

SIMULTANEOUS NARRATION: A CLOSER LOOK
COMMENTS ON A RECENT NARRATIVE PHENOMENON

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Acta Linguistica Hafniensia Vol. 42, 2010, 85-102

With this article we would like to discuss the narratological and linguistic implications of first-person, narrative fiction, which is exclusively or to a very large extent cast in the present tense. This form of narrative fiction is relatively recent and unacknowledged and known by terms such as First Person Present Tense (FPPT), or "simultaneous narration".

In an ongoing dialogue with Dorrit Cohn's work on the subject, we investigate three different points: 1) that simultaneous narration can throw light on other first-person forms, bringing to the surface hitherto unseen parallels between retrospective first-person fiction and interior monologue; 2) that simultaneous narration involves possibilities for semantic enlargement of the present now and of subjectivity, a trait that is not however specific to the fictional forms; and 3) that the uniqueness and indeed strangeness of simultaneous narration has to do with a combination of the not fiction-specific possibilities for enlargement and a fiction-specific lack of narrative situation.

1. Introduction

Simultaneous narration can be traced back at least to smaller works by Chekov, and the form really comes into its own in the first part of the 20th century with works like some of Kafka's short prose, and Remarque's novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1928) (*All Quiet on the Western Front*.) In the fifties and sixties the "nouveau roman"-movement in France employs it from time to time,¹ and today it has become quite widespread. Some rather well-known recent examples are Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* (1995), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) and many of Raymond Carver's short stories.

Scholarly work on the subject is sparse. Dorrit Cohn devotes a chapter to it in her 1999 book, *The Distinction of Fiction*. It is a small chapter, but as always in Cohn, very lucid and clever. Her work provides the starting point for our investigation.

2. A "negative" definition

Following Cohn we refer to the narrative phenomenon in question with the term 'simultaneous narration' (an alternative term is the grammatical characterization FPPT (first person, present tense)) even though as our analysis will show, this term might not be satisfactory in all respects. Also following Cohn we will begin by characterising simultaneous narration negatively by stating that it cannot be understood as interior monologue nor as retrospective narration cast in the historical present.

Let us take a look at a small quote from Raymond Carver's short story "Whoever was using this bed":

She takes her pillow and puts it on the far side of the bed, against the headboard, scoots over, and then she leans back once more. She doesn't look sleepy. She looks fully awake. I get into bed and take some covers. But the covers don't feel right. I don't have any sheet;

¹ Nathalie Sarraute: *Martereau* (1953) is an example and also Alain Robbe-Grillet: *La Jalousie* (1957) which we will return to.

² As explained above, the uncertainty of the narrative status of the interior monologue has to do solely with the question of address, and not with the structure of events retold. The retold events of an interior monologue have narrative structure, but one's definition of narrative might have a receiver as a necessary element, thus leaving the fictive situation of the interior monologue outside the realm of narrative.

³ Among others by Stanzel, Booth and Hamburger.

⁴ A present phenomenon like Facebook self-presentation very often involves a person's simultaneous reports of his own actions.

⁵ The narrator even reflects upon this plasticity on a meta-level, as when he exclaims: "Vergehen

all I have is blanket. I look down and see my feet sticking out. I turn to my side, facing her, and bring my legs up so that my feet are under the blanket. We should make up the bed again. I ought to suggest that. But I am thinking, too, that if we kill the light now, this minute, we might be able to go right back to sleep.

"How about you turning off your light, honey?" I say, as nice as I can.
(Carver 1988: 40)

Reading a passage like Carver's as either an interior monologue or conversely a retrospective account cast in the historic present is what Cohn refers to as "normalising" because both of these forms implicate the mimesis of a "realistic" narrative situation: either someone telling about his past to us, the readers, or someone talking to himself in his head.

However, none of these two possibilities seem to be able to account for texts like the example given.

One thing that seems to mark this passage as retrospection and not an interior monologue is the quotation of speech: "*How about you turning off your light, honey?*" I say, as nice as I can. The quotation indicates that the sentence has already been spoken and is now being retold by the I who thus becomes a narrator. Also inner happenings are mediated. Instead of just the thought, the I tells us that "I am thinking", thus again assuming the role of a narrator.

Finally, in favour of the retrospection reading, the reporting of actions brings to the fore an often quoted normalising argument: No one tells his life as he lives it. Thus, the events must be past, and the present tense hence a historical one.

At this point however, one should remember our very first strictly formal definition of simultaneous narration: first-person narrative fiction cast exclusively in the present tense. The narrator in Carver's story never refers to the ongoing events using the past tense, and thus we may critically ask the retrospection-reader: is it ok to see the present tense as the metaphor for another tense that is not put to use at all?

Also there are several moments in the text where the language presents itself as directly occurring in the mind of the protagonist. In the quote given we find a sentence like – *We should make up the bed again* – which, given the following sentence – *I ought to suggest that* – makes sense only if read as a silent self-address. Later in the story we have the protagonist's thoughts about lighting a cigarette: *The bedroom is filled with smoke. I light one up, too. Why not? The hell with it.* Especially the last two sentences bear the unmistakable mark of an immediate verbalised thought.

