ignorance and servility of the people. The phrase "loyal subjects" serves as a clear instance of voice-snatching, where the character's voice momentarily supersedes the narrator's, reflecting the characters' misguided sense of reverence.

In modern novels, the phenomenon of "voice-snatching" is ubiquitous. In Mansfield's short story "A Cup of Tea" (1922), the narrative observes, "And people hurried by, hidden under their hateful umbrellas". The word "hateful" reflects the sentiment of the people rushing past. Similarly, in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the text states, "Darlene, pure Nightingale compassion, is handing

[15] See Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, trans., C.H. Brewitt Taylor, Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1925. The translation is slightly modified according to the original Chinese version.

[16] Lu Xun, "Forging the Swords," *Munsey's Magazine*, October, 1926.

him a hard red candy, molded like a stylized raspberry… mm, which oddly enough even tastes like a raspberry, though it can't begin to take away that bitterness".[17] In this case, the phrase "oddly enough" represents an instance of voice-snatching by Slothrop, as it subtly integrates his subjective perspective into the third-person narrative. This shift is achieved through the inclusion of a simple adjective, which encapsulates Slothrop's personal reaction to the candy.

The phenomenon of character's "voice-snatching" can be understood as a highly distinctive variant of free indirect speech. Through voice-snatching, a character's feelings or thoughts are conveyed through a single adjective or adverb, bypassing the need for direct quotation typically seen in free indirect speech. Unlike free indirect speech, however, voice-snatching is characterized by its brevity—it does not form a complete sentence but instead is embedded within the narrative flow, seamlessly blending with the narrator's voice. In this way, it subtly usurps the narrative voice, seamlessly introducing the subjective evaluation or perspective of the character into the text without disrupting the overall discourse.

Voice-snatching can be particularly challenging to distinguish from narratorial commentary, in which the narrator directly interprets or evaluates the actions and behaviors of characters. In Chapter Seven of *The Scholars* (*Rulin Waishi*《儒林外史》), the text reads: "The next year, when Prince Ning defeated the imperial troops at Nankan, the common people opened the city gates and fled for their lives. Powerless to resist, Intendant Wang hired a small boat and made off at dead of night".[18] Some commentators argue that this phrase "powerless to resist" is actually a self-exonerating expression used by Intendant Wang to shift blame and avoid responsibility. From this perspective, the expression is seen as an example of "voice-snatching", where the character's voice subtly intrudes upon the narrative. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as a straightforward account of Wang's situation, indicating that he genuinely was unable to resist; in this case, it would simply be the narrator's objective portrayal of the event, without any subjective commentary from the character.

Distinguishing between narratorial commentary and a character's subjective perspective can often be challenging. However, there is a way to clarify this distinction. Consider the following passage from Mo Yan's renowned *Radish* (1986):

> "Who the hell splashed me?" the little stonemason shouted, glaring at the little blacksmith.
>
> "I did, what's it to you?" The little blacksmith, glowing all over, leaned gracefully on his hammer, tilting his head and saying, "Are you blind?"[19]

Here, the question arises: does the term "gracefully" reflect the little blacksmith's posture with a subtle touch of sarcasm from the narrator, or is it an instance of the character's "voice-snatching"? One useful way to distinguish between the two is to check whether the phrase "in the character's view" could be inserted without

[17] Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, New York: Penguin Books, 1978, p. 89.

[18] Wu Ching-Tzu, *The Scholars*, trans., Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1973, p. 91.

[19] Mo Yan, *Radish*, Jinan: Shandong Literature and Art Publishing House, 2002, p. 26.

altering the meaning. In this case, the word “gracefully” cannot be preceded by “the little blacksmith thought”, which indicates that this is not an instance of voice-snatching. Instead, it is a brief narratorial commentary, wherein the narrator subtly mocks the little blacksmith’s posture. This suggests that the narrator, not the character, is offering an evaluation of the scene.

Conversely, in the first example from this text, the phrase “the scoundrels came up”, though not overly redundant, could be rephrased as “(in Cao Cao’s mind) the scoundrels came up”. The narrator’s focus gradually shifts from mockingly criticizing Cao Cao’s lustful behavior and the misfortune it brings him, to expressing concern over whether he will escape danger. This shift in perspective, while subtle, is significant. The narrator’s manipulation of the narrative voice plays a pivotal role in shaping the reader’s sympathies, and this control over the narrative can shift almost imperceptibly. A single word, such as “scoundrels”, can significantly alter the narrator’s stance, signaling a shift in tone and attitude.

Chapter 15
Stratification, Transgression, Cyclical Transgression

15.1 Narrative Stratification

The complexities of narrative stratification and transgression have long captivated scholars, generating extensive discussion in both Chinese and international academic circles. In the past 40 years, research on this issue has proliferated across diverse disciplines, including logic, philosophy, narratology, and visual semiotics. As these debates have deepened, the subject has expanded in scope, and the field has grown significantly.[1] However, scholarly articles that provide a clear and systematic analysis of this issue remain rare, with many of the existing works giving the impression that the more the topic is discussed, the more obscure and elusive it becomes.

I have been engaged with this issue for over two decades, ever since I published my first paper in 1990, in which I explored the phenomenon of cyclical transgression in Chinese novels, with a particular focus on works from the late Qing period. The initial feedback I received from my peers was that this phenomenon could be explained away as the result of authorial carelessness—poor writing, in other words. However, framing the issue as a matter of "authorial mistakes" ultimately leads to a dead-end, particularly when it comes to formal experimentation, which traditional Chinese literati often regarded as trivial and unworthy of serious discussion. Consequently, such matters remain beyond verification. Nevertheless, when cyclical transgression is found across a broad range of works, spanning different ethnic groups and literary traditions, it becomes increasingly clear that the phenomenon cannot be reduced to mere "carelessness" on the part of the author.

The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, it aims to broaden the discussion by examining the issue across all narrative genres, with particular emphasis on image-based and cinematic narratives, in order to assess whether a clearer, more

[1] See John Pier, "Metalepsis", in Peter Hühn et al., eds., *Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009, pp. 190–203.

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_15

universally applicable understanding can be achieved. Second, it intends to break the issue down into distinct levels of analysis, deliberately avoiding the conflation of problems that arise at different levels. The structure of the chapter unfolds as follows:

A. An exploration of how narrative stratification is established;
B. A detailed analysis of the conditions under which the boundaries of stratification are violated, resulting in what is referred to as "transgression";
C. A consideration of the specific form of logical paradoxes that arise within narratives, notably the so-called "strange loop";
D. Finally, an investigation into how cyclical transgression leads to the emergence of the "paradox of transgression".

To effectively address these four steps, it is crucial to first untangle several perplexing concepts and resist the temptation to conflate a variety of intricate examples. While this method may occasionally seem excessively rigorous or overly analytic, such a careful and detailed breakdown is indispensable for fully dissecting and comprehending the issue at hand.

In *Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction*, Genette offers an extensive and detailed discussion of the issue. However, the term metalepsis, regardless of how it is translated, carries a rhetorical meaning that is largely unrelated to narratology. By appropriating this rhetorical concept, Genette is required to demonstrate a connection between the two. His central argument is that "fiction is an extension of figures of speech".[2] To substantiate this, he needs to argue that "factual narrative is not an extension of any figure of speech". However, he does not address the concept of "factual narrative" at all. In fact, as noted earlier, Genette was among the first to draw a distinction between the fictional and the factual, a distinction that he fails to reconcile in his argument. This omission, consequently, creates a significant gap in his reasoning, complicating the interpretation and further study of the issue.

The phenomenon of stratification and transgression, though rare in factual narratives, is by no means absent. The phrase "The Grand Historian says" in *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji,*《史记》) exemplifies a form of narrator commentary or intervention. In a certain sense, such commentary constitutes a transgressive phenomenon—though its formulaic nature has diluted this effect over time. This point will be further discussed in the following section. A more contemporary illustration appears in the award-winning documentary *Last House Standing* (2004). During the first half of the film, the filmmaker is entirely absent from the narrative, functioning purely as an observer who records the solitary life of an elderly man in his home. However, toward the end of the film, the elderly man takes the camera from the filmmaker and begins filming her—the "intruder"—thereby reversing the roles of observer and observed. This shift exemplifies not only a transgression but a cyclical

[2] Gerard Genette, *Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction*, trans., Wu Kangru, Guiling: Lijiang Publishing House, 2013, p. 14.

form of transgression. Genette's claim that such transgressions can only occur within fictional narratives is, in this case, called into question.

This chapter explores stratification within the context of general narratology, extending across various media and genres. The complexity of this concept intensifies when narrative transgressions intersect with cross-media elements. In performative narratives, multiple narrative levels unfold synchronously, while in recorded narratives, they occur across distinct points in time. The convergence of these two narrative types introduces intricate temporal dynamics. Furthermore, certain genres use characters as sub-narrators within stratified layers, while others establish narrative frames to house sub-narratives. When combined, these approaches yield increasingly complex and multi-layered relationships within the narrative structure.

To address the complexities of stratification, it is first crucial to define the term clearly. Most scholars refer to it as "narrative levels", but this lacks a verb form and thus fails to capture the dynamic process of level generation. Recently, some scholars have adopted the term "hierarchy", but this word implies control rather than creation. Consequently, this book suggests a more precise English term: stratification.

Thirty years ago, I put forward a straightforward definition of narrative stratification: The function of a higher narrative level is to provide either the narrator or the narrative frame for the level below. In other words, a character situated at a higher narrative level may become the narrator at the subsequent level, or an event at the higher level may give rise to a narrative act that generates the lower-level narrative—thereby establishing its narrative frame.[3] Genette, who has extensively examined this issue, writes of the relation between narrative levels, "Any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed".[4] Here, Genette's concept of a "higher" level corresponds to what I refer to as a "lower" level. While there is no substantial difference between "higher" and "lower" as relative terms, Genette's definition becomes impractical in certain contexts. For this reason, I suggest grounding stratification primarily in the identity of the narrator, with narrative levels being distinguished by the presence of different narrators. For instance, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the event of Baoyu's journey to the "Land of Illusion" might be seen as "higher" than the main narrative, as it takes place within a supernatural realm controlled by figures like the Illusory Monk and the Divine Nun. However, this episode does not constitute a sub-narrative, since the same narrator recounts both the main story and this event without a shift of the narrator.

Similarly, the story of "a pipe dream" in *The World Inside a Pillow* (*Zhenzhong Ji*, 《枕中记》) does not qualify as a sub-narrative, as it remains within the same narrative frame. In *Gravity's Rainbow* by Pynchon, the narrative begins with the protagonist's nightmare, and only upon his awakening do we realize that everything

[3] See Zhao Yiheng, *The Uneasy Narrator* (2nd Edition), Chengdu: Sichuan Publishing Group, 2013, p. 102.

[4] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans., Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 228.

described up to that point was part of a dream. However, both the dream sequence and the subsequent scenes set during World War II in Britain belong to the same narrative level. In much the same way, the "The Commander Hung, in Heedlessness, Frees the Spirits" episode in *The Water Margin* and the story from *The Romance of Sui and Tang Dynasties* (1675), in which Emperor of Sui is reincarnated as Emperor Tang, both create an "aetiological frame" but do not represent a stratification of the narrative. This is because they do not introduce a new narrator. Instead, these episodes share the same narrator as the rest of the text—the storyteller. Narrative stratification occurs only when a new narrator is introduced, as seen when Nelly narrates the story of Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Height*s (1847), or when a new narrative frame is established, as in the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet* (1599).

In recorded narratives—such as fiction, historical accounts, and journalism—the act of narration always occurs after the events being recounted, rendering the narrative inherently retrospective. Thus, as the narrative level increases, the events at that level actually occur earlier in time. This framework can help differentiate between narrative levels. For example, "The Commander Hung, in Heedlessness, Frees the Spirits"[5] in *The Water Margin* takes place before the main narrative begins, indicating it cannot belong to a higher narrative level. Similarly, Baoyu's journey to the "Land of Illusion" is not a tale recounted to others after experiencing it, so it does not qualify as a sub-narrative. Narrative stratification can thus be likened to building a tower, with each successive level representing a later moment within the narrative timeline.

Recorded narratives are, by nature, retrospective, with the narrator omniscient by definition, as they recount events that have already concluded. Walter Benjamin aptly observes: "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can relate. It is death that has lent him his authority." In this sense, "death" signifies the story's "end", from which the narrator derives their all-encompassing perspective. When stratified narratives employ this retrospective structure, they often take the form of "a retrospective within a retrospective". For example, a report on the excavation of Cao Cao's tomb might include an expert opinion suggesting that new findings shed light on Cao Cao's burial customs. Such a report, by presenting recent discoveries, also sheds light on a more distant historical past. Similarly, a history of the late Qing Dynasty might use a newly discovered account from the early Republic era, where someone recalls that general Yuan Shikai, having been approached by the reformist Tan Sitong, subsequently informed the Manchu military leader Ronglu, leading to Tan Sitong's arrest. This stratified structure moves from primary narrative to sub-narrative, embodying "a retrospective within a retrospective" or "the past within the past". This approach of discerning narrative stratification is exclusively applicable to recorded narratives.

The naming of narrative levels is inherently relative. In a work with three narrative levels, designating the middle level as the main narrative positions the level

[5] Shi Nai'an, *Shui Hu Chuan* or *All Men Are Brothers* or *Water Margin*, trans., Pearl S. Buck, New York, George Macy Companies, 1948, p. 3.

above as the supra-narrative and the level below as the sub-narrative. Alternatively, if the higher level is regarded as the main narrative, the two lower levels are correspondingly labeled the sub-narrative and sub-sub-narrative. Generally, narratives do not extend beyond three levels; surpassing this threshold usually signals a deliberate attempt to enhance structural complexity.

In certain cases, determining the primary narrative layer can be particularly complex. For example, in Lu Xun's "The New Year's Sacrifice", there are three distinct narrative levels: at the first level, the narrator recounts their own experience in Luzhen, describing an encounter with Xianglin's wife as a beggar and eventually learning of her death. The second level shifts to the narrator's recollections of events in Xianglin's wife's life. Finally, embedded within these recollections at the third level, Mrs. Wei recounts the story of Xianglin's wife to Aunt Si on three separate occasions, and Xianglin's wife herself shares the account of her son's death.

The first narrative level occupies approximately two-fifths of the story. If this level is designated as the main narrative, then the second level would be the sub-narrative, and the third level would be the sub-sub-narrative. However, a closer examination of the content reveals that the second level, which consists of "my" recollections, offers a more coherent and consistent account of Xianglin's wife's life. This allows for an alternative division, in which the second level serves as the main narrative, the first level functions as the supra-narrative, and the third level as the sub-narrative. Therefore, in the case of "The New Year's Sacrifice", both approaches to defining narrative stratification are equally valid.

For another example, although *The Arabian Nights* adheres to the traditional "envelope" structure that was prevalent in ancient Arabian storytelling, where the primary focus is on the stories narrated by Scheherazade rather than on her own story, Scheherazade's own narrative (the "transformation" of power through storytelling) resonates strongly with modern thought so that it is entirely justifiable for contemporary readers to regard it as the main narrative. In this context, however, Richardson's classification of narrative stratification as first-degree narrative, second-degree narrative, and so on, offers a simplified approach to the issue.[6]

15.2 The Stratification of Performative Narratives

In performative narratives, the narrator functions as a "narrative frame", one that does not manifest as a character within the story. When a person-narrator begins their tale, they construct an embedded, self-contained narrative world. Upon the conclusion of this embedded narrative, the storytelling returns to the higher narrative level. For instance, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the Reverend Void can only

[6] Brian Richardson, ed., *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time Plot, Closure, and Frames*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002, p. 329.

proceed to find Jia Yucun after the Stone's narrative has come to an end.[7] This separation in performative narratives can be signaled in various ways, marking both the beginning and the conclusion of the narrative frame. Examples include the curtain call in a theatrical performance, the whistle of a referee in a sports event, the start and end of a game, or the opening and closing credits of a film. Such transitions, often referred to as "frame-shifting", generate a sub-narrative that is nested within the primary narrative. Hofstadter identifies the initial boundary of the narrative frame as the "push in" and the final boundary as the "pop out".[8] Together, these boundaries create a distinct narrative level that contains a world enacted or brought to life through performance.

