statu**S Q**uaestionis•
l a n g u a g e t e x t c u l t u r e•

Andrea Fenice

Analysing Epistemic Disparity: The Use of Possible-World Theory in the Identification of Rhythmic Strategies

Abstract

This article discusses the integration of semiotic rhythm analysis with the theory of possible worlds. The complex issue of analysing rhythm in narrative texts has been tackled by Daniele Barbieri with his theory based on 'textual relief', an adaptive theoretical tool for identifying and investigating rhythmic strategies at all textual levels and across different media. Narratology, with its in-depth description of narrative strategies concerning worldbuilding, can contribute to a great extent to this endeavour. Merging the two theories, a detailed analysis of narrative choices can be performed, with a specific focus on the narrator's strategies concerning withholding and divulging information to the recipient. Offering a theoretical overview and specific examples of different narratorial strategies, this paper examines several ways in which narrators can exploit the epistemic disparity between the recipient's knowledge and their own to manage tension and suspense, thus creating textual relief.

1. Introduction

Rhythm. The word is familiar to any recipient that ever enjoyed an aesthetic text: music has rhythm, and poetry. There is rhythm in narrative discourse, be it an everyday oral storytelling, a novel, a film or any other story told in any medium. Even architecture, when considering its aesthetic implications, can be said to have its own rhythms. Yet, when it comes to analysing such an omnipresent concept, scholars struggle: rhythm is as easy to grasp intuitively as it is hard to pin down to a precise definition. Narratology, despite its thriving evolution of theoretical approaches, has issues dealing with the topic, as spelled out by Mieke Bal when she notes: "Much as narrative media, especially film, work with rhythm, the analysis of it has not been successful at all. [...] Narrative rhythm, although quite characteristic and effective, will remain the most elusive aspect" (Bal 2009, 98). Here, Bal refers to the predominant theoretical approach to rhythm analysis, the

Genettian model based on anisochrony.[1] Such method has several drawbacks, which led to it gradually being neglected. The result is that rhythm analysis has almost disappeared from narrative studies since, surprisingly, very few narratologists have transformed discontent into new theoretical proposals.[2]

In contrast with the standstill of narrative studies, semiotics has experienced growing interest on rhythm at large. Giulia Ceriani, for instance, starts from the assumption that "rhythm is not an ineffable phaenomenon: it is a complex morphology, which requires considering the consistency of its natural as well as psychic, cultural or discursive manifestations" (Ceriani 2003, 8).[3] What appears to be a purely theoretical approach, however, hides a key practical intuition: rhythm analysis cannot disregard the recipient's role in the meaning-making process. In particular, the recipient's expectations create a perceptual necessity; "satisfying such necessity results in the pleasure of recognising a rhythm, the pleasure of an expectant subject joining their object. [...] Thus, rhythm is a cognitive move combined to an emotional involvement" (Ibid., 116). Rhythm is then defined by Ceriani as a "narrative strategy" (Ibid., 127), aimed at modulating expectation at discourse level. In more technical terms, it is "a salience susceptible of becoming pregnant" (Ibid., 121).[4] Such definition evokes the notion of 'textual relief' which is the core concept of Daniele Barbieri's rhythm analysis. The following two sections present the fundamentals of Barbieri's approach to rhythm, which will then be expanded upon, using the theory of possible worlds; the aim is showing how the two methods can be integrated to refine the analysis of narrative rhythms in a text. In order to do so, I will introduce the concept of 'epistemic disparity', a narrative strategy relying on the mechanisms of fictional worldbuilding to manage the readers' expectations and, in turn, the rhythm of the text.

---

[1] Gerard Genette defines "effects of rhythm" as the relationship between the duration of the story and the time of discourse, i.e. the textual space dedicated to it. See Genette 1980, p. 87.

[2] Rhythm in narratology is assimilated to duration and, often, even completely ignored. Monika Fludernik, for instance, in her *Introduction to Narratology* (1996) does not mention rhythm at all when discussing narrative speed and pace. A sort of vicious circle is created: on the one hand, the study of rhythm is neglected, perhaps because the definition is considered outdated and unusable in modern narratological analysis while, on the other, the concept itself remains anchored to old standards thus becoming increasingly obsolete. Among the very few exceptions, it is worth mentioning Marco Caracciolo, who worked on rhythm as an experiential phaenomenon. See, for instance, Caracciolo 2014.

[3] All quotations from Ceriani 2003 are my translations.

[4] For a thorough discussion of the concepts of salience and pregnance see Thom 1990.

2. Rhythm and Tension

Barbieri's theory of rhythm analysis[5] has the advantage of being detailed and comprehensive, while also being extremely concrete and text-oriented. He starts form the simple assumption that rhythm is the iteration of a pattern in time (see Barbieri 2004, 65). Usually, when referring to rhythm in this common definition, those patterns are detected in prosodic or phonetic aspects. Think, for example, about the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in an iambic pentameter; or consider the pattern created by alliterations, or the rime scheme in a poem. Such rhythms are intuitively recognisable and engender expectations in recipients: a form is recognised and a tension arises towards its prosecution and completion. Thus, tension and rhythm are complementary and interlinked, and every aesthetic text is built around a variable balance between confirming and frustrating the reader's expectations. The alternation of tension and distension is the basis of rhythmic patterns:

Rhythm is a fundamental aspect of the tensive mechanisms. The simplest kind of tension possible is the expectation for the following element in a rhythmic repetition. Rhythm is the modulation of tension, the organisation of elements in relief to create and resolve expectations. Vice versa, rhythm is engendered by the effects of tensive devices. Without tension, one cannot attribute any relief to specific textual aspects, and elements in relief are the essential rhythmic elements (Barbieri 1996, 5).

