Stockholm
University
Department of English

An Imperfect World, Imperfectly Retold:
Mimetic Uncertainty in Early, Late, and Meta-Modern Fiction

Jonathan Brott
Master's Degree Project
English Literature - Fall 2020
Supervisor:
Irina D. Rasmussen

Abstract

Proposing the concept of *mimetic uncertainty,* this project aims to provide a critical inquiry into the correspondence of unreliable narration and realism. Building on Springett (2013) and Olsen (2003), a distinction between narratorial unreliability and uncertainty is proposed to denote whether a narrator explicitly signals an awareness of their fallible narration. I thereafter indicate how narratorial uncertainty, on the one hand, can serve to evoke a "reality effect" (Barthes 1989) on a receptive aesthetic level; and on the other hand, can provide a form of historicity (Jameson 1985) and discursive realism (Auerbach 2003) on an expressive historical axis. Through this tripartite framework, realism is contextualised within the discourse of unreliable narration, as well as the specific debate which surrounds uncertainty and fallibility.

The textual analysis focuses on three separate works—Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague year* (1722), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and finally, Tao Lin's *Taipei* (2013)—with the twofold aim of (1) providing a model for approaching uncertain narration and (2) applying a historically contingent realist reading. I argue that in all three novels, emphasis on how readers may respond to uncertain narration provides insight into socio-historical and discursive points of friction surrounding their authors.

The overarching ambition of this study is to provide a more substantial and historicized understanding of the stylistic devices of contemporary authorship, while more broadly signifying the unexpected critical acuity of mimetic approaches as well as the challenges and demands which metamodernist literature approaches.

Keywords: Mimetic Uncertainty, Uncertain Narration, Unreliable Narration, Realism, Modernism, Metamodernism, Reflexivity, Virginia Woolf, Tao Lin, Daniel Defoe.

Introduction

The unreliable narrator is a concept as misleading as its very name suggests. Despite being a fundamental category taught at literature departments around the world, it is easily reduced to a rhetorical device that serves to create intrigue and distance between the reader and narrator. A further problem with the notion of an unreliable narrator is that it tends to be thought of as a binary concept: either reliable or unreliable. It is important to sustain the critical acuity of this term, by using it as a way of discussing narratorial dynamics, and not as a static label. Beyond conventional notions of a narrator being *untrustworthy* (for instance, being a child or racist), a vast spectrum of uncertainties are subsumed under this umbrella term. One way to restore some specificity to the concept of unreliability is to distinguish unreliable narration from 'fallible' narration. At stake in this differentiation is however the notion of a supposedly reliable counterpart. This paper begins by asking what occurs when a narrator conveys an awareness of their fallible narration, how this affects the reader's experience of realism, and how the specific manifestations of fallibility help us gain insight into the literary and cultural paradigm of an author.

Prior approaches to unreliability tend to shy away from and distance themselves from discourses on realism. But while realist approaches to literature are often avoided within the study of unreliability, it seems nearly impossible to discard the notion that by reading fictional works, one is provided—perhaps not a one-to-one representation—but an imprint, which provides some amount of insight into the *real* world. Therefore there is a need to develop a model for consciously dealing with the underlying realist assumptions of unreliable narration, converting them from a dangerous obstacle to be avoided, into a critical tool to be harnessed with care.

A range of critics[1] have attempted to distinguish the narrator that is deemed unreliable (untrustworthy) from the one whose limitations are justified by the reader (restricted/fallible). However, a broader study of the process of *disclosure* and its interactions with realism has yet to be constructed. It seems the only attempt at this distinction can be found in a singular Master's thesis[2] from Massey University, which

[1] The distinction between fallible & untrustworthy narrators was first suggested by Olson 2003, but has been a growing concern, and seems implicit in the works of Phelan and Rabinowitz as well as many others in the field.
[2] Springett 2013

modestly proposed the concept of "narratorial uncertainty". I wish to therefore carry that torch forward and shift the focus further from unreliability to the concept of uncertainty, and finally (adding a realist approach) towards what I will term *mimetic uncertainty*.

Building on the rhetorical framework suggested by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz, along with an emphasis on the cognitive process of disclosure as proposed by Ansgar Nünning, in combination with Greta Olson's focus on "fallible" narrators, I aim to expand upon the "bonding effect"[3] of the unreliable narrator, and discuss the bonding effect of an "uncertain narrator".[4] The term uncertain narrator was first employed by Ralph Springett[5] to refer to instances where a narrator explicitly signals hesitation towards their narration and thus discloses awareness of their fallibility. Explicit hesitations of this kind bring to light the fundamental epistemological ruptures of narrativity, which can create a bonding effect between reader and narrator, by the text, in one critic's words, "preaching its own untrustworthiness".[6] Without engaging in the invention of too many neologisms, I employ the term "mimetic uncertainty"[7], to further denote how explicit fallibility (narratorial uncertainty) reflects paradigmatic epistemological positions, social realities, and historical sensibilities, thus creating more reliable narrators.

As Springett's work focused solely on the effect of narratorial uncertainty on third-person narratives, this paper will aim to apply it to a broader cross-section of three novels with radically different narrative situations and historical contexts, which all employ uncertain narrators differently. The first two chapters will examine the works of Daniel Defoe and Virginia Woolf to provide illustrative examples of how uncertainty functions at a rhetorical and receptive level. These works are associated with two separate poetics and cultural-historical paradigms: Defoe, with an early modern realism, and Woolf, with a modernist *anti-realism*. I argue that the differences in narratorial uncertainty reflect and respond to epistemological and existential problems of their respective historical and cultural paradigms.

[3] Phelan and Rabinowitz, Authors, Narrators, Narration 2012, 34
[4] This term was proposed by Springett (2013) yet utilized solely in relation to heterodiegetic narratives.
[5] Springett 2013
[6] Jongeneel 2008, 307
[7] A nod to Auerbach (2003), whose monolithic book *Mimesis* provides a historicized reading of how representations of reality evolve in response to their historical periods, making it possible to glean insight not about what is represented, but how it is represented.

Having shown the coherency between specific types of uncertainty and broader cultural phenomena, I will apply the same kind of reasoning to our current paradigm through the novel *Taipei* by Tao Lin. Our notions of a cultural paradigm or literary epoch are mostly constructed after the fact, but by understanding how they interact with specific textual phenomenon we can achieve a kind of historical validation of these broader paradigmatic tendencies. In this way, we can begin to do the same for our current paradigm, by carefully utilizing the same tools but now applied to our own cultural-historical moment. This essay hopes to further historicize the development of a kind of 'self-aware failure' present in metamodern artistry, which has been brewing among young avant-garde authorship, yet has far-reaching effects on our broader cultural landscape. There is a certain hesitancy towards naming the movement before it moves, from fear perhaps of claiming a movement that is still developing. The main reason for both examining contemporary literature alongside more canonized works is to show that what at times appears as disruptive in the literary landscape, can be seen alongside a lineage of authorship. What we hope to show is that Tao Lin's seemingly neurotic treatise on realism and ennui has precedence in literary history, and similarly provides a symptomatic insight into our contemporary culture, showing how metamodernist thought begins to mend the traumatic ruptures of postmodernism.

Background

Metamodernism: Un Petit Histoire

Upon first reading the works of Tao Lin, I found myself profoundly enjoying certain meaningless scenes: those in which characters continually misunderstand each other in conversations about the most conventionally banal topics; those in which the monotony and confusion of everyday life is laid most bare in Lin's characteristically monotone narration. However, this prompted me to ask, why might one enjoy the experience of miscommunication, failure, and mundanity, and what could this indicate about the current state of contemporary authorship?