The nature of time varies considerably across different media. In performative narratives, including "recorded performative narratives" such as films, there is no temporal distinction between narrative levels. Structurally, the outermost level, which "encloses" others, is regarded as the higher narrative level because it provides the contextual framework for the narrative acts occurring at the lower levels and establishes the "frame narrator". In film, narrative progression is predominantly linear (except in techniques such as split-screen), which necessitates the introduction of an additional narrative frame. For example, in the film *Vanilla Sky* (2001), the story opens with the protagonist driving through the streets of New York, which appears eerily deserted. He then awakens to discover it was all a dream. In contemporary narratives, it is common for only the "closing" boundary of the frame to be visible, while the initial boundary is often absent.

For another example, in the film *A Beautiful Mind* (1998), which portrays the life of the brilliant mathematician John Nash, Nash is shown to have three close companions: his roommate Charles, Charles's young niece Marcee, and a government agent named Parcher. As the narrative progresses, Nash is diagnosed with severe schizophrenia, and it becomes clear that these companions are purely figments of his imagination. The film discloses that each of these hallucinations represents different aspects of his psyche. Consequently, the segments of the film leading up to this revelation are presented as Nash's subjective perspective, constituting a sub-narrative entirely shaped by his delusions.

In narrative structures, two primary forms of stratification emerge: one where all narrative levels are presented in the same medium, another where different levels are conveyed through different media. The shift in narrators, whether taking the form of a person or a frame, across these levels typically occurs through one of the following common methods. In performative narratives, a sub-narrative is frequently created by introducing a separate framework within a higher narrative level. This can be described as a "play within a play", which may include examples such as a stage play within another stage play, a film within a stage play, or a stage play embedded within a film.

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[7] Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Volume 1), trans., Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, Chap. 1, pp. 1–18.

[8] Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, New York: Basic Books, 1979, p. 128.

In Stan Lai's stage play *The Peach Blossom Land* (1986), the narrative transitions into a play within the play when the director-character calls out, "Adjust the lights", causing the theater lights to flicker. The concept of embedding a stage play within a film can trace its formal origins to Shakespearean drama, particularly *Hamlet*, where a play is staged within the larger narrative framework. In contemporary cinema, embedded plays often appear within films, as seen in *The Banquet* (2006). These sub-narratives are typically stylized, employing forms such as puppet shows, animation, cabarets, or masques, which make the stratified structure of the narrative more distinct. A notable example is Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Double Vie de Véronique* (1991), which uses a puppet theater as a sub-narrative. In this sub-narrative, a dancer breaks her leg, paralleling the struggles of Véronique, the film's protagonist, who suffers from a congenital heart condition. Similar techniques appear in other films, where sub-narratives are woven into the primary storyline through varied performance styles. For instance, Huang Jun's *The Twins* (2011) integrates animation as a sub-narrative, while Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) incorporates Beijing opera. In *Perhaps Love* (2005), directed by Peter Chan, a stage play functions as a sub-narrative, while Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) uses a dance drama to explore its themes. In contrast, narratives featuring films embedded within stage plays are much rarer, typically appearing in contemporary experimental theater. One example is Meng Jinghui's multimedia musical *Amber* (2005), where a "documentary" about the lead actress is shown during the sixth scene. This sub-narrative provides background on the character's romantic history, seamlessly blending film with live theatrical performance to create a multi-leveled narrative structure.

Recreational games, sports competitions, and video games are generally not considered "plays", yet they are often integrated into film and television narratives. This integration might be aptly termed "games within films". Incorporating games as sub-narratives within films has become a widely employed storytelling technique. For example, in Lam Tze Chung's *I'll Call You* (2006), games function as a sub-narrative to represent the progression of a dating experience. Similar cases can be observed in the Polish film *The Killing Room* (2009) and the Dutch film *Ben X* (2007). In the Japanese anime *Hunter* × *Hunter* (1999), the protagonist Gon embarks on a journey to find his father, who has been missing for years. The only lead Gon has in locating his father is a video game his father developed. Along with his companions, Gon enters the game as a player, navigating its virtual world by battling monsters, completing missions, earning points, and progressing through various levels. Within the game's framework, some high-level players find the game world more desirable and comfortable than the "real" world, opting to remain in the game permanently. The conclusion of the game presents a critical intersection between the virtual world and reality, but only the most skilled players can reach this point. These elite players are rewarded with the opportunity to bring the rare and valuable treasures they earn within the game back into the "real" world, underscoring the intricate relationship between the game's internal narrative and its connection to external reality.

On the other hand, the concept of "films within games"—in which films serve as sub-narratives—is considerably more prevalent. Almost all video games feature interlude animations or cinematic sequences that play a pivotal role in the overall narrative structure. A clear example of this can be found in the fighting game *Infinity Blade* (2010), where the interlude animations, which provide essential narrative context, take precedence as the main narrative, while the player's actions—engaging in battles with samurai and monsters across various levels—constitute the sub-narrative. The single-player game *The Sims* (2000) allows players to control a character and guide them through various life tasks—attending school, working, falling in love, getting married, having children, and so on. Characters can also purchase houses, furniture, and televisions. Notably, the in-game televisions can actually play a wide range of programs, with various categories to choose from, including movies, TV dramas, variety shows, or any video selected by the player. Watching television is also one of the game's required activities, as each character must achieve a certain "entertainment score" over the course of their simulated life.

Role-playing games invariably incorporate "interlude animations" or "cutscenes" to introduce the plot, providing context for the narrative in which the player assumes the role of a character. A prominent example of this can be found in *Call of Duty 2* (2005), a game centered on World War II. At the beginning of each mission, the game presents a documentary-style introduction, featuring real historical footage from the brutal Soviet-German conflict. These poignant, historically accurate scenes serve not only to set the historical backdrop but also to immerse the player in the intensity and gravity of the war, thereby enhancing the overall narrative experience before the player takes on the role of a participant in the unfolding events.

As observed, all instances of "plays within plays" and their variations introduce a new narrative frame within the primary play, creating a clear separation between the main narrative and the sub-narrative. Identifying this new narrative frame can, however, pose challenges when the story remains within the same medium. For example, if one color film is stratified to embed another color film, it becomes necessary to establish a distinct separation between the two for clarity. In contrast, cross-media stratification—such as embedding an animated film within a live-action movie—presents less of a challenge in this regard, as the medium shift is immediately apparent and visually distinct. In cases where changing the medium is not possible, filmmakers often rely on stylistic variations to indicate the transition between narrative levels. A common technique in this regard is the use of monochrome or blurred shots to signify a flashback, effectively marking a temporal shift from the present narrative. This approach is frequently employed in cinema to clearly delineate different narrative levels or time frames, ensuring a smooth and comprehensible transition for the audience.

Identifying the stratification of mental narratives is a particularly complex task, making the analysis of "dreams within dreams" especially challenging. While the entire plot of *Inception* is constructed around layered dreamscapes, dreams and hallucinations remain beyond the control of the recipient, who remains entirely covert. Although such stratification may indeed exist, its mechanisms are often obscure and difficult to decipher. Despite these challenges, dreams and daydreams frequently

appear in performative narratives, often taking the form of "dreams within plays". A striking example occurs in the film *Late Autumn* (2010), directed by Kim Tae-yong. In this film, the heroine, portrayed by Tang Wei, witnesses a man and a woman arguing in a park. Within her hallucination, this quarreling pair transform into ballet dancers. This instance demonstrates that "dreams within plays" function fundamentally as a variation of the "plays within plays" structure. In such cases, the dreamer assumes the role of the recipient rather than the narrator, with the transition into the dream or daydream commonly marked by stylistic techniques, such as blurred or defocused shots.

The phenomenon of cross-genre stratification, particularly the integration of "texts within plays", is a subject of great interest to me. This approach weaves textual narratives into performative ones, creating a narrative stratification. Due to the fundamentally distinct temporal characteristics of these two media, textual narratives often serve as devices to introduce flashbacks or elaborate on background information within the performative framework. Games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), *Baldur's Gate* (1998), and *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) illustrate this technique by incorporating textual sub-narratives. Within these games, players encounter items resembling "books" that are fully readable, offering rich background details about the game's universe and lore. A comparable example can be found in the game *Swords of Legends* (*Gujian Qitan*,《古剑奇谭》, 2010), where the game interface includes a compendium system. One of its notable features, titled *Extensive Records of Mysteries* (*Dongming Guangji*,《洞冥广记》), consists of scrolls that progressively unlock as players advance through the game. These scrolls provide detailed entries on the settings, missions, and cultural context, seamlessly embedding textual elements within the broader narrative framework.

15.3 The Time Problem of the Stratification in Performative Narratives

In written media, factual narratives are fundamentally retrospective, with events at higher narrative levels unfolding later in the temporal hierarchy. This structure implies that sub-narratives in written texts typically operate as flashbacks. However, in the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Baoyu's journey to the "Land of Dreams" is not depicted as a flashback. Instead, this dream sequence is integrated into the main narrative and does not function as a distinct sub-narrative. The television adaptation of the novel, however, employs a notably different narrative technique. In this version, Jia Baoyu's act of falling asleep establishes the framing device for the dream narrative. The transition into his dream world is visually marked by elements such as drifting clouds and mist, which serve to distinguish the dream sequence—the sub-narrative—from the main narrative. Upon the conclusion of the dream, similar visual cues signal the transition back to reality, showing Jia Baoyu awakening—a process often described as "popping out" of the dream. In the television

adaptation, both the main narrative and the dream sequence are performative narratives, unfolding simultaneously rather than retrospectively. As a result, the dream narrative exists as a synchronous sub-narrative embedded within the main narrative structure. Jia Baoyu's journey to the "Land of Dreams", therefore, operates not as a temporal flashback but as a concurrently unfolding narrative level within the overarching performative framework.

The term "parallel narrative" in recorded narratives generally refers to the presence of multiple parallel threads; however, the overall narrative structure remains linear. Conversely, the inherent simultaneity of performative narratives facilitates the realization of genuinely parallel storytelling. This can be achieved by dividing a screen or stage into separate sections or by segmenting a film's narrative into distinct auditory and visual elements. The use of split screens, in particular, has become a well-established and frequently employed technique in cinematic storytelling.

Theater stages are also capable of employing the "split stage" technique. For instance, Stan Lai's *The Idyllic Life* (1986) divides the stage into four sections arranged in a two-by-two grid, with each section representing a separate household. In contrast, textual and verbal narratives are fundamentally linear, meaning they cannot present events simultaneously. Instead, they must unfold sequentially, a method often described as "pausing one thread to explore another". While novels can utilize an omniscient narrative point of view—such as stating, "That night, both the French and Russian forces were intensely preparing for battle"—this is not an example of a split narrative. Instead, it merges two narrative threads into a single cohesive account.

Due to the multimedia nature of performative narratives, films can employ a technique known as sound-on-image overlap. It refers to a technique in film and media where the sound from the next shot begins before the current visual shot has finished. This overlap helps to create a smoother transition between scenes and can enhance the pacing of the narrative. It is often used to maintain continuity and tension, bridging the visual shift with auditory cues, which contributes to the construction of a truly dual narrative. For instance, in Peter Chan's *Swordsmen* (2011), a police officer seeks to rescue the protagonist from a gang's encirclement by convincing him to take a drug that will mimic death. While the officer is still explaining his plan, the camera has already shifted to the next sequence: the protagonist, assumed to be dead, is transported and miraculously revived on the journey. At this point, the officer's explanation transitions from diegetic sound to voice-over. Similarly, in the television series *Orphan Black* (2013), a policewoman talks to herself while reviewing a case file, contemplating how she will defend herself at an upcoming meeting. The camera continuously alternates between scenes of her reading the file and speaking at the meeting. Here, the sequence of her "reading the case file" is narrated through voice-over, while her "defending herself at the meeting" is conveyed through diegetic sound. Although these two sub-narratives occur at different moments in time, they are seamlessly interwoven within the alternating scenes. The ability of performative narratives to integrate two distinct narrative threads into a unified whole is a direct result of their inherent simultaneity: both the main narrative and the sub-narratives unfold concurrently.

Christopher Nolan's *Inception* offers one of the most striking examples of stratified performative narratives. The film's story operates across seven levels of dreams within dreams. Unlike actual hallucinations or dreams, the dreamscapes in the film are constructed through cinematic imagery, framing them as performative narratives. This performative nature enables all seven levels to be depicted simultaneously, a hallmark of performative narration that facilitates the concurrent representation of multiple narrative levels. However, while performative narratives usually progress in a linear fashion, *Inception* employs cross-cutting techniques to depict the "present moment" across multiple levels simultaneously.

15.4 The Embedding

Narrative stratification presents a striking paradox: while readers and audiences often find it intuitive and easy to "naturalize", its analysis within narratology remains notably intricate and frequently elusive. The renowned Czech sinologist Jaroslav Průšek criticized *The Travels of Lao Can* (1903–1907) for employing an excessively intricate structure of nested quotations.[9] Specifically, he highlighted two prominent chapters in the novel's second volume, where the nun Yiyun recounts her romantic experiences in an elaborate first-person narrative.[10] In these chapters, Yiyun tells her story to Mrs. De, recounting how her lover, Ren San, relayed a discussion with his mother about the prospect of marrying Yiyun. In this narrative framework, Yiyun assumes the role of the sub-narrator, while Ren San occupies the position of the sub-sub-narrator. Both narrative levels are presented through direct speech. The complexity deepens as Ren San recounts his mother's words using yet another direct quotation, creating a triple-embedded structure: the primary narrator quotes Yiyun, who quotes Ren San, who in turn quotes his mother. This intricate stratification poses significant challenges to preserving the immediacy and vividness typically associated with direct quotation. This complexity is particularly apparent when Yiyun mimics Ren San reproducing his mother's tone: """Good child! You are a clever child. Reflect carefully on your mother's words – are they not correct?""" The three levels of quotation marks visually underscore the narrative stratification, but they also disrupt the dialogue's natural rhythm. Moreover, this structure subtly compromises Yiyun's portrayal as a composed and intelligent figure.

In stark contrast with Průšek's critique, the two chapters in question from *The Travels of Lao Can* have been widely celebrated by readers and critics alike. Their literary significance was highlighted in 1930 when the novel's second volume was published and Lin Yutang translated these two chapters into English. Notably, the narrative technique of embedded direct quotations is not exclusive to Chinese

[9] Jaroslav Prusek, *The Lyric and the Epic: Studies in Modern Chinese Literature*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 46.

[10] Liu E, *The Travels of Lao Can*, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2000, pp. 237–253.

literature; it is also a prominent feature in Western novels, especially those of the eighteenth century or works influenced by that period. A notable example can be found in the nineteenth century in *Wuthering Heights*, where the first-person narrator, Lockwood, records Nelly's recounting of events involving Isabella in his diary. In one instance, from Chapter Eight, Nelly reads aloud a lengthy letter from Isabella that itself contains several direct quotations: "'This is Edgar's legal nephew', I reflected – 'mine in a manner; I must shake hands, and – yes – I must kiss him. It is right to establish a good understanding at the beginning'".[11] While this stratified narrative structure may not initially seem unnatural, its complexity becomes evident when the levels are disentangled: Lockwood is quoting Nelly, who is quoting Isabella, who in turn is quoting another character. At this point, the tone risks feeling overly elaborate or artificial. Jaroslav Průšek's critique of *The Travels of Lao Can* for its multi-leveled narrative construction may have overlooked the fact that such intricate structures are by no means unique to Chinese fiction.

