# Interfpretation

Willemsen, Steven; Troscianko, Emily; Andersen Kraglund, Rikke

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**Interpretation: Its status as object or method of study in cognitive and unnatural narratology**

*Steven Willemsen (University of Groningen), Rikke Andersen Kraglund (Aarhus University) and Emily T. Troscianko (Oxford University)*

Interpretation is arguably something of an elephant in the room for narratology and literary studies. Although interpretation clearly plays a central role in the humanities, its status in the study of narrative raises slippery methodological questions. Narratology in particular has proposed various strategies for confronting (or dodging) the many ways of conceiving of the nature, functions, and determinants of interpretation. The major contrasts between unnatural and cognitive approaches to narrative are arguably rooted in ongoing disagreements about interpretation.

This special issue exists because, instead of seeking to overcome their differences, these two strands of narratology have been more prone to cultivate their opposition. This is understandable when you compare their conceptual underpinnings. Whereas cognitive forms of narratology are unified by the basic assumption that there is *continuity* between sense-making processes directed at narrative and cognitive processes operative in the rest of life, unnatural approaches stress the *discontinuities* between the two for particular kinds of fictional narrative.

Part of the disagreement is merely a matter of emphasis. Unnatural narratologists often criticize cognitive narratology for its "mimetic bias" – for being overly restricted to conventional mimetic *texts* (Richardson 2011). But this call for a wider range of texts is closely linked to deeper worries about interpretation: cognitive approaches are also held to be overly oriented toward "naturalizing" *interpretive stances* (Nielsen 2013: 373). Unnatural narratologists have stressed that the interpretation of narrative need not be a disambiguating process, as cognitive narratology allegedly implies, and have preferred to emphasize the notion that, in Maria Mäkelä's words, the reader need not be treated "as a mere sense-making machine but as someone who might just as well opt for the improbable and the indeterminate" (2013: 145). Cognitive narratologists have disputed the validity of these objections, often refuting the need for a specifically "unnatural" narratology (e.g., Fludernik 2012), and claiming that the phenomena which unnatural narratologists seek to describe are perfectly amenable to cognitive-narratological models.

We aim to show how interpretation runs through many of these issues as an (implicit or explicit) bone of contention. More specifically, we present and examine the thesis that different conceptions of the status of interpretation in narratology underlie some of the key conceptual differences between unnatural and cognitive narratology. The role of interpretation in the humanities at large can be understood as falling into two methodological traditions: treating interpretation either as a *method of study* or as an *object of study*. Narratology, we will argue, currently occupies a somewhat volatile position between the two—not least because the choice between them involves some key questions about the goals and nature of the discipline.

In order to illuminate the often implicit stances of cognitive and unnatural narratology, we first offer a contextualizing discussion of the place of "interpretation" in narratology, literary studies, and the humanities more broadly. This is followed by an overview of how scholars in cognitive and unnatural narratology have sought to deal with the complexities of interpretation in their analyses. Finally, a case study of Hans Christian Andersen's short story "The Shadow" ("Skyggen") will crystallize the theoretical observations and illustrate the potential for reconciliation—and its limits.

**1. Interpretation, a brief contextualization.**

One key distinction must be made when talking about "interpretation" within the context of academic inquiry. On the one hand, interpretation is often deployed as a *method of study* (what can interpretation tell us?). That is, it can be used to acquire insights about texts or artifacts, often through academically established frameworks that guide the interpreter in his or her reading. On the other hand, the interpretive process itself can also be taken as the *object of study* (what is interpretation?). That is, one can aim for a descriptive or explanatory grasp on the complex processes by which people make meanings out of texts, artefacts, or events.

Historically, the humanities have been the site of interpretation as a *method* of study par excellence. Many areas of the humanities—including major currents in literary studies—have made it their business to develop and apply refined frameworks for interpretation, focusing on what these can teach us about texts, artifacts, rituals, or other cultural practices. This idea of the humanities as a

fundamentally interpretive practice has been formative in the evolution of most humanities disciplines, including the practices and institutions of literary studies as we know them today.

The second approach—treating the process of interpretation as an *object* of study—has by comparison been decidedly less dominant and influential, but has certainly not been ignored. The initial establishment of hermeneutics as a primary method of study for the humanities, for instance, drew on philosophical hermeneutics in its keen interest in what constitutes interpretation as an epistemological or even ontological a priori (Mueller-Vollmer 1985). Meanwhile, the study of how meaning is established became central to research programs as diverse as frame analysis in sociology (Goffman 1974) and thick description in symbolic anthropology (Geertz 1973).

Narratology seems always to have been ambivalent towards both ways of approaching interpretation. In its structuralist origins, the discipline marked a deliberate move away from the philological and hermeneutic methods of literary studies, intending to offer a more "objective" approach based on the identification and analysis of structural and universal features of narrative discourse. Nonetheless, as has often been discussed, subsequent "post-classical" (Alber and Fludernik 2010) generations of narratologists have been notoriously noncompliant with these aims. In recent years, a number of literary theorists have called for more attention to the status of interpretation in narratological description, discussing its centrality, inevitability, and limits (e.g., Nordlund 2002; Jackson 2003; Pettersson 2009; Easterlin 2012: 20-27; Korthals Altes 2014: 36, 91-100; Caracciolo 2016a). Among the manifold variations of post-classical narratology, some (e.g., postcolonial narratology) have incorporated interpretive methods from cultural studies into narratological frameworks, making narratology a tool for gaining understanding of cultural phenomena. Other research programs, meanwhile, have foregrounded the descriptive or explanatory study of the interpretive process itself, focusing on how texts shape and constrain interpretive engagement—a perspective first brought to the fore by approaches like reader-response criticism. Moreover, under the influence of psychology and other cognitive sciences, the idea that narrative itself constitutes an important mode of interpreting and organizing the world has gradually gained momentum too (e.g., Bruner 1986; Knight 1994; Turner 1996; Herman 2003), reinforcing the inseparability of narrative and interpretation.