Therefore, enjoying an aesthetic text is not a passive activity: what we read, watch or listen always creates expectations and, provided that our attention is kept, we are likely to try and predict the consequences of what we are reading, or anticipate the evolution of the patterns we encounter. When reading a sonnet with the ABAB rhyme scheme, for instance, past the first two lines we expect a repetition of the final sounds of the next two. This is due to the strict formal structure of that particular form of poetry. Even in everyday speech sentences have 'expectation markers'. A simple 'however', for example, creates in the reader several expectations: the prospect of a sentence, for one; then expectance for a clause which is in contrast with what previously expressed. Finally, when reading

---

[5] Daniele Barbieri has been dedicating most of his research to the study of rhythm. His 2004 book, *Nel corso del testo*, merges most of his previous research in a unified theoretical discourse, while following works focus on rhythm in specific media and genres, such as poetry and visual storytelling.

'however', we expect a possible turning point in a reasoning or narration. While analysing the rhythm of Leopardi's poem *L'infinito*, Barbieri identifies as many as seven different levels that contribute to the rise of tension: metric, syntactic, metric-syntactic, prosodic, lexical-prosodic, lexical-syntactic and semantic-narrative.[6] At every level there are elements that create expectation in the reader. Barbieri uses the phrase 'perceptual term' to indicate "any textual element thanks to which it is possible to make predictions, i.e. any textual element that can rise expectations" (Barbieri 2004, 43). Such expectations can range from very short (e.g., syntactic expectations about the closure of a phrase) to extremely long-term (e.g., the solution of the initial mystery in a detective novel). It should be clear that almost any textual item can be considered a perceptual term, under certain circumstances. Barbieri associates to perceptual terms the concept of 'form', defined as "a perceptual or conceptual configuration to which we can ascribe some sort of completeness [...], a formal closure" (Ibid., 48).

What distinguishes the two notions is the requirement for a form to have closure, which implies an autonomy that is absent from the perceptual term. Noticeably, some perceptual terms are forms by themselves, depending on the level considered. The 'however' mentioned in the previous example, for instance, is a perceptual term generating expectation on the syntactic level, but it is also a form on the lexical level, since it is an autonomous word. In that regard it is complete and fulfils expectations. This, of course, is not true for all perceptual terms; as an immediate example, consider an expression such as 'once upon a…', which, unlike 'however', is incomplete (and thus generates tensions) on all formal levels where it exists. It could be maintained that a perceptual term is the incomplete version of the form it recalls, but this would be an oversimplification, not taking into account that not all perceptual terms point to a form actually present in the text; meaning is a process, evolving during the reception of a text. Indeed, the recipient's expectations can be more or less specific, based on the tensive devices developed by the text. Perceptual terms references can range from very specific to generic and subtle. Moreover, expectations can be shaped by the overall textual form, which depends on the genre it belongs to; in other words, narrative conventions can affect interpretation.

---

[6] See Barbieri 2004, 45. Such distinction into levels is functional to the analysis of expectations in a poem. Some of those levels are almost insignificant in other textualities, such as the metric and prosodic in prose fiction, while other levels acquire much more importance and new levels need to be considered; thus, other means of identifying elements creating expectations (relief) must be devised to analyse, for instance, a novel. Cf. next sections.

3. Textual Relief

While identifying the rhythmic patterns that trigger interpretative tension may be easy on some textual levels (see previous examples about poetic texts), when narrative texts are considered in their entirety, the operation is not so straightforward. Although a rhyme scheme creates an evident repetition of a pattern in time, the same cannot be said for the elements of narrative discourse. As mentioned before, the classic narratological approach unsuccessfully relied on anisochrony, the relationship between time of the story and time of discourse; however, one must agree with Barbieri's remark: "Our experience as readers makes us suspect that rhythm in narration may be completely independent from the quantity of time recounted. A good narrator can obtain the effect of a fast-paced, intense, pressing rhythm either telling the evolution of human race or describing a swift fighting scene" (Barbieri, "Tempo e ritmo nel racconto per immagini", 2-3). Hence, the concept of 'textual relief' is introduced. The term should be intended in its 'spatial' sense of an element that stands out against the others, as in the sculpting technique of high relief. Textual relief is described as follows:

[A] textual feature appearing at all levels, contrasting marked textual zones with zones that are not or less so; somewhat reintroducing at all levels the gestalt opposition between foreground and background. [...] In order to understand what relief is, the simplest and self-evident example is the stress on syllables in spoken language, opposing stressed and unstressed sounds (Barbieri 2004, 72).

Relief is what makes textual elements come forward to be noticed and interpreted and even though it is always engendered at a specific level, its effect can propagate to other levels, provided that they have similar complexity. Moreover, several levels can show elements in relief at the same time, magnifying the resulting effect. It follows that a text does not have a single rhythm, but several co-occurring ones that contribute to the overall rhythmic effect. Depending on the type of textuality, however, one or more formal levels can emerge as more relevant to the general rhythm. In poetry, for example, the syntactic level is extremely important, while in narrative texts (novels and short stories, but also most drama and films) it is far less relevant and the narrative structures are privileged. This does not mean that other levels do not participate in the creation of rhythmic/tensive patterns, but that the narrative rhythm is 'prominent'. In

other words, in a narrative text, the recipient's attention is mainly devoted to character relations, sequences of events and other narrative structures, but other features such as symbolic patterns, word choices or other 'style' effects have their importance as well. Consider, for instance, the fundamental role of the soundtrack in films. Prominent and background levels work together towards the creation of the overall rhythmic intensity, which is the sum of the quantity of relief present in a given portion of text.