Hofstadter suggests that readers perceive narrative stratifications as natural because they can momentarily forget that they are navigating through multiple levels of storytelling. Once immersed in the story world, readers probably lose awareness of which narrative level they are engaging with. As he explains: "It is not too uncommon to go down three levels in real news reports, and surprisingly enough, we scarcely have any awareness of the suspension. It is all kept track of quite easily by our subconscious mind. Probably the reason it is so easy is that each level is extremely different in flavor from each other level. If they were all similar, we would get confused in no time flat".[12] This observation is particularly relevant to *The Travels of Lao Can*, where readers may easily lose sight of the fact that certain passages represent the third-level quotations. McHale offers a valuable view, positing that the complexity found in postmodern fiction arises from the deliberate mixing of narrative levels. He states, "Postmodernist texts, in other words, tend to encourage *trompe-l'œil*, deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world".[13]

When narrative stratification shows a high degree of similarity between its various levels, it is often termed "embedded narrative". Its cultural prototype is found in the heraldic designs of European noble families. If one coat of arms features another design with a similar composition embedded within it, this is referred to as "recursion". Theoretically, narrative stratification could extend infinitely. However, in practice, as the number of levels increases, they tend to become increasingly redundant and lack meaningful significance, ultimately evolving into a form of "infinite recursion"—a textual experiment that loses its narrative purpose. For instance, when two mirrors are perfectly parallel to each other, the resulting nested reflections form a type of infinite recursion.

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[11] Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, New York and London: W· W· Norton & Company, 2003, p. 107.

[12] Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, New York: Basic Books, 1979, p. 128.

[13] Brian McHale, *Postmodernistic Fiction*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 115.

The film *The Words* (2012) opens with a professor delivering a lecture on a book titled *The Words*, in which he narrates the story of the novel. The novel's narrator is a writer who becomes famous for this very work. However, the writer discovers the novel in an old briefcase and publishes it as his own. The plot takes a turn when an elderly man—who turns out to be the original author—appears. This man then assumes the role of the narrator and retells the entire story, which is also titled *The Words*. The film unfolds in three distinct narrative levels, which can either be viewed as occurring independently or simultaneously. In the film *The Words*, the professor lectures on *The Words*, the writer plagiarizes *The Words*, and the elderly man is the true author of *The Words*. This creates a multi-leveled recursive structure, with the text remaining identical across all levels.

15.5 Transgression: Trespass of Stratification

Some narratologists refer to the phenomenon of transgression as a "tangled hierarchy", while Genette refers to it as "metalepsis", an undeniably sophisticated choice of terminology. Genette defines metalepsis as a "deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding".[14] However, introducing the discussion with rhetorical terminology risks further complicating an already intricate issue. This section proposes an alternative term, "trespass of stratification", for the concept of transgression. Although somewhat lengthy, this term prioritizes clarity of meaning. The analysis proceeds in two stages. The first expands the discussion beyond fiction to encompass all narrative genres, with a particular focus on visual and cinematic media, in order to investigate whether a more universal and comprehensible interpretation is possible. The second stage breaks the issue down into a series of logical steps, each building on the previous, to facilitate a more structured and systematic exploration.

Transgression disrupts the boundaries of the narrative world, undermining its semantic independence. When these boundaries are broken, the mechanisms that construct and govern the narrative world become exposed. A narrative world can successfully "map" onto the experiential world only when its boundaries remain intact and clearly delineated.

Fundamentally, transgression entails the simultaneous collapse of spatial and temporal boundaries within the narrative framework. Consequently, such boundary violations are rarely observed in non-fictional recorded narratives, such as historical accounts. For example, if a historical figure were alive and dissatisfied with how they were depicted by a historian, their criticism would result in the creation of a separate text rather than a trespass of stratification within the original narrative. Fictional works, however, allow for such transgressions. In *A Dream of Red Mansions,* for instance, Jia Yucun directly addressing Reverend Void exemplifies a

[14] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 88.

boundary-breaking interaction—an event that would be inconceivable within the constraints of historical writing.

All narratives, whether factual or fictional, are inherently stratified, though this stratification does not always lead to transgression. The process of narration inherently requires a higher-level narrative act to generate the narrative at a subordinate level, reflecting the essential stratified structure of all narrative forms. In this sense, stratification is integral to the very nature of narrative. However, in most narratives, the boundaries between levels remain intact and undisturbed. As Nelles points out, fictional narratives, unlike their factual counterparts, possess an intrinsic potential to disrupt these boundaries.[15] While fictional narratives are capable of stratification trespass, such transgressions are neither required nor inevitable.

The narrative stratification in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is inherently intricate, but what elevates its complexity further is the presence of transgression. "The Buddhist of Infinite Space and the Taoist of Boundless Time",[16] situated at the supra-narrative level, frequently intrude upon the main narrative, engaging in acts of stratification trespass no fewer than seven or eight times. Positioned at a higher narrative level, these figures appear to possess an innate authority to guide and correct the actions of characters within the main narrative. Even more perplexing, however, is the phenomenon of "ascending intrusion", in which elements from the lower narrative level ascend into the higher levels. For example, while Zhen Shiyin and Jia Yucun are portrayed as possessing exceptional "insight" compared to ordinary characters, their stories remain confined to the main narrative, as relayed by the Brother Stone to the Reverend Void. In essence, their narratives are encapsulated within the account inscribed upon the stone. Yet, a remarkable transgression occurs at the novel's conclusion. The Reverend Void seeks guidance from Jia Yucun on how to organize the manuscripts he has copied. In an unexpected turn, Jia Yucun advises him to consult "Mr. Cao Xueqin", the name of the real author of the novel. This event represents an ascending intrusion, where a character from the main narrative level transcends into the supra-narrative level. A possible explanation for this narrative anomaly is that, by the novel's end, Jia Yucun is approaching a state of "enlightenment". This newfound state may grant him the capacity to transcend the confines of the narrated world, enabling him to interact with a higher narrative level.

The transgression within the recorded narrative introduces a perplexing temporal inconsistency. When the Reverend Void transcribed the main narrative of *A Dream of Red Mansions* from Brother Stone, it was already long after Brother Stone had lived out his life as Jia Baoyu in the Grand View Garden. By this point, the events of the story had extended far beyond Jia Yucun's career as an official and his interactions with the Jia family, encompassing what is described as "several lifetimes". This raises a fundamental question: how can Jia Yucun still be alive—albeit residing on the fringes of the mortal world—despite such a significant temporal gap? The

[15] William Nelles, *Framework: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative*, 1997, New York: Lang, p. 152.

[16] Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Volume 1), trans., Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, p. 3.

puzzle deepens further, as this interaction occurs after Jia Baoyu himself has reverted to his original form as a stone beneath the Green Ridge Peak. How is it possible that Jia Yucun advises the Reverend Void on finding Cao Xueqin to edit the manuscript? Such a temporal anomaly challenges the coherence of the narrative's structure and disrupts the integrity of its internal logic.

This seemingly impossible temporal discrepancy underscores the inherent temporal paradox often found in recorded narratives. When characters from a higher narrative level descend into a lower one, temporal confusion is usually minimal, as such interventions are retrospective in nature, offering commentary on prior events. Conversely, when characters from a lower narrative level ascend into a higher one, the paradox becomes much harder to resolve, as this movement implies a leap into the future. This phenomenon epitomizes the nature of transgression, which disrupts both the spatial and temporal boundaries of the narrative world. In novels, such transgressions appear relatively straightforward to achieve. However, closer scrutiny reveals that they frequently lead to unresolved temporal paradoxes, exposing the narrative's internal inconsistencies. In contrast, historical and journalistic narratives, which operate within stricter temporal frameworks, may employ narrative stratification but rarely permit transgressions across narrative levels. This is due to the rigid temporal coherence required in these genres, which would be undermined by such boundary violations. Therefore, while narrative stratification is a universal feature across all forms of storytelling, transgression is a distinct phenomenon that remains exclusive to fictional narratives.

Another frequently discussed narrative is Julio Cortázar's short story "The Continuity of Parks" (1964). In this story a sudden plot twist calls into question the nature of reality, when the world of the man in the study is invaded by the characters in the novel he is reading. A temporal discrepancy arises here: since the conspiracy of "killing the reader" has already been established in the narrative, and the plot describes the man with a knife walking through the park, how much time has elapsed during his journey? The story opens by mentioning that the reader has been engaged in the book for several days, which suggests that the assassin, too, has been walking for that same extended period.

In Fei Ming's *The Biography of Mr. Mo Xuyou* (1932), there are several instances of "ascending invasion", skillfully handled to avoid any obvious temporal discrepancies:

> "Are you not the old woman I just scolded? If you do not blame yourself, how can you blame me? Are you here for revenge? How do you know I am Mr. Mo Xuyou? This must be the work of some writer, who, knowing that our two countries are at war, first made sure to provide my name".[17]

In this scene, the characters, the old woman and Mr. Mo Xuyou engage in a direct confrontation, which, according to Mr. Mo Xuyou, is instigated by the narrator (the writer) who provokes the conflict. This situation exemplifies a modified form of

[17] Fei Ming, *The Biography of Mr. Mo Xuyou*, Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2003, p. 21.

narrative transgression. In recorded narratives, a temporal paradox often arises: when a character from a higher narrative level intrudes into a lower one, time must be shifted backward; conversely, when a character from a lower level intrudes into a higher one, they must advance into the future. Despite this, readers may not always recognize the temporal inconsistency at play.

Narrative transgression is not a stylistically "neutral" technique; rather, it tends to be fantastical, bizarre, and often satirical in nature. Works that aim for "realistic" effects or adhere to the strict formalities of "classical" traditions are not suited to incorporating such trespass of stratification.

15.6 Narrative Paradox and Self-Referential Paradox

A fundamental and universal paradox in narrative lies in the interplay between the narrator (or the narrative frame) and the narrative text. The narrator is capable of generating a narrative text that can describe virtually anything, even when constrained by the inherent limitations of the medium (for example, the restricted ability of sculpture to tell elaborate stories). Within the bounds of the medium's representational capacity, the narrative text itself faces no content restrictions. Yet, the narrative text cannot explain the process of its own creation. Narration, by its very nature, establishes the framework for the content being narrated, and this framework must exist outside the scope of the narrative content. To illustrate, a painting cannot depict the frame that encloses it. While it may render an image of a frame within the composition, that depicted frame can never encompass the painting as a whole. Similarly, in film, if the narrative employs a first-person voiceover using "I", this "I" cannot simultaneously appear in the visual frame—except as a character within the story. In such a case, the "I" ceases to function as the overarching narrator and becomes part of the narrative itself.

In performative narratives, it is not a "narrative time discrepancy" but a "narrative frame discrepancy" that hinders the sub-narrative from describing the act of narration itself. Take, for instance, a live television broadcast where a reporter on-site remarks, "It's a beautiful day, and we're all looking forward to a smooth air show." In this context, the reporter functions as a character situated within the framework of a television production, and their statement represents a sub-narrative. The live camera crew filming the scene cannot simultaneously depict their own activity. If the camera crew and their operations appear on screen, it becomes evident that a secondary camera crew is documenting them, thereby introducing an additional narrative level.

The notion of "self-narration" introduces a particularly challenging paradox. Consider a diarist who writes, "I am currently writing these lines in a cheerful mood", or a field recorder might declare, "I am about to begin recording". At first glance, these appear to be complete narrative acts. Yet, neither the diary reader (even if the reader is the diarist themselves) nor the person listening to the recording has any access to the process by which the act of narration was created. The diary reader, for instance, cannot observe the precise moment when the words were written, just

as the listener cannot hear the exact instant the recording device was activated. Although one might encounter a description of how the textual framework was constructed, such an explanation inevitably requires a secondary narrative to account for the primary act. A useful analogy is the birth of a child: while the child's first cry may serve as a narrative act, the child cannot articulate how that cry came into existence. Only the mother, whose perspective exists outside the child's immediate experience, is capable of providing such an explanation.

Russell proposes one of the most well-known set-theory paradox. It arises from the hypothetical consideration of a set that includes all sets which are not members of themselves. The core question it poses is: Is this set a member of itself? Regardless of the answer, the outcome leads to a contradiction. If the set is a member of itself, it violates its defining condition, which excludes all sets that are members of themselves. Conversely, if the set is not a member of itself, it satisfies the condition and therefore must include itself, creating an irreconcilable paradox. To illustrate this paradox, Russell devised the famous "barber's paradox". Imagine a barber who declares, "I shave all men in town who do not shave themselves, and only those men." This statement results in a logical contradiction. If the barber does not shave himself, he falls into the category of men who do not shave themselves, and by his own rule, he must shave himself. However, if the barber does shave himself, he no longer qualifies as someone who does not shave themselves, meaning he should not shave himself.

The resolution to this paradox lies in recognizing that the barber, as the rule-maker, has the autonomy to either shave himself or refrain from doing so, as the authority to establish rules is independent of their application. In other words, the barber, who defines the set, cannot logically belong to it. A comparable situation can be found in the case of a notice on a wall stating, "Posting notices on this wall is prohibited". Although it seems to contradict its own rule, the notice remains valid because it operates outside the jurisdiction of the prohibition it imposes. Similarly, the narrator, as the creator of the narrative, is inherently excluded from its content. The narrator cannot use the narrative to describe the act of narration itself, as this would place them within a framework that they, as the originator, cannot inhabit.

This set-theory paradox emerges solely in instances of self-reference, that is, when the narrator addresses the act of narration itself. The paradox is an inevitable consequence of any statement that refers to itself. For instance, expressions such as "What I said is not true", or more simply, "I am lying", give rise to a paradox, as any response inevitably leads to a contradiction. A narrative produced by a specific act of narration cannot include a description of the act itself; instead, it requires another act of narration (or an alternative narrative persona or frame) to describe the narration process.

15.7 Cyclical Transgression

The extension of this self-referential paradox leads to what Douglas Hofstadter describes as a "strange loop". The cyclical nature of the phenomenal world has long been recognized by humanity, with one of its most iconic representations being the

Ouroboros—an ancient artistic motif portraying a serpent devouring its own tail. This symbol encapsulates the idea that every end inevitably leads back to a beginning, just as every beginning inherently contains its end. Between the first and fourth centuries AD, the *Ouroboros* was widely embraced by philosophical and mystical traditions such as Gnosticism and Hermeticism, serving as a visual metaphor for the perpetual recurrence of the cosmos. The simplicity and mystery of this image have allowed it to endure across centuries, continuing to inspire modern design. Its profound symbolic resonance is evident in its use by contemporary designers, including those specializing in jewelry and watch design.

The *Ouroboros* represents movement confined to a single level, whereas a true strange loop involves transitions between distinct levels, either in an ascending or descending direction. Each level is defined by its boundaries, and moving beyond these boundaries leads to another level. When this crossing results in a return to the original level, it forms what can be described as an "infinite cycle across levels". This idea is most notably illustrated in the Chinese *Yin-Yang Taiji* diagram, which differs fundamentally from the concept of the *Ouroboros*. While the *Ouroboros* depicts a continuous, self-contained motion within a single plane, the strange loop represented by the *Taiji* diagram embodies a dynamic interaction and reciprocal movement between two separate levels, emphasizing their interconnectedness and perpetual exchange.