So far we have followed Cohn's analysis. But if we move on from that starting point and regard the problem in a cognitive, phenomenological perspective, we can assemble yet another set of arguments that partly strengthen the idea of simultaneous narration as something different from both interior monologue and retrospective narration using historical present, and partly shows that Cohn's probing of all these different first-person forms may be refined.

2. A phenomenological perspective

As Wallace Chafe shows in his monograph from 1992, *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time*, it may be of great linguistic interest to note that an object may appear in different ways to experience, depending upon the intentional stance of the consciousness. Sometimes, for example, we intend something by remembering it, while at other times we will intend something by perceiving it directly, and as we all know from experience, the directly perceived present reality is much more vivid than the remembered, bygone past which appears in a more schematical way.

Long before Chafe, the philosophical tradition of phenomenology has thoroughly investigated this question, and what there seems to be general agreement that objects given to an immediate perceptual consciousness are more detailed and appear in a temporal flow, whereas objects approached by consciousness in other modes (such as linguistic reference, memory, fantasy, anticipation, etc.) appear in a different, more schematic way, i.e. less detailed, more general, and not temporally continuous. 'Not continuous' here meaning that they make up experiential islands which may be manipulated by consciousness in a way that immediate reality cannot. I can think of Tuesday and then think of Monday, but I cannot in memory experience the days flowing into each other in that order.

Now, almost the whole of Carver's story seem very "immediate" in the sense that it mimics some of the traits of what we might call the direct mode of consciousness. That is, it presents things the way things are given to such a consciousness: detailed and continuous. If we look at the first quote again, we will see that the bodily actions of the two people as well as the scene in which they appear are accounted for in great detail. If someone was looking back at this event, it would probably be normal to just say something like, *I did not sleep much last night, the bed was a mess, and my wife and me were tossing and turning.* But in the actual quote we learn on which side of the bed Iris puts the pillow, how blankets and sheets become mixed together, we learn how the gaze of the man change from one moment to the next, how feet and legs are moved in relation to the blanket. Furthermore, everything seems to happen in a quasi-continuous flow. Events are presented in the right order, so to

speak, and furthermore in a tempo that facilitates the image of a synchrony between reading time and event time.

This kind of immediacy-mimesis makes up the lion's share of Carver's piece. But sometimes it shifts and represents events in the more schematic form normally characterizing memory:

So we get out of bed and start getting dressed. In some ways it's just like any other morning, except we do things faster. We drink coffee and juice and we eat English muffins. We remark on the weather, which is overcast and blustery. We don't talk any more about plugs, or about sickness and hospitals and stuff like that.

(Carver 1988: 42)

Here, the meaning of the sentences does not constitute a similar flow. The remark that things are done faster is a kind of frame or context for the following sentences, and the meaning it expresses could only have been conceptualised after the meanings that it proceed. And here we do not learn what exactly is being said about the weather or how coffee and muffins are eaten. Instead the passage seems to mimic the displaced mode of consciousness, a mode where things are not directly perceived.

3. Historical present and interior monologue: A closer look.

The phenomenological perspective is an addition and supplement to Cohn's analysis. However, there is also one point where she may be criticised, and which may pave the way for a more positive definition of the simultaneous narration.

As we have said, Cohn contrasts the form with the historical present to the one side and with the interior monologue to the other. And we have followed that method as our starting point. However, in this operation, it may seem as though the historical present and the interior monologue are two opposed members of the same category, but that is not really the case. First of all: one is a grammatical phenomenon, a semantic value that the present tense may take, while the other is what you might call a fictional genre or narrative type, and a type that may easily contain verbs in the historical present.

In Cohn's account the historical present is associated exclusively with the retrospective first-person account, Dickens' *David Copperfield* is the example, and again this is contrasted with the interior monologue in that the first is called narrative, the other not, and in that the first form employs a metaphorical, historical present and the other a genuine present.

As far as we can see this opposition is flawed. Interior monologue and retrospective first-person narration have a lot more in common than Cohn suggests, and a look at their shared features shed a great deal of light on simultaneous narration. The common traits are treated here under three headings: *grammar*, *narrative structure* and *phenomenology*, the latter aiming at the modes of consciousness represented and how:

- **Grammar**
Both forms are dominated by the past tense, the tense used when referring to remembered events. And both forms can replace this past tense with a historical present.
- **Narrative structure**
Both forms are narrative in the sense that the language of both forms are addressed to someone, and in the sense that past events are retold.
- **Phenomenology**
Both forms are realistic in the sense that they keep a distinct line between a narrating now and a narrated past, and they do this in a way where perceptions and bodily actions are limited to the narrated past. There is no (or hardly any) sensing and moving around in the realm of the narrating now.

It should be noted that no extensive study lies behind these claims. Actually they are based on a comparison only of two examples, namely the ones that Cohn primarily refers to: Dickens' *David Copperfield* as an example of a retrospective first-person narrative, and the Penelope-chapter from Joyce's *Ulysses* as an example of interior monologue. Nevertheless we believe that our points have a principal and general validity.