For narratology, questions about the place of interpretation relate to the question of what exactly the field's purpose is. Should the discipline form an *interpretive method* (or set of methods) to aid the (critical) understanding and explication of cultural expressions? Or should it focus on the *meta-questions*, addressing how the interpretation of narrative texts generally functions and how this affords certain (aesthetic, cognitive, or cultural) effects? Or should its task remain on the *descriptive* and historical side, emphasizing the characteristics of texts over context or readers? Or is it the narratologist's job to untangle the complexity of narrativity as a general-purpose tool of the human mind or a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon? The following outline of the status and function of interpretation in cognitive and unnatural narratology will show that the two seem to have settled on different answers.

## 2.1 First- and second-generation cognitive approaches to interpretation

The original (now "first") generation of cognitive approaches to narratology tended to cope with the complexities of interpretation by taking a clear stance, avoiding the subjectivity of the humanities' interpretive methods altogether, and favoring descriptive and explanatory studies of the more universal processes and mechanisms underlying acts of interpretation. As such, the approach focused on obtaining relatively universal and generalizable knowledge about textual processing rather than on generating or investigating singular, perspectival, or contextually embedded interpretive engagements with specific texts. These original cognitive approaches to narrative interpretation gave rise to some highly influential theories, models, and descriptions of "local" cognitive processes assumed to underlie or constitute narrative understanding. These included work on the script-, frame-, or schema-driven nature of narrative understanding (e.g., Fludernik 1996; Herman 1997; Jahn 1997; Stockwell 2002), notions such as conceptual blending in relation to literary meaning-making (e.g., Turner 1996), and empirical investigations of the discourse-processing aspects of reading, with an emphasis on the "mental representation" of textual structures (e.g., Bortolussi and Dixon 2003).

The exclusion of interpretive methods (or, some would say, the pretense thereof) has frequently been a source of criticism directed at cognitive narratology. Scholars have argued that the universal methodologies of the natural sciences are fundamentally unsuited to the objects of literary

studies (e.g., Jackson 2003); have expressed concerns about the limitations of the approach relative to aesthetic complexity (e.g., Ryan 2010: 472-473); have objected that narratologists have sometimes uncritically seized on outdated or questionable cognitive concepts (e.g., Semino 1997: 149; 2001: 353); or have claimed that many cognitive models might not offer much more than novel ways of talking about old, familiar hermeneutic concepts (Allington 2005: 2-3; Korthals Altes 2014: 48-50).

The "second generation" of cognitive narratology has in part been propelled by such criticism within narratology and literary studies, but mostly takes its inspiration from developments within the field of cognitive sciences, specifically the emergence of E-approaches to cognition. One of the interesting reorientations of the second-generation approach to cognition lies in its reaffirmation of the centrality of interpretive concepts in cognition, reconnecting the cognitive sciences to insights from hermeneutics and phenomenological philosophy, and foregrounding some of their long-overlooked affinities (Gallagher 2004). Interpretation is treated not just as an epistemological matter, or a set of functional mind-tools, but as an ontological precondition of any sentient subject, which, by definition, always finds itself pre-situated in (and "towards") a world that is filled with possibilities for interaction. In the enactivist view, interpretation is essentially the dynamic and emergent result of the constant feedback loops between a subject's experiences and the affordances of the world in which the subject is embedded—a process in which meaning is a precondition for interpretation as much as a product of it (Smythe 1991).

In the study of narrative, second-generation approaches focus predominantly on the processual study of interpretation, articulating the embodied, enactive, and embedded aspects of narrative meaning-making rather than focusing largely on abstract, propositional, and representational information-processing in linear input-output structures, as "first-generation" approaches tended to do. According to Marco Caracciolo, who has developed the most extensive second-generation approach to narrative interpretation (2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a), narratologists can benefit from studying "the structures of interpretation through the lens of science. If we do this, a number of constraints *on* (or affordances *for*) interpretation will emerge, making clear that interpretation may be 'unimaginably complex,' but that there is still method in this complexity" (2014b: 399). Caracciolo's model characterizes narrative interpretation as a reciprocally modifying interaction between a narrative text

and the reader's "experiential background" of previous interactions and experiences (2014a: 5). The model relies on previous generations of cognitive theory like frame theory and conceptual blending, but uses these to tease out the diverse phenomenological resources on which the interpreter can draw, ranging from highly personal values and competences to elementary bodily resonances. *Interpretive methods* (the academic study of texts) form a natural extension of these fundamental interpretive processes (Caracciolo 2014a: 5).

Beyond modeling the general processes of interpretation, second-generation cognitive analyses have mostly focused on matters of emotion, embodiment, and enaction as key factors in our engagement with literary works and their meaningfulness. Some have used cognitive theory to ask how narrative style and form correspond to, or diverge from, aspects of the embodied mind, and so shape real readers' interpretations (e.g., identifying examples of "cognitive realism" in literary Modernism [Troscianko 2014] or Realism [Troscianko 2012]). Others have focused on particular experiential dimensions of the reading experience (such as Kuzmičová [2014] on mental imagery), or have sought dialogue with earlier narratological models of the reader: Karin Kukkonen (2014), for instance, complements Wolfgang Iser's propositional account of the reader's engagement with the temporal dynamics of plot (1972) using an embodied-cognitive approach based on Bayesian probabilistic models. Meanwhile, Marco Bernini (2014) has explored how the reader's interpretive activity is shaped by inferences about authorial intention that the extended-cognition paradigm allows us to understand as emerging in writing as well as being retrospectively recoverable when reading.