The *Taiji* diagram has its numerous variations, all characterized by the pairing and intertwining of dual elements such as two dragons, two snakes, two fish, or two phoenixes, each created through the intersection of opposing symbols. This motif likely stems from the reproductive worship of early societies, symbolizing dualities like male and female, sun and moon, and other fundamental phenomena across human, biological, and natural domains. Over time, these oppositional yet complementary forces evolved into the symbolic representation of *Yin* and *Yang*. The black-and-white cyclical motion of the *Taiji* diagram does not merely depict repetition but encapsulates a process of continuous advancement that transcends and integrates multiple levels. Unlike linear or single-layered cycles, the *Taiji* diagram portrays a perpetual dynamic between opposites, embodying both unity and progression. This process entails a transition from one level, identified as level A, to a higher or contrasting level, level B, followed by a return to level A, completing a loop of reciprocal elevation and integration.

The defining feature of a strange loop is "transgression and cycling", where the ultimate result is a return to the initial starting point. In narratological terms, this concept is described as "cyclical transgression". To clarify, we can draw a parallel with the set paradox, particularly the self-referential paradox of "what I say is not true". The same instance can also be found in the so-called "postcard paradox", in which one side of the postcard states, "The statement on the back of this postcard is true", while the reverse side reads, "The statement on the back of this postcard is false". These two statements are both true and false simultaneously. The ensuing process of back-and-forth verification inevitably leads us back to the starting point. However, because the narrative plot is defined by a negative dynamism (as discussed in Chap. 4 of Part Three of this book), it is impossible to remain in the same

position. The text's intrinsic negating force propels us forward, pushing us along the cyclical transgression once again.

Narrative stratification occurs when one level of narration introduces an act of narrating that subsequently serves as the frame for the next level. While characters or plotlines may cross these boundaries between levels, the distinctions between them remain clearly defined. However, a strange loop, or what can be described as cyclical transgression, arises when the next level of narration becomes involved in defining the narrative act of the preceding level. In such instances, the emerging narrative not only comes into existence but also loops back to its origin, thereby recreating itself in the process.

Thus far, no Western scholar has addressed the issue of cyclical transgression in narratives. Even recent narratological studies that explore various impossibilities in fiction and highlight numerous examples of "diegetic violations" have not engaged with this specific problem.[18] Therefore, I will devote more attention to it in this discussion. When a narrative explains its own origin and provides its own narrator, it results in a logical paradox. This is not merely an inconsistency in logic but also problematic from a mythological perspective, as it contradicts the fundamental principle that the Creator cannot create himself.

An early instance of cyclical transgression, as I see it, can be identified in the early nineteenth-century Chinese novel *Flowers in the Mirror* (1815). In the twenty-third chapter, Lin Zhiyang confidently claims to Shu Shiguo that he has read not only Laozi and Zhuangzi but also a book titled Shaozi. He describes it as "a work published during our holy dynasty, authored by a descendant of Laozi".[19] Lin Zhiyang then proceeds to elaborate on the contents of Shaozi, which align precisely with the narrative of *Flowers in the Mirror*. In the novel's final chapter, the text discloses that its author is "a descendant of Laozi", identifying *Flowers in the Mirror* as the very Shaozi Lin Zhiyang purports to have read. This self-referential structure generates a paradox within the narrative: the book that Lin Zhiyang reads is simultaneously the book that narrates his act of reading it.

This example of cyclical transgression is somewhat ambiguous and could be seen as a character's playful jest. However, the novel presents another example of cyclical transgression that is far more explicit and significant. In the opening chapter of *Flowers in the Mirror*, during the Queen Mother of the West's birthday celebration, the Fairy of a Hundred Plants mentions a jade tablet located in Lesser Penglai, inscribed with celestial writings. Intrigued, the Fairy of a Hundred Flowers expresses her desire to see it. The Fairy of a Hundred Plants explains that the tablet "contains immortal secrets and is guarded by celestial beings. It will remain hidden until the destined time arrives, hundreds of years in the future".[20] In the forty-eighth chapter, Tang Xiaoshan arrives at Lesser Penglai and discovers the jade tablet. To her

[18] William L. Ashline, "The Problem of Impossible Fiction," *Style*, no. 2, 1995, pp. 215–234.

[19] Li Ruzhen, *Flowers in the Mirror*, Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2013, p. 110.

[20] Li Ruzhen, *Flowers in the Mirror*, Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2013, p. 2.

amazement, the inscriptions recount "the future lives of the fairy sisters".[21] Tang transcribes the text onto banana leaves. Back on her boat, her pet white ape examines the transcription. In a lighthearted moment, Tang humorously entrusts the ape with the responsibility of "delivering the tablet to the destined individual". By the novel's conclusion, the immortal ape completes its task, ultimately delivering the tablet to a descendant of Laozi during an era of peace, who uses its contents as the basis for composing the one hundred chapters of the whole novel *Flowers in the Mirror*.[22]

In *Flowers in the Mirror*, a narrative structure emerges that parallels the composite narrator framework found in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. In the latter, Reverend Void functions as both the scribe and the transmitter of the narrative. Similarly, in *Flowers in the Mirror*, Tang Xiaoshan takes on the role of the scribe, while the white ape serves as the transmitter. The "descendant of Laozi" assumes the position of editor, analogous to "Cao Xueqin", and the text inscribed on Brother Stone's body is transformed into a jade tablet, bearing a mysterious attribution. This construction of the narrative highlights the notion that the physical presence of the narrator is not inherently essential to the act of narration. The key distinction between these two works lies in the origin of the narrator. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the composite narrator originates from a supra-narrative level, while in *Flowers in the Mirror*, the narrator arises from within the main narrative itself. In other words, in Flowers in the Mirror, the narrative inherently generates and defines its own narrator.

This narrative structure inevitably gives rise to a profound logical paradox. In Chap. 48 of *Flowers in the Mirror*, Tang Xiaoshan claims to have transcribed inscriptions that recount the future stories of the sisters. However, the text of *Flowers in the Mirror*, compiled by the "descendants of Laozi", not only includes this act of transcription but also encompasses the entire narrative, spanning all one hundred chapters, and including the events that led up to Tang Xiaoshan's transcription of the tablet. This results in a strange loop, where the inscriptions narrate the very process of their own transcription. Remarkably, such a significant structural paradox seems to have largely gone unnoticed by both readers and critics. In the main narrative, Tang Xiaoshan's transcription serves as the creation of a sub-narrative. Yet paradoxically, this sub-narrative ultimately subsumes the entire supra-narrative. In this context, transgression is no longer an act of crossing boundaries between different narrative levels. Instead, it becomes the very condition that allows the stratification of the narrative to exist. Cyclical transgression, in turn, dissolves the structure of stratification, as any movement between levels ultimately returns to the original level. This intricate structure can be likened to a *Möbius* strip.

In the early twentieth century, narrative stratification experienced a remarkable rise in popularity within late Qing Dynasty novels, attaining an unexpectedly widespread presence. During this period, Chinese literary culture upheld a distinct hierarchy of genres, and late Qing novels adopted two primary types of supra-narrative

[21] Ibid., p. 232.

[22] Ibid., pp. 498–502.

structures. Vernacular novels often employed the "discovery of manuscripts" framework, as seen in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, while novels written in the classical Chinese style typically utilized the "listening to a story" structure, similar to that of *The Lady of the Camellias* (1848). The "listening to a story" framework, however, was inherently limited in its potential to evolve into cyclical transgression. This constraint arose from the immediacy of the narrative act, which transpired directly between characters without introducing the temporal displacement needed to cultivate greater narrative complexity. In contrast, the "discovery of manuscripts" supra-narrative offered a broader narrative scope, providing the flexibility to incorporate multiple characters and enabling the development of self-referential cyclical transgressions. As a result, cyclical transgressions in late Qing Dynasty novels are primarily associated with vernacular works.

Towards the end of *The Records of Officialdom Exposure* (1903), a celebrated late Qing Dynasty novel by Li Boyuan, a patient dreams of a place strikingly similar to the bustling streets of Shanghai. In this dream, he encounters a foreign-style house where a group of editors from a publishing house are busily compiling a book. The editors, as they explain, aim to "mold these officials to a certain standard". However, the scene takes an abrupt turn when cries of "Fire! Fire! Fire!" erupt from within the house. People rush out, clutching fragments of a partially burned manuscript. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that only the first half of the manuscript has survived the flames. This surviving portion, unsurprisingly, turns out to be "The Records of Officialdom Exposure" itself—a book focused solely on exposing scandals, and therefore incapable of fulfilling its original purpose of "educating and reforming" the officials. This narrative structure not only provides an explanation for the origin of the main story but also introduces a cyclical framework similar to that found in *Flowers in the Mirror*. The book glimpsed by the patient in his dream contains an account of the patient's own act of dreaming. Thus, the main narrative gives rise to a sub-narrative, which, in turn, loops back to become the supra-narrative, creating a self-referential and cyclical structure.

A more intricate example of cyclical transgression appears in Sun Ximeng's *Booming Thunder* (*Hong Tian Lei,*《轰天雷》, 1902), a novel centered on a notable political scandal from the late Qing Dynasty. The story centers on Shen Beishan, a Suzhou native, who, after penning a letter that criticizes the influential officials around Empress Dowager Cixi, is imprisoned and narrowly escapes execution. In the novel's concluding chapter, a group of Shen Beishan's friends gathers for a banquet. During the event, Jian Zhai mentions that he recently purchased a novel titled *Booming Thunder*. Afterward, Jing Fu requests to borrow the novel of *Booming Thunder* from Jian Zhai and its opening preface as read by Jing Fu is presented within the novel. In this way, the preface of the "novel within the novel" titled *Booming Thunder* ultimately becomes the postscript of the entire novel also titled *Boom Thunder*, actually referring to the same book. This results in a more intricate instance of cyclical transgression than that seen in *Flowers in the Mirror*. In this case, the novel Jing Fu borrows explicitly recounts his own act of borrowing it, while the novel Jian Zhai reads describes his act of reading it, creating a self-referential loop within the narrative.

In the novel, an additional narrative level beyond the supra-narrative is introduced. A man named Ayuan receives a package from a friend, accompanied by a letter in which the friend explains that he is about to die and is therefore entrusting him with the manuscript of a novel he has written in Japanese. As Ayuan does not understand Japanese, he enlists the help of a friend to translate the novel into Chinese. This scenario mirrors the "discovery of manuscripts" structure found in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. What makes this particularly intricate is that this very story functions as the preface of the "novel within the novel", *Booming Thunder*, which is read by the character, Jing Fu, and also serves as the postscript to the entire work. This structure creates a cyclical transgression that not only subsumes the supra-narrative but also absorbs the supra-supra-narrative. In other words, the main narrative not only generates its own source of narration but also provides the source for the supra-narrative. The intricate complexity of this narrative structure, along with the paradoxical nature of its stratification, is both intellectually stimulating and disquieting upon deeper reflection.

Cyclical transgression emerges as a striking feature in numerous works of Western literature, with *Don Quixote* (1615) standing out as a quintessential example of this narrative complexity. Widely regarded as a monumental classic of world literature, the main narrative of the novel centers on the adventures of Don Quixote and his loyal squire, Sancho Panza. In the first part of the narrative, Don Quixote discovers a manuscript recounting his own story within a lead case belonging to a doctor. In the second part, he visits a printing house where the book *Don Quixote* itself is in the process of being printed. Fascinatingly, both the manuscript he finds and the book being produced include accounts of these very events: his discovery of the manuscript and his visit to the printing press. This scenario creates a narrative paradox that is both logically and temporally impossible. The manuscript had been completed long before Don Quixote encountered it, and the book had already been finalized by the time he observed its printing. It is, therefore, logically inconceivable for Don Quixote to witness the creation of a text that not only narrates his story but also includes his discovery of the manuscript and his visit to the printing house. Even if the book possessed prophetic qualities, such predictions could only pertain to a future time, not situated within its narrative past. As a result, the structure of *Don Quixote* exemplifies a paradigmatic instance of cyclical transgression.

In Lewis Carroll's celebrated classic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Alice embarks on a quest to uncover her identity. The animals she encounters advise her to consult Absolem, the caterpillar, revered as the sage of Wonderland. Absolem reveals a calendar that records events across time—past, present, and future. Curiously, the calendar includes a scene showing the exact moment they are opening the calendar, portraying Alice herself consulting it. This narrative structure illustrates a classic example of cyclical transgression, as the very act of consulting the calendar is recursively documented within the calendar's own narrative.

Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* serves as a quintessential instance of cyclical transgression, intricately interweaving its main narrative with a sub-narrative: the parchment manuscript penned by the gypsy Melquíades. In the story, Melquíades—a prophetic figure with encyclopedic knowledge of the

world—produces a mysterious manuscript written in Sanskrit. It is Aureliano, the last descendant of the Buendía family, who ultimately deciphers this enigmatic text. Following the tragic loss of his wife in childbirth, Aureliano experiences what seems to be a moment of divine revelation, suddenly acquiring the ability to read Sanskrit as fluently as Spanish. The manuscript emerges as a meticulous record of the Buendía family's history, with Melquíades foretelling their destiny a century in advance, down to the smallest detail—including Aureliano's eventual reading of the manuscript itself. Operating as a sub-narrative, the manuscript mirrors and encapsulates the events of the main narrative. The novel reaches its denouement the instant Aureliano finishes reading the parchment, at which point the story of Macondo also comes to an end. In this climactic moment, a hurricane—reminiscent of the apocalyptic storm described in the *Bible*—obliterates the town, erasing it entirely from existence. Thus, Macondo, defined by its hundred years of solitude, dissolves into nothingness.

The manuscript, which chronicles the one-hundred-year history of Macondo, constitutes the entirety of the narrative in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This structure exemplifies a distinct case of cyclical transgression: the manuscript written by Melquíades includes an account of Melquíades writing the manuscript. This, however, raises a compelling paradox: how can events that occurred prior to the manuscript's creation be incorporated into this novel? This narrative configuration mirrors the structural pattern found in *Flowers in the Mirror*.

Although the number of novels featuring cyclical transgression is relatively small, this group includes many renowned classics widely recognized by readers. Over generations, scholars and critics have rigorously examined these works, delving into their various dimensions. From *Flowers in the Mirror* to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, nearly every aspect of these texts has been thoroughly analyzed, resulting in a substantial body of academic discourse. Surprisingly, however, their distinctive application of cyclical transgression has received little attention. One possible explanation for this oversight is the tendency of readers to "naturalize" cyclical transgression within a single medium—be it text, image, or film—thereby neglecting the fundamental purpose of narrative stratification: to establish clear hierarchical roles for the upper narrative (to offer a narrator for a lower level) and the lower narrative (to be narrated by a narrator at a higher level). This naturalization process can be particularly challenging, when the boundaries of narrative stratification coincide with the boundaries between media. This phenomenon, referred to as transmedial stratification, requires that any transgression between narrative levels also involves a shift from one medium to another. Thus far, no examples of transmedial cyclical transgression have been identified. Instead, the instances observed remain confined to a single medium, where transitions occur from the narrated level to the narrating level within textual, visual, or—most commonly—cinematic forms.

Films, by their very nature, are performative narratives, with the narrator manifested as a narrative frame. In such narratives, achieving narrative stratification necessitates the establishment of an additional performative frame. Because these performative frames at different levels operate simultaneously, they eliminate the temporal discrepancies that often complicate cyclical transgressions. This

synchronicity is one reason why cyclical transgressions are notably prevalent in film. Consider, for example, Marc Forster's *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). In the film, the protagonist discovers that he is a character being written into a novel and can hear his actions narrated by the author's voice-over, which is delivered in the past tense, as is typical in fictional narration. Later, the character learns that every previous work by the author has concluded with the death of the protagonist. Alarmed, he seeks out the author to implore her to alter the narrative and spare his life. Touched by his plea and actions, the author rewrites the ending to save him. The film's narrative structure circumvents temporal inconsistencies, allowing the character to directly perceive how he is being narrated. By contrast, in a novel, the use of past tense narration inherently precludes such interactions, as the narrated character exists in the past while the narrator remains in the present. In film, however, no such temporal barriers exist when a character transitions into the narrating level. Instead, the act of writing becomes a performative process of the writer, whose narrative can be influenced and reshaped by the character's intervention.

