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## Historicizing Plot: A Poetics of Coincidence and Counterfactuality

- Hilary P. Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality. Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*, Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press 2008. XII, 289 S. [Preis: \$ 50,00]. ISBN: 978-0-8032-1093-6.

### Introduction

While Hilary P. Dannenberg's new book features a relatively unassuming title, it tackles not just one, but several large topics. Focussing on two phenomena – coincidence and counterfactuality – that may at first sight seem only of marginal importance in plot theory, her study (1) seeks to provide a new model for analyzing plot in narrative fiction and (2) attempts to connect cognitive research on real-life mental operations with the analysis of concrete textual features. Last but not least, it (3) promises to chart a history of the last 400 years in the development of narrative fiction in English, showing how through the lens of the phenomena of coincidence and counterfactuality one can assemble an »evolutionary map of the novel« (135) that offers a fresh perspective on the status of individual works and authors. In order to achieve these goals, Dannenberg brings together a broad range of research from different fields, most notably narratology, cognitive studies and possible worlds theory. It is one of the great strengths of this study that despite the multitude of different aspects it incorporates, it is so lucidly structured that it is easy to follow the set-up of the argument.

In combining narrative theory and literary history, Dannenberg rethinks the role of patterns that historians of the novel have mostly seen as deviations from a norm of tightly structured causal relations: from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, plots centring on coincidence were frequently derided as »unrealistic« and associated with the older form of romance. Counterfactuality, on the other hand, is often thought of as a phenomenon confined to a few specialised genres, such as science fiction or alternate histories. As Dannenberg argues, however, such supposedly marginal narrative strategies have played an important role in the history of the novel. She conceptualizes the two as principles that oppose each other in one central respect: the coincidence plot is associated with *convergence*, as it »involves the intersection of narrative paths and the interconnection of characters within the narrative world, closing and unifying it as an artistic structure.« By contrast, plots of counterfactuality are marked by *divergence*, »the bifurcation or branching of narrative paths«, thereby creating »an open pattern of diversification and multiplicity.« (2)

As a proponent of the currently burgeoning field of cognitive approaches to literature, Dannenberg does not regard plot as a specifically literary phenomenon, but is interested in the way in which everyday mental operations are elicited by specific devices in literary texts. Seen from this point of view, what is at the centre of attention is not so much ›plot‹ understood as a structural feature of a text, but the dynamic process of ›plotting‹ or ›emplotment‹, which highlights the active participation on the part of the reader: »Plot and the larger mental operation of plotting in its most extensive sense can be understood as any attempt to make sense of a larger, unorganized entity by constructing some kind of reductive and selective system.« (13) ›Plot‹ as a structure within the text is thus inextricably linked to the real-life process of sense-making. Thus, her analyses not only concern themselves with the order in which

parts of the story are told, and the causal connections suggested between them, but also with the way in which the reader is involved in configuring and reconfiguring the text, forming and revising expectations about the outcome of the action as she goes along. Moreover, plot in this sense is closely linked to the representation of literary characters because the trajectories that can be mapped draw their interest from the narration of emotionally engaging life stories, and also because characters' expectations, hopes and fears, as far as they are represented by the text, play an important role in the configuration of these trajectories.