Second-generation views on literary interpretation are also being explored empirically. For example, Raymond Gibbs (2017) conducts an exploratory analysis of readers' interpretations of a passage from Nicholson Baker's *The Anthologist* to show how both recreational and professional interpretations of narrative result from a set of embodied dynamics in which personal, historical, and cultural constraints interact, highlighting both commonalities and individual differences in interpretive results. Richard Gerrig and Micah Mumper (2017) treat readers as participants in narrative worlds, and report on experiments that assess how participatory responses are affected by factors like similarity judgments and degrees of transportation, which in turn are determined by the full range of prior life experiences. By their very nature, empirical studies tend to work with more specific hypotheses than

theoretical approaches, and research like this helps to test and refine the many predictions that can be derived from a second-generation take on interpretation.

These examples all clearly make interpretation the *object* of academic inquiry. In its disciplinary grounding, second-generation cognitive narratology, like its predecessor, favors explanatory perspectives on interpretation over the practice of interpreting. Cognitive narratologists generally appear less concerned with extracting meanings from a text than with asking *how* this extraction takes place.

But to claim that cognitive narratology is therefore more concerned with human minds than with texts would be misguided, for two reasons. First, for most cognitive narratologists, studying the processes of interpretation (or of the human mind in general) serves equally to generate understanding of artworks and their cultural functions; some also argue that artworks in turn give us insights into the human mind. After all, the second-generation approach views minds and texts as manifestations of the same extended system of interactive cognition, and sees interpretation as one of the key channels within that system. Secondly, more often than not, even when big theoretical questions are being tackled, literary scholars also use cognitive theory to help shed light on specific literary works. But rather than adopting a hermeneutic program that seeks primarily to establish the meaning of a text or detect expressions of broader cultural patterns, most scholars using second-generation methods focus on the spaces of intersection between literature's structures or contents and the cognitive realities of readers. As an example we might take Kay Young's (2011) interpretations of the work of Austen, Eliot, and Hardy, which explore how these works "perform" aspects of the embodied mind, and how the close reading of literature may reciprocally affect readers' own minds. Such an approach deliberately blends *interpretive methods* with *explanatory models* of interpretation (and the workings of the embodied mind more generally) to achieve an enriched understanding not only of particular literary works, but possibly also of readers and their understanding of themselves and others.

In sum, cognitive narratology generally studies the *process of interpretation* via its relationship with textual features. It does allow for the generation of *interpretive end products*, but, as Caracciolo has argued, when providing "readings informed by cognitive science," cognitive theory should be "used heuristically, and with full awareness of its epistemological limitations" (Caracciolo

2016a: 188; see also Nordlund 2002: 314). After all, taking theories developed in line with the criteria of the natural sciences and applying them as part of an interpretive method in the humanities can easily lead back to thorny issues as to what type of knowledge is being pursued: do we want to do interpretation better in general, interpret specific texts better, understand better how interpretation works, or all three, or something else altogether? For Caracciolo, practicing interpretation guided by cognitive theory could ideally "illuminate a background of metacognitive questions while pointing to the incompleteness of current scientific knowledge about the mind" (2016a: 188), encouraging interpretive practice and the cognitive sciences to "work in tandem, calling attention to each other's blind spots" (2016a: 188). Such truly two-way scientific dialogues are being furthered by work that brings together those whose background is in cognitive science with those trained in literary studies or linguistics to address questions at all points of the narrative-mind spectrum (e.g., Young and Saver 2001; Burke and Troscianko 2013, 2017). However, in such interdisciplinary endeavors, the dominant interest often remains on the side of the explanatory perspective—something true of cognitive narratology more broadly.


**2.2 Interpretation and unnatural narratology**

Like cognitive narratology, unnatural narratology is not a fully integrated field of study. It is best described as a collective research program, represented in the work of literary theorists such as Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Maria Mäkelä, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson. It has always been heterogeneous in both its sources and its methods and it remains a workshop for varying, and to some extent competing, theories.

In part, however, unnatural narratology arose as a reaction against certain tendencies in narrative theory in general, and cognitive narratology in particular. Unnatural narratologists recognize and theorize the ways in which fictional narratives and our interactions with them can be *discontinuous* from "real-life" sense making—an idea usually rejected by cognitive narratology. Unnatural narratologists point out these discontinuities from the everyday both in *narrative texts*— observing how a substantial number of fictional narratives transgress or obstruct everyday mimetic parameters—and in the *interpretive responses* that these evoke, contesting Monika Fludernik's

assertion that "[w]hen readers read narrative texts, they project real-life parameters into the reading process and, if at all possible, treat the text as a real-life instance of narrating" (Fludernik 2001: 623). Unnatural narratologists collectively turned against the putative centrality and *necessity* of this naturalization as a strategy for reading and interpretation. As Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson have summarized it:

> Common to all the approaches within unnatural narratology is (1) a fascination with highly implausible, impossible, unreal, otherworldly, outrageous, extreme, outlandish, and insistently fictional narratives and their structure; (2) the urge to interpret them by addressing the question of what they might potentially mean; and (3) an interest in examining the relationship between these specific narratives and all other narratives. (Alber et al. 2012: 380)

Here too, issues of interpretation come into play in many of the differences between practitioners of unnatural narratology. These begin with the core question of defining what exactly makes a narrative "unnatural." Jan Alber, for instance, argues that we should restrict "the term to narratives which represent storyworlds that contain physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios or events" (Alber 2013: 69), thus making the unnatural about the relation between textual content and extra-textual logic. But others have focused more on stories' effects or reception in their conceptualization of the unnatural. Henrik Skov Nielsen relates the unnatural to the *interpretive strategies* that a story requires, arguing that a narrative is unnatural when it cues a recipient "to employ interpretational strategies that are different from those she employs in non-fictionalized, conversational storytelling situations" (Alber et al. 2012: 373). Stefan Iversen likewise takes the interpretive process to be integral to the unnatural, arguing that unnatural narratives are those which "present the reader with clashes between the rules governing a storyworld and scenarios or events producing or taking place inside this storyworld—clashes that defy easy explanations" (ibid.: 373).