Grammar

The first point was a little bit of a surprise, at least to us. We all know that *David Copperfield* is primarily told in the past tense and most of us would guess or tell without looking that it now and then shifts to the historical present.

The interior monologue, however, is commonly understood as a genre of immediacy, so one would probably guess that it was dominated by the present tense. But this is not the case, at least not with the paradigmatic Molly-monologue. A count on three randomly chosen pages show an average on each page of 43 verbs in the past tense and 27 in the present. And sometimes, at least in five cases we have found, the dominating past tense is changed to a historical present like in the following case:

like that picture of that hardened criminal he was called in *Lloyds Weekly news* twenty years in jail then he comes out and murders an old woman for her money
(Joyce 1997: 673)

There are good reasons why there would be a dominance of the past tense even in the interior monologue. As the reader might recall, not an awful lot happens in the "now" from where Molly is performing her monologue. She is in bed in fact, and except for a single visit to the chamber pot she does not move around at all. Her mind does, from time to time, turn to her immediate surroundings, mostly the messed up bed and her physical condition, she is having her period, but mostly her thoughts wander to previous events and to general speculations that do not have anything to do with her immediate surroundings. As a study made by Wallace Chafe suggests this is in compliance with a natural discursive attitude: people mostly talk about things that are not part of their immediate surroundings, maybe because these surroundings are already given through perception, (Chafe 1982).

Narrative structure

Moving on to the next point, we state that both retrospective first-person narration and interior monologue have narrative structure. They both retell events and they are both addressed to someone. This is a controversial statement, because the interior monologue is normally defined as a non-narrative form. Genette, in *Narrative Discours*, sees the form as "emancipated from all narrative patronage" (Genette 1980: 174). Stanzel says about the self of the interior monologue that: "it does not narrate or address a listener or reader," (Stanzel 1984: 212). And Cohn subscribes to these ideas.

As already mentioned, Molly does recapitulate many previous events in her monologue. Now the question of whether this recapitulation is narrative in nature or not has two sides to it, a structural and a communicative. Structurally, there seem to be no reason why Molly's discourse should not be called narrative. Surely her inner language is very messy compared to that of David Copperfield, but a passage like the following:

the night I was sure I heard burglars in the kitchen and he
went down in his shirt with a candle and a poker
(Joyce 1997: 673)

– clearly has a narrative structure, presenting as it does different causally connected events in a sequence. And there are many of such small stories in Molly's monologue, small stories that combine into a larger one about Molly's relation to the men in her life, and about the relation between men and women in general.

The other side of the question is trickier. It seems natural as Stanzel does, to think of narrative as something that must be addressed to someone. And surely, Molly does not address another person. The premise of the piece is that the words we read are words running silently in her head.

But does that necessarily mean that she is not addressing anyone at all? Even though it could seem a trivial point, it must be noted that a language producer like Molly does in fact address *herself*. It is of course a matter of definition whether or not a narrative is regarded as something that *must* involve a receiver different from the sender, but no matter what, it is important to understand that the interior monologue is *self-addressed*, because only thus can it be understood what kind of mental stuff the interior monologue can convey, and in turn how exactly simultaneous narration differs.

Phenomenology

This leads us to the third point which concerns precisely the kind of mental stuff that is rendered by the two forms in question: the retrospective first-person narrative and the interior monologue. The question is what aspects of consciousness is presented and how.

First of all, we would like to focus on the interior monologue in its status of verbalised *self-address*. And we will discuss how only some aspects of consciousness find their way to such a self-address, while a great many other aspects are left out.

Now, we all know that we sometimes talk to ourselves and thus perform interior monologues. We are capable of generating silent words in our minds and capable of somehow listening to these words in our heads. However, we also know that we are aware of other things than words. First of all,

we are aware of our surroundings through our senses, and also very importantly, we are aware of our own bodies and the actions we perform with this body.

Now an amazing quality of *at least* one type of fiction, namely epic fiction in the third-person, is that it can convey the awareness in a fictive person of, not only the verbal thoughts, but also of non-verbal stuff like perceptions, actions and feelings. The German literary scholar and philosopher Käte Hamburger was the first to notice this phenomenon and to give it due theoretical attention, and she explained the issue in phenomenological terms when she stated that

Epic fiction is the sole epistemological instance where the I-originary (or subjectivity) of a third-person qua third-person can be portrayed.
(Hamburger 1973: 83)

Later, Chafe has given his cognitive account, which is in fact also based on a phenomenological analysis of consciousness. He describes three "channels" through which a consciousness has access to its immediate surroundings, namely action, perception, and something he calls evaluation which perhaps more accurately could be called simply "thought", or "direct thought" underlining its concern with immediate surroundings, (see Chafe 1992: 197). And Chafe then looks at a one of Hemingway's Nick-stories to show how fiction may convey the immediate awareness of these channels.