The paragraphs above outline the mechanisms that regulate tension and how relief can function as an indicator of the rhythmic patterns inside a semiotic level and as a coordinating element between levels. What has intentionally been overlooked is how relief emerges from textual structures. This issue is central, since it is identification of elements in relief that allows for patterns to be recognised and rhythm analysis to be performed. Relief can be generated in most disparate ways, depending on the formal level and the specific features of each textuality; however, Barbieri divides the creation of relief in two main categories, position and novelty:

- Novelty is related to the concept of markedness. Each textual level has its own unmarked configurations, standard arrangements that do not create surprise. As usual, consider as an example the less complex syntactic level. The unmarked sentence structure in English is SVO; such word order is perfectly predictable and generates no surprise. Deviations from the standard create a novelty, which in turn generates an interpretative tension. The same reasoning can be applied to other textual levels where, however, deciding what is unmarked can require a more advanced analysis.

- Positional relief, on the other hand, is usually codified in the form's structure. This can easily be seen thinking about the story-form, where the most obvious positions of relief are the beginning and the end. Most forms have one or more positions that put elements in relief independently from what they are.

The two modalities of *mise en relief* are cumulative: if an element of novelty occurs in a position of relief, the effect will be magnified; conversely, where a positional relief is filled with an expected element, tension will decrease. This effect can be exploited to modulate tensive effects. Moreover, the two general conditions for textual relief – position and novelty – recall to a certain extent the Saussurean distinction between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, since positional relief depends on the relation with co-occurring elements, in *praesentia*, while novelty concerns various possible alternative outcomes of a

perceptual term, in *absentia*. The mechanism that allows rhythms to be perceived, in other words, seems to be based on a distinction deeply embedded into the structure of language. This notion agrees with the intuitive idea that no act of communication can exist without having a rhythm. However, while rhythms pervade every aspect of a text, not all of them are relevant. If we consider rhythm as an isotopy,[7] it requires a selective process to be recognised and every text adopts specific strategies to induce such recognition in its audience.

The following sections will discuss some of those strategies, focussing on narrative devices that rely on worldbuilding and exploit the mechanisms that allow recipients to fill-in the inevitable gaps in the fictional world. Making use of possible-world theory, one can schematise narrative discourse and outline how the creation of fictional worlds interacts with the recipient's expectations, putting narrative elements in relief. Furthermore, possible-world theory is especially suitable for discussing story beginnings, one of the main sources of 'positional relief' in a narrative form. Before moving to the main topic of this article, however, a brief example might help review the key points of rhythm analysis discussed so far.

The following is a revisitation of a classic example, proposed by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative;* while discussing the role of verb tenses, he mentioned that "the impression of rapidity is explained by the concentration of values in the foreground, as in the famous expression *Veni, vidi, vici*" (Ricoeur 1984, 71). Such claim can be discussed in terms of rhythm analysis, without even changing the original statement. The assumption is that foregrounded elements are not actions in the simple past (perfective) as Ricoeur implied, but rather what Barbieri calls textual relief. With this difference in mind, it can be said that in Julius Caesar's renowned expression the sense of extreme rapidity is conveyed by the great amount of information given in such a short sentence. The phrase, in fact, is a full-fledged story condensed in three words. As such, a great narrative relief is created. In Genettian terms, a long story time (a whole military campaign, although brief) in a very short discourse time. However, there is much more in this sentence as far as rhythm is concerned. Considering the story-form, both novelty and position relief are detectable. The latter is given by the presence of the beginning and the end of the story, and further enhanced by the close

---

[7] Barbieri notes that rhythm could be considered as a specific instance of isotopy, which is a detectable recurrence of meaning traits (semes). Just like rhythm, an isotopy is an open form, not tending towards a closure but rather perpetuating until substituted by another one or by a temporary absence. Rhythms are a subset of isotopies, in that the recurrence also needs some sort of regularity to generate expectation. See Barbieri 2004, 70.

proximity of the two; novelty is detectable in the unusual structure of a story told eliding all the information but the essential verbs. This prominent narrative relief comes alongside reliefs on several background levels. Firstly, there is the prosodic pattern of the alliteration of the 'v' sound; then, on the syntactic level, the repetition of three consecutive verbs in the same tense creates an iteration, a source of rhythmic regularity. In addition, the semantic level presents a crescendo, a series of actions growing rapidly to the archetypical climax of victory. In conclusion, if we consider '*veni, vidi, vici*' as a story, thus assigning the prominence to the narrative level, an intertwining of reliefs on several levels can be detected, creating a cooperation of background rhythms that contribute to enhance the prominent narrative rhythm. The result is a sum of rhythmic patterns which creates an extreme overall intensity.

Since even a three-word narration has so much to offer to rhythm analysis, it's easy to understand that the rhythmic complexity of a novel or film requires some theoretical devices to schematise the narrative level and highlight rhythmic and tensive patterns. Thus, expanding the methods for identifying elements in relief becomes essential.

4. Possible Worlds and Rhythmic Strategies

This section introduces the theory of possible worlds, a concept that analyses the content of a fictional text as a modal system built on logic relationships between its elements. Such system – the fictional universe – is inherently incomplete, since it is created by a narrative which is necessarily finite. The mechanisms through which the recipients make up for such incompleteness can be exploited by the text to create tensions and rhythms. Recognising those strategies allows for the identification of narrative relief, thus complementing the method for rhythm analysis presented in the previous sections.

Umberto Eco defines a possible world as follows:[8]

---

[8] Eco bases his formalisation of possible words on Jaakko Hintikka's theoretical framework (see especially Hintikka 1973) from which he draws most of the logic relationships that control the behaviour of possible worlds, the individuals and their properties. The following definition is originally presented in chapter 8 of *Lector in fabula* (Eco 1979), many parts of which were directly translated in The *Role of the Reader* (Eco 1984).