## **Main Arguments and Structure**

The study is divided into three major parts. The first two have theoretical foci, while the third part is dedicated to the diachronic overview of coincidence and counterfactuality in selected narrative texts. The first part, »Theorizing Time and Space in Narrative Fiction«, introduces the conceptual framework from which the study proceeds – or rather three »interlocking conceptual frameworks« (13). Chapter 1 (»Cognitive Plotting«) mainly focuses on »the reader's mental responses to narrative plots in terms of her varying ability to [...] mentally cross the border between her own and the fictional world« (19). It draws on Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of »immersion«, which proposes that fictional texts can more or less successfully induce a reader to give herself up to a »mental journey« into the fictional world, and introduces features connected to plot (e.g. suspense) that foster this process. Chapter 2 (»Ontological Plotting«) then works with concepts from possible-worlds theory to convey a better idea of what strategies a literary text can employ in order to create a life-like fabric of »alternate possible worlds that give it depth and interest« (45). Narratives, Dannenberg argues, do much more than present a pre-discursively existent story in a new order: they are interesting to us because in the process of reading, we are invited to imagine different possible outcomes, wish for, expect or fear certain alternatives, or engage with the characters' expectations, fears or wishes. In realist fiction, these alternate outcomes are clearly distinguished from the »actual narrative world« by information that allows the reader to establish an »ontological hierarchy« (e.g. when it becomes clear that an event is just a dream, or part of a wish-world). Chapter 3 (»Spatial Plotting«), finally, draws on schema theory in order to shed light on basic real-life sense-making operations that also become important for the processing of information about time and place in narrative. It proceeds from Mark Johnson's thesis that humans often use spatial metaphors in order to apprehend phenomena connected to time, because space to us is a more tangible category which can be connected to concrete physical experiences like going from A to B, or choosing between two paths. Dannenberg then introduces some spatial schemata that are used in fictional texts to »simulate« space in more complex ways (75) and explains how these are used in conjunction with plot patterns.

As a whole, part 1 gives introductions to a broad scope of theoretical fields and deftly weaves together concepts from various disciplines. If some questions still remain open in this part, this is because of problems that are hard to solve for cognitive approaches to literature in general. In particular, the most interesting concepts for literary scholars seem to be the ones that are hard to validate on an empirical basis because of their complexity. The concept of »immersion« is a case in point: taken literally, does it really tell us what happens in our minds when we read a certain kind of literature? In what sense is the idea of a »mental journey« and of »boundary crossing« more than just a metaphor for cognitive operations that we are far from having understood? And on what basis is it possible to argue that it is a fact that »immersive reading involves the reader's overriding of her true ontological level and her mental relocation into the narrative world« (23)? Would it not be just as valid to argue that a distinctive feature

of reading fiction is that we are always on some level aware that the narrative world is not ours and that we cannot ›enter‹ it?

In part two (»Theorizing Coincidence and Counterfactuality«), the status of real-world mental operations also plays a role, but it stays on the safer ground of psychological research and its application to the representation of complex literary characters. This part focuses on what might be called a »poetics« of coincidence (chapter 4) and counterfactuality (chapter 5). In a first step, psychological research on coincidence and counterfactuality in real life is outlined. This is especially interesting in the case of counterfactuals, which are currently discussed as a new field for interdisciplinary research. Chapter 4 then lays out a number of concepts to facilitate the analysis of coincidence – defined as »a constellation of two or more apparently random events in space and time with an uncanny or striking connection« (93). Dannenberg distinguishes the phases and patterns of the »traditional coincidence plot«, which usually hinges on a ›recognition scene‹ and which involves the idea of an actual relationship between characters (most often kinship) or objects prior to the point in the narrative at which they come together. Conversely, in the case of »analogical coincidence« the connection consists only in structural similarity, not in prior relationship. Chapter 5 discusses the different approaches to counterfactuality in a variety of disciplines and makes the concept viable for analyses of individual literary texts by opting for a narrow definition as »theoretical alterations or mutations of a past sequence of events made in order to construct a different version of reality that counters the events of the ›real‹ or factual world« (110). With the help of her concept of an »ontological hierarchy«, Dannenberg maps out three main tendencies for the use of counterfactuals in narrative texts: (1) a »realist« version, in which counterfactual plotting is clearly delineated as the mental operation of a character or overt narrator and distinguished from the actual textual world, (2) »semirealist«, which can feature more than one »actual« world within the text, but still conforms to »realist explanatory strategies such as causation« (121; e.g. in a science-fiction text which features the possibility of time travel), or (3) »antirealist«, in which the existence of alternate worlds frustrates any attempt by the reader to establish a coherent ›actual‹ world of the text. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to a survey of key forms of counterfactuality in fiction.