Another film that presents a more explicit example of cyclical transgression is *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011), directed by George Nolfi. In this film, the Adjustment Bureau (as the supra-narrator) has already predetermined a blueprint for individuals' destinies, and the protagonist is destined to become president, with the Bureau overseeing the process to ensure it unfolds as planned. However, an unforeseen complication arises when the protagonist falls in love with a woman, derailing his destined course and, in turn, disrupting the supra-narrative. In an effort to restore order, the Bureau repeatedly employs drastic measures to separate the couple. Despite these interventions, the protagonist, driven by his resolve, devises a strategy to outmaneuver the Bureau and forcibly alter the blueprint of his fate. The crux of this narrative lies in the film's temporal structure, which operates within a performative narrative framework. Although the Bureau's blueprint delineates the protagonist's destiny in advance, each stage of the plan must be "actualized" through the protagonist's lived experiences. Consequently, the narration by the supra-narrator and the plot enacted by the characters unfold simultaneously, enabling the cyclical transgression to occur without disrupting the underlying temporal logic. In contrast, If the story were a recorded narrative, the blueprint would already be fixed. While characters might theoretically transgress into the supra-narrative, such an intrusion would require the original blueprint to be destroyed and completely rewritten, as reconciling the alterations with the established timeline would be impossible. This distinction highlights why narrative stratification and transgression are increasingly prevalent in films, as the medium inherently facilitates the seamless blending of multiple narrative levels.

Here, I aim to provide a succinct summary of the characteristics of narrative stratification and transgression:

> First, narratives are not merely capable of being stratified; they are, by their nature, stratified, as this is a fundamental requirement for the act of narration itself.

Second, narrative stratification can exhibit considerable similarity between levels, and in principle, such stratification can extend infinitely.

Third, in the case of fictional narratives, once stratified, characters can engage in various transgressions across different narrative levels, which does not disrupt the boundaries between those levels, even if this results in an infinite loop.

Fourth, however, the very nature of narrative dictates that a narrative text cannot describe itself or recount the process of its own creation. When such a narrative arises, it gives rise to a paradox – what can be described as a "strange loop". In a stratified narrative within the same medium, it is possible, through deliberate design, for the elements at the lower level (the narrated) to "transgress" into the upper level (the act of narration), thereby describing its own creation, resulting in a cyclical transgression. This intricate process enables the narrative to portray the very act of narration that produces it, but such an inherently impossible task can only be accomplished at the expense of logic (and potentially time as well).

It is crucial to highlight that the phenomenon of cyclical transgression in films need not be excessively complex or intricately designed. In fact, such instances can be found in the course of our everyday lives. For example, a girl might document the unfolding of her romantic experiences in a diary. Later, she shares this diary with the boy in question, who then offers comments or reflections on how he is portrayed. In turn, the girl incorporates these insights into her diary. A similar dynamic can be observed in the context of a thesis defense. During a thesis defense, each committee member asks questions and provides evaluations of the student's work—this constitutes one narrative level. Meanwhile, the defense secretary records both the questions and the student's responses, compiling them into an official defense transcript, which belongs to a higher narrative level. However, if the secretary actively participates in the discussion and subsequently documents their own contributions in the transcript, this constitutes a case of transgression between levels. Furthermore, if a committee member explains to the student how the secretary records the proceedings, and this explanation is then documented in the transcript by the secretary, a cyclical transgression occurs. Such complex narrative situations do not require deliberate manipulation in fictional works to arise; they can naturally emerge in real-world discourse.

This also challenges Genette's assertion that "metalepsis" is confined to fictional works. In any narrative, it becomes difficult to prevent the narrated subject from engaging in the act of narration and recounting their involvement in the narration. When this happens, the narrator, unlike in recorded narratives, can no longer claim full control over the storytelling process. The narrative progression may then be divided into distinct segments, as the act of narration takes on the characteristics of a performative narration. This dynamic explains the occurrence of cyclical transgression in films such as *Stranger Than Fiction* and *The Adjustment Bureau.*

Chapter 16
Meta-Narrative

16.1 Defining "Meta"

This chapter adopts a distinctive approach by examining the foundational principles that underpin meta-narratives across diverse genres. To facilitate this analysis, it is crucial to first provide a precise definition of the terms "meta" and "meta-narrative." Such clarification is particularly important given that the field of narratology has traditionally focused its attention on the study of "metafiction".

The prefix "meta-" originates from the Greek word "$\mu\varepsilon\tau\acute{\alpha}$", meaning "after". Its use can be traced back to Andronicus, the earliest editor of Aristotle's works, who named the volume on philosophy Metaphysics because it followed the volume on natural sciences in his compilation. Philosophy, being traditionally viewed as a deeper exploration of the fundamental principles underpinning the natural sciences, helped shape the meaning of "meta-" to signify an investigation into foundational rules and principles. In simple terms, "meta-X" refers to the study of X itself. For example, the analysis of the rules and principles governing language—encompassing grammar, lexical organization, and semantic structure—is termed "meta-language", which can be understood as "language about language".

The term "meta" has extended its application to encompass diverse fields of inquiry, such as "meta-history", which broadly refers to the philosophy of history; "meta-logic", which examines the foundational principles underlying logic; and "meta-criticism", closely associated with the realm of literary theory. While the prefix "meta" has its roots in antiquity, the theoretical examination of meta-narratives is distinctly modern in origin. The development of meta-theory began to take shape in the early twentieth century within scientific and philosophical domains. In the 1920s, Bertrand Russell's introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* provided one of the earliest clear articulations of meta-language in a modern context. Russell emphasized the inherently hierarchical nature of meta-language, stating: "Every language has, as Mr. Wittgenstein says, a structure

Y. Zhao, *A General Narratology*, China Academic Library,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-8068-2_16

concerning which in the language, nothing can be said, but that there may be another language dealing with the structure of the first language, and having itself a new structure, and that to this hierarchy of languages there may be no limit".[1] In the same year, French mathematician David Hilbert introduced the concept of "meta-mathematics", and in 1937, philosopher and logician Willard Van Orman Quine proposed the notion of the "metatheorem" within the context of logical systems. As the twentieth century advanced, the concept of "meta" emerged as a fundamental category across a wide range of academic disciplines. By the mid-twentieth century, "meta" had become a central focus of scholarly inquiry, fostering extensive analysis and critical engagement within the theoretical paradigms of various fields.

Some narratologists incorporate the concept of "meta-narrative" into their analysis of fiction. For instance, Gérard Genette employs the term "metadiegetic" level to denote the narrative level embedded within the intradiegetic level.[2] Wang Liya has observed that narratologists often regard meta-narrative as merely a specific technique of metafiction—a literary device employed within fictional narratives.[3] Genette also employs the term "meta-text" to refer to the commentary texts—such as news, reviews, gossip, rumors, and critiques—that emerges about a text and its author in the interval between its production and reception. These discourses, which Genette categorizes as "metatext", shape the ways in which the original text is received and interpreted.[4] Such materials can be broadly understood as "texts about the text", highlighting their function as external commentaries on the original work. To address potential confusion and avoid terminological overlap, this book adopts the term "commenting-text" to specifically refer to these external materials, distinguishing them from other uses of "meta-text".

In the previously discussed uses of the term "meta-narrative", it is noteworthy that Genette's terminology introduces three distinct and seemingly unrelated applications of the prefix "meta-": metadiegesis (indicating a higher narrative level), meta-text (referring to a commentary on the text), and metalepsis (as explored in the previous chapter). This proliferation of "meta-" concepts might seem excessive or unnecessarily complex. This chapter examines meta-narratives through the framework of textual construction principles, aiming to uncover the fundamental patterns of "meta-narrativization" across various texts and media. The concept of meta-narrativization describes the relationship between narrative texts and their narrative frames. The discussion begins with an exploration of meta-narrativization across several major narrative genres, spanning both factual and fictional narratives. Subsequently, the chapter seeks to distill the core principles of meta-narrative from

[1] Bertrand Russell, "Introduction by Bertrand Russell", Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Centenary Edition), New York: Anthem Press, 2021, p. 50.

[2] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans., Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.

[3] Wang Liya, "The Difference between 'Meta-Fiction' and 'Meta-Narrative' and Its Impact on Interpretation", *Foreign Literature Review*, no. 2, 2008, pp. 35–44.

[4] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans., Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

the diverse examples found within these genres, laying the groundwork for understanding this pivotal concept in contemporary culture. As the overview will demonstrate, the prefix "meta" embodies an inherently expansive meaning, encompassing a wide range of applications that defy straightforward categorization. This inherent breadth underscores the significance of a systematic approach to analyzing meta-narratives within different textual and media contexts.

16.2 Meta-Narrativization of Factual Narratives

16.2.1 Meta-History

The term "meta-history" has been employed by numerous scholars, with one of its earliest notable usages appearing in 1970, when a Dutch academic analyzed Heidegger's "Metahistory of Philosophy". This study delved into the historiographical implications of Heidegger's philosophical framework.[5] Among factual narrative genres, history stands as the most representative, and it is within this field that the concept of "meta-narrativization" has generated the most profound intellectual impact. In 1973, Hayden White's groundbreaking work, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, brought this concept to the forefront.[6] White's book examines the interpretive frameworks utilized by nineteenth-century European historians, revealing the consistent use of specific narrative methodologies to structure historical accounts. He underscores how historians consciously made deliberate choices regarding which details to include, emphasize, or omit in their narratives. The emplotment of historical narratives invariably aligns with particular cultural and philosophical paradigms, reflecting and responding to the prevailing social questions of the time. As a result, history transcends a mere recounting of events; it operates as a "meta-history" that interrogates these events through broader interpretive and ideological lenses. This perspective challenges the notion of history as a neutral representation, instead presenting it as a constructed discourse shaped by historiographical and philosophical principles.

In his influential work *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Hayden White further expands on the idea of history as a narrative by drawing comparisons between historical writing and literary storytelling. Traditionally, history has positioned itself as a "scientific" and "objective" discipline. However, White argues that history shares more in common with the forms of literature than with the methodologies of science. While chronicles may appear to simply "discover" or "reveal" facts about the real world, histories actively

[5] Bernd Magnus, *Heidegger's Metahistory of Philosophy: Amor Fati, Being and Truth*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970.

[6] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

"invent" historical facts by selecting, organizing, and constructing plots. In this sense, history is not a science but rather a form of "storytelling", a perspective that directly challenges proponents of realist fiction who claim that fiction is often more truthful than historical accounts.

Building on Hayden White's groundbreaking insights, the term meta-history became a cornerstone of New Historicism, particularly in its engagement with the "philosophy of history". Scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt and Arthur Danto further developed and popularized the concept, broadening its intellectual resonance. Louis O. Mink's 1987 work, *Historical Understanding*,[7] offers a clear and comprehensive synthesis of the key themes that define the narrative turn in historiography. The influence of the meta-historical approach has extended far beyond the field of historiography, significantly shaping the broader landscape of the humanities. This intellectual shift has catalyzed a profound and enduring movement that continues to influence contemporary scholarship across multiple disciplines. Earlier sections of this book—notably Part I, Chap. 5, which examines the distinctions between factual and fictional narratives—have already addressed some of the broader implications of this transformative paradigm, laying the groundwork for understanding its far-reaching impact.

16.2.2 Meta-Journalism

The term meta-journalism was first introduced by the eminent phenomenological semiotician Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who employed it to examine the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of how mass communication texts are encoded.[8] In contemporary journalism and communication studies, the concept has gained increasing prominence, although its interpretations remain diverse and often inconsistent. Some scholars equate meta-journalism with what is commonly referred to as "new journalism".[9] This movement represents one of the earliest deliberate attempts to reframe the discipline through a process of narrativization. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is widely recognized as a seminal work that launched this genre, often referred to as the "nonfiction novel" or reportage. New journalism merges subjective reporting with narrative techniques, situating itself at the intersection of fiction and traditional journalism. Within this framework, the term meta-journalism is employed metaphorically.

The term meta-journalism is widely used by contemporary scholars to describe discussions and reactions surrounding news stories, particularly the secondary

[7] Louis O. Minke, *Historical Understanding*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987.

[8] Richard Lanigan, *Phenomenology of Communication: Merleau-Ponty's Thematics in Communicology and Semiology*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1988, p. 104.

[9] David L. Eason, *Metajournalism: The Problem of Reporting in the Nonfiction Novel*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977.

coverage and critiques that follow a story's initial release. This usage closely aligns with Genette's concept of the meta-text.

Occasionally, meta-journalism refers to instances where journalists incorporate personal commentary into their reporting, such as reflections on the writing process, expressions of their thoughts and emotions, or protests against challenges encountered during interviews.[10] This interpretation parallels the "narratorial comments" frequently found in works of fiction. Despite these variations, the term is most commonly employed to examine the cultural and political frameworks through which audiences assess the "truth value" or "moral value" of news. It is also a lens for analyzing media biases that emerge in specific historical contexts or within particular news outlets.[11] Additionally, some journalism research institutions, such as Harvard University's Journalism Lab, utilize meta-journalism to define their broader scope of inquiry. In this context, the term refers to the theoretical study of journalism itself.

16.2.3 Meta-Advertisement

Advertising has become an increasingly prominent genre in contemporary society. However, its brevity and the often fluid nature of its textual forms make it a particularly challenging subject for scholarly inquiry. Consequently, the existing body of research on advertising remains relatively limited. In recent years, the term meta-advertisement has gained traction, although its definition often lacks clarity and consistency. In some instances, meta-advertisement refers to advertisements that promote a company's advertising practices. For example, an ad might feature a business showcasing its own billboard in a prominent location, such as Times Square in New York, where the act of advertising itself becomes the subject of the advertisement. The term also applies to ads that embed one medium within another, as seen in the well-known tagline "As seen on TV". Another example is the "meta-rhetoric" of advertising, which includes statements like, "thousands of people will see this billboard today; contact us if you're interested in placing an ad here". Additionally, meta-advertisement can describe forms of "aggregate advertising". For instance, a magazine cover model might simultaneously endorse the clothing, hairstyling, makeup, and photography involved in the photoshoot. Similarly, a single poster for a film festival might serve to promote not only the festival itself but also the multiple films featured in the event.[12] Self-referential advertising is another facet of meta-advertisement. This includes examples like the statement, "Xin Fei advertising is

[10] Chris Atton, *An Alternative Internet: Radical Media, Politics, and Creativity, Edinburgh*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 53.

[11] Michael Thomas Carroll, *Popular Modernity in America: Experience, Technology, Mythohistory*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000, p.41.

[12] George R. Rodman, *Mass Media Issues: Analysis and Debate*, Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1993, p.59.

not as good as Xin Fei refrigerators", which draws attention to the advertising itself while simultaneously promoting the product.

As advertising continues to expand its role within the cultural industry, new forms of meta-advertising are likely to emerge. However, explicit theoretical frameworks categorizing themselves as meta-advertising remain scarce, and to date, there has been no comprehensive exploration or development of a unified meta-advertising theory.

16.3 "Meta-Narrativization" of Fictional Narratives

16.3.1 Meta-Theatre (or Meta-Drama)

Among fictional narratives, theatre was the earliest genre to be consciously shaped by the process of "meta-narrativization". The enduring tradition of "plays within plays", a motif that has recurred in theatrical works since antiquity, serves as a vivid illustration of meta-theatre. This distinctive characteristic demonstrates that meta-narrative techniques emerged in theatre long before they appeared in other narrative forms.