I was quick to situate this more broadly within the context of metamodernism, a descriptor that is quickly gaining traction and critical relevance in describing our current socio-cultural paradigm. In a 2010 essay, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker first began to sketch out metamodernism as a description, not of what *will come* after postmodernism, but rather of what *has come*. Metamodernism emerges as a response to growing discontent with the paralyzing "scepticism" of postmodernism—a result of its over-awareness of the unattainability of any grand endpoint (a neurotic deconstructivist attitude)—along with a longing for the "enthusiasm" of modernism and its ceaseless creative activity.[8] The result of this predicament, Vermeulen and Akker claim, is an oscillation between the poles of (modernist) sincerity and (postmodernist) irony, resulting in an "informed naivety", "pragmatic idealism" or in my words: a *sincere irony.*[9] My Bachelor's thesis focused on finding homology between this metamodern sensibility and the concept of Romantic Irony as found within the Idealist tradition, suggesting ultimately that the two share an immense structural similarity while being responses to different cultural contingencies.[10] The benefit of these kinds of sensibilities is that they manage to free authors from the deadlocks of postmodern defeatism, through an asymptotic approach towards transcendental/utopian goals, with no promise of ultimate fulfilment, while still pragmatically covering new political and discursive territory. Vermeulen and Akker summarize the activity of metamodernism most succinctly in the analogy of a donkey chasing a carrot:

[8] Vermeulen and Akker, Notes on metamodernism 2010, 5-6
[9] Ibid.
[10] Brott 2018, 19

> Like a donkey it [metamodernism] chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across.[11]

Another way to express the metamodernist attitude is in a simple articulation of emotion: where the modernist might say "I love you", the postmodernist says "I was going to say I love you, but it doesn't mean anything", while the metamodernist goes on a long ramble saying "I know it doesn't mean anything, that people have written thousands of books and plays and poems and dissertations about it, and it is just a chemical process in my mind, but *I still love you*". A recurring trope in metamodernist theory is thus an engagement with a kind of literary and artistic failure either redeemed by aestheticization or, inversely, simply laid bare. As James Burton puts it in one instance (in reference to contemporary poetry written by black female writers) this trope of failure, rather than redeeming itself, instead exposes how "American society has failed people of colour"[12]. In Tao Lin's case, it is possible to find both celebratory as well as critical aspects, as one reviewer suggests, moments of "beauty appear, sudden, stark and unexpected as a skyscraper in the jungle, before the narrative retreats back into drugs and ennui".[13] Considering Lin's rising popularity, this jarring and ambiguous depiction of life seems to speak to a large section of readers.

Having noted a recurring concept of failure, I wished to consider a historical overview of 'failed narration' or 'failed language'. This drew me to examine the history and development of unreliable narration, as a failed speech act. As we find in Tao Lin's work an almost pedantically reliable narrator, who recites in great detail every banal occurrence and stuttering phrase, it seems instead that it is the content—not the narrator—of his work that is unreliable: an alienated existence in late capitalism, a drug-induced monotony, and most importantly, a young generation who spends its time passively "looking at the internet"[14]. In my own reading, I found myself experiencing an odd satisfaction in the frequent failure of communication between Lin's characters. It is not that they are ineloquent, but rather that they do not seem to know what they are

[11] Ibid.
[12] Burton 2018, 60
[13] Quinn 2013, para 7
[14] Lin 2013, 14-15

trying to say. This aroused the feeling of these characters almost having been forced to be *characters*, and simultaneously forced into a frame of realism.

A similar tendency can be found in some modernist works, but in these cases, the miscommunication appears to occur between narrator and reader. Most distinctly this can be seen to be the case in *Mrs Dalloway*, where a narrating entity continually signals its inability to authoritatively relay both the external events it is depicting, as well as the thought processes of its characters, pointing to a fundamental epistemological rupture of language, subjectivity, and narration.

To find some kind of footing in the history of realism in English literature, I have chosen to begin the roots of the modern English novel, and the shaky fundaments of what refer to as literary Realism: Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. Thus, this project embarks on tracing uncertain narration through two key paradigms with unique stances towards literary realism, yet which utilize surprisingly similar techniques in their depictions of fictionalized realities.

Early Modernity & Late Modernism: Why these novels?

As Vermeulen & Akker suggest: a paradigm, or what they, quoting Raymond Williams, refer to as a "structure of feeling"[15], lies somehow outside of quantifiable observation. The paradigm may be thought of as *qualia*, a wispy broad "*sens"*, as immeasurable as the faint "saline savour"[16] of Islay Whiskey (to borrow a metaphor from Vermeulen and Akker)—which despite not being enumerated in a list of ingredients, still exists and shapes the way we view our world, yet is only accessible always already after the fact. This study thus intends to concretize a section of our current literary paradigm, by having it interact with a lineage of realism. I wish to examine how Tao Lin can be thought of as both breaking with older approaches to mimesis, while at the same time suggesting that his writing furthers an almost absolutist/actualist take on literary mimesis, which speaks to the growing demands of a post-postmodern literary audience.

The primary material I will be reviewing can be seen as representative of three moments in what we might call *early-*, *late-*, and *meta*-modern literature. I propose to examine the overlooked and seemingly banal presence of uncertain narration, to show how uncertainty towards different aspects of narration depicts and faces the challenges of these respective paradigms. Rather than attempting to 'understand' the author or the work, I intend to examine how the text both corresponds to—and creates—the literary paradigm it is rooted in.

We will begin with Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of The Plague Year,* a novel conventionally heralded as one of the first milestones in the genre of Realist literature, yet it simultaneously instantiates the very ruptures of historicity and fictionality. Analyses of this work often focus either on its psychological realism (Shigematsu 2018), its historical depiction of London (Mayer 1997) or its odd biographical status (Bastian 1965). What has yet to be attempted is an investigation into how uncertainty—the hesitations and hedges of the narrator—interact with and drive the experience of realism. Robert Mayer provides a summary of the unique position of Defoe's authorship, when in an analysis of the text's reception, he suggests that its status as a classic, that is, its ability to alter even a modern reader's horizon, stems from an

[15] Vermeulen and Akker, Metamodernism 2017, 27
[16] Ibid.

"insistent confounding of the distinction between history and fiction"[17]. Mayer emphasizes the *Journal*'s ability to negate "our sense of the fictive by asserting its historicity" in a way which creates "fictional forms" which can be regarded as a "species of historical discourse"[18]. Concluding his analysis, Mayer states the need for taking seriously "facts in fiction"[19], which in today's critical climate are often condemned to the realm artistic expression or textual phenomenon, jettisoned far from the notion of facts in reality. He thus stresses that any theory of the novel is "incomplete without an account of how fiction refers" and furthermore "*does* the work of history"[20].

For this study, however, the action of "referring" will take far greater precedence than whatever history may actually have occurred. As we will find, while laying extratextual claims to reality and history, and rendering in detail his own experience, Defoe's narrator demonstrates that even the most meticulous recounting contains uncertainties and ambiguities. These uncertainties function at first glance as a failure to give an authoritative report, yet in fact manage to evoke the very real uncertainties of history and human cognition. In particular, Defoe's employment of narratorial uncertainty depicts the hysteria and indeterminacy of London during the plague year, so that the lapses in what might be thought of as realism (such as magic, angels and supernatural phenomenon) by being depicted sceptically, strengthen the reliability of the narrator, and thus the *realism* of the text.