Countless classics in literary history involve invented unnatural characters, events and worlds. Consider the metamorphosis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, or Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." Readers may be asked to

imagine what it is like to be an animal, as in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr,* a nose in *The Nose* by Nikolai Gogol, a ghost as in Horace Walpole *The Castle of Otranto*, or dead as in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* by Machado de Assis. Fictional narratives can give access to heaven and hell, to alternative futures, to a world where time is moving backwards, or to never-ending metaleptic loops. Some of these works can be categorized as fantasy, science fiction, fairy tales, Gothic novels, metafiction, postmodern fiction or children's fiction and to some extent can be "normalized" by means of generic conventions, but they all ask the readers to imagine something they cannot experience in real life and therefore call for other forms of interpretation and analysis.

As Brian Richardson has noted (2016: 386), most unnatural narratologists consider cognitive theory to have been applied to narrative in an unnecessarily restrictive way. For instance, when David Herman constructs a model of literary character that restricts itself to treating characters as if they were people "or prototypical members of the category of 'persons'" (Herman et al. 2012: 240), he "neglects or denies those characters that defy standard concepts of personhood, such as schematic or dehumanized figures, contradictory or conflated entities, impossible beings, parodic types, and characters who know they are fictional" (Richardson 2016: 400). Perhaps in part because of their "mimetic bias," most cognitive theories of narrative do not make any principled difference between fictional and nonfictional narratives. Iversen has proposed a pragmatic, rhetorical approach that addresses not only the functions of unnatural devices in fictional narratives but also "the many cases where such devices appear locally in otherwise traditional types of narratives, or appear outside of generic fiction, be it in poetry, in everyday communication, or in rhetorical discourse, such as advertisements" (Iversen 2016: 456).

Another critique of cognitive narratology is that cognitive interpretive concepts such as mental "scripts" and "frames" have been used similarly to the concepts of structuralist narratology—as a way to help interpretations seem "intersubjective" and universally valid instead of personal and context-dependent. In the first generation of cognitive literary studies, cognitive narratologists such as Richard Gerrig and Giovanna Egidi studied predictive inferences as a way to determine how readers in general were likely to understand a literary text, and aspired to give "an exhaustive account of all the processes that function at each moment while a reader experience a narrative" (2003: 35). Whereas such

approaches sought to show regularity in readings or determine prototypical interpretive strategies, unnatural narratologists have argued that many unnatural narratives are best served by the acknowledgement and preservation of their interpretive ambiguity and multiplicity (e.g., Richardson 2011: 33; Iversen 2013: 93). As Iversen has argued, a "major limitation inherent in a full-blown cognitive approach to narrative, with an insistence on fully renaturalizing or recognizing the haunting and wondrous otherworldly visions of minds, events, and scenarios that some narratives manage to capture, is that it runs the risk of reducing the affective power and resonance of such narratives" (2013: 96).

In this context, unnatural narratologists such as Henrik Skov Nielsen have called for "unnaturalizing reading strategies" (Nielsen 2013) to resist the application of real-world models and limitations in interpretation, and "leave open the possibility that unnatural narratives contain or produce effects and emotions that are not easily (if at all) explainable or resolvable with reference to everyday phenomena or the rules of the presented storyworld" (Alber et al. 2012: 377). Unnatural narratologists study the differences between interpretation of fictional narratives or unnatural devices and qualities on the one hand, and interpretation of nonfictional narratives without unnatural devices on the other, the two offering different opportunities and prompts for interpretive engagement (see Kukkonen and Nielsen's article in this special issue).

What are the effects of these unnatural elements or devices? In fictional narratives real-world assumptions do not always apply (e.g., the restrictions of a single experiential perspective may be lifted). This has significant consequences for the interpretation of these narratives because an interpreter may "avoid assumptions which would hold true for nonfictional accounts" (Nielsen 2016: 473). Iversen has shown that this idea of distinctive interpretive engagement also draws on Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization (see Anderson and Iversen's article in this special issue). Iversen rereads Shklovsky, drawing on rhetorical and pragmatic approaches to look at function more than form and describing how defamiliarization and unnatural elements can be used as rhetorical devices. Unnatural narratology shares Shklovsky's idea that the use of "strange-making" formal techniques of presentation and representation can "impede, obstruct, and in other ways de-automatize perception" in ways that re-intensify it (Iversen 2016: 458). For Iversen the unnatural can be seen as a

subset of the devices of defamiliarization, as a "permanent defamiliarization, a permanently upsetting sense-making" and a source of "perpetual unrecognizability." These features are not just a "cognitive burden to overcome" but "mov[e] and motivate[e] people while retaining their untranslatable quality" (ibid.: 460-461).

## 3. A case study: Interpretations and meta-interpretations of "The Shadow"

The conceptual differences between unnatural and cognitive narratology, which were ever-present as we wrote this article, are just the latest incarnation of an older chasm in narratology. The divisive question is whether narratology is a conceptual tool that aids us in the interpretation and appreciation of specific texts, or a theoretical framework that conceptualizes and explains the general make-up of texts and our interactions with them. Although neither cognitive nor unnatural narratology is fully committed to either stance, they do emphasize different angles. The standoff appears to boil down to the question of whether one seeks to capture the qualities and interpretive riches of specific narratives, as unnatural narratologists generally seek to do, or wants to describe and understand the literary experience and the processes underlying it, as cognitive narratologists generally aim to.

To illustrate how these differences play out in the analysis of specific narratives, we take Hans Christian Andersen's 1846 story "The Shadow" ("Skyggen") as a textual example. We will provide first an unnatural and then a cognitive take on the text as an object of interpretation, followed by reflections on each other's interpretations to show how each field might respond to the other's take on the text. Although we are three individuals who work in areas broadly related to unnatural (Kraglund) and cognitive (Troscianko and Willemsen) narratology respectively, we make no claims to the representativeness of our readings or meta-readings; something both fields can perhaps agree on is that no reading is an unconstrained, context-free act, and no single reader can stand in for any other. Nonetheless, we hope this commentary plus meta-commentary format will help bring into focus what the theoretical divergences outlined in the previous sections mean for the analysis of narratives and perhaps also for the status of narratology.