[A] possible state of affairs expressed by a set of relevant propositions where for every proposition either p or ~p. As such it outlines a set of *individuals* along with their *properties*. Since some of these properties or predicates are actions, a possible world is also a *possible course of events*. Since this course of events is not actual, it must depend on the propositional attitudes of somebody; in other words, possible worlds are worlds imagined, believed, wished, and so on" (Eco 1984, 219).

Moreover, eco maintains that a text "is *a machine for producing possible worlds* (of the *fabula,* of the characters within the *fabula,* and of the reader outside the *fabula*)" (Eco 1984, 246). The core concept behind possible worlds is neatly summarised by Marie-Laure Ryan: "The literary text establishes for the reader a new actual world which imposes its own laws on the surrounding system, thereby defining its own horizon of possibilities. In order to become immersed in this world, the reader must adopt a new ontological perspective, thereby entailing a new model of what exists and what does not" (Ryan, "Possible Worlds").

Thus, according to possible-world theory, every fictional story takes place in a fictional world, however similar it might appear to the real one. Such world model is necessarily incomplete since, as Lubomír Doležel points out, the human mind cannot encompass a single object in its entirety – let alone a whole world (see Doležel 1998). Consequently, every fictional world presents areas of radical indeterminacy. Therefore, as noted by Eco, "no fictional world could be totally autonomous, since it would be impossible for it to outline a maximal and consistent state of affairs by stipulating *ex nihilo* the whole of its individuals ad of their properties" (Eco 1984, 221).

Since only a subset of the possible world, its individuals and their properties can be described, a text must rely on recipients to 'fill in the gaps'. Therefore, possible worlds are subject to the so called 'principle of minimal departure': if something is not explicated, it is usually assumed to be as it is in the recipient's actual world (the real world). In Ryan's words, "whenever we interpret a message concerning an alternate world, we reconstrue this world as being the closest possible to the reality we know" (Ryan 1980, 403). If not for this principle, the narrator would have to describe in detail every single fictional object or event. On the contrary, excessive description is felt as marked by most readers. This fact alone can be exploited to engender relief: unusual emphasis on individuals – or some of their specific traits – may trigger a recognition as perceptual term and the beginning of tensive patterns related to the hypothetical form(s) associated to it.

Given that "it would take a text of infinite length to construct a complete fictional world" (Doležel 1998, 169), Doležel introduces 'saturation', a concept to

express the completeness and definiteness of possible worlds. According to Doležel's model, texts can deal with fictional entities in three ways, that he calls textures.[9] The text can present something explicitly, thus creating a fictional fact (explicit texture); if nothing is written (zero texture), a gap originates in the fictional world. There is a third and more subtle option, which involves implying the existence of the fictional entity (implicit texture). As a matter of fact, according to Doležel, "implicitness based on presupposition is a major source of fictional-worlds construction and reconstruction. [...] an entity is often introduced into the fictional world by way of existential presuppositions" (Doležel 1998, 175). Doležel illustrates this point citing the first sentence of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, which mentions a train to Warsaw, and he claims that the existential presupposition is that trains exist in that specific fictional world. I argue that the reader may also infer the existence of stations, rails, ticket collectors and so on, and that this assumption does not imply a gap, since those fictional entities are required by the existence of a train as he/she knows it. An 'actual' gap, on the contrary, corresponds to something never mentioned. The implicitness, in other words, corresponds to a blurry domain in between what is explicitly stated and what is not mentioned at all. This distinction might seem purely speculative in realistic storytelling, but it becomes essential for the analysis of tensive devices in other genres. While a train is something undisputable,[10] the effect of mentioning, for instance, a ghost can create a remarkable interpretative tension. Is the ghost a real supernatural entity, a trick of the mind, a clever ruse to conceal a murder? In such cases, the principle of minimal departure allows a fictional text to play with the recipient's expectations. The examples in section 5 present this idea in detail.

The three types of textual statements (textures) correspond to different fictional domains: "the explicit texture constructs the determinate domain, the implicit texture the indeterminate domain, and zero texture the domain of gaps" (Doležel 1998, 182). Saturation establishes the density of the fictional world; the determinate domain constitutes the core, surrounded by a zone of indeterminacy, which in turn is surrounded by the gaps of unsaid.

---

[9] "A texture is the exact form of expression, the original wording in which the motif appears in the literary text". What in Eco's terms would be a proposition defining an individual and/or some of its properties. In other words, what the text says (or does not) about a specific fictional entity or fact. See Doležel 1998, 35.

[10] Then again, it depends on the audience's expectations. If a train was to be mentioned in a science fiction while describing a character commuting to the moon, the principle of minimal departure would be challenged, arising several interpretative tensions.
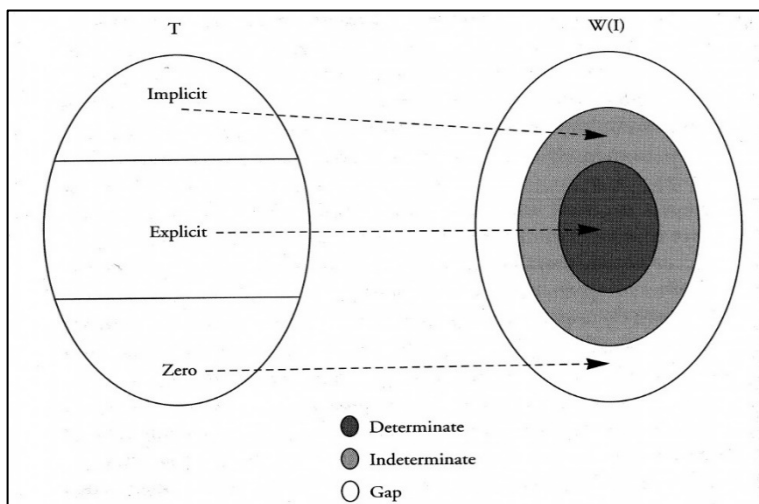
Figure 1 – Saturation and domains, in Doležel 1998, p. 182

All three domains are fundamental as far as rhythm analysis is concerned, given how the principle of minimal departure works, i.e. how readers (but the same is true for recipients of all textualities) can fill in the gap domain and presuppose existence in the indeterminate domain.