In contrast to Defoe's realism, we find Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway,* a text which is often read as an experiment at the limits of what is narratable. Woolf's novel functions as a further 'wrench in the cogs' of realism and invites us to consider the continued critical utility of what we may broadly refer to as 'discursive realism'.[21] The bulk of our analysis will focus on Woolf's rejection of circumstantial realism, and consequent step towards discursive realism. A useful background to Woolf's unique position towards realism will be outlined based on her own writing, in the essay "Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown", as well as a chapter from Pam Morris's *Virginia Woolf in Context*[22]. In addition, we will borrow an approach from Melba Cuddy-Keane[23], who attempts to draw parallels between the cognitive mapping of London produced in

[17] Mayer 1997, 545-6
[18] Ibid. 547
[19] Ibid. 550
[20] Ibid., (emphasis added)
[21] This term is further explained
[22] Morris 2013
[23] Cuddy-Keane 2020

Woolf's novel, and the networked structure of the human mind. We will use this approach to examine how the uncertain narration of *Mrs Dalloway*—often as an inability to authoritatively relay spatiotemporal occurrences, and the thought processes of its characters—imitates the experience of a fragmented subject thrust into cosmopolitan modernity, and thus the very limitation of its narration comes to constitute its strength. Finally, we will discover a similar mimetic tendency in Tao Lin's work, but now, in the place of the confounding metropolis, we find that the vastness of the internet is navigated instead.

Theoretical framework

On Unreliability

Our entry-point into the history of the unreliable narrator can be found in Ansgar Nünning's attempted synthesis of "rhetorical" and "cognitive" approaches[24]. The rhetorical approach, initiated by Wayne C. Booth, and later developed by theorists such as Phelan and Rabinowitz, focuses on the narrative as a "purposive communication", which intuitively interprets the anomalies in a narrative as "if they are intended to be made sense of".[25] This approach provides a productive means of analysing the effects of unreliability on the *meaning* of a narrative from an expressive perspective, while carefully skirting around both the *affective fallacy* and the *intentional fallacy* by discussing the intentionality of the "implied author".[26] The rhetorical approach is commonly utilized in teaching the concept of unreliable narration and equips one with a toolbelt of terminology and a distinguishing taxonomy of types of unreliability.

On the other side of the spectrum, Nünning mentions the host of cognitive approaches available. These broadly emphasize a more receptive methodology, using "frame theory" to contextualize the reader's response to unreliable narration in terms of "naturalization".[27] Naturalization refers to a reader's attempts to resolve "ambiguities and textual inconsistencies" by "attributing them to the narrator's 'unreliability'".[28]

In an attempt to combine these two approaches, Nünning proposes a "tripartite structure" made up of "authorial agency, textual phenomena […] and reader response".[29] For any literary scholar, these three poles may trigger a sense of familiarity, as they make up what is often considered the 'rhetorical triangle'.[30] Centrally, Nünning poses the question: if we consider a narrator unreliable, what are we comparing them to? Within Booth's original definition we would claim that they should be considered unreliable in relation to the implied author, yet we simultaneously

[24] Nünning 2008, 31
[25] Phelan and Rabinowitz, Authors, Narrators, Narration 2012, 31
[26] Phelan, Estranging Unreliability 2008, 16
[27] Nünning 2008, 30
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid. 31
[30] A remapping of the Aristotelean rhetorical triangle, with the corresponding poles of Ethos (Author), Logos (Text), Pathos (Reader).

find that this implied author is itself a discursively determined construct. As Nünning suggests, quoting Seymour Chatman, one might better refer to the implied author as the "inferred author".[31] This points us to investigate the process of identifying unreliability as a phenomenon located at an intersection of the reader's preconceived knowledge and their interaction with the text (the conceptual horizon of the author). This is, however, not to say that there can be no authorial intent; Nünning suggests two simultaneous layers of communication:

> The narrative not only informs the reader of the narrator's version of events, it also provides him or her with indirect information about what presumably 'really happened' and about the narrator's frame of mind.[32]

Nünning indicates that the notion of unreliability tends to rely on "realist and mimetic notions in literature" which presuppose a "reliable counterpart" capable of providing an objective and authoritative narration of events.[33] While we do agree that the realist territories may be slippery slopes, we find a more nuanced solution to this in Phelan's concept of a "continuum of reliability"[34] spanning from less to more reliable, thus providing room for unreliability, with no promise of a reliable counterpart.

Nünning goes on to list a number of cues which help a reader identify unreliability in a narrator. Firstly, these are divided into a model of *referential* frameworks which inform a reader, including among others, "general world-knowledge", historical and cultural codes, and "social, moral or linguistic norms"[35]. Secondly, a set of *literary frames* of references are present, including "literary conventions", "intertextual frames of reference", "stereotyped models of characters" as well as "the structure and norms established" by the work itself.[36] This separation is useful but needs to be adapted and recontextualized for every piece of writing. Nünning's focus is furthermore mainly on the cognitive-receptive facets. While one may agree that the work is only accessible by reading it and that a reader's interaction with a text is primarily informed by their own referential frameworks, this does not mean that it should be impossible to make similar inferences about an author's referential framework. Just as Nünnning attempts to take the step beyond the rhetorical and cognitive to investigate how cultural norms inform the reader, we wish to take the

[31] Nünning 2008, 34
[32] Ibid. 38
[33] Ibid. 42
[34] Phelan, Reliable, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration: A Rhetorical Account 2017
[35] Nünning 2008, 47
[36] Ibid. 48

same step but in the opposite direction, in order to examine how these cultural norms and literary paradigms inform and shape the author and narrator. Whereas one may concede to the fact that it may be impossible to ascertain authorial intention, there should be ways of investigating the cultural paradigm which informs these intentions. Readers, critics, and authors do have access to (perhaps performatively/retroactively constructed) conceptions of both historical and contemporary cultural paradigms and are thus always in dialogue with them and recreating them in every instance of both reading and writing. By examining instances of uncertain narration, it is possible not only to gain access to how, as Nünning puts it, "the projection of an unreliable narrator" is informed by the referential network of a reader, but rather inversely, by carefully employing and separating distinct approaches to realism, we find that the specific ways in which a narrator is considered unreliable provide insight into the literary and cultural paradigm of its author.

Nünning indicates, discussing future studies of unreliability, that more research is needed in the area of:

> what Bortolussi and Dixon have called 'inference invitations' i.e the range of signs and signals [...] which invite the reader to make inferences pertaining to the narrator's potential (un-)reliability beyond what is stated in the text.[37]

Taking up this challenge, this essay focuses on the most explicit inference invitation of all: direct uncertainty or hesitation—a clue which gives insight into the "changing cultural discourses"[38] of the implied author, accessible through studying present norms which inform the reader's referential network, in tandem with a rhetorical approach towards literature as a purposive yet often unconscious and historically contingent mode of communication.

[37] Ibid. 66
[38] Ibid. 69

On Uncertainty

The specific inference invitation of interest for this study is what we will elaborate upon as “explicit fallibility”, or “narratorial uncertainty”. These concepts have been touched on in multiple articles on unreliability yet it is rarely read against the historical-cultural discourses that a work is produced in.

Greta Olson, building on Phelan’s rhetorical terminology (in tandem with Nünning’s receptive approach), first proposed a distinction between “fallible” and “untrustworthy” narrators. To account for whether or not a reader considers a homo-diegetic narrator’s unreliability to be intentional or not, Olson examines how they are deemed “situationally motivated” (fallible) or “dispositionally unreliable” (untrustworthy).[39] We may be tempted to claim that this additional distinction could be explained using what Phelan & Rabinowitz’ refer to as “bonding” or “estranging” unreliability combined with the notion of “restricted” narration. Yet simultaneously, discreet terms of this kind allow further clarity in the muddy waters of unreliability, and perhaps even hint that *uncertainty*, rather than *unreliability*, may be a more suitable umbrella-term for these narratorial attributes.