In 1963, Lionel Abel introduced the term "meta-theatre", identifying Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as its quintessential example. Abel argued that *Hamlet* epitomizes meta-theatre not only because of the play-within-a-play deliberately staged by the protagonist but also because the entire narrative is deeply intertwined with the theme of "acting". According to Abel, the entire drama is driven by the necessity of pretense, rendering *Hamlet* fundamentally a play within a play. Abel further contended that the Renaissance marked the end of the Aristotelian conception of tragedy, with "tragedy being replaced by meta-theatre".[13] This claim forms the central argument of his book, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. Abel's analysis does not limit itself to a specific category of drama or particular dramatic techniques. Rather, he posits that modern drama, by its very essence, is inherently meta-theatrical.

Some critics maintain that meta-theatre is more prominently associated with comedy, a genre that has incorporated meta-theatrical elements since the era of Aristophanes in ancient Greece. This is particularly evident in comedic works that openly highlight their fictional nature and humorously challenge the audience's willingness to suspend disbelief. Such meta-theatrical techniques are a defining feature of comedy across diverse cultures and historical periods, with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* frequently cited as a pinnacle of this tradition.[14]

[13] Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1963, p. 112.

[14] G. Beiner, "Comedy as Heuristic Fiction: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the Context of Shakespearean Comedy", eds., Herbert Grabes et al., *The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, vol. 3, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1985, p. 79.

Metatheater is, in fact, a technique that comedy almost inevitably employs, exemplified by the intricate interplay between narrative levels in Chinese comedic forms such as *Xiangsheng* (cross-talk), where performers frequently move fluidly between the fictional world and reality. However, as seen in modern theater, metatheatrical devices can be thought-provoking and profoundly meaningful without falling into clichés. This transgressive dynamic, rather than merely being an incidental feature, can serve as an artistic objective in itself. Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) exemplifies this approach, using meta-theatre to explore and expose the essence of metatheatrical nature—a quality that is often obscured by conventional dramatic structures.

This distinctive meta-theatrical consciousness diverges significantly from the principles of realism. Realist theatre demands that actors suppress their personal subjectivity, immerse themselves fully in their characters, and faithfully portray their roles. The goal of this approach is to elicit the audience's emotional identification with the characters, fostering a sense of immersion in the perceived authenticity of the theatrical world and ultimately affirming its interpretation of reality. Metatheatre, however, takes a different path. It invites the audience to critically reflect on their own roles, prompting them to recognize that both the performed subject and the performing subject—including their own role as spectators—are simultaneously constrained by the theatre and yet capable of transcending it. This realization exposes the inherent limitations of the "objectivity" that dramatic narratives often purport to offer. Within this process of self-reflection, two pivotal insights emerge: first, human nature allows for a detached, introspective perspective, as long as one adopts a reflective stance; second, this very act of reflection can be dramatized—indeed, theater itself exists as a medium through which such introspection unfolds.

16.3.2 Meta-Cinema

The concept of meta-cinema emerged early in the history of film. From the moment cinema evolved beyond static camera positions to incorporate editing and other forms of "post-production", it became apparent that cinematic narratives were primarily constructed through the intricate processes of cutting and assembling in the studio—unlike theatre, which unfolds in live performance. While theatre is characterized by its "natural" enactment and fiction by its "natural" narrative progression, cinematic storytelling is, at its core, fundamentally "unnatural". André Bazin astutely observed that "montage which we are constantly being told is the essence of cinema is, in this situation, the literary and anti-cinematic process par excellence".[15] Although describing cinema as "anti-cinematic" might initially seem paradoxical, this perspective emphasizes the highly constructed nature of cinematic illusion. This understanding may explain the substantial scholarly discourse

[15] Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema*? vol. I, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p. 46.

surrounding meta-cinema, despite the absence of a definitive text titled "Meta-Cinema". Such a book may be unnecessary, as all films inherently rely on "post-production", a process far more significant than the textual revisions common in fiction. This meticulous "processing" constitutes a meta-level operation, underscoring the self-reflexive and deliberately constructed nature of cinematic narratives.

The most abstract conception of meta-cinema can be attributed to the eminent French postmodern philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who explored the philosophy of cinema in two seminal works. Deleuze contends that the ideas of nineteenth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson embody a philosophical outlook intrinsically suited to the philosophy of cinema, the "movement-image". Additionally, Deleuze suggests that Edmund Husserl's phenomenological account of the perception of nature can be viewed as inherently "pre-cinematic"; while the universe as Bergson experienced "is startlingly ahead of his time: it is the universe as cinema in itself, a meta-cinema".[16] Though this interpretation functions metaphorically, it remains profoundly compelling to reflect on how philosophers analyze and engage with the narrative structures and broader philosophical dimensions of cinema.

16.3.3 Meta-Game

The concept of the "meta-game" is of exceptional significance, particularly when we consider the substantial semantic differences in how the term "game" is understood in Chinese and Western languages. These differences necessitate a thorough clarification of the meta-narrative associated with the term to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding. In Western languages, the term "game" encompasses a broad range of meanings, including not only all forms of sports and physical activities but also various forms of competition, with a particular emphasis on intellectual contests. Consequently, the Chinese term for "game theory" (*boyilun,* "博弈论") is a direct adaptation of the broader Western concept of "game theory", which is extensively applied in disciplines such as economics, political science, and psychology to analyze competitive behaviors, cooperation, and conflict resolution. The study of international politics can usually be referred to as "meta-game".[17] Ludwig Wittgenstein's influential theory of "language games" further expanded the term's scope, redefining it as a general framework for understanding the pragmatic expression of meaning. By contrast, the semantic scope of the term "game" in traditional Chinese usage was initially much narrower. Discussions surrounding the "meta-narrativization of games" would likely have been considered irrelevant within this context. However, over time, the Chinese language has gradually embraced these

[16] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, trans., Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 59.

[17] Ulrich Beck, *Power in the Global Age: A New Global Political Economy,* trans., Kathleen Cross, London: Polity Press, 2005, p. 2.

broader interpretations, reflecting a growing integration of the expanded meanings associated with the term into its linguistic and intellectual discourse.

A meta-game typically involves interpretive actions within the game that provide commentary or explanation on the game itself. Examples include scoreboards, level progression charts, and comparative leaderboards displayed in video games, as well as time delay indicators, referee explanations, and scoreboards in soccer matches. These elements significantly shape the unfolding of the game by providing critical information that affects strategic decision-making. In soccer, for example, comparative metrics such as the number of goals scored in home versus away matches or the time remaining until the match ends can substantially influence the strategies employed by both teams. Similarly, in video games, mechanisms like leveling up or down alter the rules of the game, compelling players to adjust their strategies in real time. In this framework, meta-game is a game that governs the game itself. It operates simultaneously on a parallel level, exerting a controlling influence over the course of the main gameplay.

Games encompass a wide range of activities, including children's play, making the concept of meta-play a central focus in pedagogical studies. What may initially appear as children engaging in play solely for entertainment often serves as a vital means of acquiring essential social communication skills.[18] Such play, particularly when it involves role-playing, reveals its deeper purpose: fostering the development of interpersonal understanding. Educators frequently emphasize the importance of guiding children to recognize the underlying objectives of play, which operate at the meta-play level. This perspective frames play as a mechanism for cultivating mutual understanding and exploring its broader social dimensions.[19] Through such guided engagement, children gradually learn to create their own stories using toys, effectively synthesizing the narratives they encounter in their environment. This process of constructing meta-play not only enhances their imaginative storytelling abilities but also deepens their capacity for meaningful social interaction.

16.3.4 Metafiction

The meta-narrativization of fiction stands as one of the most intricate manifestations of meta-narrative, a phenomenon that aligns with the medium's distinctive attributes. This book has previously underscored the remarkable flexibility of textual narratives, particularly in relation to their manipulation of time and the interplay between narrative levels. Metafiction offers unparalleled adaptability, enabling fiction to achieve a narrative complexity at a meta-level that surpass those of other forms of

[18] Patricia Nourot, "Sociodramatic Play: Pretending Together", in eds., Doris Pronin Fromberg and Doris Bergen, *Play from Birth to Twelve: Contexts, Perspectives, and Meanings* (2nd Edition), New York and London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 87–102.

[19] G. M. van der Aalsvoort, "Early Social Development and Schooling, in ed., Sanna Jarvela, *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning*, Oxford: Academic Press, 2011, p. 146.

narrative medium. Significantly, early inquiries into meta-narrative were largely confined to the realm of metafiction. Even in contemporary discourse, the term "meta-narrative" is frequently treated as synonymous with "meta-fiction", reflecting the enduring centrality of fiction in discussions about meta-narrative structures.

The term "metafiction", which denotes fiction about fiction, is first credited to novelist William H. Gass in his work *Fiction and Figures of Life*.[20] The earliest comprehensive scholarly exploration of the concept, however, was undertaken by Robert Alter in *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*. Alter introduced the phrase "self-conscious genre" to describe this phenomenon, identifying it as part of a "non-mimetic secondary tradition" distinct from the "great tradition" of the Western novel, which he characterized as being rooted in mimetic representation.[21] Other critics have offered alternative labels for this narrative form. For instance, Brooke-Rose termed it "experimental fiction", while Raymond Federman coined "surfiction" in 1976. Despite these variations, by the early 1980s, the term "metafiction" had become widely accepted. A pivotal contribution to the field came with Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, which significantly bolstered the term's academic visibility and utility.[22] Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* further offered a detailed and accessible analysis of the term and its broader implications.[23] In his 1986 study *Contemporary Metafiction: A Poetological Study of Metafiction in English Since 1939*, Rüdiger Imhof observed that in the early 1980s, metafiction attracted only a small group of readers who had a taste for unconventional and challenging narratives. However, by the late 1980s, it had gained widespread prominence, with a large number of ambitious critics and scholars entering what had by then become a fundamental domain of literary studies.[24]

Providing a concise summary of the extensive body of literature on metafiction is a challenging task. The term "metafiction" encompasses both a formal narrative feature and a distinct postmodernist literary genre. As a contemporary genre, metafiction represents a postmodern narrative genre of non-realist fiction. Unlike traditional works of surrealism, absurdism, or magical realism, its "non-realist" quality is rooted not in the content it portrays but in its formal structure. Metafiction disrupts the narrative conventions that typically generate a "sense of reality" within fiction. As a genre, it elevates the intrinsic meta-narrative characteristics of fiction to their highest degree, foregrounding the self-referential nature of the narrative form.

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[20] William H. Gass, *Fiction and Figures of Life*, New York: Knopf, 1971.

[21] Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978.

[22] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980.

[23] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1984.

[24] Rüdiger Imhof, *Contemporary Metafiction: A Poetological Study of Metafiction in English Since 1939*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter University Press, 1986, p. 2.

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality".[25] Similarly, Mark Currie describes metafiction as "novels written by people who do know how to tell a story but whose narratives turn back on themselves in differing levels of self-consciousness, self-awareness and ironic self-distance".[26] Susan Lanser adopts the term "self-conscious narrative" to describe narratives that permit explicit attention to the act of narration itself and its fictionality.[27] These perspectives illustrate that the term "self-conscious fiction" is often employed interchangeably with metafiction, with the concept of self-consciousness serving as a critical framework for its interpretation. Moreover, the term "self-conscious" carries nuanced connotations of discomfort or awkwardness, which enriches its application and provides a vivid, multidimensional understanding within this context.

In conventional fiction, traces of metafictional techniques are typically stylized and have become so integrated into standard narrative conventions that readers are often unaware of their presence. These elements seamlessly blend into the narrative framework, preserving the realism of the fictional world. For example, while the works of Balzac and Thackeray contain numerous narrative intrusions, they are still widely regarded as exemplars of "realism". In contrast, metafiction intentionally brings these traces to the forefront, explicitly highlighting and playing with self-referential techniques. By doing so, it transforms the narrator into a storyteller with an acute sense of "self-consciousness", deliberately rejecting the illusion of objective reality. Instead, the act of narration becomes an exercise in self-parody, consciously engaging with and subverting the conventions that traditionally underpin the narrative form.

16.4 Contemporary Culture and "Meta-Narrative"

The preceding sections examined meta-narratives across a variety of narrative genres, including meta-history, meta-news, and meta-advertising within factual narratives, as well as meta-drama, meta-film, meta-fiction, and meta-games within fictional narratives. This examination underscores the ubiquity of meta-narratives, revealing their presence in virtually every narrative genre. Notably, most contemporary narrative genres can be characterized as incorporating meta-narrative elements. These elements, however, exhibit a remarkable diversity and complexity, making it extraordinarily difficult to provide a comprehensive summary or systematic classification. This presents a significant challenge for scholars engaged in the study of meta-narratives.

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[25] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 2.

[26] Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, London: Macmillan Press, 1998, p. 62.

[27] Susan Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

To date, no scholarly framework has successfully articulated the common mechanisms of "meta-narrativization" across diverse narrative genres. In *Picture Theory*, W.J.T. Mitchell posits that the concept of "meta" fundamentally involves secondary representation. Drawing on Michel Foucault, Mitchell describes this as a "representation, as it were, of Classical representation".[28] From this perspective, all meta-narratives emerge from prior narratives—whether derived from one or more texts, alternative forms, or even the narrative itself. By their very nature, they conform to the essential definition of being "narratives about narrative". Despite this foundational premise, the immense diversity of narrative forms renders it exceptionally difficult to systematically define their modes of meta-narrativization. The varied and unique characteristics of different narrative types, as demonstrated in this book, further complicate attempts to delineate their meta-narrative structures. Consequently, the analyses presented in the following sections should be viewed as a preliminary effort to engage with this multifaceted and challenging subject matter.

First, meta-narrative elements are pervasive across narratives; however, a text qualifies as a "meta-narrative text" only when certain meta-narrative elements assume a dominant or central role. This dominance can be achieved through several well-defined methods of meta-narrativization. Second, a shared hallmark of these meta-narrativization methods is the act of frame-breaking, which disrupts the established boundaries of narrative representation. Finally, this chapter contends that the function of meta-narratives extends far beyond merely introducing a sense of "estrangement", novelty, or enhanced communicative efficacy. By deliberately exposing and critically examining the structural mechanisms of narrative, meta-narratives allow texts to transcend the constraints of traditional, organically unified forms.

Meta-narratives do not constitute a singular, unified category; rather, they encompass a range of diverse methods of "meta-narrativization" employed across various genres, each designed to evoke qualities associated with meta-narratives. By identifying the shared characteristics of these techniques, we can undertake a more abstract analysis of the essential features that define meta-narratives.

It is important to emphasize that stylization is one of the most effective means of neutralizing the impact of meta-narrativization. For instance, in traditional Chinese vernacular novels, common narrative devices such as recurring phrases like "The reader may not know" or the narrator's explanatory, and interpretive comments on the plot exemplify meta-narrative techniques. However, when these devices become stylized through repeated use, they are perceived by readers as entirely natural, thereby diminishing their meta-narrative effect. Thus, neither absolute meta-narrativization nor absolute stylization exists. Instead, the interaction between these two forces generates a dynamic tension, which gives rise to the concept of "degrees of meta-narrativization". When meta-narrativization reaches a certain threshold, it resists being "naturalized" by readers through cultural conventions, thereby

[28] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 58.

attaining the distinct status of a meta-narrative. The various methods of "meta-narrativization" examined below should, therefore, be viewed as some strategies for generating meta-narrative effects given certain context. Although meta-narrative elements are ubiquitous, a work can be identified as a meta-narrative text only when such elements are intentionally foregrounded and assume a dominant role within the narrative.