Let us return to the previous example about Dostoevsky's novel and examine a random zero texture and the corresponding gap. In *The Idiot* the sea is mentioned for the first time in chapter XV. However, even before that point, the reader was perfectly aware that the fictional world *did* include the sea and thus, obviously, its being mentioned after fifteen chapters does not constitute relief. In fact, it is irrelevant that the sea is mentioned at all. Even if it were not, I believe that no reader would have claimed that in *The Idiot* the sea doesn't exist. This is due to the principle of minimal departure, which functions recurring to what Eco calls textual cooperation, while defining the text as "a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work. What a problem it would be if a text were to say everything the receiver is to understand – it would never end. If I were to phone you and say, 'I'll take the highway and be with you in an hour,' you would not expect me to add that I shall use my car along the highway" (Eco 1995, 3). Eco's example summarises the incompleteness of possible worlds detailed so far and stresses the essential role of the recipient. The gaps in the possible world are filled by recurring to a pool of shared knowledge, which Eco calls *encyclopedia*, and which varies with society, culture and historical period. Given a model reader, thus, existential presuppositions are expected to be consistent. Therefore, even

though the domain of gaps constitutes great part of every fictional world, it may be said that such world is the same for most readers. And so are the expectations arising from such unsaid elements. This conclusion is essential: otherwise the rhythm analyst could only come to personal conclusions. Conversely, minimal departure allows a certain degree of generalisation. Moreover, Doležel suggests an extension of the concept of encyclopedia, to account for the multiplicity of possible worlds: "The actual world encyclopedia is just one among numerous encyclopedias of possible worlds. Knowledge about a possible world constructed by a fictional text constitutes a fictional encyclopedia. Fictional encyclopedias are many and diverse, but all of them to a greater or lesser degree digress from the actual-world encyclopedia".[11] Thus, when a recipient approaches a new text, he will recur to the encyclopedia he *expects* will better adapt to the still unknown possible world. The process taking place in the aforementioned examples is now much easier to describe: in the case of the train, the reader correctly applies the real-world encyclopedia, while with the ghost, several encyclopedias may conflict creating a perceptual term with several hypothetical meanings. Readers will need further information to narrow down their expectations to a single form. Therefore, depending on the reader's familiarity with genres and authors, when reading Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and Lovecraft's *The Hound,* the presence of the spectral beast may or may not lead to a different set of expectations and tensions. Eco calls this process of educated guessing based on pre-existing knowledge 'inferential walks' and claims that a text "not only tolerates, but anxiously awaits these inferential walks in order not to be obliged to tell too much" (Eco 1984, 214). What is more, texts can exploit the clichés and tropes to throw the audience 'off the scent' and then subvert their set of expectations, thus creating strong novelty relief. In more formal terms, "at every disjunction of probability, the reader can venture several hypotheses and it cannot be excluded that discursive structures may maliciously steer them towards hypotheses which are to be discarded" (Eco 1979, 120).[12] Hence, texts make

---

[11] Doležel 1998, 177. According to Eco, the reader's encyclopedia is the sum of all the knowledge of a certain reader, drawn from real life but also fictional works which, in turn, is a part of the shared knowledge of a culture/historical period/social group, which Eco calls Global encyclopedia and corresponds to an image of what we consider the real world. Doležel's version might be less accurate, since knowledge is indeed an organic ensemble and not something that can be comparted, but his assigning a different encyclopedia to every possible world seems to be a useful simplification worth adopting, since it helps the recognition of expectation patterns in rhythm analysis.

[12] Translation mine. It is worth noting that Eco's 'disjunction of probability' is much akin to Barbieri's 'perceptual term', since they both refer to textual elements that can drive predictions and expectations. This is

constant use of minimal departure to create their possible worlds by drawing into their recipient's encyclopedias. This is generally an unmarked feature (i.e., there is no relief in discovering that the sea is part of the fictional world of *The Idiot*); however, narrators can exploit the way in which textual cooperation works to create relief in the construction of possible worlds. This device is especially effective in correspondence of narrative turning points (novelty relief) or at the beginning of narrative discourse (positional relief), since the fictional world is still 'empty' and any information given or withheld generates higher narrative relief.

5. Epistemic Disparity

In case of a homodiegetic narrator or strong internal focalisation, for instance, tension can arise from what I call 'epistemic disparity': the relationship between the knowledge the narrator has about the fictional world and that of the text's recipient. The different relative epistemic stances a narrator can adopt lead to different approaches in disclosing the fictional world in which the story is set, creating diverse constructions of narrative tension:

- A first possibility is the audience having access to information unavailable to the homodiegetic narrator. This is usually the case in realistic or historical fiction, or when the narrator is young or inexperienced of the world.

- Secondly, the narrating voice can withhold information to the reader; in this case the homodiegetic narrator knows more about the fictional world than the audience does. This is true for instance, in most fantastic narratives, where real-world knowledge does not fully apply.

- Lastly, the fictional world can be disclosed in a more complex, mixed way, in which the recipient's knowledge is partially challenged and there might be the necessity of readjusting or shifting encyclopedias several times.