A compelling argument for the use of this further distinction can be found in Ralph Springett’s work which seems to be one of the first studies to propose the term “narratorial uncertainty” to encompass explicit hesitation of a narrator. Springett argues that readers by default tend to trust a heterodiegetic narrator (by drawing on literary genre conventions of omniscient narrators). When a narrator then displays fallible attributes, the reader is at first unable to “fully trust the narrator”.[40] However, as Springett claims, “when the narrator admits his or her unreliability — by being uncertain — the reader may end up trusting the narrator, in spite of this admission”.[41] Springett’s study lays the groundwork for delineating narratorial uncertainty from fallibility and unreliability. Their rigorous breakdown of the phenomenon however leads them to a somewhat narrow historical scope and furthermore solely discusses the effects of heterodiegetic narratorial uncertainty. I hope therefore to give evidence that the same kinds of uncertainty apply to a wide range of narrator types, ranging from first-person pseudo-historical narrators (Defoe), complex third-person (Woolf), as well

[39] Olson 2003, 101-2
[40] Springett 2013, 14
[41] Ibid.

as semi-biographical third-person narrators (Lin). The express aim of this perspective is to examine how uncertainty develops and changes over time, and to suggest that studying these phenomena in a historicized context allows entry into an unexplored—or at least hitherto unnamed—avenue of critical theory.

Another angle on uncertainty is provided by Els Jongeneel's study of the metafictional mimetic qualities of the French *Nouveau Novel*.[42] Jongeneel describes how the New Novel, despite its emphasis on textual autonomy and subversive and complex narrative situations "remains firmly wedded to the representation of reality" —a facet often overlooked in contemporary study. [43] As these "benevolent narrators [...] confide their struggles with language" they become "trustworthy, though fallible" ultimately "preaching [their] own untrustworthiness".[44] These narrators range from homodiegetic "I"- narrators, to the more popular "multi-voiced discourse as a means of expressing modern society"[45]. Jongeneel interprets these strategies as responding to the impact of French Rhetoric which "came under scrutiny at the beginning of the twentieth century"[46] as well as anticipating post-modernist and post-structuralist sentiments. Jongeneel's interest in the metafictional qualities of these texts form a valuable method of deciphering the narrative situation, and thus prompts us to discuss what a fallible or uncertain narrator may have meant in the earlier contexts of Defoe and Woolf, and in the current epoch, through Tao Lin.

Building on Springett, Olson, and Jongeneel's approaches, we will examine three examples of how uncertainty evokes an experience of realism by alternatingly aligning itself with, and breaking with, a reader's referential framework. Furthermore, we will argue that the choice of *what is made uncertain* in these narratives (be it a rumour, an event, a thought, or a line of dialogue) provides insight into the cultural and historical paradigm which their authors are responding to.

[42] Jongeneel 2008
[43] Ibid. 304
[44] Ibid. 307
[45] Ibid. 315
[46] Ibid. 303

On Realism – The Thing Inside the Text.

As previously suggested, something of a crisis has pervaded literary criticism in recent decades. The Derridean maxim "il n'y a pas de hors-texte"[47] [There is no outside-text] which may initially have sent ripples along the surface of literary studies, has now been so deeply internalized that it has taken on the form of a worn-out slogan A central ontological problem lies at the heart of this sentiment, yet this problem is intuitively resolved by all readers. While a philosophy student may spend hours discussing the ontological existence of a table, they will at the end of the day still place their cup on it.

A resurgence in realist ontologies, or *neovitalisms*[48], in the form of New Materialism and New Historicism, have appeared in response to the perceived crisis of realism. While the debate of realism seems fundamentally opposed to reaching consensus, it is important to avoid thinking of these different approaches as being in polemic with each other. As we wish to show in our tripartite structure: a realist approach depends on which reality one is looking for. We therefore present a negotiated model for realism. By combining historicist, discursive, and cognitive approaches to realism, different questions and answers emerge, providing insight into three discursive levels of a work of literature: the event, the author, and the reader. Taking inspiration from Seymour Chatman's model[49] of narratorial mediation, we add to the equation (ever cautiously) the "event". What we find in doing this, is that even though this "event" remains inaccessible in any objectivist perspective, the different social dimensions and realities become apparent through visualizing a tripartite mediation in the following figure:

[47] Derrida 1976, 158
[48] In other domains of Philosophy one may refer to the growing fields of "actor- network theory, new materialism, speculative realism, and object- oriented ontology" Sbriglia and Žižek 2020, 4
[49] This model is visualized, and expanded upon by Jahn Manfred 2017, to display how communication occurs between "(1) author and reader on the level of nonfictional communication, (2) narrator and audience or addressee(s) on the level of fictional mediation, and (3) characters on the level of action."

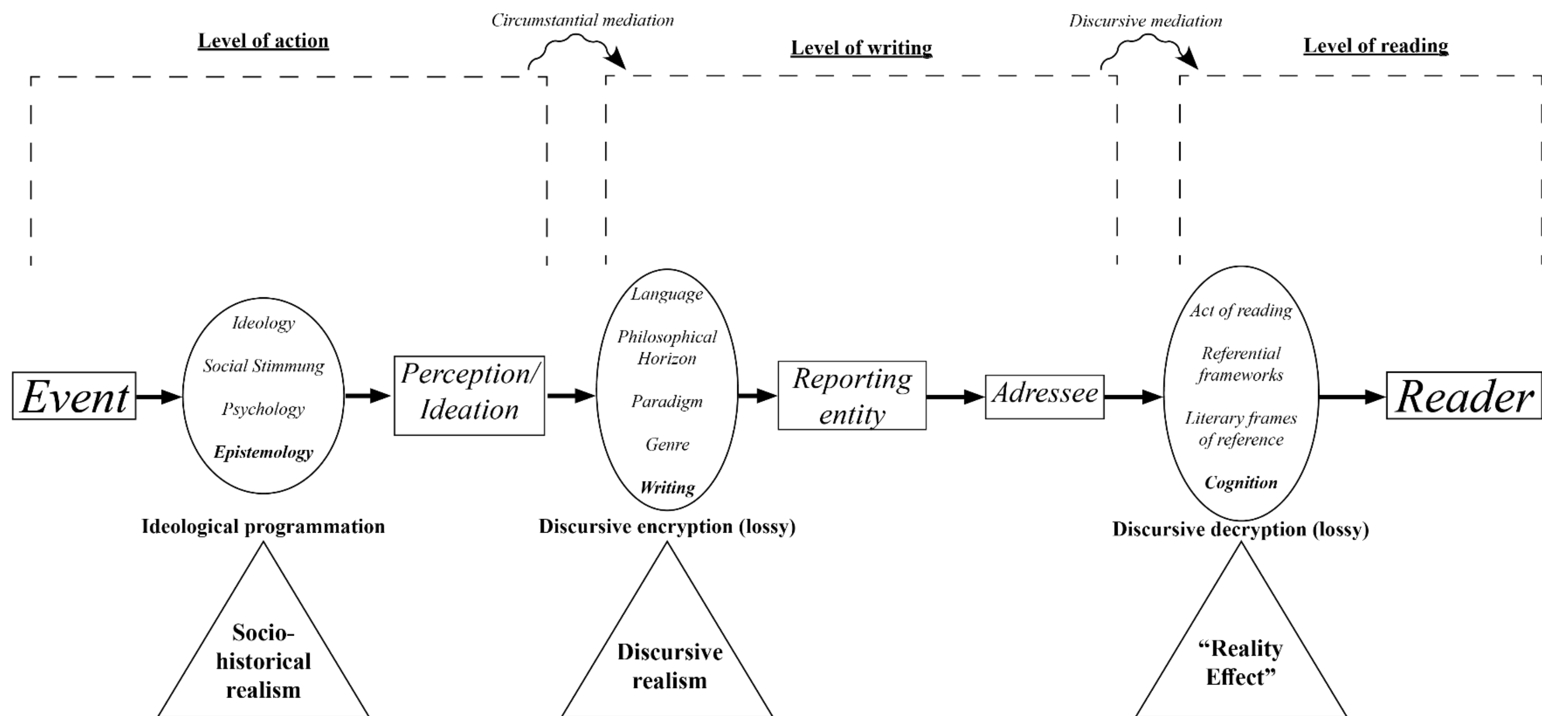


Figure 1. Our tripartite model of literary realism.