The "meta-narrativization" operates along a spectrum. For example, in Wang Anyi's *Brocade Valley* (1987), the narrator seems almost impatient to achieve self-consciousness. This disrupts the narrative's objectivity, as the narrator appears more invested in the development of the plot than the protagonist herself—a woman engaged in an extramarital affair. However, the signs of "meta-narrativization" in the text are sporadic and remain measured, rendering the novel within what Alan Wilde describes as "mid-fiction". This term refers to a middle ground between realist fiction and self-reflexive fiction—highly experimental in nature but not primarily reliant on self-reflexive techniques.[29] This insightful analysis highlights the notion that meta-fiction does not adhere to fixed or absolute boundaries but rather exists along a continuum shaped by varying degrees of meta-narrativization.

This variability explains why the concept of meta-narrative exhibits pronounced "cultural specificity". Methods of "meta-narrativization" can differ significantly across cultures, with modern meta-narratives often diverging fundamentally from their traditional counterparts. Furthermore, what is perceived as a meta-narrative in one cultural context might be regarded as entirely conventional in another. The four approaches to "meta-narrativization" outlined below illustrate different dimensions, ranging from internal to external frameworks. The first two operate within the realm of intra-textual meta-narrativization, the third extends beyond the boundaries of the text, and the fourth functions at the intertextual level, engaging in meta-narrativization through interactions between texts.

16.4.1 The First Type: Meta-Narrative Exhibiting the Process of Text Construction

This method of meta-narrativization emphasizes the deliberate exposure of the processes through which a narrative text is created, making it a quintessential example of a "narrative about the narrative process". Narratives traditionally establish independent worlds through mediatization, creating the illusion of a self-contained reality. However, when the mechanics of text construction are revealed, this illusion is dismantled, drawing attention to the artifice behind the narrative. For example, meta-dramatic characters may break the fourth wall to reveal themselves as actors, meta-fiction acknowledges itself as a constructed text, and meta-advertising unveils its

[29] Alan Wilde, *Middle Ground: Studies in Contemporary American Fiction*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987, p. 4.

fabricated nature, such as showcasing paper backdrops to highlight its artificiality. Similarly, meta-film exposes its production techniques, including editing, staging, and other contrivances. Each narrative genre offers numerous approaches for revealing its construction and showcasing its self-consciousness. In David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), the editing process becomes an integral part of the final film, explicitly drawing attention to its artificial nature. Similarly, the Chinese scholar Zhi Yu, in his commentary on Deng Xian's reportage *The Soul of a Great Nation* (1990), which chronicles the Burmese Expeditionary Force, also employs the term "meta-narration" to describe the author's extensive direct commentary within the text. Deng reflects on his own enduring political anxieties and fears as a descendant of the expeditionary soldiers and recounts his investigative journey into this historical episode.[30]

Films that incorporate the filmmaking process into their narrative structure provide a distinct meta-cinematic perspective. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Prénom Carmen* (1983), for example, Godard himself appears as a director within the film, guiding the characters on how to craft a movie based on the story of "Carmen". Similarly, Fellini's *8½* portrays a director grappling with creative paralysis, who turns to his dreams for inspiration, effectively merging the boundaries between reality and imagination. Movies like *Center Stage* (*Ruan Lingyu,*《阮玲玉》, 1992) and *My Week with Marilyn* (2011), which prominently explore aspects of film history, also qualify as meta-films due to their reflective engagement with the cinematic medium. Additionally, works such as *Videodrome* (1983) and *Baghead* (2008) go further by centering their narratives on the very process of their creation. These films consciously depict their own development, positioning the act of filmmaking as a core element of the storyline. This self-referential technique identifies such works as "self-begetting films", where the narrative and the creative process are intricately intertwined.

In traditional fiction, narrators generally possess the authority to comment on the story's form and content as it unfolds. However, in meta-fiction, narrators often intentionally showcase their ultimate control over the narrative's construction. A prominent example is Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which, adhering to the Kino-Eye theory, employs techniques such as "rewinding". In one notable scene, the film plays backward to depict sliced beef seemingly reattaching to a cow, highlighting cinema's essence as an art of visual illusion. A comparable meta-narrative technique is found in the Chinese sitcom *My Own Swordsman* (2006), where characters frequently break the fourth wall, utilizing props for humor and directly addressing the audience. In one memorable scene, an innkeeper and a servant humorously debate the whitening properties of a lotion. The innkeeper then turns to the camera, delivering an impromptu advertisement: "This whitening lotion – you deserve to have it!" Similarly, in certain costume comedies, actors performing perilous martial arts stunts issue direct warnings to viewers: "These actions are dangerous – please do not attempt to imitate them." These examples illustrate how meta-fiction and meta-narrative techniques intentionally reveal the constructed

[30] Zhi Yu, "Historical Restoration, Meta-Narration, and Stylistic Blending: A Study of Deng Xian's Documentary Literature", *Journal of Sichuan Education Institute*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1995, p. 74.

nature of storytelling. By breaking conventional narrative boundaries, they prompt audiences to critically engage with and reflect on the inherent artifice of the narrative medium.

The "self-exposure" in such narratives does not necessarily reveal the actual process of creation. Instead, it often uncovers an even more absurd and fantastical fabrication. For instance, in John Barth's *Dunyazadiad* (1972), the narrative explores the purported origins of *The Arabian Nights*. In this reimagining, the tales that Scheherazade uses to captivate the brutal Sasanian king are supplied by her sister, Dunyazade, who acquires them daily from an old man named Barth. Amusingly, Barth himself retrieves these stories from his bookshelf, specifically from a modern edition of *The Arabian Nights*. Similarly, in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the "author" unexpectedly appears within the narrative and manipulates the story's timeline by resetting a clock by 15 min. This seemingly minor adjustment results in dramatically altered plot trajectory.

Another type of meta-narrative, characterized by "narratives within narratives", is constructed through the generation of additional narratives. While this phrasing may seem convoluted, the distinction lies in the fact that a typical "story-within-a-story" does not automatically qualify as a meta-narrative. The use of narrative stratification is a common storytelling device, as exemplified in *The Decameron* (1350–1353), which cannot be classified as a meta-narrative because it does not overtly reveal the narrative construction process in a way that challenges or surprises the audience. However, meta-narrativity emerges when a narrative embedded within another is deliberately and prominently emphasized. Notable examples include Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1984), and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), in which the protagonist metaphorically engages with a "film within a film" by observing the unfolding events through his window.

Another subtype of "narrative within a narrative" involves the pastiche of various genres. Novels often incorporate elements from other narrative forms. For example, traditional Chinese novels frequently include poetry, and in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the patterns on the jade worn by Jia Baoyu are depicted within the text. Such instances of pastiche often seem natural and seamlessly integrated into the narrative. A similar example appears in Lu Xun's "Old Mr. Gao" (1925), where the protagonist receives a letter of appointment from a school. Instead of merely summarizing the letter's content, the narrative reproduces the letter in its entirety, reflecting the distinctive early Republican style, complete with its absence of punctuation. Here, the visual presentation of the printed text blends naturally into the story, and may not initially strike readers as a meta-narrative technique. However, meta-narrativity becomes apparent when the narrator consciously exaggerates the use of pastiche. For instance, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967) incorporates illustrations of flags, Tai Ji diagrams, trucks, pistols, and even a questionnaire for readers. This approach resembles the collage-like integration of animated sequences within a film, intentionally disrupting traditional narrative conventions and highlighting the constructed nature of the storytelling process.

16.4.2 The Second Type: Meta-Narrative Consisting of Multiple Converging Narratives

In texts where multiple narratives unfold simultaneously, readers are granted the autonomy to choose among them, thus creating a meta-narrative. This autonomy effectively shifts control from the narrator to the reader, who actively participates in the construction of the text. Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1938) is often cited by metafiction theorists as a seminal example of this technique. O'Brien famously remarked, "A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and interrelated only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter, one hundred times as many endings".[31] When each narrative thread is considered in isolation, it forms a standalone narrative. However, when these threads coexist and interact within a single work, compelling readers to navigate and choose among them, they collectively constitute a meta-narrative.

This narrative form essentially consists of multiple interconnected texts that coexist within a unified framework, with intertextuality serving as its defining feature. This technique has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary cinema. Films such as *Run Lola Run*, *Sliding Doors* (1998), and *Source Code* exemplify this approach by presenting multiple variations of the same storyline within a single narrative structure. In contrast, this technique is less common in factual or documentary narratives and can only emerge under specific conditions. For example, a history book might state: "There are several theories regarding the fate of the Jianwen Emperor". However, since neither the author nor the reader has the capacity to determine a definitive version, this approach lacks the meta-narrative quality that characterizes fictional works.

16.4.3 The Third Type: Meta-Narrative Involving Hierarchical Interaction

This type of meta-narrative reveals the hierarchical interaction between different levels of engagement. Many games serve as extensions of other games, effectively becoming "games about games". A classic example is betting on the outcomes of other games. This form of gameplay, with roots as ancient as civilization itself, includes activities such as betting on horse races, dog races, cricket fights, or ball games. It is essential to distinguish this from merely spectating, where observers remain passive and do not participate in an additional layer of gameplay. In contrast, those who place bets are actively engaging in a secondary game that operates on a different level. The interplay between these two levels of gameplay creates what can

[31] Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1961, p.1.

be termed a classic meta-game, where the secondary game is centered around and intrinsically tied to the outcomes of the primary game.

Meta-advertising elevates the concept of hierarchical interaction to a more engaging and imaginative realm. Take, for instance, a Louis Vuitton (LV) advertisement featuring the iconic French actress Catherine Deneuve. The ad presents a lively film set, complete with a prop train, lighting rigs, and an elaborate production setup, suggesting that the ad's primary goal is to depict Deneuve boarding a train with her LV suitcase as she heads home. The production is portrayed as meticulously detailed, highlighting LV's dedication to craftsmanship and Deneuve's commitment to her performance. The process appears so demanding that Deneuve is shown taking a brief moment to rest. In this candid moment, she sits on an LV suitcase, massaging her feet. The advertisement's slogan reads: "Sometimes, home is just a feeling". This advertisement transforms the act of filming into the central narrative, exemplifying "advertisement about advertisement". By highlighting the production process and humorously exposing its challenges, the ad offers a self-referential commentary on the labor-intensive nature of creating such visuals. Deneuve, one of France's most celebrated beauties, is humorously depicted as visibly fatigued, yet finding comfort in the practicality of the LV suitcase, which doubles as her impromptu seat. This is a quintessential example of a "meta-narrative advertisement", revealing the hierarchical structure of its creation.

16.4.4 The Fourth Type: Parasitic Meta-Narrative

Parasitic meta-narrative texts are those that depend on preexisting narratives for their foundation. These narratives explicitly reference or engage with other narratives or groups of narratives, exemplifying a form of "coexistence of narrative

texts". This method highlights the pervasive phenomenon of intertextuality, where texts are constructed around or allude to earlier works. For example, Nabokov's *Lolita*, as the author himself noted, alludes to and parodies more than 60 writers. However, many readers may find it difficult to identify these references without prior knowledge or guidance. The effectiveness of parody hinges on the reader's ability to recognize the original material being imitated or subverted; without such recognition, the parody fails to achieve its intended effect. Prominent examples of parasitic meta-narratives include Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), which parodies Zen koans, John Hawkes' *The Lime Twig* (1961), which parodies the conventions of popular thrillers, and John Gardner's *Grendel* (1961), which reinterprets and subverts the themes of the epic *Beowulf*.

Tributes to earlier works often go unnoticed in most films, having been largely naturalized through formats like "sequels", "prequels", "adaptations", "returns", and "spin-offs". However, certain creative approaches highlight the "pre-text", transforming these works into "narratives about narratives". For example, François Truffaut's *La Nuit Américaine* (1973) references his own film *Les 400 Coups* (1959), including a scene where a character tears down a poster of the American classic *Citizen Kane* (1941). Similarly, Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980) parodies Federico Fellini's *8½*, while *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) pays homage to Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr* (1924).

It is only through explicit techniques that directly signal a "parasitic" relationship with earlier texts that narratives can clearly convey their meta-narrative intentions to the audience. For instance, novels like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and stage plays or films such as David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988) rely heavily on their intertextual connections to earlier works. For audiences unfamiliar with *Jane Eyre* (1847) or *Madame Butterfly* (1904), the thematic resonance of these later works might be lost. *Wide Sargasso Sea* offers a haunting counter-narrative to the romanticized love story in *Jane Eyre*, exposing the troubling context that precedes it. Similarly, *M. Butterfly* delves into the complex dynamics of East-West cultural relations, intertwining this with the exploration of homosexuality.

16.5 "Frame-Breaking": Common Features of Meta-Narratives

The defining feature of all methods of "meta-narrativization" lies in their tendency to break the established frame segregation that defines narratives. The segregation serves to segregate narratives from both the empirical world and other narrative texts, functioning on the levels of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Although this subject has been thoroughly examined in the earlier chapters of this book (particularly the first five), it is useful to return to this question in the context of meta-narrative. The first degree segregation differentiates semiotic representation from lived experience, a process primarily marked by mediatization. This distinction,

referred to as "mediated segregation", results in the formation of a textual world constructed entirely of signs. Texts operating at this level of representation are typically factual narratives. Fictional narratives, however, require a second-degree segregation beyond this foundational semiotic representation. This additional level introduces a further "representation" of the initial representation of experience. Within this double-segregation structure, the second level of segregation renders the representation "opaque" in relation to the empirical world. Consequently, recipients of fictional narratives no longer expect these texts to function as direct references to the real world, thus reinforcing their identity as mediated and constructed artifacts.

All meta-narratives inherently challenge the established framework of segregation. A particularly distinctive form of "meta-cinema", rarely found in other narrative genres, involves addressing the audience directly from the screen, thereby breaking the boundaries of cinematic segregation. In theater, it is customary for characters to speak directly to the audience—such as through prologues or interludes performed by narrators or comedic characters—a practice that is not typically classified as "meta-drama". Similarly, direct communication with the audience in advertisements, which arises naturally from their persuasive intent, is not considered "meta-advertising". In contrast, cinematic performances are deliberately concealed behind an implicit framework, lacking a transparent "fourth wall" that would permit direct interaction with the audience. When such a technique is employed, it effectively breaches the film's fictional segregation. A striking example of this occurs in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), where Allen, appearing as the protagonist, directly addresses the audience and solicits their opinions about the characters in the film. This technique represents a dual-leveled meta-narrative: it not only integrates the production process into the narrative but also has the character engage directly with the audience.

Certain instances of what might be termed "frame-breaking" are particularly explicit. In *The Ring* (2002), for example, the ghostly antagonist physically crawls out of a television screen, while in *One Missed Call* (2008), a ghost crosses over into the real world through a cellphone. Perhaps the most literal and tangible manifestation of a "frame" can be seen in the visual arts, where the physical frame of a painting and its title demarcate the boundaries between the artistic world and the surrounding space, effectively separating representation from the empirical world. When a painting portrays its own frame, it engages in a self-referential act of "meta-narrativization", consciously drawing attention to its mediated nature.

16.6 "Meta-Narrative" and Narrative Theories

A "normal" narrative typically operates within the confines of its established frame. In contrast, a meta-narrative inherently seeks to "break" or at least "challenge" this frame. This deliberate act of provocation draws the reader's attention to the

existence of the frame itself, revealing that, although narratives unfold within these segregated boundaries, the frame is often overlooked or taken for granted. The technique of "frame-breaking" thus serves to defamiliarize the frame, making its significance more apparent. This approach forms the basis for the discussion of meta-narratives in the final chapter of this book: the primary objective of meta-narratives is not to convince the audience of the narrative's reality, but to expose the fact that all narratives are constructed. By revealing this constructed nature, meta-narratives prompt the audience to question the "naturalization" of stories and challenge prevailing assumptions regarding their authenticity and transparency.