These different 'narrative stances' allow the text to enact opposite strategies in the construction of the fictional world, all with the purpose of engaging the reader by maintaining a constant tension throughout the narration. The result is unusual relief put on certain story elements. Three examples of contemporary novels, each adopting one of these strategies, will be discussed. Two texts feature

---

not surprising, considering that Barbieri has been one of Eco's students and their semiotic approach is closely intertwined.

a homodiegetic narrator, and one a heterodiegetic narrator focalised through the main character.

In Sara Nović's *Girl at War* (2015)*,* the protagonist and narrator is Ana Jurić, who is ten at the beginning of the story. In the first section, the outburst of the Yugoslavian civil war and the following ethnic cleansing are depicted through the innocent and naïve eyes of the young girl. Even if historical data is seldom explicit, constant reference is made to the several factions involved and, more or less indirectly, to historical facts or figures such as Milošević. Thus, it is quite easy for the reader to place the story in its spatial and temporal framework. Despite the presence of fictional characters and some historical inaccuracies, the fictionality of the world is not self-evident to the reader, who builds around the narrator's propositions drawing from his/her real-world encyclopedia: a basic command of contemporary history (or a quick search on the Internet) is enough to 'fill the gaps', reconstructing the fictional world as being similar to the reader's actual world in the early 1990s. In such structural context, narrative tension arises from the extreme divergence between the narrator's and the reader's knowledge of the world. While young Ana is new to the concept of war and violence and lives in a playful, cocoon-like world throughout the first section of the novel, external knowledge creates in the reader a series of expectation patterns concerning possible negative outcomes for the events narrated. Even if the narrator's voice is constructed to mitigate this sensation, the result is a constant feeling that something horrible is imminent. Tension arises from the reader's epistemic superiority over the narrator and from her inability to recognise the clues of what is happening around her.

This narrative device culminates in chapter 7 of Part I, when Ana's family is captured by Serbian soldiers at a roadblock and her parents are shot, together with other Croatians. She survives thanks to her father, who makes her feign her death. Thus, the passage is charged with extreme relief: the initial lack of understanding of the protagonist/narrator is counterbalanced by the reader's recognition of the narrative pattern (ethnic cleansing) that had been envisaged from the beginning, thanks to the extratextual knowledge injected in the possible world's indeterminate domain. The long-constructed tension is discharged as the reader's worst expectations are fulfilled. Therefore, adding to the emotive shock of the event, the novel manages to create a 'structural shock' as well: the massacre of Ana's family and the consequent collapse of her idyllic world corresponds to the end of the reader's epistemic superiority. From this point on, both Ana Jurić and the reader are deprived of any certainty. It may be said that the reader's epistemic superiority functioned as a proxy of the narrator's false sense of security,

enveloping them both in a safe cocoon. Now that the readers' expectations have been fulfilled, they must cope with a new possible world, as Ana does in the story. This destabilising effect works alongside other devices, such as the strong emotional immersion due to the homodiegetic narrator, to increase the narrative relief of this central event.

In the post-apocalyptic novel *Zone One* (2011), by Colson Whitehead, the epistemic stance is reversed. While in *Girl at War* non-mentioned features of the fictional world can be inferred from real-world encyclopedia, in a sci-fi narration it is impossible to do so. The text takes advantage of this feature by making Mark Spitz – the focalising character and source of the narrating stream of consciousness – hold back information that cannot be obtained recurring to the personal encyclopedia. The novel's opening is set in a fictional world which mirrors the actual world, then, with no explanation and without so much as a paragraph change, an everyday memory of New York turns in a war scenario: "When his unit finally started sweeping beyond the wall—whenever that was— he knew he had to visit Uncle Lloyd's apartment [...] only a few blocks past the barrier. [...] He slung his assault rifle over his shoulder and parted the blinds at the end of the corridor" (Whitehead 2011, 6). The setting is overturned, and the reader is flung in a completely unknown post-apocalyptic fictional world. The narrator mentions fictional entities such as "The time of the ruin", "the incident", "the disaster", and then gradually "the advent of the plague", "the skels", "the sweeper units": these are all implicit textures that can lead to partial existential presuppositions only, since the reader's encyclopedia is still missing those 'entries'. The narrator has a complete knowledge of the fictional world, but provides only sparse glimpses about the new configuration of reality, and the reader is left alone to scramble a few tiles, struggling to compose a mosaic image without knowing the general picture. This device has a strong rhythmic effect, since unknown entities are assigned increased relief as the reader strives to infer their meaning from the narrator's report of his everyday life in a post-apocalyptic world. Thus, epistemic disparity here creates a regular pattern of interpretative tensions, one for each implicit texture awaiting to become explicit. This is what Barbieri calls a "second-order rhythm" (Barbieri 2004, 99), a rhythm which does not directly arise from textual elements, but from a perceived regularity of the tensive patterns themselves; in simple words, a rhythm of tensions.

Yet, readers are not thoroughly lost: since the novel came out after many post-apocalyptic zombie narratives, they can recur to fictional encyclopedias to make partial sense of the new world. Beginning the story in a world similar to the actual one tricks the reader and requires an encyclopedic shift. This creates a sense of

alienation that mirrors the involvement in a global upheaval. In the same way as the novel's survivors, readers face a world of devoid signifiers, like "an insect exploring a gravestone: the words and names [are] crevasses to get lost in, looming and meaningless" (Whitehead 2011, 7). Once again, although in a reverted way compared to *Girl at War*, the epistemic disparity fuels the narrative tension, creating positions of extreme relief; the principle of minimal departure is actively exploited and the result is a fictional world which unfolds gradually, where placing an explicit texture is a difficult feat, and a sudden update in the proprieties of a fictional object can make the reader reconsider all his expectations.