Let us look at a small quote:

He started a fire with some chunks of pine he got with the ax from a stump. Over the fire he stuck a wire grill, pushing the four legs down into the ground with his boot. [...] There was a good smell. Nick got out a bottle of tomato ketchup and cut four slices of bread. The little bubbles were coming faster now. Nick sat down beside the fire and lifted the frying pan off. [...] He looked at the fire, then at the tent, he was not going to spoil it all by burning his tongue.
(Hemingway 1970: 139-140)

Taken for themselves sentences like: "The little bubbles were coming faster", "Nick sat down" and "he was not going to spoil it all by burning his tongue", could be just account of facts, but in the context of the fiction they do something else, which is to convey respectively a perception (of the bubbles), an action (sitting down), and a thought, (he was not going to spoil it all), as appearing to Nick. With the words of Chafe:

A sensitive reader may appreciate the fact that a statement like *Nick sat down* is ambiguous in terms of consciousness. Its ordinary interpretation may be one in which an outside observer remembered this event. But in the context of this story the same statement is understood as Nick's own experiencing of what he did.
(Chafe 1992: 255)

Thus, both the Nick-story and Molly Bloom's interior monologue are involved with consciousness, but in quite different ways. In the Molly example we get an excessive self-address made up only of the things Molly says to herself. While in the Hemingway-example we get consciousness of things that are not necessarily verbalised. That Nick is sitting down is of course not something we should imagine him saying to himself, and the same goes for perceptions like "there was a good smell", or "the little bubbles were coming faster now", and perhaps even the desire not to spoil the dinner by burning his tongue. The sentences signify Nick's own experience of actions, perception and thoughts, and this seem to be facilitated precisely by the fact that they are not verbalised by him.

We are touching here upon a well-known difference between third-person and first-person fiction, namely that in the first case the consciousness of the protagonist is represented by words that are not his. By contrast, the first-person narrator is constantly producing language, and is always himself responsible for representing his thoughts, perceptions and actions. This in turn creates some limits for the first-person form if it wants to appear realistic: namely that all non-verbal mental stuff such as for example actions and perceptions, must be displaced in relation to the narrating now. Both Joyce's Penelope-chapter and Dickens' David Copperfield comply (almost completely) with this rule. They both have a separation between the narrating now on the one hand and the displaced sphere of narrated past and imagined future on the other. And actions and perceptions are almost exclusively limited to the latter.

Thus one very good reason why Joyce's Molly-monologue is often treated as a paradigm of the form is that Molly almost does not move at all, and when she does she never reports it directly. She will say for example

O Lord I must stretch myself

(Joyce 1997: 662)

and then we can gather that she stretches herself. Likewise, if she hears a train, she will not say "I hear a train" but instead we get her thought or "interpretation" of the perception:

frseeeeeeeffronnnng train somewhere whistling the strength those engines have in them like big giants
(ibid.: 663)

Thus an important condition for the convincing quality of Joyce's Molly monologue is that Molly does not move or act very much, and thus Joyce does not have to deal with the problem of conveying indirectly how and where she moves or what she senses in whatever new scene she might move into. Cohn expresses the matter like this in *Transparent Minds*:

when monologists become much more enterprising [than Molly] they begin to sound much less convincing; forced to describe the actions they perform while they perform them, they tend to sound like gymnastics teachers vocally demonstrating an exercise.
(Cohn 1978: 222)

However, one thing that Cohn does not mention and which does seem rather important is that it is only in the self-addressing *now* that Molly is at rest! Molly is happily moving, dialoguing and sensing in the past that she refers to:

he asked who are you going to and I said over to Floey
(Joyce 1997: 652)

after I took off all my things with the
blinds down after my hours dressing and perfuming
(ibid.: 651)

So this is what we mean when we say that retrospective first-person narrative and interior monologue share phenomenological features: the kind of mental stuff that is non-verbal in nature, is hardly ever reported directly from the narrating now but is instead recounted from mainly a displaced past. And this seem to comply with a realistic norm which is that is ok to go around talking about what one *has* done or *will* do, *has* seen or *will* see, while no one goes around reporting what he does and sees.

Summing up, we find grammatical, narratological and phenomenological reasons for not making too sharp a distinction between interior monologue and retrospective. The difference seems to be one of address: in the fictive narrative situation of retrospection the narrator-I is more aware of his reading public, more well-ordered and coherent. In the fictive narrative (?)² situation of the interior monologue there is only the I's address to itself, thus calling for no extra order or coherence apart from the associative structure of the thoughts and sensations themselves.

The aim so far has been to revise and refine our knowledge of what simultaneous narration *is not* and to clarify the description of the first-person, narrative field in which it belongs. Now, we will turn to a more positive investigation of the manner. First we would like to show how simultaneous narration involves a spectacular enlargement of the now in terms of not only time, but also the kind of mental operations the speaker might carry out in the now. Secondly we will show how this enlargement may involve the subjectivity of the narrator as well, or to be more precise, how simultaneous narration can facilitate a kind of "plasticity of subjectivity". And in our analysis we will ask whether these enlargement-characteristics are specific to the fictional form of simultaneous narration or whether they can be found in non-aesthetic genres as well. Thirdly and finally, we will conclude our discussion with Cohn by critically looking at the three characteristics of simultaneous narration that she lines up in her article (Cohn 1999).