The choice of story was encumbered by the heterogeneity of definitions of the unnatural. "The Shadow" counts as unnatural only for *some* unnatural narratologists, such as Jan Alber (due to its

events being physically, logically, or humanly impossible) or Nielsen (because it arguably requires interpretive strategies different from real-life, conversational storytelling; see Alber, Iversen, et al. 2012: 373). For others, like Richardson or Iversen, the familiar generic context of the fairytale would probably counter or entirely negate the unnaturalness (Richardson 2016: 386, 389). We take an intermediary example rather than a highly experimental text that might meet all commentators' criteria, in the hope that it will help highlight some of the definitional questions raised by the concept of the "unnatural," along with other features of the cognitive/unnatural divide as they are manifested in matters of interpretation.

"The Shadow" is a story about a young man, a Romantic, scholarly character, visiting a foreign country. A house across from where the young scholar lives fascinates him. No one has ever been seen in the house, but in the evenings the door is open. The house is dark inside, but from its interior the young scholar hears the sound of music. One night he wakes up and fancies that a marvelous radiance is emanating from the balcony across the street, and he sees a lovely maiden. Later he discovers his shadow cast on the mysterious house, and he wishes that his shadow could go inside. The next morning, he finds that his shadow has disappeared. It comes back many years later, in an almost human form, and tells him that he saw Poetry herself in the house across the street that day. The shadow tells the scholar that after visiting the house, he lived under the skirts of a "cake-woman" and only ventured out in the evenings and nights. He says he has been peeping into places where no one else could peer and has seen what nobody knows but everyone would like to know, and has used this knowledge to become rich. The shadow now persuades the scholar to come on a journey as his servant. Later the scholar agrees to act as shadow, so that the shadow can be taken for a real man. In the end, the scholar attempts to reveal the real relationship between the two of them, but no one believes him and the shadow has the man executed for his attempt to tell the truth.


### 3.1 An unnatural interpretation

Andersen's story has been read and analyzed from a variety of critical methodologies: its socio-political, biographical, psychoanalytical, and historical complexities have all been addressed. From an unnatural perspective, the first key observation is that the story does cue the reader to use interpretive

strategies that are different from those employed in reading nonfictional narratives without unnatural devices; after all, the story presents to the reader a man who can lose his shadow, as well as a shadow that can talk and be perceived as a real man by those around him. If we follow Nielsen's definition of the unnatural, the question for the unnatural narratologist is, then: how can I interpret these deviations from and transgressions of real-world boundaries?

At the beginning of the story the reader encounters a conventional realist storyworld. Every time something strange happens, the narrator naturalizes it. The scholar just "*fancied* that a marvelous radiance came from the balcony across the street" and it only seems "*as if* a radiance" came from a maiden and the flowers were "*like* flames"; the narration even states that it is "quite possible that he *only imagined* this" (1949 [1847]: 1-2, all italics added). Several times similes like these are used to indicate that subjective experience shapes the reality of the storyworld. The young man tells his shadow to make himself useful and step inside only "as a joke." But these naturalizations end when the shadow actually leaves the scholar and enters the house. This shift opens up a gap in the text. In a humorous meta-commentary on the story, via intertextual reference to the Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Sclemihis wundersame Geschichte* (1813), the narrator points towards its fictionality: "What annoyed him most was not so much the loss of his shadow, but the knowledge that there was already a story about a man without a shadow. All the people at home knew that story. If he went back and told them his story they would say he was just imitating the old one" (1949 [1847]: 2). This passage demonstrates a self-reflective awareness of literary history, a sense of the text as existing among other texts. An unnatural reading can be helpful in examining this self-consciousness of the text, and in helping the reader to recognize the ways in which the story thematizes its own interpretations and its own fictionality, while denaturalizing the reading process. Andersen overtly breaks the rules of physical possibility, and does not allow this deviation from a more natural storytelling situation to go unnoticed by his readers, instead accentuating the artificiality of the telling.

"The Shadow" has been described as a story about how human beings can embody different identities, and how one's life can be viewed as a struggle between them, possibly even a struggle to the death. It has been interpreted as a philosophical parable about the relationship between "one's identity as defined by knowledge of and commitment to absolute ideals of Truth, Goodness, and

Beauty and one's identity as it exists without inspiration from these ideals" (White 1994: 637).

Different approaches to identifying the "real" subject of the tale have been suggested. But for an

unnatural approach, this story or fairytale does not have just *one* sense; what is of interest is the

flexibility of interpretations of the text. "The Shadow" has an openness that can inspire multiple

readings, and it can be appreciated from very different angles, depending on the interpreter's interests.

"The Shadow" can be said to thematize the very subject of this article, interpretation. The

story frequently poses direct interpretive questions about the loss of the shadow ("What *does* it all

mean?", [1949 {1847}: 3]) or about the mysterious house ("But who lived there? What entrance did

they use?", [ibid: 2]) that seem to function as invitations to the reader. Several other scenes in the story

concern interpretation in that they delineate the circular nature of interpretation and the problem of

experiencing something when one has already decided what to find and how to interpret it. The

scholar is curious to know what the shadow saw in the house across the street. When the shadow tells

him that he saw Poetry herself, his description of Poetry is not very convincing; he just repeats the

same phrase over and over again: "I saw everything, and I know everything" (ibid.: 4). As it turns out,

the shadow has not really been in the innermost rooms, but has stayed in the dark anteroom. The only

one who gives an interpretation of Poetry is the scholar, but he has already decided what there is to

find, and being a scholar who aspires to write about the true, the good, and the beautiful, he has some

very romantic ideas about Poetry: "Was it like a green forest? Was it like a holy temple?" and "Did

fair children play there and tell their dreams?" (ibid.: 4). The shadow has actually gained his

knowledge about the world from peering into places no one else can peer into; he knows significantly

more than he could if he were a real person, has seen a wicked world, and now cashes in on others'

misfortunes. He has no illusions, no utopian thoughts or ideals, nor is he heroic. The pure-hearted

scholar, on the other hand, is pursued by sorrow and trouble and looks more and more like a shadow

himself: "what he had to say about the good, the true, and the beautiful, appealed to most people about

as much as roses appeal to a cow" (ibid.: 5). At moments like this, the story is humorous in its tone,

displaying an element of social satire. It evokes a battle between irony and naivety and reveals

Andersen as an early modernist (Mylius 2006).

