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**Der heterodiegetische Präsensroman – ein Fall von
unreliable narration?
(Abstract)**

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Research has shown that the present-tense novel poses significant logical problems of narrative mediation. For this reason, the current essay addresses the question of whether, due to these problems, the heterodiegetic present-tense novel is a case of unreliable narration. To this end, the essay first discusses the sustainability of the concept of unreliability. Its point of departure is the observation that researchers have created significant confusion by applying a characterological concept to literary phenomena. Despite an overwhelming amount of pertinent essays and monographs on the topic, the central questions raised by this concept are still highly contested: To which narrative instances can we plausibly apply the category of unreliability? Precisely which narratological aspects of the mediating instance can we account for using the category of unreliability?

Using the example of Holden Caulfield, the narrating protagonist from J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, this essay demonstrates which difficulties arise when we impute unreliability to a complex narrative instance. The lack of conceptual precision which comes to light in this novel not only leads – as in the case of *Catcher in the Rye* – to contradictory assignments of the category of unreliability in one and the same text but also to the constitution of a text corpus that is primarily characterized by its heterogeneity. This undermines the intersubjective use of concepts and, as a result, further literary knowledge. Therefore, this essay argues that we should abandon the concept of unreliability in favor of more precise analytic categories, instead of making the discussion of this category even more unwieldy than it already is by adding new definitions and thereby impeding agreement within the scientific community.

In order to more precisely define the logical problems of narrative mediation of the heterodiegetic present-tense novel, the essay will first define the speech acts of narration, taking the temporal relation between the narrative procedure and the narrated events as the identifying feature. In the process, the use of the simple-past tense proves to be constitutive, not only because of experience in daily life with the speech act of narration but also and above all for logical reasons. Here, the preterit retains its deictic function of referring to the past. In terms of genre, the present-tense novel resembles drama, since there too the mediating instance makes use of the present tense as the marginal text does in drama. This is why we can no longer refer to a narrative speech act in the case of the present-tense novel. Rather, the present-tense novel creates the same impression as the speech act of live reportage in daily life. Connected to this, however, are perspectival restrictions of the spatial and temporal type (predominantly *zeitdeckende Vermittlung*, where narrating time matches narrated time; uncertainty about the future, spatial fixity), but primarily with respect to the representation of another consciousness (extremely limited introspection). However, because the mediating instance in the present-tense novel tends not to adhere to these restrictions, we are confronted with a paradoxical form of narrative mediation.

Depending on the design of a text, the reader can either become aware of this paradox or it can remain hidden from him or her. The latter is the case in Andrea Camilleri's crime novel *Il*

tuttomio (2013), which aims to make the recipient as focused on the plot as possible and hence to heighten the suspense that is constitutive for the genre of the crime novel. It is probably for this reason that the present tense emerges more frequently in recent crime novels. This is also the case for Stefan Slupetzky's novel *Das Schweigen des Lemming* (2006), although in this text the form of narrative mediation – in contrast to Camilleri's text – is extremely conspicuous. The rhetorical prominence of the mediating instance and the technique of montage, coupled with the use of the present-tense, work to disrupt the illusion. Accompanying the suspense on the level of the plot is a meta-fictional layer that prompts the reader to reflect upon the conventions of the crime novel.

The essay then briefly presents two texts which, each in a different way, legitimate the use of the present tense, so that the impression of a paradoxical form of narrative mediation does not at all arise. In Wojciech Kuczok's novel *Senność* (2008), the mediating instance repeatedly creates the impression, through its particular behavior, that the present text is a screenplay, a genre for which the present tense is constitutive. In Vladimir Makanin's short novel *Laz* (1991), on the other hand, the present tense functions as the tense which signals timelessness, thus underscoring the allegorical character of the text.

Even when such strategies of legitimation significantly attenuate the paradoxical effect of present-tense usage, we nonetheless have to remain cognizant of the fact that the transgression of its restrictions raises fundamental logical problems of narrative mediation, since we cannot plausibly explain the accompanying enlargement of the mediating instance's perceptual perspective. In this sense, we could regard the specific form of narrative mediation in the present-tense novel as a case of unreliable narration. This would entail, however, that we broaden even more the umbrella term of unreliability, as scholars have already been doing for some time now. But that would accomplish precisely the opposite of what scientific concept-building should in fact strive for: namely, to describe textual phenomena with the greatest terminological precision and thereby to ensure agreement within the scientific community.

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