The enlargement of the present now in simultaneous narration

² As explained above, the uncertainty of the narrative status of the interior monologue has to do solely with the question of address, and not with the structure of events retold. The retold events of an interior monologue have narrative structure, but one's definition of narrative might have a receiver as a necessary element, thus leaving the fictive situation of the interior monologue outside the realm of narrative.

In narratology, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* is often characterised by camera- or eye-metaphors,³ indicating that the narrating voice is only reporting what is seen in the present moment. Such reporting does in fact constitute a characteristically large part of the text, indirectly giving a portrait of a strange consciousness, obsessed with reporting perceived details of little immediate relevance (an obsession which must be interpreted as result of the almost pathologically searching jealousy of the title).

As an example of a simultaneous narration, Robbe-Grillet's novel is atypical in that the first-person pronoun 'I' is never used – yet the whole setting and string of events are invariably experienced from a point of view within the fictive realm, and the language in the novel must be understood as originating from this source.

The setting is a colonial banana farm in Martinique. The "narrator", (the banana farmer), is probably suspecting his wife for being unfaithful with the farmer from the neighbouring estate. Painstakingly detailed descriptions of scenes take up much of the narrative, the main events being the visit to the house of the neighbour, drinks on the terrace, a dinner, the deal between wife and neighbour to go down to a coastal town to buy some goods, their coming back belatedly, allegedly having had to spend a night at a downtown hotel.

Let us move forward to a closer at the now of the narrative. The often mentioned "photographic", momentary quality of the style is evident in the opening sentence:

Maintenant l'ombre du pilier – le pilier qui soutient l'angle sud-ouest – divise en deux parties égales l'angle correspondant de la terrasse.
(Robbe-Grillet 1957: 9)

But even in passages which may appear as strictly objective and purely perceptual as this, far from all focus remains upon the present now and on perceptions only. The narrator is, for example, able to conjecture about the inner states of other subjects:

Adossée à la porte intérieure qu'elle vient de referme, A..., *sans y penser, regarde le bois dépeint de la balustrade*
(ibid.: 13-14, italics added)

–of course exceeds the abilities of any merely perceptual knowledge to hypothesize about the perceptions and lack of thoughts of other characters. Furthermore, the I may relate present perceptions to memories of earlier experiences:

A... porte *la même robe qu'au déjeuner*. Franck s'est presque disputé avec sa femme, à son sujet
(ibid.: 21, italics added)

The present tense may even refer to not just what is the case right now, but also what is generically the case in recurring situations:

Le boy fait son entrée pour ôter les assiettes. A... lui demande, *comme d'habitude*, de servir le café sur la terrasse
(ibid.: 27, italics added)

Such generic knowledge may even pertain to action possibilities, not merely perceived content:

A la limite des plaques, les nouvelles écailles de peinture se laissent aisément enlever; *il suffit de glisser l'ongle* sous le bord qui se décolle et de forcer, en pliant la phalange ; la résistance est à peine sensible.
(ibid.: 29, italics added)

Pour se rendre à l'office, le plus simple est de traverser la maison.
(ibid.: 48)

All in all, a camera-eye interpretation, i.e., the idea that the consciousness depicted is restricted to perceptions in the present now is simply not true (even if the large amount of such perceptions make such a fallacy understandable). The I-consciousness is able to connect present observations with knowledge from different sources: inferences about mental states of others, memories, generic knowledge of what is usually the case, action possibilities based on a given perception.

³ Among others by Stanzel, Booth and Hamburger.

Could this "inflation" of the present perceptual now be a characteristic of simultaneous narration – thus relativising its alleged close connection to simultaneity?

5. The enlargement of the now in non-fictional variants

Even if the "inflation" of the now is probably present, to different extents, in all cases of simultaneous narration, it is not a unique feature of *fictional* simultaneous narration. The "inflation" of the present moment is namely also, in a very natural way, found in real-life cognates to simultaneous narration, such as simultaneous reporting in journalism, for instance live commentating of sports in radio or TV:

In moments of hectic activity, the aim of the sports commentator is to chart as detailed as possible the events he sees unfolding before him – but as soon as events give way to less intense activity, the present tense used often "widens out" to cover time slices of more extensive size, such as the whole game ("an intense struggle we are witnessing today between these two teams"), the whole day of the game ("it is a fantastic day here at Old Trafford"), the whole career of a player ("his career is outstanding and he proves again today that he is something special") – or even skipping very precise time reference to go to generic or gnomic use of the present tense instead: "games between these two teams are always particularly wicked", "in a game like this, it is very important with an aggressive defence", "all of the ball must pass all of the line in order for a goal to be scored". In sports commentating, thus, a continuous use of present tense holds the possibility for a zooming in and out on present "nows" of very different sizes – as well as the possibility for leaving these "nows" in the background in order to dwell upon different, more timeless structures of the game.