On their later journey, the scholar and the shadow meet a princess who has the malady of seeing things too clearly, but she misinterprets the shadow. She thinks the shadow's problem is that he does not cast a shadow, but she never considers the more unnatural possibility that he actually could be a shadow himself. She is seduced by the shadow's pranks, and when examining the shadow, she does not notice that the shadow is letting the scholar answer all the difficult questions. Her misconception of the relationship between the man and the shadow causes a series of mistakes, and in the end she casts the noble-souled scholar aside to marry the fraud. The princess has made up her mind about the relationship between the two men, and this is shown to be based on presupposition rather than the product of interpretation. It is primarily how the shadow is dressed, and his considerable fortune, that makes people interpret him as human. Reality seems to be dominated by appearances. In this sense, the story can be read as a story about blindness, seductiveness and the threatening quality of truth-telling, and it uses unnatural elements to illuminate social problems in a new way.

In sum, an unnatural narratological approach shows "The Shadow" to be an insistently fictional narrative in which multiple phenomena do not correspond to any real-world scenarios. The story's fictionality is paramount. Something that is impossible in real life (such as losing one's shadow or being a sentient shadow) is accepted as true in this fictional story, and we do not have to impose real-world necessities on it. Nor do readers need to compare the unnatural happenings with real-life situations. The story asks us to imagine something—what it is like to lose one's shadow—that cannot be fully comprehended or experienced. We have to acknowledge the fundamental ambiguity in "The Shadow," and the sheer number of readings that this may afford. The unnatural approach prefers interpretations that foreground the differences between invented and reported worlds—interpretations that are not restricted by referentiality, but are interested in the capacity of this story's magic and its meta-narrative strategies to change readers' views about real life.

## 3.2 A cognitive (meta-)interpretation

The humanizing of an inanimate—indeed an immaterial—entity; the extended direct speech of the dialogues between man and shadow; the matter-of-fact manner in which the shadow's disappearance is evoked—all these features would appear to challenge an approach that in principle draws no

distinctions between this narrative and the narratives of gossip or football commentary. But for the cognitive narratologist, these features are perfectly amenable to analysis from a cognitive perspective. The tendency to anthropomorphize non-human natural forms is commonplace: we treat our cars as though they have personalities, see faces in the clouds, and readily attribute defiance, timidity, and elation to a big triangle, a small triangle, and a circle shown moving around in a short and primitive animated film (Heider and Simmel 1944).

The shadow cast by a human body is consistently perceptually available, and by definition closely resembles the human form and replicates its movement patterns. We have all played games with shadows, whether making puppets dance behind a screen, making shadow rabbits or birds with our hands by candlelight, or watching our full-body shadows stretch to giant's height on an evening lawn. Shadows' possibilities fascinate us, and sometimes draw us into the realm of fantasy. How far we go in that direction depends on many factors—the progression from childhood to adulthood being an obvious one. One empirically grounded theory of anthropomorphism has identified key factors increasing our tendency to anthropomorphize: the accessibility and applicability of anthropocentric knowledge about humans; the current level of need to interact effectively with one's environment (via hypotheses to help make sense of complex or otherwise unpredictable stimuli); and the lack of a social connection with other humans (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). In the case of the shadow of a young man alone in a bewildering foreign land, with a tantalizing mystery on his doorstep, all three influences are likely to be in play.

Focusing on the anthropomorphic element makes the story's central "unnaturalness" entirely natural: a manifestation of a general cognitive tendency, here expanded on in narrative form. A cognitive interpretation might go on to acknowledge that the anthropomorphism here is not a static given, and that its epistemic status in the fictional world is never made explicit. The early descriptions, focalized largely through the scholar, evoke his disorientation in the unfamiliar climate, his physical dwindling in the daytime and revival in the evenings when he can stretch out on the balcony—and the shadow's characteristics are a natural counterpart to his own (contracting and stretching, as he does). But as the narrative progresses, and the shadow holds conversations and wears clothes, the balance of evidence tips from the uncanny (that which can just about be realistically explained) towards what, in

Todorov's (1970) schema, can be thought of as the marvelous: clearly supernatural in the fictional world, yet still fundamentally natural in the sense of being generated by the author's mind and generating particular responses in the reader's.

Here it is already becoming clear that the cognitive interpretation tends towards a meta-interpretation. Any given statement about what the text means ("the text instantiates the multifaceted nature of humans' anthropomorphic tendencies") tends to give way to statements about what the text does ("the text's instantiation of the nature of humans' anthropomorphic tendencies takes a changing set of forms that may incline readers towards interpreting those tendencies as more or less supernatural"). That is, interpretation as method constantly slides into interpretation as object. It is hard—perhaps impossible, perhaps meaningless—to adopt a cognitive approach without linking what is given in the text with the cognitive contexts of its creation and/or reception, because the basic premise of the cognitive approach is that texts and minds operate in constant interaction with one another. Texts are created by the cognitive activity of authors and made meaningful by that of readers. So as soon as you make a statement about textual features, you find yourself making a statement about cognitive features too: any feature has effects (including the effect of connoting meaning) only by being cognitively engaged with.