Firstly, beginning with the *level of reading*: Roland Barthes deconstructs circumstantial and mimetic approaches to realism as an "ancient mode of verisimilitude"[50], famously critiquing the "insignificant notation" as exemplified in Flaubert's reference to a barometer. Ultimately, Barthes suggests that any notion of realism only ever amounts to the production of a "reality effect"—and that a direct verisimilitude of the 'real' would contain a "resistance" to meaning.[51] Contextualized in the debate of the May '68 student riots, Barthes formulates the need for a realist framework which does not expect "description to afford 'decoding'" but rather a discourse "whose goal is not the revelation of a unique and 'true' structure but the establishment of an interplay of multiple structures".[52] Barthes ultimately only suggests the need for such a discourse, while being careful not to propose one. His call is for a discourse of dynamisms, yet this truly open-ended discourse is paralyzing and unactualizable in its insistence on the fragility of interpretation. What Barthes concludes is that "the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of

[50] Barthes 1989, 147
[51] Ibid. 146
[52] Ibid. 154

realism".[53] But using this approach, alongside a Foucauldian insistence on the *épistémè*, we can begin to learn about the reader's horizon of understanding and its ideological framework. Most importantly, I conceptualize the Barthesian reality effect as a catch-all term for *formal realism*: textual attributes that seem to on a cognitive and affective level suggest reality, regardless of whether there is an actual historical referent or not.

Secondly, we find the inverse of this on the *level of writing*. With some inspiration from Auerbach, we find that while the "event" remains inaccessible in our equation, the way it is represented can be understood as a type of discursive encoding. As an author depicts an "event"—be it a past historical moment or a fictive story, the instance of writing situates the work within a discursive field, and in a sense encodes parts of their socio-cultural context. It is worth emphasizing that what we at this moment refer to as encoding is a kind which is inherently "lossy" (to borrow a technological term)—since there are no claims to an authoritative and complete picture of the historical moment of writing.

Thirdly, moving ever closer to our event, we approach the *level of action*. We find that in the act of perception, despite being *subject* to their own contingency, historical events are both encoded and distorted. Revisiting Flaubert's barometer, Frederic Jameson concludes that the western notion of a referent, "the sense of raw data existing objectively out there", is for modern critics "a myth, a mirage, or an ideology" and what instead becomes significant is the "reality of the appearance".[54] Jameson confirms Barthes' suspicion of the "purely connotative" functions of realist description, which signal simply "'this is reality', or better still, 'this is realism'".[55] However, taking a step further, he instead suggests that while "any house would do", the contingent details of Flaubert's description enacts a kind of ideological "programmation" which manifests itself in ambiguous details.[56] Be it the barometer indicating the "the triumph of science and measurement over the older cyclical and qualitative time of the seasons"[57] or the "musty smell" of the house displaying that "[h]owever abstract and impersonal the world which has here slowly been set in place, it will necessarily be accompanied by forms of subjectivity specific to it".[58] If we extract the Jamesonian

[53] Ibid. 148
[54] F. Jameson 1985, 375
[55] Ibid. 376
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid. 379
[58] Ibid. 380

methodology and attempt to apply it to our model we find that his interest lies nearer to a circumstantial approach to realism, yet the object of study is no longer a naïve objectivist notion of the "event", but rather the ideological networks which govern an author's cognition of the event.

Thus our approach to realism oscillates between three poles; suggesting that if carefully delineated, these kinds of realism may work in tandem: between the initial programmation which we term *sociohistorical realism*—to the *discursive encryption* of the instance of writing—and finally to the cognitive *reality effect* of the instance of reading.

Chapter One – Problematic Realism.

Laying the Groundwork: A Journal of the Plague Year

"It was *about* the beginning of September"[59]—thus begins Defoe's *Journal* with a hint of ambiguity already in the third word. A seemingly superfluous "*about*" lingers, indicating that what is to come is somehow both factual and fictional, somehow both an authoritative and a subjective account. The novel in its title lays claim to historical validity, claiming to be:

> Observations or Memorials
> of the most remarkable occurrences,
> as well public as private, which happened in
> London during the last great visitation in 1665.
> Written by a CITIZEN who continued
> all the while in London.
> Never made publick before.[60]

However, considering that its author would have been five years old during the plague year of London, its biographical nature is highly debated. We will use this work to contextualize some apparent problems with realism and unreliable narration and to introduce how uncertainty may be foundational to even the most reliable narrator.

Ansgar Nünning proposes in a blanket statement that one has no reason "for questioning the reliability of Defoe's narrators despite the fact that their memory is sometimes faulty and that their accounts contain the occasional inconsistency".[61] While we agree that one may be hard-pressed to consider Defoe's narrator unreliable, we hope to demonstrate that deeming him uncertain provides insight into the realist strategies employed by Defoe.

The realist aims of the novel can be divided into two categories: meta-fictional and fictional. On the meta-fictional level, the aim is to convince the reader of the validity of the journal form, i.e that the text was written by a person who actually lived through the plague year. Key features on this level include the presentation of intermedial and epistolary material (in the form of official statements, newspaper clippings, and other 'found' material), historical claims, and genre-specific *formal*

[59] Defoe 2012, 1, (emphasis added)
[60] Ibid.
[61] Nünning 2008, 57

imperfections. This last feature functions in surprisingly disruptive forms. Official statements appear in long-form, filling multiple pages with mortality bills, and repetitions are frequent, with the narrator often repeating entire lines of argument. These imperfections may seem redundant to the story itself, yet all serve to convince the reader that they are in fact reading a real and mostly unedited journal, thus naturalizing the narrator within the autobiographical genre.

What we mean when referring to the "fictional level" depends on whether readers have chosen either to consider the journal as a real historical artefact, as a work of fiction, or perhaps somewhere in-between. Depending on how a reader naturalizes the narrative, the techniques are employed by the author either for *accuracy* or *realism*. The "fictional level" is therefore closest to a historical or circumstantial conception of realism yet might more broadly be referred to as the 'level of action'. We find on this level that questions of congruity and historical reference are central, yet a perhaps overlooked area is how these interact with the narrator's uncertainty.

The forms of narratorial uncertainty we are interested in can gathered up in the notion of *appeals to fallibility*; inference signals wherein the narrator states their limitations. The primary types of appeals to fallibility in Defoe's *Journal* can be summed up in the following list, in ascending order of uncertainty:

- Meta-fictional appeals to fallibility (discursive level):
  - Omission and reduction
  - Ineffability
  - Faulty memory
- Fictional appeals to fallibility (level of action):
  - Limited knowledge / Modal uncertainty
  - Second-hand sources

In the first category, *omission and reduction*, we find that the narrator chooses to not disclose information either out of respect for the privacy of the people involved, as in "I care not to mention the name, though I knew his name too, but that would be an hardship to the family, which is now flourishing again"[62], or out of an aspiration for brevity, such as when enumerating long lists of newspaper clippings bookended by: "and such a number more that I cannot reckon up; and if I could, would fill a book of themselves to set them down".[63] Considering the novel as an entirely fictional work, one might deem such an omission unnecessary, yet it seems to imply that *the whole*

[62] Defoe 2012, 60
[63] Ibid. 22

story is not being told, but could have been. Whereas this appeal to fallibility may be of the less uncertain kind, it introduces us to a function of negative external reference whereby a finger is pointed, yet in the same motion retracted.

Another instance of reduction for brevity may clarify this notion: after having enumerated a large list of supposed cures proposed by the numerous "quack doctors", the narrator passingly mentions that the "College of Physicians" published a daily list of recommended medicines, only to then negate this reference by claiming that as they can be "had in print, I avoid repeating them for that reason".[64] What makes this kind of reference unique is not only its positive referential nature but its subsequent negative reference. Not only does Defoe reference an external historical source, but he also retracts this reference, seemingly in order to claim that his narrative is something different than already written history.