Part three (»Coincidence and Counterfactuality in the History of Narrative Fiction«) charts the development of the two patterns through 400 years of literary history. It thus follows the recent trend in narrative studies to situate those features within historical contexts that the structuralist approaches of classical narratology represented as timeless phenomena. Dannenberg gives a fascinating survey of the different forms and especially the functions plots of coincidence and counterfactuality have taken in narrative texts (and a few films), drawing on a large number of (predominantly canonical) works. The chapter on »Metamorphoses of the Coincidence Plot« demonstrates that a focus on this pattern »reveals a continuity rather than a dichotomy between romance and realism« (142). One fascinating point that could in itself be the focus of another study is the connection between changing beliefs about the ways in which God or fate or random chance direct human lives, and modifications of the coincidence plot, which can thus be seen as staging assumptions about principles of causation. In such passages, the close relation between the development of plot patterns and the history of mentalities becomes tangible. What is also particularly helpful is how Dannenberg manages to sum up major features of the use of coincidence in different literary epochs and genres (e.g. the Renaissance Romance, the Victorian Novel, Postmodernist Fiction) without glossing over the variations and shifts in function that can be found even in one and the same work.

Similarly, the chapter on counterfactuality charts a new territory by giving the first comprehensive overview of the development of counterfactual plot patterns in narrative fiction. Dan-

nenberg demonstrates that counterfactual patterns are by no means an invention of science fiction or postmodernist fiction, but can be traced back to the Renaissance novel, in which both characters and narrators speculate on the question »what if«. She stresses the particular importance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the site of a »watershed«: the »hegemony of fairytale story-lines«, which hinges on patterns of coincidence serving to bring about successful courtship and marriage, is challenged by an increasing number of works in the second half of the century (193). Dannenberg shows how in novels by Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, counterfactuals are used to question cultural norms about gender roles. The rest of the chapter then turns to 20<sup>th</sup>-century texts with more obvious counterfactual patterns, which can have very different functions: while antirealist forms often »refer to the overall sense of the constructedness of all sense-making patterns« (229), in other cases counterfactuals can be used to defend or attack a concrete *status quo*.

## Conclusion

*Coincidence and Counterfactuality* is a rewarding read. Its particular merits are the insights it gives into the many facets that are involved in a cognitive approach to plot in literary texts, its formulation of a poetics of coincidence and counterfactuality in narrative fiction, and, above all, its outline of the changing forms and functions of the two patterns through the history of the novel. The one expectation that is not fulfilled is that the study could, despite its acknowledgement of »the intrinsic complexity and mutability of plot in theory and narrative practice« (13), have tried to provide at least a heuristic terminological distinction between the different intra- and extratextual levels of »plot«, »plotting« and »emplotment«. While the argument that these aspects are closely intertwined is convincing, it does not follow that it would be impossible to keep them apart on a conceptual level. Phrases like »the reader's mental responses to narrative plots« (19) suggest that the author herself at least at times thinks of »narrative plot« as a phenomenon that can be conceived of as separate from the mental operation of a reader. A consequence of the refusal to provide clear definitions of »plot« and related concepts is that the status of coincidence and counterfactuality as »plot patterns« also remains somewhat opaque. This means that, for example, it is not clear whether one should think of them as two possible strategies among a larger array of different possibilities (what would then be comparable »patterns«? And what would be the status of the two in relation to the others?), or if the concepts cut across so many categories that it would be futile to try describing other phenomena on the same level.

The intriguing parts of the study more than make up for these points of criticism, but what remains is the impression that it is Dannenberg's excellent diachronic survey rather than her very complex theoretical model that offers the most interesting points of departure for further research. Among the book's most engaging parts are those that start exploring concrete interrelations between plot patterns and cultural context, involving topics like individual agency, processes of historical causation, and gender roles – more investigations into these fields would be highly welcome.

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