Once cognitive narratology acknowledges that what it does is analyze—not just exemplify—interpretive tendencies, many options open up. One might follow the example of Kukkonen's (2017) exploration of how fictional texts can highlight the ambiguous boundaries between the interpretive possibilities of the uncanny and the marvelous, and how this highlighting can help expose, through defamiliarization, the continuous updating and readjustment of probabilities by which our minds makes sense of the world (an idea very close to Shklovsky's deautomatization, promoted above as an unnatural perspective). One could talk about how the distinct phases of this process may induce shifting and sometimes unsettled interpretive-emotional responses in readers. One might also begin to pinpoint the roles of embodiment and enaction as mediators between the textually created characters and actual readers; a cognitive approach could investigate how the kinesthetic and sensorimotor qualities of the imagination, as well as its capacity for indeterminacy (Troscianko 2014), are activated and exploited by textual evocations of movement and other bodily experiences that link man and

shadow, and how this in turn generates further interpretive probabilities hovering between the uncanny and the marvelous. Such an approach can ask to what extent the type of ontological violation in question (here, a shadow coming alive) is also counterintuitive (intuition may not resist this particular anthropomorphization very long or strongly, because the genre makes it quite easily assimilable), and how the relations between ontology and intuition in turn shape the new interpretive stories readers tell about Andersen's (Zunshine 2008).

It is eminently possible to flesh out these possible responses. A reader might interpret the initial morning disappearance of the shadow and the scholar's evening attempts to entice it back as an occurrence poised ambiguously between the scholar's delusion and a literally supernatural happening. As the scholar makes himself little and then big in the evening lamplight, this reader might remember the games she played with her shadows as a child; she might in one direction (the psychological reading) draw an interpretive contrast between the scholar's bodily disconnectedness and her own more harmoniously embodied existence in childhood, and she might take that further into inferences about the ageing process or the intellectualist tendency to separate the life of the mind from that of the body. These reflections might be balanced out by the supernatural route of trying to imagine herself without a shadow, imagining what else would need to change for that to be the case, elaborating on other stories she's read where it is the case, and find those imaginings in tension with the ones about her childhood games.

As literary scholars, we might want to close down the difference between that possible reader and ourselves, and simply *be* "the reader" for a while. But making interpretations of the kind she does (reading the scholar as commentary on the disembodiment of scholarship, say) is not a cognitive narratological activity—it's just called reading. The study of narrative in a cognitive framework takes a step back and asks how any such interpretation comes about within the mind-text system. This question might well involve empirical investigation beyond an individual scholar's analysis of the text. Readers' individual vacillations around these interpretive possibilities are likely to depend on prior reading experiences, on cognitive and personality traits, on personal associations that affect empathy with the scholar, and so on. Empirical investigation is the only way of establishing to what extent an individual critic's connection of a specific textual cause and its interpretive effect is borne out more

generally: was it really that metaphor which prompted my cynical reading, or was the fact that I slept badly last night more important? Cognitive narratology is thus likely to be invested in empirical investigation to the extent that it is invested in the attempt to understand interpretations better, rather than merely to perform them.

### 3.3 The unnatural interpretation from a cognitive standpoint

To a cognitive narratologist, the unnatural interpretation we began with may well read like a cognitive interpretation pretending not to be one. The essence of the objection to adopting cognitive principles of analysis seems to be that "fictionality is paramount" in the story. But there is no incompatibility between cognition and fiction, even flamboyantly self-aware fiction. Andersen's mind created a text which bears a certain relationship to everyday reality and to other texts that were created before it, and readers' minds engage with this cognitive creation via all the means humans use all the time to negotiate phenomena with every possible configuration of plausibility, trustworthiness, (self-)referentiality, and so on. The same goes for the intertextual qualities of "The Shadow": there is nothing in the least unusual in making reference to other versions of a story one is telling, whether those other versions are published works of literature or variants on the rumor one is helping spread about some celebrity persona's plastic surgery. Likewise for metareferentiality: being a story about interpretation means being a story about how minds work, something humans have needed to be interested in for their whole evolutionary history.

Similarly, when it comes to the invitation to imagine something physically impossible—a shadow detaching itself from the caster of the shadow—there is no need for recourse to anything non- or anti-cognitive. Trying to imagine logical, conceptual, or physical impossibilities (a three-sided square, a chemical composition of water other than $H_2O$, a human with no shadow) is interesting, but in no sense unnatural. A cognitive perspective is the only one which can give us purchase on the details of what happens when we try: on the distinctions, for instance, between imagining (perhaps in a sensory mode), conceiving, or entertaining thoughts of something. Literary narratives can push the boundaries of our experience, but so can philosophical thought experiments, mathematical theorems, historical artifacts, face-to-face conversations, and countless other subtypes of human ingenuity: there

are myriad differences in inflection, but there is no magic boundary between "literature" and the rest. So whether it refers to unnatural narratologists or readers of texts, the statement that "we do not have to impose real-world necessities on this fictional narrative [or] compare the unnatural happenings with real-life situations" is meaningless. The text is part of the real world, whether or not it is acknowledged as such within the process or outcome of interpretation or in the analysis of that interpretation. Of course, our awareness of fictionality is likely to affect our responses to a textual feature (you will respond differently to Andersen's protagonist losing his shadow and to your friend's email telling you he has lost his), but the reasons and mechanisms for these differences are "real-life" cognitive facts too.

Once the set of interpretations offered in the unnatural reading are reinterpreted as cognitive despite appearances, we can turn to the more interesting question of what attitudes towards interpretation itself are manifested in this reading. A shift takes place between the opening observation that the story cues "the reader" to use interpretive strategies that differ from nonfiction, and the subsequent question: "how can I interpret these deviations from and transgressions of real-world boundaries?" The first takes interpretation as its object, the second initiates an example of interpretation as method. The latter dominates the rest of the unnatural reading, presenting a variety of options for interpreting particular aspects of the story. Statements like "unnatural narratologists prefer to emphasize the flexibility and complexity of interpretation," or "the unnatural approach prefers interpretations that…" make it clear that the unnatural approach towards interpretation involves normative standards: certain interpretive attitudes are deemed more interesting or appropriate than others. From a cognitive standpoint, expressing interpretive preferences is a phenomenon to be investigated, not to be actively replicated in academic discourse. And the very preferences expressed here are ideally suited to cognitive investigation. A focus on texts that "can be appreciated from very different angles, depending on the interpreter's interests" is precisely a call to explore psychological variability as it affects interpretive response. Here the potential becomes clear for a cognitive-narratological approach to help shed light on the effects of some forms of (ambiguous) unnatural fiction. The distinct effects of such texts could be studied in terms of the cognitive discord between

what is textually presented and the knowledge, models, and sensations of everyday embodied actions, thoughts, feelings, or contexts that readers are likely to rely on in their sense-making attempts.