In the second category, we find the notion of *ineffability*: those instances where the narrator appeals to their inability to convey what they have experienced. These moments might easily be reduced to a rhetorical technique of hyperbolically amplifying the events described by signalling, for instance, the limits of metaphor: "Were it possible to represent those times exactly to those that did not see them, and give the reader due ideas of the horror that everywhere presented itself, it must make just impressions upon their minds and fill them with surprise. London might well be said to be all in tears".[65] However, at other times, this appeal to ineffability points to the larger limitations of language and description itself:

> I wish I could repeat the very sound of those groans and of those exclamations that I heard from some poor dying creatures when in the height of their agonies and distress, and that I could make him that reads this hear, as I imagine I now hear them, for the sound seems still to ring in my ears. If I could but tell this part in such moving accents as should alarm the very soul of the reader, I should rejoice that I recorded those things, however short and imperfect.[66]

In this quote Defoe appeals to a fundamental mimetic problem; how does one translate a dying groan into text? Barring the addition of further metaphor or descriptive adjectives (anecdotally we might mention the countless synonyms for "death-gurgle" in Arabic), the act of writing seems not only unable but perhaps even uninterested in a direct *one-to-one* description of sensory perception. The appeal to ineffability thus at

[64] Ibid. 176
[65] Ibid. 12
[66] Ibid. 76

times functions as a rhetorical device, yet also points to a desire to transcend the limits of a simple *one-to-one* representation.

Lastly, we confront the notion of *faulty memory*. Just as Nünning suggests, the narrator's faulty memory might not constitute them as unreliable, but this judgement is made precisely because the unreliability is explicitly disclosed. Defoe's narrator frequently shows hesitation towards his recollection of events with phrases such as "One time before the plague was begun […], *I think* it was in March, seeing a crowd of people in the street"[67] and the perhaps more unlikely conclusion to a very detailed story: "As to the poor man, whether he lived or died *I don't remember*".[68] Eri Shigematsu has delved into this notion; in an article on Defoe's psychological realism he sets up a conflict between the "circumstantial realism" which Defoe is often celebrated for and the "psychological realism" which is often overlooked in his works.[69] Shigematsu concludes that the tension between Defoe's experiencing self and narrating self "imitates the natural oscillation in point of view in remembering past experiences".[70] Illustrated by temporal oscillations, the act of sorting memories, and the notion of "stylistic contagion"[71] all serve to evoke the "the impression that what is happening in the character's mind is real".[72] What Shigematsu however overlooks is the even more complex temporality layering of Defoe's narrative.

Readers are not only presented with a narrating self, who directly repeats their past experiences but rather two more narrating entities: a 'journaling self' and a 'collecting narrator', as well as an implied 'editor'. To first illustrate the notion of a journaling self, we find a passage in which the narrator refers to an original journal:

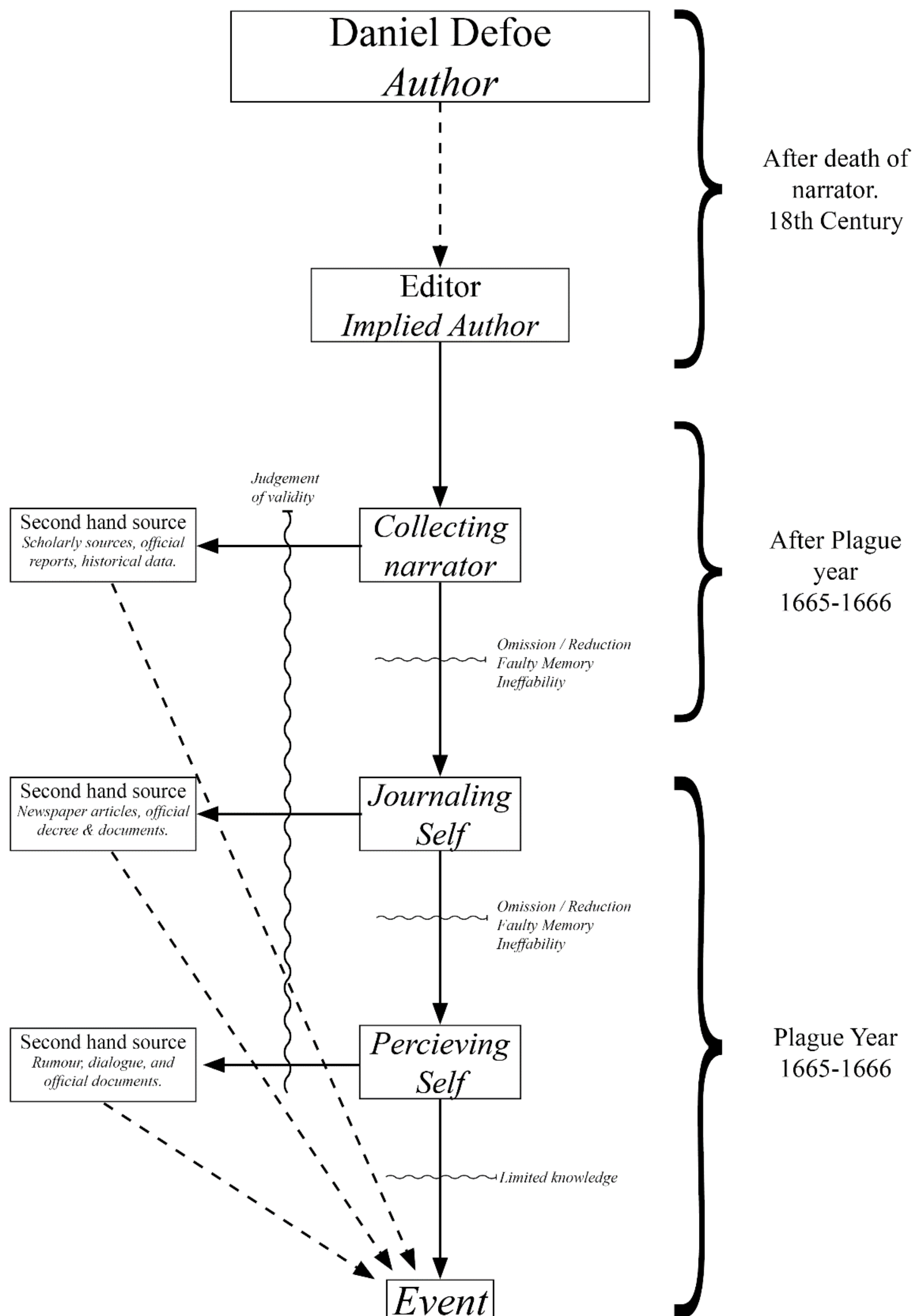
> [I]n writing down my memorandums of what occurred to me every day, and out of which afterwards I took most of this work […] What I wrote of my private meditations I reserve for private use, and desire it may not be made public on any account whatever.[73]

We find here a division which suggests that parts of the narrative are written daily during the plague-year by a 'journaling self', and other parts are written or edited after the plague by a 'collecting narrator'. Furthermore, a final writing entity is present in

[67] Defoe 2012, 17, (emphasis added)
[68] Ibid. 121, (emphasis added)
[69] Shigematsu 2018, 72
[70] Shigematsu 2018, 83
[71] Ibid. 79
[72] Ibid. 83
[73] Defoe 2012, 57

the form of a supposed editor or publisher, as exemplified in a footnote, claiming that "The author of this journal lies buried in that very ground, being at his own desire, his sister having been buried there a few years before".[74] The temporal layers that the journal consists of can be subdivided and visualized by the following schema:

Figure 1. Narratological schema of *Journal of the Plague Year*.



