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Unreliable Narration With a Narrator and Without

The article outlines an explication of the concept of ›mimetically unreliable narration‹, i. e. the idea that a fictional narrative is reliable if it gives an unobjectionable account of the fictional facts, and unreliable, if it does not.

While we agree with the majority of contemporary narratology that a narrator can be distrusted in a number of different ways, we argue that the diversity of mimetical unreliability runs deeper than is generally acknowledged. There is a distinction to be made that is based on the question whether the unreliable narration has, or has not, a narrator in the first place. Thus we claim that there are two kinds of mimetically unreliable narrations: ones with a narrator and ones without a narrator. The paper explains this distinction and defends it against a number of objections.

In the introduction of our paper, we argue for the assumption that not every fictional narrative has a fictional narrator by drawing on a certain understanding of fictionality. According to the so-called ›Institutional Theory of Fiction‹, fictional texts ask their readers to adopt a particular, rule-governed attitude of reception towards the text. Adopting this attitude means, centrally, to treat the sentences of the text as an invitation to imagine certain things. Some fictional texts invite their readers to imagine that there is a fictional narrator. This means that the text prompts us to imagine that we are reading or listening to someone's narrative. Some fictional narratives do not prompt us to imagine anything of the text of the work or about a teller. Instead, these narratives require us to merely use the sentences of the work as a prop to imagine certain things based on their content.

Based on this observation, we argue that both kinds of fictional narratives can be mimetically unreliable and propose to clarify the concept of mimetical unreliability as follows: The narration expressed by a literary work is mimetically unreliable if, and only if, the work authorizes imagining that the narrator does not provide completely accurate information, *or* the work does not authorize imagining

that there is a narrator; instead it seemingly, or *prima facie*, authorizes imagining states of affairs that are not completely accurate. We elaborate on the components of this proposal, dwell on some of its apparent problems, comment on several competing understandings of unreliability in fictional narratives, discuss the question whether it should be seen as a comparative or as a classificatory term, and briefly address the concept's ascription in the context of textual interpretation.

The distinction between unreliable narrations with a narrator and without is not meant to replace other current distinctions between varieties of unreliability in fictional narratives. The main interest of our proposal lies in the way it uses the theory of fiction in order to shed light on narrative unreliability. Narrative unreliability, in our view, is a complex phenomenon in that its explanation presupposes some such theoretical underpinning.

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