Nothing can be said about a text without making—explicit or implicit—statements about the process of coming to that conclusion. Arguably, making the interpretive process explicit and trying to understand it better are what distinguish the academic study of narrative from the everyday pleasures of reading and reflecting on one's own reading, as well as from the hermeneutic practices of traditional literary criticism.

**3.4 The cognitive (meta-)interpretation from an unnatural standpoint**

While acknowledging the relevance of cognitive narratology's work to the larger project of narrative theory, this section seeks to sharpen the sense of the distinction between the two perspectives. Unnatural narratology is only one of many worthwhile perspectives and there are limitations built into any theory; pursuing certain kinds of knowledge inevitably means not pursuing other kinds. For the cognitive narratologist the unnatural interpretation may read like a cognitive perspective "trying not to be one," but although the two approaches share common interests, they also conflict.

Interesting and persuasive as explanations about the cognitive logic underlying readers' interpretations may be, the goal of performing a reading is also always to interpret a specific text. We have to test our theories against their ability to respond to the interpretive challenges in "The Shadow"; in this case, an overly strong focus on the story's "relationship to everyday reality" quickly becomes reductive. Most unnatural narratologists would object to the tendency to use a literary text as a case study or illustrative example of more general questions about human psychology and textual processing. In the cognitive interpretation, the theory seems to precede narrative; close reading is sacrificed and the primary object of study is not the literary text, but the workings of the human mind—a position that downplays many of the story's dynamics on aesthetic, affective and ethical levels.

One can also question the tendency to take the actual as the horizon of expectations by reading Andersen's story as related to real-life experiences. The cognitive approach tells us that the tendency to anthropomorphize non-human forms like shadows is a commonplace human tendency. Although

the scholar indeed anthropomorphizes his non-human shadow in the beginning of the story, the story becomes fascinating when the shadow is not just something that is treated as humanlike, but turns into a kind of man. In the cognitive approach this change in the story is relatively neglected and disambiguated in the pursuit of the "natural"—i.e., treating the story's central "unnaturalness" as an entirely natural manifestation of a general cognitive tendency expanded in narrative form. In many ways the cognitive reading could almost do without Andersen's story; in tending towards a meta-interpretation, cognitive approaches seem proud to "avoid" interpretation, being invested in attempts to understand interpretation better rather than "merely" performing interpretations. But if we are going to interpret Andersen's story, an interpretation always precedes the meta-interpretation, otherwise the meta-interpretation has no foundation or becomes too dependent on personal associations. It is like the scholar who can't see poetry because he has already decided what to find without visiting the house, or the shadow who tells the scholar that he saw everything, and he knows everything, but has only been to the anteroom.

An unnatural narratologist will not buy the idea that we are all (whether we know it or not) cognitive narratologists. We can of course agree that there is no incompatibility between fiction and cognition – that fictional texts are part of the real world. There is no need for recourse to anti- or non-cognitive stances. But in the process of interpreting a fictionalized narrative it is important not to impose real-world necessities on fictional stories. It would have been a very different story if Andersen had limited himself to what is possible in real life. As readers, we are asked to use our imagination in significantly different ways than we would have if the scholar had just dreamt that the shadow was real.


**Conclusion**

Although the three of us have been unable to reconcile cognitive and unnatural narratology here, we hope that the above confrontations have helped spell out more clearly the different statuses the two approaches accord interpretation. To us, the theoretical as well as the case-study work involved in writing this paper made clear that the methodological divergences between cognitive and unnatural

approaches are rooted in what are essentially conflicting views on the tasks of narratology as academic discipline – views to which interpretation is central.

It is not that the two approaches lack common ground. Researchers in both fields are likely to agree that interpretation is perspectival and contextually determined; that text, reader, and world should be understood as recursively connected; that "mimetic" texts have attracted too much attention; and that the first generation of cognitive approaches focused too much on universalizing knowledge about the mechanisms of textual processing. Moreover, there is obviously much potential for collaborative exchange, for example in detailed exploration of the specific interpretive processes activated by distinctly unnatural narratives (which is already happening, from both the unnatural and cognitive directions; e.g., Alber 2016; Caracciolo 2016b; and Kiss & Willemsen 2017).

But despite these commonalities, the differences run deep. For those who work within unnatural narratology (or at least the one writing here), it is important to appreciate texts' fictionality, to recognize and theorize the ways in which fictional narratives and our interactions with them can be discontinuous from "real-life" sense-making, and to emphasize that it is not always fruitful to stress similarity to "real-world" experiences. For cognitive narratologists (or at least the ones writing here), claims that any text or interpretive process is not part of "real life" are incoherent, and the disciplinary division built upon them therefore ill-founded. To them, factors like fictionality and mimesis make differences only in degree, not in kind, and the point of the academic study of texts is not merely to make statements about textual meaning but to acknowledge and then explore the factors which have brought about that meaning-making.

The cognitive conclusion, then, is that no convergence between approaches is necessary (or possible) because the cognitive already encompasses the unnatural – a position that, of course, the unnatural field continues to contest. We are thus left at an impasse in which pragmatic collaboration is eminently possible, but also obscures the fact that the fundamental questions about interpretation raised here still need tackling. We hope that our dialogue here allows you to draw from our disagreements your own conclusions about narratology and its relation to interpretation, and to reflect on the underlying open question about how the two fields do or should relate.

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