Metalepsis out of Bounds

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Abstract

This is a review of the panel "Metalepsis out of Bounds" presented at the 2013 ENN conference. The three convenors proposed complementary remarks to the extent that they either questioned the conceptualization, examined the functioning of metalepsis or applied theoretical models to textual material. Beside an in depth reflection upon the concept, broader questions concerning narrative and popular assumptions of narratology arose.

Since Genette coined the term *metalepsis* in his *Narrative Discourse* relegating it to the classics – in his works *author's metalepsis* referred to «pretending that the poet himself brings about the effects he celebrates» – the topic gradually transformed from a minor, rather slipshod remark into a central notion in narratological theories. Genette named «any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic univers, etc.), or the inverse (as in Cortazar['s *Continuidad de los Parques*]), [that] produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical (when, as in Sterne or Diderot, it is presented in a joking tone) or fantastic» (234-35) a narrative metalepsis, arguing that the «metalepsis here forms a system with *prolepsis, analepsis, syllepsis*, and *paralepsis*» (235). Since the French specialist in narratology mapped out the phenomenon, different studies, from different perspectives, have been devoted to the subject (Pier and Schaeffer) and by consequence, different typologies and different ways of classification have been developed (Nelles; Malina; Wagner; Fludernik; Grabe et al.; Ryan, "Logique culturelle de la métalepse"; Klimenek). The device drew critical attention during the heydays of postmodernist literature and contributed highly to the establishment and self-understanding of postclassical narratology. During the past decade, several scholars have underlined that metalepsis is not an exclusive literary device but can be found in almost every form of representation. With that knowledge, different research projects have started to focus on the occurrence of metalepsis in painting, movies, comics and recently theologians as well as historians have studied the phenomenon.1 And the anthology *Metalepsis in Popular Culture* (Kukkonen and Klimek) is one of the first volumes to bundle the scientific interest of different research areas.

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1 For example, during the the conference "Die Metalepse in antiken Diskursen" at the University of Giessen in 2011.

This review of the panel "Metalepsis out of Bounds", organized during the 3rd ENN conference in Paris, wants to summarize the presentations and, moreover, outline the most important questions and remarks that occurred during the discussion and exposed some theoretical obstacles.

The panel "Metalepsis out of Bounds" especially focused on the application of the device in literary texts. In the first place, the panel was understood as a possibility to exchange information and knowledge about a topic approached from different research angles out of literary theory. Dr. Liviu Lutas (University of Lund) analysed the use of metalepsis in two Francophone works of fiction dealing with the past – Charles Ferdinand Ramuz's short story *Scène dans la forêt* and Marie Ndiaye's novel *Trois femmes puissantes (Three Strong Women)*– and in one film – *God on Trial* by Andy De Emmony. He pointed out how the device can influence the conceptualization of the past. Saartje Gobyn (Ghent University) focused on literary work, analysing the appearance and the functions of metalepsis in Günter Grass' *Die Rättin (The Rat)* with special attention for the textual circumstances in which metalepses can occur. Professor Kangru Wu's (Capital Normal University, Beijing) presentation on the occurrence of metalepsis and *mise en abyme* in Chinese literature rounded off the panel. She discussed the functions of *mise en abyme* in the drama *The Peony Pavillon* (Xianzu) and the occurrence of metalepsis in the Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Cao Xueqin), using Dorrit Cohn's division of interior and exterior metalepsis and pointing out that metalepsis is a wide spread phenomenon in both Chinese and Occidental literature, used to underscore the fictive character of narration. The three papers were complementary to the extent that they either questioned the conceptualization, examined the functioning of metalepsis or applied theoretical models to textual material. Given this combination of angles, the panel elicited fruitful and interesting discussions regarding the phenomenon.

One of the remarks during the discussion referred to the hero from *Die Blechtrommel* (Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*), Oskar Matzerath, who gets an alter ego in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,* and questioned if we have to define such a transgression as a metalepsis too. Frank Wagner and Sabine Schlickers, among others, would categorize such a movement as a horizontal metalepsis. If we consider a transgression from one story world to another as a metalepsis, it becomes, in some cases, almost impossible to distinguish between metalepsis and other intertextual references. When for example, Little Red Riding Hood appears in *Witches Abroad* (Terry Pratchett), do we have to consider her appearance as a metalepsis or as an intertextual reference? Liviu Lutas notices that Marie-Laure Ryan considers such examples as a case of *transfictionality* – «Transfictionality is the migration of elements such as characters, plot structures, or setting from one fictional text to another» ("Possible Worlds") – and thus not a metalepsis at all. Ryan argues that already existing fictional characters who appear in new novels (as Little Red Riding Hood in *Witches Abroad* and Oskar in *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close*) can be seen as counterparts from the original characters. Françoise Lavocat, on the other hand, links the concept of *transfictionality* to *metalepsis*. She observes that definitions of transfictionality hover between a «cas particulier de l'intertextualité» and a «sous-division d'un certain type de métalepse, […] plus précisément […] une métalepse d'énoncé horizontal» (158). Lavocat herself distinguishes between *intraleptic transfictionality* and *metaleptic transfictionality*. The degree of metafiction – the text's 'consciousness' of its different diegetic levels – is decisive in categorizing a form of transfictionality as metaleptic. This short summary shows that there is a clear overlap between the concept of