[74] Ibid. 172

In this model, the narrating entities distinguished by distance from the event, and the multiple appeals to fallibility are plotted out into their corresponding temporal levels and referential vectors. The appeals so far mentioned (omission/reduction, faulty memory & ineffability) occur in the gaps between perceiving and writing, serving to evoke realism on a meta-fictional level by suggesting that *the whole story* is not being told, with the narrator being certain of what they have experienced, but unwilling or unable to convey it.

The next set of appeals—*limited knowledge* and *second-hand sources*—bring us closer to the notion of narratorial uncertainty. In these situations the epistemological restriction occurs either directly between the perceiving self and the event, or through any of these narrator levels by means of a secondhand-source, allowing the narrator to tell us *the whole story* as they experienced it, and instead shifting the fallibility to either their own perception or to an external source.

Let us first note the most general type of uncertainty: *limited knowledge*, or what Springett terms "epistemic modality".[75] Springett uses this term to describe moments in which a narrator uses modal particles such as "seemed" or "perhaps" to indicate hesitation or doubt towards the information they are conveying. The main conclusion drawn from this is that epistemic modality embodies the narrator as a subjective agent, thus "forego[ing] omniscience".[76] However, in Defoe's narrative, omniscience is foregone from the start, owing to the pseudohistorical and autodiegetic nature of the narrative. Defoe's narrator makes frequent appeals to either his limited knowledge such as when stating that a man cries out and then claiming "I could not hear what he said"[77], or by employing modal markers to indicate either speculation, or to present a second-hand report. Spontaneously, one might find that the reference to a 'known unknown' seems at odds with a desire to historically relay events, and superfluous in a purely fictional narrative. This kind of hesitation may, however, depending on if one chooses to parse the novel as fact or fiction, either serve to (as fiction) emulate and embody the psychology and limited perspective of a perceiving subject, or (as fact) function as a sceptical marker towards second-hand sources, thus strengthening the reliability of a narrator.

[75] Springett 2013, 23
[76] Ibid.
[77] Defoe 2012, 46

Epistemic modality is in Defoe's case intimately tied up with second-hand reports. The overwhelming majority of appeals to fallibility found in the *Journal* fall into the niche of second-hand sources. Access to any information is provided either by first-hand experience on multiple temporal levels, or secondhand retellings. Even second-hand sources exist on multiple temporal levels: between the *collecting narrator* citing scholarly sources after the end of the plague, the *journaling self* who reads newspapers and official documents in his home, or the *perceiving self* who hears rumours on the streets and dialogue being relayed. One might even be tempted to model the interaction between the multiple temporal levels of narration themselves as being retellings of secondary sources; as the journaling narrator reflects on his experiences, he simultaneously evaluates them in relation to his current state of mind, as well as to other second-hand sources.

Rumour & Realism: Mimetic Uncertainty

As second-hand sources make up the bulk of Defoe's narrative, I wish to provide close-readings of these in order to clarify the effect that their usage may have on a reader. To give an initial example of the function of rumour: on page 121 the narrator relays the tale of a plague-stricken man who in a state of delirium swims across the River Thames and is somehow in the process cured of his illness. A noteworthy detail of this *hyponarrative* is how it begins with the clause "I *heard* of one infected creature who, running out of his bed in his shirt in the anguish and agony of his swellings, […] directly into the Thames". [78] This hedging phrase familiarly suggests that the hyponarrative is based on second-hand accounts. With this in mind, however, two avenues of interpretation become possible, depending on whether a reader approaches the *Journal* as historical fact or fiction. If parsed as historical fact, the reference to "having heard" the story can be naturalized as a 'hedge for accuracy' in which the author divulges the uncertain origin of the story. If parsed as fiction, the need for this hedge seems less apparent, however, as the author should conceivably be unfettered by the burden of historical accuracy. But even if considered fiction, the presentation of a second-hand

[78] Defoe 2012, 121 (emphasis added)

account serves as a negative reference to some internal reality, creating a formal *reality effect* through the presence of superfluous reference.

Taking a close look at the hyponarrative itself, the historical validity may be further questioned. Through swimming across the presumably heavily polluted waters of the Thames, the man in question is "cured" of the plague, with the explanation that "the violent motion of his arms and legs stretched the parts where the swellings he had upon him were […] and caused them to ripen and brake; and that the cold of the water abated the fever in his blood".[79] While this explanation may seem implausible, we might ask, who is discredited by the unlikely nature of this tale? Here lies an interesting function of rumour for Defoe; by having the narrator relay the story as a rumour, i.e. with uncertainty, his reliability is strengthened. Core to this is that not only is the rumour simply discarded as false, but it is simultaneously narrated in great detail. One way of interpreting this effect is that the narrator, by providing a phantasmatic rumour enveloped in a sceptical tone, operates a threefold mimetic effect. On the level of sociohistorical realism, he conveys an image of how rumours may have spread in London at the time. On the level of discursive realism, Defoe's narrative reflects a sceptical attitude towards magical occurrences, perhaps typical of the early enlightenment period in which the *Journal* was published. And finally, on the level of a formal *reality effect,* the narrator's uncertainty strengthens his reliability through distancing himself from the unfolding events. When the historical referent (the *hyponarrative*) is laid bare as "phantasmatic activity"[80] the narration itself seems to be foregrounded. As both reader and narrator rely on secondhand accounts, they *share an ear*, creating a relation of mutual distance to the events being narrated and most importantly evaluated.

But we might not be content with simply a restricted subjective narration, of being limited to one's sensorial experience; if one still clings on to the notion of an authoritative retelling being possible, the prospect of escaping a purely subjective retelling into a more comprehensive verisimilitude lingers. It is here we come to Defoe's own deliberations on the dichotomy between what he in the novel refers to as *general* and *particular* knowledge. As a part of the narrator's general use of hedging and judgements of validity towards secondary sources, these same deliberations are

[79] Defoe 2012, 122
[80] Barthes 1989, 145

often applied to the rhetorical purpose of the *Journal* itself. The narrator weighs the usefulness of the particular (anecdotal) and the general (generalized) historical truth of the narrative. One might ask here which truth would be more interesting for a reader, and the solution seems to depend on which reality one is looking for. If we refer to particular instances, i.e. the events directly witnessed by our narrator, the anecdotal takes precedence, while the general refers to inference drawn from these witnessed events. In the case of the swimmer, the conclusion drawn is that while the specifics of the reported case (being cured by swimming in the Thames) may be incorrect, the story serves to confirm the general truth of "the many desperate things which the distressed people falling into deliriums"[81], or even further: to depict the spread of supernatural rumours.

Inversely, the narrator at times attempts to make inferences from already generalized knowledge, when discussing the misconduct of watchmen leading them to be killed, he concludes that:

> I think seven or eight […] were killed; I know not whether I should say murdered or not, because I cannot enter into the particular cases. It is true the watchmen were on their duty, […] but as they were not authorized […] to be injurious or abusive […] when they did so, they might be said to act themselves, not their office; to act as private persons […] and consequently if they brought mischief upon themselves by such an undue behaviour, that mischief was upon their own head.[82]

Here, Defoe speaks from a position of generalized knowledge, and therefore avoids entering into "particulars", but continues a line of reasoning which concludes that if any watchmen were indeed killed, they were probably acting beyond their authority, and thus were not killed as watchmen. This line of speculation seems to suggest the potential danger of solely basing one's knowledge on generalities (i.e., justifying murder), yet also that general knowledge may be more useful if one is interested in more representative accounts. However, this sentiment is again echoed in reverse in a subsequent passage, which discusses the impossibility of reaching a general knowledge at the time of the plague year: "It was for want of people conversing one with another, in this time of calamity, that it was impossible any particular person could come at the knowledge of all the extraordinary cases that occurred in different families".[83] This statement mobilizes a surprisingly complex critique of circumstantial realism by

[81] Defoe 2012, 122
[82] Ibid. 117
[83] Ibid. 122

suggesting that perhaps a more authoritative retelling of the events in London is only possible with hindsight. A brief discussion follows where the narrator mentions that it "was never known to this day how many people in their deliriums drowned themselves in the Thames", that few were "set down in the weekly bill" and furthermore that "I might reckon up more who within the compass of my knowledge or observation really drowned themselves in that year, than are put down in the bill of all put together".[84] A conflict arises here between the supposed observations of the narrator and subsequent second-hand sources taking the form of a 'data-gap'.