When a narrative breaks the frame, as Martin observes, "immediately the author has become a theorist".[32] This statement highlights the central function of meta-narratives: they offer a means of "studying theory through narrative", even though they do so without explicitly relying on theoretical language. In essence, meta-fiction serves as a form of critique, wherein the narrator or a character assumes the role of a critic or theorist, analyzing and questioning the very rules and principles of narration from within the story itself. For instance, Hayden White's *Metahistory* is translated into Chinese as *Meta-Historiography* (*Yuan Shixue*, 《元史学》), signaling a theoretical dimension in the study of history that becomes prominent when it is meta-narrativized. Likewise, the concept of meta-games involves a study of games and an exploration of their underlying principles. This examination extends beyond the domain of coaches and kinesiologists to involve high-level expectations for athletes, who are not only required to play the game but also to understand its governing rules. Decisions made by coaches during matches, such as substitutions or tactical adjustments, can directly influence the outcome of the game. However, these decisions are invariably rooted in a systematic understanding of the game's rules.[33] In the realm of meta-drama, Richard Hornby identifies three key orientations, "In summation, where the play within the play was a device for exploring existential concerns, and the ceremony within the play a device for exploring social concerns, role playing within the role is a device for exploring the concerns of the individual".[34]

The observation is indeed logical: meta-drama not only examines the structure of drama itself but also delves into the philosophical underpinnings that shape it. However, it can be argued that all dramas inherently bear the influence of dramatic theory, and in this sense, one could contend that any drama—or, more broadly, any narrative—carries some degree of meta-narrativization. What distinguishes a true meta-narrative, however, is its intentional display of narrative strategies, coupled with a deliberate revelation of the relationships between narratives and other broader themes such as society, existence, and subjectivity. This conscious unveiling has a

[32] Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 181.

[33] Barney Darryl Pell, *Strategy Generation and Evaluation for Meta-Game Playing,* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1993.

[34] Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, London and Toronto: Associate University Press, 1986, p. 85.

crucial function: it deconstructs the "reality" traditionally associated with realism, undermining the narrative's ability to convincingly simulate the "real world". In doing so, meta-narratives challenge the ideological power of conventional storytelling, which often masquerades as a truthful representation of reality under the pretense of verisimilitude.

Placing something in quotation marks transforms it into an object of linguistic construction, rather than an independent entity that is simply "reflected" by language or other artistic expressions. The phrase "narrative expresses life" differs fundamentally from "narrative expresses 'life'". The former is "naturalized", presenting life as an entity that exists independently of narrative and maintains its full ontological reality. In contrast, the latter encloses life within quotation marks, thereby stripping it of its ontological status. Within this framework, "life" exists only as a construct of "narrative expression", and outside this construct, it loses its independent qualities. In other words, "life" is rendered without full ontological presence.

A deeper distinction lies beneath these two statements. In "narrative expresses life", both "life" and "narrative" occupy the same level of signification, and the relationship between them unfolds horizontally within that shared domain. Whether the process of expression is revealed, while important, is not of the major concern. In contrast, in "narrative expresses 'life'", the subject and object are placed in different hierarchical planes: "narrative" is situated above "life" and asserts dominance over the term enclosed in quotation marks. Here, the act of expression itself becomes central, as it disrupts the hierarchical boundary between the two. In this context, the focus shifts away from the essence of "life" and instead centers on the act of "expression". Narrative, in this case, becomes a self-referential act of signification—a narrative about the narrative itself, or, in other words, a meta-narrative.

Meta-narratives serve to illuminate the constructed nature of narratives, encouraging a deeper reflection on their fundamental essence. They reveal that the fictional world is, in essence, a product of the narrative itself. As a result, the "real" world we experience is no more inherently real than fiction; it, too, is constructed from signs. In this sense, the world can be understood as a text, with the boundaries of signs defining the boundaries of the world. As Robbe-Grillet insightfully observes: "What he [the author] asks of him [the reader] is no longer to receive ready-made a world completed, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work – and the world – and thus to learn to invent his own life".[35]

While the centrifugal movement represents a dominant trend in contemporary cultural expression, if this trajectory remains confined to the mere search for new ways to interpret the world, it risks being restricted to a single conceptual plane. To truly transcend the boundaries of contemporary cultural traditions, it is crucial to critically interrogate and reconstruct both the forms of expression and modes of interpretation. This is where the emergence of contemporary cultural meta-consciousness becomes significant.

[35] Alan Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans., Richard Howard, New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1965, p. 156.

Meta-consciousness embodies a fundamental skepticism about the ability of narratives to construct a world that accurately mirrors the real world, thus rejecting the claim to truth intrinsic to the narrative world. Instead, it emphasizes the artificial and hypothetical nature of narrative, bringing to the forefront the deeper structures that govern narrative construction—such as narrative schemas, pre-texts, intertextual value systems, and interpretive frameworks. By exposing, utilizing, and analyzing these mechanisms, meta-consciousness renders the entire apparatus of narrative creation transparent, allowing for a comprehensive examination of its operational processes.

In this type of narrative, the role of the text is no longer confined to merely representing experience; it actively constructs relationships between texts. The reader is no longer presented with pre-formed interpretations of experiences but is required to form their own understanding. The narrative no longer provides a sense of "wholeness" within its boundaries. Once all meta-languages—whether historical, ethical, rational, or ideological—are deconstructed, interpretation can no longer rely on established codes. Ambiguity is no longer excluded by the text; rather, it becomes a fundamental prerequisite for the text itself. In other words, each reader must now assume the role of a critic.

Within this framework, games can be seen as inherently meta-games with the concept of the "meta-game" extending beyond its application to games themselves and occupying an integral position in human cognition and capacity for learning. This essential capacity—the ability to draw analogies and to reject conventional, uncritical thinking—embodies what we refer to as "meta-consciousness". A narrative text becomes "meta-narrativized" precisely because it is widely recognized within a given culture, thus providing a shared platform for creativity. These texts become key references for intertextual allusions. Works like *Batman* (1939) or *Journey to the West* serve as prime examples of such foundational texts, as they offer fertile ground for the proliferation of derivative works across various media within a culture. These texts inherently possess the potential for meta-narrativization.

Texts that resist "meta-narrativization" are often considered classics or sacred works in a given culture. *A Dream of Red Mansions*, for example, has a fixed narrative structure, and any attempt to rewrite or reinterpret it is often regarded as "unfaithful" or even condemned as "desecrating a classic". These sacred texts are typically not subject to the process of "meta-narrativization". Their role within a culture is pivotal, as the act of meta-narrativization inherently carries a deconstructive power. When used excessively, this process can distort the narrative's form, gradually erode the foundational texts of a culture, and potentially dilute or even erase their original impact. This concern is not merely theoretical, but grounded in observable trends. The increasing frequency of adaptations, reimaginings, and parodies of iconic works like the *Sherlock Holmes* (1887) or *James Bond canons* (1953), or *Journey to the West* has not necessarily amplified the prominence of the original texts. Rather, these derivative works have contributed to a relative decline in their original readership, diminishing their cultural influence over time.

16.7 Meta-Consciousness and Chinese Thought

The concept of "meta-consciousness" is widely regarded as a defining feature of postmodern thought. As McCaffery notes, "'Meta-sensibility' is evolving into the characteristic sensibility of our age, the inevitable product of our heightened awareness of the subjectivity and artifice inherent in our systems, our growing familiarity with prior forms, our increased access to information of all sorts. As I outlined in my first chapter, our contemporary sensibility is saturated not only with self-consciousness but also with the realization that concepts such as play, games, fiction-making, artifice, and subjectivity lie at the very center of what makes human beings civilized."[36] However, can we truly assert that this meta-sensibility is confined exclusively to the postmodern era? Could such awareness have emerged in earlier historical periods, even if its manifestations were more subtle or fragmentary? Is it plausible to suggest that meta-consciousness could only rise to prominence as a dominant intellectual paradigm in the postmodern age?

I argue that in cultures where rationalism prevails, there is generally a weaker inclination to question or transcend established frameworks, as systems tend to function harmoniously within well-defined, unified rules. In contrast, certain philosophical traditions that go beyond rationalism—even those from pre-modern times—have more potential to nurture the development of meta-consciousness.

It is not surprising that meta-consciousness has deep roots in Chinese philosophy, particularly within the non-mainstream traditions of Taoism and Buddhism. *The Dao De Jing* (《道德经》), for instance, distinguishes the "eternal Dao" and the "eternal Name" from the "Dao that can be spoken" and the "Name that can be named", suggesting a realm beyond both the "Dao" and the "name" itself. A similar example can be found in Zen Buddhism's discussion on the distinction between "delusion" and "awakening". The *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp* (*Chuan Deng Lu,* 《传灯录》, 1004) says: "In delusion it works as knowledge, in awakening, as wisdom; obeying universal reality [principle], it works as awakening, following phenomena, as delusion".[37] This text explicitly elucidates the hierarchical relationship between states of awareness.

The *Tower of Myriad Mirrors: A Supplement to Journey to the West* (*Xi You Bu,* 《西游补》, 1641) can be rightfully considered China's first example of metafiction. While it parodies *Journey to the West*, it also delves into the concept of hierarchical levels, providing a captivating and intellectually enriching discourse. In the fourth chapter it is written, "Monkey tripped on the stone and fell into a brilliant place…. He raised his head and saw that the four walls were made of precious mirrors placed one above another. In all there must have been a million mirrors". He then sees an old friend Liu Po-ch'in in the mirror and, bowing most politely, says,

[36] Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass*, Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1982, p. 225.

[37] *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp*, trans., Randolph S. Whitfield, Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2019: Book Twenty-eight: Sayings of Chan Master Jiangxi Daji Daoyi.

"'Ten thousand pardons, great benefactor. What are you doing now? How is it that we're here in the same place?'" Liu Po-ch'in replies, "Why do you say 'in the same place?' You're in somebody else's world and I'm in your world. It's not the same place at all!"[38] This dialogue serves as an excellent illustration of the consciousness of the frame.

The dynamics of control and being controlled, manipulation and being manipulated, performing and being performed, form the fundamental principles that shape narrative. These concepts have been thoroughly examined in previous sections of this book. When Buddhism was first introduced to China, its hierarchical cosmological concepts—such as the "three realms" and the "six heavens of the desire realm"—initially struck Chinese scholars as exceedingly strange and foreign. An illustrative example can be found in the *Yaw Yang Essays* (*Youyang Zazu*, 《酉阳杂俎》, 854), which recounts a story from the *Parable Sutra* (*Pi Yu Jing*, 《譬喻经》, 497): A Brahmin magician once created a pot, from which a woman and a screen emerged. The woman set up a household within the pot. While the Brahmin rested, she conjured her own magic, producing another pot, from which a man emerged, and they lay together. Upon waking, the Brahmin swallowed his creations one by one before departing. In his *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun connected this stratified worldview to works such as *Ocean of Samādhi Contemplation Sūtra* (《观佛三昧海经》), which describes the Buddha revealing that within each hair pore are trillions of lights, wherein transformed bodhisattvas—all cultivating virtuous practices—appear.

Various Buddhist schools have long conceptualized the universe as consisting of distinct levels, a framework fundamental to their understanding of emptiness and form. For example, the *Lotus Sutra* (《华严经》) asserts: "One mind encompasses the Ten Dharma Realms, and each Dharma Realm in turn encompasses another Ten Dharma Realms – thus forming a hundred Dharma Realms." Similarly, within the Huayan school, Master Fazang—invited by Empress Wu Zetian to expound Buddhist doctrine—illustrates this hierarchical cosmology through the metaphor of a golden lion statue in the imperial palace: "In the lion's eyes, ears, and limbs – indeed, in each and every hair – there dwells a golden lion. All lions from every hair simultaneously converge into a single hair. Within each hair, infinite lions manifest, and yet each hair in turn absorbs these boundless lions back into itself. This infinite recursion mirrors the jeweled cosmic web, exemplifying the Gate of Indra's Net Realm."[39] This concept of stratification is further elaborated in the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*, where it is stated: "O noble son, when I walk, in a single thought all worlds manifest before me – passing through asamkhyeya (incalculable) worlds beyond speech". The idea of stratification is intricately connected to the practices of meditation and wisdom. Many scholars agree that the Huayan school laid the intellectual foundation for Chan (Zen) Buddhism. The notion that, "the true nature of all things is neither

[38] Tung Yüeh, *Tower of Myriad Mirrors: A Supplement to Journey to the West*, trans., Shuen-fu Lin and Larry J. Schulz, Berkeley: Asian humanities Press, 1978, pp. 54–56.

[39] Shi Jun et al., eds., *Selected Materials on Chinese Buddhist Thought, Vol. 2, Part 2,* Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983, p. 22.

non-existent nor existent" influenced Zen thought, complicating its approach to practice by introducing a deeper level of engagement with the nature of phenomena.

The concept of hierarchical stratification profoundly influenced Chan Buddhist thought, as reflected in numerous koans within Chan literature. One notable example is found in *The Book of the Lamp of the Five Lights* (*Wu Deng Hui Yuan*,《五灯会元》, 1252). In one of its stories, a master strikes a stove with his staff, releasing the stove god, who ascends to heaven. The liberated stove god, adorned in a blue robe and a high crown, returns to express his gratitude to the master. An attending monk then inquires, "We have long served the master but have not received such teachings. What profound truth did the stove deity hear to ascend to heaven?" The master replied, "I merely told him it was made of clay and tiles – nothing more." One must "shatter" the phenomenal world to ascend to a higher realm. Here, the act of "breaking" the phenomenal world symbolizes a transcendent leap to a higher understanding. Chinese poetics, influenced by Buddhist philosophy, emphasizes *xieyi* (写意, writing the essence). The premise of *xieyi* is that beyond the text lies a domain of *yi* (意, essence)—later theorized by Wang Guowei as the *jingjie* (境界, realm). This *jingjie* transcends both artistic media and the literal imagery perceived in the text.

It can be convincingly argued that ancient Chinese thinkers demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to meta-consciousness compared to their Western counterparts. However, the rise of modern meta-consciousness in the West can be traced back to the logical frameworks inherent in Greek philosophy and mathematics. For example, although Euclid's geometric system has been criticized for sustaining mechanistic thought for over a millennium, its intellectual rigor ultimately facilitated the development of meta-mathematics once its foundational axioms were questioned. In contrast, contemporary Chinese meta-consciousness reflects a modern awareness that did not directly stem from Taoism or Buddhism. Nonetheless, the non-rational elements of traditional Chinese thought paradoxically played a pivotal role in nurturing the evolution of a certain meta-consciousness.

This book concludes with a focus on meta-consciousness for a compelling reason: the notions of "frame" and "convention" serve as pivotal markers that distinguish various narrative genres. These concepts differentiate factual from fictional narratives, first-degree segregation from second-degree segregation, and recorded narratives from performative genres. In general narratology, the interpretive standard—referred to as the "naturalization of the interpretive community"—is similarly bound by the constraints of the frame. Within this frame lies a self-contained world with its own internal reality, where participants neither perceive nor need to perceive anything beyond its boundaries. In contrast, the defining characteristic of meta-consciousness is its capacity to break frames, subvert conventions, dismantle the "self-contained reality" of the frame, and deconstruct the coherence of meaning it upholds. While the frame serves to affirm its own conventions, meta-consciousness functions as the negation of those conventions. To grasp the full dynamics of affirmation, it is crucial to acknowledge the power of negation. Ultimately, narration is a uniquely human endeavor—an embodiment of the deep creative potential intrinsic to human nature. Yet, every human pursuit inevitably reveals the limitations of human cognition and the self-imposed constraints of thought.