Such enlargement of the moment can be seen as a necessity called for by the time structure of the events unfolding: The action packed nature of a sudden, "exploding" attack necessitates fast talking and a fine granularity in reporting, making the size of moments smaller (which is directly facilitated in TV-reportage by the slow motion rendering of such game details). On the other hand, less intense phases of the match call for a coarser time resolution, and phases where the game is momentarily off (the ball is out, a player is injured, etc.) gives the opportunity for more general observations or summations of what is seen. Another aspect of this is the online ability for including background information facilitating the understanding of what is happening: the particular characteristics of a player, of a team, of football as such or of general a priori human conditions. Such background information thus has, in itself, very different sources, ranging from particular memories of other games by the same player or team, abstracted knowledge from several such games, even more abstract assumptions relating to a long experience in football or even very general claims about the nature of man or of justice as such, etc. In some sense, the expertise in reporting lies in weaving these very different perceptions, analyses, memories, insights, and inferences together in a way which actually throws light on the events unfolding – much more so than if the report did, in fact, focus only, very behaviouristically, on what could be perceived in each instant, which might, to a large degree, make the presence of a commentator superfluous.

Fictional simultaneous narration is, of course, an art form, performing an unnatural task – namely to report *one's own* actions while performing them. But even a sports-reporter who is reporting his own actions, is not an unlikely thought. Of course, in most cases he does not do much else than sitting and reporting in his box. But if extraordinary events forced him to leave the box, it would not be strange for him to report on what he is doing: "A fire has broken out here at the X stadium. Smoke is filling the box. It seems like I have to leave. Now, I try to force my way through a panic-stricken crowd. We all push for the nearest emergency exit ...". In such cases, the simultaneous reporting about one's own actions would be perfectly natural. Thus, the often-supposed opposition between telling and acting is not necessarily a contradiction but rather a tension only: there are indeed cases where the simultaneous telling about one's actions is not in any way strange.⁴

Another possibility for enlargement, which may also be clearly seen in non-fictional simultaneous narration like sports reporting, regards subjectivity. Of course, the basic subjectivity at stake is the reporter's own person, but it may easily give way to more collective subjects, especially in cases where the reporter strongly identifies with one of the teams: "We are really doing great tonight!", "Denmark is taking an important step in the qualification in this game." Here, the implicit or explicit "we" which the reporter is referring to is a collective comprising the team and the socio-geographic realm it in some sense represents – and which the implied listener is taken to be a part of. In such cases, the reporter merely functions as the voice of a larger, intersubjective unity of which he himself forms a part.

Plasticity of subjectivity and of the present now in *Im Westen nichts Neues*

⁴ A present phenomenon like Facebook self-presentation very often involves a person's simultaneous reports of his own actions.

Returning now to the *fictive* realm of simultaneous narration, we find a parallel plasticity of the subject in *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1928), E. M. Remarque's gripping and indeed bestselling account of life at the WWI Western Front. The whole of the book is cast in simultaneous narration – apart from the last short paragraph relating the death of the main character and narrator where enunciation changes to third-person, past tense. Much more than the atypical case of *La jalousie*, *Im Westen* underlines the plasticity of both the present now and the narrating subject.

The text has many sequences that are immediate in nature, referring to a specific now:

Ich rufe, schiebe mich heran, schlage mit der Kapsel nach ihm, er merkt nichts – noch einmal, noch einmal – er duckt sich nur – es ist ein Rekrut – ich sehe verzweifelt nach Kat, er hat die Maske vor – ich reiße meine auch heraus, der Helm fliegt beiseite, sie streift sich über seinen Kopf, er greift zu – ich lasse los – und liege plötzlich mit einem Ruck im Trichter.

(Remarque 1929: 71)

Here, there is no doubt about the very close simultaneity of narrating, perceiving and acting, indicated by the continuity and the amount of details. Immediately after the gas attack, however, events slow down, and a more resuming approach is employed:

Die Einschläge haben aufgehört. Ich drehe mich zum Trichter und winke den andern. Sie klettern herauf und reißen sich die Masken herunter. Wir umfassen den Verwundeten, einer nimmt seinen geschienten Arm. So stolpern wir hastig davon.

(ibid.: 74)

This gradual change in time resolution may have, of course, two different sources. One is experiential: it is phenomenologically well-known that the quality of subjective experience changes when tightly packed events give way to less intense phases of experience. On top of this subjective basis comes then the selection and organization of narrated events based on reader considerations: the reader needs to know much perception and action detail in the midst of the attack, but needs not know every such detail while the wounded are carried off.

These two motivations, of course, are very different, because the former comes "naturally", inside the fictive consciousness, while the latter is in some sense unnatural, adding reader considerations, which it seems very odd to attribute to a consciousness intensely occupied with fighting. In some sense, the latter, reader-oriented motivation acts like a filter making it possible for the reader to abstract from the unnaturalness of the former. Thus, when very general summations of front experiences appear, such as

Wir schnellen mit einem Ruck in einem Teil unseres Seins beim ersten Dröhnen der Granaten um Tausende von Jahren zurück. Es ist der Instinkt des Tieres, der in uns erwacht, der uns leitet und beschützt. Er ist nicht bewußt, er ist viel schneller, viel sicherer, viel unfehlbarer als das Bewußtsein. Man kann es nicht erklären.