transfictionality and the one of *metalepsis* and that certain literary phenomena could be described both as metaleptic and as transfictional. John Pier even equates transfictionality and horizontal metalepsis of the enunciate: «[…] while metalepsis is generally found within a given text, violating that text's system of diegetic levels, infringement of boundaries can also take place across texts. Such is the case in horizontal metalepsis of enunciation, studied by Rabau (2005) under the term "heterometalepsis", but it also occurs in horizontal metalepsis of the enunciate, a phenomenon that coincides with "transfictionality" as when, say, Sherlock Holmes appears in the fictional universe of *Madame Bovary*» ("Metalepsis"). Seen in this light, it could be advisable to list up 'self-referentiality' as a necessary characteristic of metalepsis. Because of the occurrence of metalepsis, a text thus uncovers its own inner structure and refers to itself as a text/a construction. Whether a certain transfictional 'movement' is metaleptic then depends on how the transfictionality is staged, as Lavocat also suggests.

Liviu Lutas demonstrated that seemingly insignificant details as a time shift from past to present can trigger the metalepsis, which then of course is not always acknowledged as such. In the short story *Scène dans la forêt* by Swiss author C. F. Ramuz, such time shifts can be interpreted as a way of giving the reader the impression of getting closer to the events in the diegesis, which is not really a case of metalepsis. But, according to Lutas, Ramuz's time shifts can also be read as a transgression of the border between the world of what is told and the world which tells, since the present can be seen as the tense of the narrator's discourse. Marie Ndiaye's novel *Three Strong Women* constitutes another example of how a quite common device, in this case free indirect discourse, can have a metaleptic dimension, especially when its use in the text goes beyond the simple enunciation act. The fusion of voices which defines the free indirect voices leads to a fusion of identities in Ndiaye's novel, where the daughter, Norah, and the father seem to become one and the same person at the end. This fusion of identities can be interpreted metaleptically since the story was narrated by and focalized on Norah, who transgresses her narrative status when she melts together with a character inside the diegesis. Both these examples illustrate that such a highly fictional narrative device as metalepsis can be successfully used when writing about the past in a serious way. Moreover, both examples show that the reading process and the way in which some technical devices are interpreted have an important impact on the decision whether to consider a certain device as metaleptic.

During her presentation, Saartje Gobyn discussed the occurrence and the functions of metalepsis in Günter Grass' novel *Die Rättin*, a text that confronts the reader with complex narrative stratification. While the different story worlds in the beginning of the novel can easily be distinguished from each other, the different plot lines run towards the end trough one another, building one big jumble of narrative strands. Consequently, it becomes difficult to discern metaleptic movements – if, for example, characters from different story worlds meet each other in a 'new' story world, can we still categorize this crossing as metaleptic? – and especially to define them. *Die Rättin* proved it difficult, for example, to distinguish between descending and ascending metalepses because the text does not allow the reader at any time to pinpoint its characters in a diegetic or in a hypodiegetic story world. Furthermore, the novel also revealed certain metaleptic passages in which no crossing of any border can be found. The text blurs, as it were, information from different story worlds and as such presents contradictory utterances which can never be true in the different story worlds. This observation lead to suspect that it could be useful to distinguish between 'active'

metalepses – in which a transgression can be discerned – and 'passive' metalepses – in which it is rather a question of a merging of information.[2] Texts with a complex narrative structure as *Die Rättin* also raise the question whether it is necessary that the narrative levels and the borders be clearly marked in the text in order to have a metalepsis, since the concept of metalepsis is based on the (highly metaphorical) conception of levels and borders in a text, which can be crossed. Ambivalently enough, this crossing, of course, confirms in the first place the existence of the borders.

As this summary shows, the "Metalepsis out of Bounds" panel proved to answer questions concerning the use, the occurrence and the functions metalepsis can have in both films and Western and Chinese literature. Of course, however, some problems came to the surface during the discussion, which could not be solved immediately. The already mentioned remark concerning the existence of diegetic levels which can be discerned from each other as a condition for the occurrence of metalepsis stays for now largely unsubstantiated. Furthermore, we also questioned ourselves whether it is justified to transfer the distinction between real and 'not real' just like that into the text. The concept of *metalepsis* is namely based on the logical distinction between fiction and reality – a distinction that is transferred from our (extratextual/ontological) 'reality' into the text (or any work of art). This distinction divides (or can divide) the text into several story worlds or story levels, but is it justified to project the rules that order the extratextual reality in the text? Before this question can be answered further research on the theoretical models is essential. Besides valuable discussions, fruitful contacts and an interesting cooperation, the panel thus also elicited food for reflection and further research.

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[2] Grabe et al. already presented a typology in which they discern between paradoxical narration that transgresses limits (*metalepsis* and *hiperlepsis*) and paradoxical narration that annuls limits (*silepsis* and *epanalepsis*). Silepsis implies the merging of the world in which the narrator tells and 'the told'. Epanalepsis is closely connected to the phenomenon of *mise en abyme*. The metalepsis found in *Die Rättin* do not fit the category of silepsis, nor the one of epanalepsis.

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