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Telling Deceiving Selves, Bending Fictional Facts

- Zuzana Fonioková, Kazuo Ishiguro and Max Frisch: Bending Facts in Unreliable and Unnatural Narration. Frankfurt: Peter Lang Edition 2015. 268 p. Price: [EUR 56.00]. ISBN 978-3-631-66050-8.

Literary narrative fiction is through its semiotic modality uniquely endowed to probe and investigate the nexus of values, communicational strategies and personal identity negotiations at play whenever someone is telling a story. The history of modern literature is a regular treasure-trove of more or less insightful and more or less truthful narrators, attempting to come to terms with what living and what telling could or should be. From this does not follow that all silent soliloquies of the written must be read as if they operate solely according to the norms governing the stories actual people tell each other in real life. The written soliloquies may also use the invented nature of fictionalized storytelling to invite readers to partake in subverting, challenging and deconstructing the expectations, norms and forms on which notions such as storytelling, the personal, authenticity and reliability rest. In *Kazuo Ishiguro and Max Frisch: Bending Facts in Unreliable and Unnatural Narration*, Zuzana Fonioková answers to this latter invitation, setting out to investigate how experimental unreliable narration ties in with identity negotiations in the works of Ishiguro and Frisch.

The book follows a recursive design with two overarching, connected aims, one theoretical, one analytical and comparative. I will briefly mention the second, more particular aim before giving the first, theoretical and more general aim more interest. The analytical and comparative aims materialize in two large sections (one on Ishiguro, one on Frisch) and are set on exploring – through close reading – how the authors move from using more traditional types of unreliability to more radical forms. They do so while exploring the conditions as well as the limits of »the invented nature of one's identity« (245), with all analyzed novels being about »*self-deceived narrating characters*« (22, italics in original). In somewhat parallel trajectories, the two authors are described as moving beyond realist representation in order to arrive at »an even more profound depiction of the psychological condition of their narrators« (11).

The first, theoretical aim is driven by intentions that should be immediately recognizable, perhaps even homely, to scholars well versed in narratology: Fonioková wants to set up a distinction and coin a new term. The field of interest, likewise, is somewhat of a usual suspect, in that it centers on the challenges raised by what is typically referred to as unreliability, i.e. situations where storytellers appear to say more or less than they could and/or should. In Booth's classic wording from *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: »[a narrator is] reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not«.[1] Being one of the key features of modern written fiction, phenomena related to unreliability remain among the prime candidates for what an adequate theory of literary fictive narration should be able to explain. The idea of unreliability has been the center of so much attention that one might even talk about unreliability studies as a subfield of narrative theory, cutting across other fields such as rhetorical narratology, cognitive narratology and intercultural narratology.

Combining rhetorical (Phelan), communicational (Yacobi) and reader-oriented (Nünning) approaches to unreliability with insights from possible-world theory (Ryan, Pavel, Doležel), the key theoretical gambit of Fonioková's contribution is based on a distinction between what is

called »unreliable narration proper« and what is called »narrational fact-bending« (10). Fonioková finds the term unreliable »overused« when used to describe and analyze a certain type of »unnatural or antimimetic narration« (ibid.) such as that found in Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, in Martin Amis's *Times Arrow* or, as per the second aim of the book, in selected novels from the productions of Ishiguro and Frisch. This particular type of unnatural narration, the »fact-bending« narration, is characterized by a process through which the »fictional world adopts the narrator's perspective« (ibid.). This conflation of the presented and the presenter leaves no room or discrepancy between the (possibly weird, strange and fact-bending) world presented by the narrator and what Booth would refer to as the norms and values nested in the implied author. This makes it impossible for the reader to, as Fonioková puts it »discover an implicit correct version of what happened« (ibid.) and it breaches »the convention that the reader can trust the mimetic components of an unreliable narrator's discourse« (23). This distinction is then coupled with a distinction between unreliable and unnatural narration as prompting different reading strategies. While both more traditional unreliability and the experimental, fact-bending and unnatural form force the reader to »do much more than lie back and enjoy a simple story« (252), important differences exist in the type of mental activity. Unreliable narration »encourages the reader to try to find out what happened on the level of the fictional world« whereas in narratives »that employ unnatural elements to portray the narrator's fact-bending, the main focus of the reader's interpretative activity is not on reconstructing the fictional reality but on figuring out why the fictional world defies the rules and logic of the extratextual world« (251).

The project carried out through the book deserves credit on several accounts. Theoretically and methodologically, it is liberating to follow an approach that does not attempt to downplay or explain away the difficulties encountered when trying to grasp the complex nexus of aesthetic and ethic matters at work in what is referred to as unreliability. A major strength of the book is its demonstration of just how fertile this ground is for thinking not only about narrative as such but also for thinking about self and identity in general. Insisting on not reducing or translating the experimental forms to mere wrapping or filler, the book goes counter to what other proponents of unnatural narratology have termed mimetic reductionism. The suggestion to distinguish between more traditional and more experimental forms of unreliability offers a convincing take on explicating and beginning to think about differences picked up by most readers, but given little or no thought in previous theory. Important differences do exist between the unreliability found in, say, some of Nabokov's writing and the radical skewedness of autodiegetic narration found in some works by, say, Kafka.

Secondly, to this reader (who admittedly is no expert on Frisch or Ishiguro) the readings appear convincing, as does the positioning of the results of the readings in relation to the existing receptions of the writers. Further, the theoretical distinction, rather than being (yet another) taxonomy or analytical, abstract matrix, actually helps in seeing and understanding important aspects of how and for what purposes Ishiguro and Frisch push the boundaries of traditional forms of unreliability. While it can be argued that most modern autodiegetic fiction deals with dilemmas about having and being a self, about the role of narration and invention in relation to being or becoming human, the readings combine close reading of the invented selves with insights from psychology on self-deception outside of the invented realms in impressive and inspiring ways that could easily be extended further to other narrative artifacts, either fictional or factual.

As for possible reservations, one minor issue is the somewhat underdeveloped notion of the unnatural. Used in the title as well as in the key theoretical distinction one would expect the term to receive a more systematic attention. Fonioková claims that the »use of the term is based on the work of scholars in the Unnatural Narratology research group based at Aarhus University« (10, n. 2), however, this is only partly the fact (among the more obvious omissions from

the emerging canon of unnatural narrative theory are the works of Henrik Skov Nielsen, including the jointly authored 2010-article from *Narrative*).[2] A perhaps more substantial reservation can be raised about the selection and combination of precisely Ishiguro and Frisch, and, following from that, about the connections between the theoretical and analytical/comparative aims. The argument for investigating these two and only these two authors in the same book is that Fonioková finds a »considerable resemblance between the two writers' narrative techniques« (11). One could easily find dozens of other writers employing similar strategies and one could also find considerable differences between these authors along other axes. This also raises questions regarding the potential generalizability and applicability of the theoretical insights drawn from these particular readings. Apart from brief mentions of how modernist writings invite epistemological questions, whereas postmodern writings invite ontological questions (McHale), the book is somewhat stingy with its contextualization such as positioning the authors and the narrative techniques in relation to larger historical, cultural or aesthetic constellations.

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Notes

[1] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago [1961] 1983, 158–159.
[2] Cf. Jan Alber/Stefan Iversen/Henrik Skov Nielsen/Brian Richardson, Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models, *Narrative* 18:2 (2010), 113–136.

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