(ibid.: 59)

– then the narrating consciousness is at a distance to grenade shocks, interpreting his own reactions to them in terms of a biological theory of instinct as more basic than consciousness. Characteristically, the passage given occurs during the driving of the battalion towards the front line – thus, the reflective stance of the subject, communicating its theory of battle to the reader, is read as natural because it may, at the same time, be seen as the soldier's own speculations shortly before the next fighting erupts.

In some cases, much longer periods of actions may be compressed

Wir fahren einige Tage. Die ersten Flieger erscheinen am Himmel. Wir rollen an Transportzügen vorüber. Geschütze, Geschütze.

(ibid.: 199)

But the marked lack of boundaries of the now never forms an obstacle to reading. In such resuming passages, the narrating consciousness is very palpable – of course the experiencing consciousness must have perceived and acted in much detail during those days which are not here reported. The unnaturalness of such "editorial" shifts between levels of detail is strangely evened out by the simultaneous narration form, which makes the reader move seamlessly between a present now lasting less than seconds and to one taking several days.⁵

⁵ The narrator even reflects upon this plasticity on a meta-level, as when he exclaims: "Vergehen

The plasticity of subjectivity is also, in this case, intimately related to the front experience. There is a constant gliding from “I” to “we” in the book’s first-person stance – and the “we” may even refer alternately to the I and another comrade, to parts of the battalion, to the whole battalion, to WWI soldiers as such (also including enemy combatants). The very first word of the novel is characteristically “We”, and the I is only gradually introduced as one among several of this “We”. This plasticity is also seamlessly accepted by the reader, probably because of the special character of front experience where battle tasks time and time again constitute collective intentionalities where individuals intentionalities merge and where survival may easily depend on the mutual trust between men and their collective action. This is, of course, the often-reported close solidarity of the *Männerbund*, and in some passages, the narrator also reflects upon this. While happily eating a roasted, stolen goose together with his superintendent Kat, the narrator reflects:

Was weiß er von mir – was weiß ich von ihm, führer wäre keiner unserer Gedanken
ähnlich gewesen – jetzt sitzen wir vor einer Gans und fühlen unser Dasein und sind uns so
nahe, daß wir nicht darüber sprechen mögen. (ibid.: 98-99)

These deliberations on plasticity of time and plasticity of person in simultaneous narration thus lead us to conclude that these are not the privilege of the fictional form especially. Both are also found in non-fiction simultaneous narration. Thus we are led back to the lack of explicit addressee as the feature that singles out the fictional form and which, in combination with the potential for enlargement of the now and of subjectivity (a potential that according to our argument and analysis is component part of narrating in the present tense *per se*), gives fictional simultaneous narration its peculiarity and unnaturalness.

While the reporter has his immediate public, the readers, listeners or viewers that he simultaneously narrates events to, and while the interior monologist is addressing him- or herself – no such fixed receiver can be found in the fictive simultaneous narration. However, simultaneous narration cannot possibly be reduced to interior monologue. It would be absurd to assume that the nameless narrator of *La Jalousie* or Paul Bäumer of *Im Westen* do in fact relate all the perceptions, events, and actions to themselves while they occur. Obviously, they do not need to tell themselves what they experience. At the same time, a literary receiver is present to the extent that such cases of simultaneous narration is definitely not the association current of streams-of-consciousness – the narrator edits the content experienced; changes scenes, shifts detail levels, provides resumes, etc. An organizing tendency shows itself side by side of the experiencing ego consciousness – the strange thing of course being that these two are merged in the same subjectivity.

Concluding remarks

In Cohn's account for simultaneous narration, she highlights three interconnected characteristics:

To bring to light the fiction-specific effects inherent in simultaneous narration, I will now briefly focus on three principal and closely interrelated features of simultaneous narration: the incongruity of its narrative situation, the semantic implications of its narrative tense, and the absolute focalisation of its narrated experience.
(Cohn 1999: 105)

Cohn's first point – the narrative incongruity – seems perfectly correct. We would add that this incongruity has its specific base in the absence of any plausible addressee of the narration performed. As a third alternative to first-person retrospective narration and interior monologue, addressed to a reading public and the narrator's own self respectively, simultaneous narration does not just mix the neighbouring narrative situations but constitutes a characteristic form of its own. And the essential aspect is that there is no plausible receiver of the discourse. Simultaneous narration may contain passages, which do not seem organized with a receiver in mind, while sometimes an explicit organization with respect to a reader peers through. These currents may not, however, in Cohn's words, be normalized.