The 'stragglers' are a poignant example; they are mentioned several times before the narrator gives the following explanation:

There were your standard-issue skels, and then there were the stragglers. Most skels, they moved. They came to eat you [...] The stragglers, on the other hand, did not move, and that's what made them a suitable objective for civilian units. They were a succession of imponderable tableaux, the malfunctioning stragglers and the places they chose to haunt throughout the Zone and beyond. An army of mannequins, limbs adjusted by an inscrutable hand (Whitehead 2011, 41-42).

Despite the fact that these strange harmless skels (zombies) are the targets of the civilian squads the main character belongs to, the stream of consciousness technique allows the extremely focalised narrator to delay this explanation more than 40 pages into the novel. Thus, before this passage, the reader has only a vague idea of what stragglers are: the focalising character has no reason to think about them in detail, since they are part of his everyday routine; on the other hand, every time stragglers are mentioned, there is an increase of attention in the reader, who is trying to fill in a gap in the fictional world. This corresponds to a series of textual reliefs which culminate in the quoted passage, an extreme relief due to the closure of an interpretative tension towards the understanding of the term. The rhythmic role of this device, however, does not end here. Towards the end of the novel, Mark Spitz's squad is attacked by a straggler and his teammate Gary is killed. This event is naturally in great relief, since it is a narrative turning point; however, I maintain that the worldbuilding based on epistemic disparity contributes to an even higher relief. The fact that stragglers are motionless is not a regular explicit texture, mentioned as a fact by the narrator in the first pages; in fact, it is a hard-earned entry in the specific fictional encyclopedia the reader is constructing for this possible world. This knowledge was an achievement, and thus it being challenged in correspondence with a major narrative event makes it

even more significant. Just as in *Girl at War, Zone One* builds a deep engagement with the reader, a 'structural immersion' that goes beyond the simple emotional identification with characters. It works on a rhythmic and tensive level to fulfil and disrupt expectations in order to modulate the relief of narrative elements.

Finally, a good example of the third kind of epistemic disparity is Philip Roth's novel *The Plot Against America* (2004); it is an alternative-history fiction that builds its possible world with a strategy that can be considered a blending of the two just analysed. The reader thinks he/she knows the fictional world, but it is a false belief. The knowledge that the plot is set in the 1940s immediately conjures in the reader's mind historical knowledge to complete the fictional world, drawn from the real-world encyclopedia. The fact that the novel unfolds in an *alternative version* of the 1940s, however, undermines the reader's convictions and opens the ground to the uncertainty of speculative fiction, managing narrative tension through lack of information. However, unlike in *Girl at War*, the narrator in *The Plot Against America*'s is by no means naïve. Even though the focalising character is indeed the boy Philip Roth, the narrator is an adult Philip, recounting memories of his childhood. Furthermore, the fact that the main character and the narrator share the name with the author plays with the readers' expectations, complicating the relationship between the actual world of the fiction and the real world, blurring the borders between possible-world domains: thus it's easy for the reader to superimpose the indeterminate domain of the fictional world with the real world. This strategy is an intentional mechanism to stimulate the principle of minimal departure. The text tricks the reader into adopting the epistemic stance of superiority given by historic knowledge of the real world, although it is clear from the very beginning that this is an alternative history, since the 'point of departure' is presented in the opening sentences: "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear. Of course no childhood is without its terrors, yet I wonder if I would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn't been president or if I hadn't been the offspring of Jews" (Roth 2004b, 1).

The opening words also show that the narrator is writing from a later time span. This is an essential difference from the construction of the fictional world in *Girl at War*, since it allows the narrator to describe and comment on (alternative) historical events with insightful details that a child could not muster. The result is a narrative tension arising from both the recognition of an historical crisis, namely the rising of a fascist government in a country, and the 'what-if effect' caused by the alternative events. As in *Zone One*, the reader must adjust his understanding of the fictional world every time a contradicting proposition is

given. The unsettling effect, however, is even greater, because the starting point is not a fictional encyclopedia – which a reader is always prepared to modify – but, apparently, the real world encyclopedia. Thus, when an explicit texture appears, rather than filling the indeterminate or gap domains, it often causes a shift, a surprise due to the realisation that knowledge taken for granted was actually just an inference. And yet, the narrative is constructed to make the reader forget the fictionality aiming, as Roth himself stated, "to alter the historical reality by making Lindbergh America's 33rd president while keeping everything else as close to factual truth as I could" (Roth 2004a). The narrator seems constantly to linger on this deceptive epistemic stance, thus giving increased relief to elements that diverge from real-world history while the narrative crescendo of the story unfolds.

The three world-building strategies exemplified are based on distinctive epistemic relationships between the narrator and the reader. The saturation of the possible worlds is used either to create expectation patterns in a reader who knows more than the narrator does, or to force him/her to continually adjust their limited understanding of the fictional world, or else to shift from real to fictional every time a new fictional fact overwrites the 'filler knowledge' taken from the reader's real-world encyclopedia. "The readers have to be ready to modify, supplement or even discard the actual-world encyclopedia" (Doležel 1998, 181), and when this happens a sharp relief is put on the narrative element that caused the knowledge shift. The examples also showed that homodiegetic narration is particularly effective in exploiting the principle of minimal departure because it lacks the absoluteness of the heterodiegetic narrator, which Doležel calls 'authoritative narrative'; while "entities introduced in the discourse by the anonymous third-person narrator are *eo ipso* authenticated as fictional facts" (Ibid., 149), the possible world created by the homodiegetic narrator's discourse can be challenged to a certain extent. Just as it happens with characters, the reader feels he/she is allowed to question the truth value of statements. This sort of equality allows the enactment of the epistemic disparity strategy. On the contrary, "authoritative narrative is prisoner of its authentication force: it cannot lie or err" (Ibid., 149), and thus the text must recur to different devices to create tensive patterns related to the structure of possible worlds. A similar effect, as seen in *Zone One,* can be achieved through focalisation: the reader has access to a fictional person's knowledge, desires and beliefs. However, this is only possible when the focalising devices are extreme – as in the case of the stream of consciousness – and alter the depiction of reality significantly. Otherwise, unlike narrators, characters do not have the 'authority' to participate in the construction

of the actual world, but can only build their own versions of possible worlds, based on their knowledge, intentions, wishes and so on. Those too may be analysed for tensive or rhythmic patterns, but further venturing into this topic requires notions of the modal structure of narrative universes,[13] which would exceed the scope of this paper.

