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Notes for a(nother) Theory of Experientiality

This article takes up Monika Fludernik's concept of experientiality and attempts to develop it in a new direction. It is well-known that Fludernik introduced the term ›experientiality‹ in her Towards a ›Natural‹ Narratology (1996) as a label for narrative's »quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience« (ibid., 12). However, in her book Fludernik made the additional move of arguing that experientiality is the defining feature of narrative, thus attracting a barrage of criticisms from scholars (Sternberg 2001; Alber 2002; Wolf 2003; Herman 2009) who insisted that we need other, more traditional criteria for determining what qualifies as narrative in a given context. In the discussion that ensued, the concept of experientiality was widely cited but rarely subjected to detailed scrutiny per se – that is to say, in abstraction from Fludernik's problematic claim that it constitutes the essence of narrative.

In this article, I argue that Fludernik's intuition about experientiality is well worth following – provided that we ease up on its connection with narrativity. I begin by exploring the limits of Fludernik's representational, ›quasi-mimetic‹ approach to the relationship between narrative and experience. We should not underestimate the difficulties of capturing experience in narrative terms: storytellers struggle hard to evoke the ›texture‹ of experience, and especially that of our embodied (perceptual and emotional) contacts with the world. Fludernik was right to suggest that embodiment is the core feature of experientiality, but her emphasis on representation kept her from fully addressing this issue. Stories, I point out, are entangled in an experiential network that comprises their producers, their recipients, and the events and existents that they semiotically represent. I use conversational narrative (cf. Ochs/Capps 2001) as a point of entry into this problem, building on John Searle's (1983; 1992) concept of the ›Background‹. The stories we tell in social interaction express – and attempt to make sense of – our past experiences by projecting them against a shared background of perceptions, emotions, and values.

In the second part of the article, I try to show that this experiential background is brought to bear on stories of all kinds, and that it accounts for the representational dimension of narrative experientiality. Consider fictional narratives: far from being ›things in the text‹, the characters' experiences are created and recreated

by the story producers and recipients, in the course of their engagement with the story, on the basis of their experiential background. In other words, our imaginative constructions and reconstructions of characters' experiences draw on ›experiential traces‹ left by our past interactions with the physical and social world. Importantly, however, not only does engaging with narrative tap into our experiential background, but it can also feed back into the background itself. This feedback effect – or »impact«, in David Herman's (2007, 256) term – may come in various forms: imaginings, emotional reactions to the characters and the situations with which they are faced, judgments that invite us to rethink our cultural values. It is on the last aspect that I focus in the context of this article. Specifically, I capitalize on Wolfgang Iser's insights about the ›negativity‹ of literary works in order to establish a correlation between the aesthetic value of a story and its capacity to restructure our background at a conceptual, culturally mediated level. Through their open-endedness or ›negativity‹, literary stories ask questions that resonate with the experiential background of many different recipients, leaving a deep mark on their worldview.

All in all, I propose to use the term ›experientiality‹ to designate the experiential ›feel‹ that results from the interaction between narrative and our experiential background: stories rely on our familiarity with human experience, but at the same time they can provide full-fledged imaginative experiences that have an effect on our background. In order to show how this process works, in the third part of this article I offer an interpretation of a novella by Samuel Beckett, Company. What is interesting about this text is that its insistence on the protagonist's bodily experience turns it into a test case for embodiment. Company is generally thought of as a meditation on the problem of the self (Locatelli 1990; Malina 2002); however, I argue that most critics have downplayed the importance of the protagonist's body in Beckett's exploration of the boundaries of subjectivity. In particular, in his piece Beckett seems to put into action a phenomenological insight about the embodied roots of the self: he asks his readers to ›act out‹ an experience of pure embodiment through their perceptual identification with the character. Our engagement with the protagonist draws on our familiarity with embodied experience while at the same time having a profound impact on it (and on us): it removes the linguistic and narrative layers of our self-construction, exposing the naked body of our self.

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