Wochen – Monate – Jahre? Es sind nur Tage.” (ibid.: 136) or "In Wirklichkeit vergessen wir nichts. Solange wir hier im Felde sein müssen, sinken die Fronttage, wenn sie vorbei sind, wie Steine in uns hinunter, weil sie zu schwer sind, um sofort darüber nachdenken zu können. Täten wir es, sie würden uns hinterher erschlagen; denn so viel habe ich schon gemerkt: Das Grauen läßt sich ertragen, solange man sich einfach duckt; – aber es tötet, wenn man darüber nachdenkt.” (ibid.: 141). This blurring of time seems to be an inherent part of the front experience reported, and the narrator is able, in some situations, to grasp this reflectively.

Thus, for an analytical gaze, something paradoxical remains in the narration, and one has to accept the present tense in simultaneous narration as a narrative mode *sui generis*.

Cohn's second point goes into the different semantic implications of present tense use, and she points to the co-presence of different present tense semantics: durative-iterative, irrealis referring to fantasies, standard present tense referring to real world descriptions and perceptions. We agree that these multiple present tense semantics are indeed there, but Cohn's conclusion concerning their effect is in need of some refinement:

Used as a global fictional tense, the present can potentially bring into play all these meanings and more, fusing and confusing, consuming and subsuming them to create a grammatically homologous field of unparalleled semantic tension, instability, flexibility, and ambiguity.

(Cohn 1999: 107)

We do not deny that a paradox-seeking style is indeed possible in simultaneous narration; however, as our phenomenological analysis makes clear, the different present tense semantics may, in many cases, simply mirror fundamental conditions for the ordinary online experience of consciousness and environment. It is to simplify normal consciousness much too much to assume it should be invariably oriented towards the narrow present now only. Rather, it effortlessly integrates a sometimes more, sometimes less enlarged now with memories, fantasies, expectations, abstractions, etc., just like the case with simultaneous narration which in these respects mimics the workings of real life consciousness.

If searching for unique abilities of fictional simultaneous narration, one should rather look at its possibilities for representing different types of subjectivity, often marginal or even pathological, in combining the present tense semantics in various ways. For example, the constant verbalizing of perceptions and actions may create an image of a neurotic and over-reflected speaking ego. When the narrator in Carver's short story says: "I lie back down, close my eyes, and decide I'll count to sixty, slowly, before I say anything else about the light", it is hard to imagine that the person in question will fall asleep readily. A mind constantly reflecting the actions performed is not a mind at rest.

In our analyses, we saw two very different subjectivities portrayed in *Im Westen* and *La Jalousie* – but both could be described as abnormally tense, i.e.: the extremes of frontline experience on the one hand, the extremely jealous mind on the other. In Ernst Jünger's prose poem "The Beach Walk" the narrative present is used to outline a nightmarish dream, in another Carver-story, "Fat", the form is used to portray a neurotic woman who cannot come to terms with her own imagined obesity. In Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, the consciousness of a fashion-obsessed mass killer is charted. The side-stepping of the 'do not narrate and act at the same time'-dictum easily and almost inevitably lends itself to the portrayal of tense, marginal types of subjectivity. Or to reverse the idea: Nick Adams from the Hemingway-stories would hardly be the same tacit and masculine Nick if he had been portrayed through simultaneous narration. Third-person narration of acting and sensing in quiet solitude simply does not translate directly into simultaneous narration. Could you imagine Genesis rendered in simultaneous narration? It is hardly a coincidence that we find few holy books written using this form.

Cohn's third point is linked to the question of whether simultaneous narration is the first-person equivalent to the fictive past tense we know from the third-person realm. Here is what she adds to the point about the absolute focalization:

With its global consistency dissolving the semantic specificity that attends the historical present, one is free – and, I think, rather compellingly encouraged – to understand the present [i.e. the present tense of simultaneous narration] as a temporally indeterminate or "absolute" narrative tense, for which the most appropriate term – highlighting its fiction-specificity – would seem to be "fictional present." This understanding has the advantage of dislocating the narrated text from a temporally fixed point of origin, much as Hamburger's interpretation of the past tense in third-person fiction detaches it from the obligatory retrospection it signifies in nonfictional discourse.

(Cohn 1999: p. 106)

Cohn's remark is in one sense to the point, because as she formulates it, one effect of the fusion of different semantics "is the seamless continuity that simultaneous narration achieves between outer and inner reality, report and reflection" (Cohn 1999: 107). This has been one of our most important points as well, and we have tried to add to the understanding of this fusion by looking at enlargement-strategies and by comparing with non-fictive examples. However, it cannot be emphasised too strongly, that the fusion at stake takes on a completely different quality when undertaken from within the fictive realm as in simultaneous narration, a first-person form, as compared to third-person forms where the narration comes from without and is not itself fictive. In simultaneous narration, whatever we read

casts a specific, characterizing light back onto the fictive subject, because he or she is fictively the producer of the language. This is not the case in third-person fiction as we have seen in the comparison of an example such as Hemingway's Nick-story with simultaneous narrations such as *Im Westen* and *La Jalousie*.

Saying that the narrative medium is the message would be going too far, but the narrative form chosen will always carry a significant meaning. And literary artists such as Hemingway, Carver, Robbe-Grillet and Remarque seem to know this and use it in their work.

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Thanks to the Velux Humanities Program.