6. Conclusions

All things considered, merging the semiotic approach with the methods of narratology has proven to be not only possible but also extremely productive. In this paper, I have outlined Barbieri's theory of rhythm analysis based on textual relief and then complemented it with elements of possible-world theory to achieve a better identification of tensive and rhythmic patterns arising from fictional worldbuilding. I have discussed how different 'textures' composing the possible world domains can engender textual relief on the narrative level if the principle of minimal departure is actively exploited. Introducing the notion of 'epistemic disparity', I have illustrated three such approaches by different narrators, and the effects they have on the reader's expectations that lead to the recognition of rhythmic patterns related to story elements. The management of information concerning the fictional world works better as a rhythmic device at the beginning of narrative discourse, when the indeterminate and gap domains are vaster. In this situation the principle of minimal departure governing the recipient's expectations is constantly activating to complete the narrator's worldbuilding. If the type of narration allows withholding information – such was the case in the three examples analysed – the narrator can create tensive patterns exploiting the epistemic disparity with the reader. This is possible when the reader knows more about the world than the narrator does (young/naïve homodiegetic narrator), or when the latter refuses to disclose information about an unfamiliar fictional world (homodiegetic or extremely focalised narration); finally the narrator can exploit the apparent similarity of the fictional world with the real one to cause constant shifts in the reader's encyclopedia: a series of

---

[13] According to this model, from the actual world depart a series of relative worlds, which constitute the characters' domains, i.e. the projections of their beliefs, wishes, intentions and so on (see, for instance, Ryan 1985). The modal structure of the characters' possible worlds can be analysed at any given world-state to identify expectation patterns and narrative tensions arising from non-actual worlds.

'surprises' that cast some textual elements in sharp relief. All these strategies seem to require a non-authoritative narrative for the epistemic disparity to work.

In conclusion, despite lagging behind on original rhythm analysis, narrative studies can give a significant contribute to existing theories. Thanks to the extreme flexibility of the notion of textual relief, one can adapt rhythm analysis to different media, genres and textual levels, choosing from the cornucopia of available theories the one that best suits each specific need. In this case, possible worlds proved to be an excellent tool to deal with narrative tensions and expectations that arise from the reader's relationship with the story-worlds, giving a more detailed indication about the mechanisms of novelty and positional relief.

Bibliography

Bal, Mieke. 2009. *Narratology*: *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Third edition).* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Barbieri, Daniele. "Tempo e ritmo nel racconto per immagini." Unpublished. http://www.danielebarbieri.it/texts/temporitmoraccontoperimmagini.pdf.

Barbieri, Daniele. 1996. *Questioni di ritmo. L'analisi tensiva dei testi televisivi.* Roma: ERI-RAI.

Barbieri, Daniele. 2004. *Nel corso del testo. Una teoria della tensione e del ritmo.* Milano: Bompiani.

Caracciolo, Marco. 2014. "Tell-Tale Rhythms: Embodiment and Narrative Discourse." *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 6, no. 2: 49-73.

Ceriani, Giulia. 2003. *Il senso del ritmo.* Roma: Meltemi Editore.

Doležel, Lubomír. 1998. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.

Eco, Umberto. 1979. *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi.* Milano: Bompiani.

Eco, Umberto. 1984. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts.* Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Eco, Umberto. 1995. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods.* Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard UP.

Genette, Gérard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse, an Essay in Method. Portion of Figures III.* Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca & New York: Cornell UP.

Hintikka, Jaakko. 1973. *Logic, Language-Games and Information.* London: Oxford UP.

Nović, Sara. 2015. *Girl at War.* New York: Random House.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1984. *Time and Narrative Vol. 2 - Time in Literature.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Roth, Philip. 2004a. "The Story Behind *The Plot Against America." The New York Times Online, Sept. 19.* https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/ review/the-story-behind-the-plot-against-america.html.

Roth, Philip. 2004b. *The Plot Against America: A Novel.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 1980. "Fiction, Non-Factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure." *Poetics* 9, n. 4: 403-422.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 1985. "The Modal Structure of Narrative Universes." *Poetics Today* 6, no. 4: 717-55.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Possible Worlds." In Hühn, P. et al. (eds.). *The Living Handbook of Narratology.* Hamburg University. http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/possible-worlds.

Thom, René. 1990. *Semio Physics: A Sketch.* Translated by Vendla Meyer. Boston: Addison-Wesley.

Whitehead, Colson. 2011. *Zone One.* New York: Doubleday.

Andrea Fenice has recently completed his Ph.D. in Scienze del Testo – Anglistica (English studies) at Sapienza University in Rome. In his thesis he devised a theory of rhythm analysis based on narratology and semiotics, with a specific focus on the cognitive turn in narrative

studies and how such theories can merge with more traditional semiotic approaches. Such method was then applied to Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and its adaptations in several media such as theatre, film, graphic novels and television. On this topic, he has also published in Italian and English, exploring with different focusses the complex rhythmic devices of the novel. He is currently working on refining his theoretical approach in order to create a method that can be applied to a wider variety of texts and media, and can be used to compare rhythmic strategies in intersemiotic adaptation.