The concept of a 'data-gap' is fundamental to the realism of Defoe's novel. When the narrator indicates that reported historical data is incorrect, or that it conflicts with his own experience, he thereby implies that his retelling (be it historically accurate or not) offers an account unique to other available sources. If we return to analyze the meta-narrative perspective, referring back to the narratological schema (page 23) we find that the position of the Collecting narrator and Defoe himself seem closer than one may think. Presumably, the origin of this novel is a blend of Defoe interviewing acquaintances who lived through the plague, perusing historical accounts, and perhaps even adding some of his very first memories into a pot of fictionalized history. Multiple theories exist on the conception of the novel, most of which are summarized in F. Bastian's 1965 survey on the topic which also mentions the now popular theory of the novel being based on a journal written by Defoe's uncle Henry Foe (who shares the initials of the *Journal's* protagonist)[85]. Going through both discrepancies and historical accuracies, Bastian concludes that Defoe's narrative "stands closer our idea of history than that of fiction", with the one definite falsehood being that the book was not "the work of 'a Citizen who continued all the while in London'".[86] While this is clearly a falsehood, it is also counterintuitively central to the historical nature of the book. The novel is not only the reminiscences of *a* citizen—but a summation of the myriad voices, official and unofficial, a prism of both the recorded first-hand experiences, as well as a snapshot of the public imagination and the state of literature and fiction at its time of conception. What makes this narrative perspective unique is thus that the collecting narrator is temporally and thematically in the same position as Defoe himself, both are collecting, evaluating and piecing together the story of the plague year, using the raw

[84] Ibid.
[85] Bastian 1965, 153
[86] Ibid. 173

material of a journal alongside contemporary sources. In the final words of Bastian's essay, he states that rather than continue the historical debate, "[t]he best we can hope to do is to understand more clearly the mechanism by which this *tour de force* of literary aeronautics was achieved".[87]

This brings us to again to the task at hand: an explanation for the wealth of discussion on this topic is not only found in the novel's claim to history, but also through its method of reenacting history. The complex interplay of different (especially contradictory) sources suggests a dynamism corresponding to real events, seeming to prompt discussion on the novel's historical accuracy. One way of describing this effect is by considering it as a form of *obfuscation* — wherein a series of sceptically presented references shift the onus of reliability, transferring to an external agent, absolving the narrator of their responsibility for potential inaccuracies. Rather than simply hiding the reference, by making it implicitly stated, or by quoting a source, Defoe embeds it within his narrator's world, and as we will see in the next passage, sometimes within multiple other references as well.

A good example of conflicting retellings can be found in the rumour of a drunk man being mistaken for a corpse and getting carried off to a burial pit. The story is supposedly based on testimony from John Hayward, a gravedigger and undersexton at the parish of St Stephen. The retelling begins: "It is said that it was a blind piper; but, as John Hayward told me, the fellow was not blind"[88]. Bastian notes this detail, reciting Andrew G. Bell's claim that the story "is one instance where Defoe has repeated (with small embellishment) what was told him by a survivor".[89] On the contrary, however, Bastian claims that "far from 'embellishing' the story" Defoe "rejects some of the more picturesque details" which appear in other accounts of the same story. Let us analyze the passage and then return to the effects of this rejected embellishment.

The story begins with the assertive phrase "*It happened* one night that this poor fellow"[90] and thereafter some uncertainty is added with the comment "John Hayward said he had not drink in his house, but that they had given him a little more victuals than ordinary at a public house"[91]—implying once more that this story is based on second-hand testimony. A reader might by this point interpret the uncertain fact of the

[87] Ibid.
[88] Defoe 2012, 66
[89] Bastian 1965, 159
[90] Defoe 2012, 66 (emphasis added)
[91] Ibid.

man's drunkenness contra blindness as a conflict between Hayward's retelling and other unmentioned sources. We then encounter further uncertainty of details, as the narrator speculates that the man "having not usually had a bellyfull for perhaps not a good while, was laid upon the top of a bulk or stall"— his drinking and eating habits described with an uncertain "*perhaps*", while he "*was"* (with no uncertainty) "laid upon the top of a bulk *or* stall".[92] In this passage, a kind of oscillation of uncertainty is apparent, as details of varying importance are retold with varying certainty. The arbitrariness of these details and the accompanying uncertainty can be conceived of as a *reality effect* in their own right. But going further, the narrator evaluates the conflicting versions of the story: "I know the story goes he set up his pipes in the cart and frighted the bearers [...] so that they ran away; but John Hayward did not tell it so", concluding that the fact "that he was carried away as above I am fully satisfied of the truth of".[93] The oscillations of certainty in this story, as well as the presence of conflicting accounts, may at first appear jarring and unnecessary, but seem to serve a larger purpose. Defoe manages to maintain both the fictionalized version (phantasmatic and humorous) as a rejected rumour, while also undercutting it with the supposed actual version (morbid and tragic). This serves as a powerful part of Defoe's historicism. By blending fiction and fact it maintains an engaging fictional freedom (which in turn carries a social realism such as the presence of gossip), alongside an objectivist (sceptical) approach to history.

Defoe's historicism can be considered in three steps. The first (level of action) is a positive reference to historical events. This reference is in turn always embedded within its sources—be it a first-hand witness or a second-hand account—it is always written after the event has occurred. The second step is thus the instance of writing, or reference, an act of necessary reduction into text (discursive encryption), which stands in relation to the moment the text is produced. Finally, we may consider the instance of reading, the moment of interpretation (discursive decryption), wherein the text is set in dialogue with the reader's referential framework, their view of the world, as well as their concept of the time the work is written, and the time it depicts. What Defoe enacts by providing conflicting accounts of events, or by displaying narratorial uncertainty, can be thought of as a form of obfuscation. Rather than simply saying 'this was what

[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid. 67

happened', the positive reference is negated internally, functionally claiming 'this is what might have happened and these are some things that definitely didn't'. By discrediting one version of a story, the other one may be deemed more reliable. Appeals to fallibility thus not only signal what is contained in the novel, but also what is not—or can not—be contained within it. Therefore, the reference is not simply a positive one (subject to the arbitrariness of the sign) but a negative one, which signals the exact limitations of the representation. This ultimately takes the form of a *reality effect*, yet still has embedded within it the two prior steps, both a positive and negative reference to historical events.

To summarize our discussion of Defoe, a final passage may provide a helpful illustration of his stance on realism. Beginning with the now familiar hedging phrase "I think it was in March", our narrator describes himself happening upon a crowd of people in the street, looking up at "what a woman told them appeared plain to her, […] an angel clothed in white, with a fiery sword in his hand".[94] The woman "described every part of the figure to the life" with such conviction that the crowd soon begins to envisage the angel themselves: "One saw one thing and one another".[95] The narrator however remains steadfastly unconvinced, claiming "I could see nothing but a white cloud, bright on one side by the shining of the sun upon the other part".[96] After being scoffed at by this woman, he reflects upon how "the poor people were terrified by the force of their own imagination".[97] Demonstrating the perhaps dangerous rhetorical and mimetic power of realistic representation, this passage functions as a kind of *mise en abyme* for the *Journal* itself. While inhabiting a grey zone of historical validity, the power of description is shown to be immensely convincing. We find that even if the historical referent is questionable, literary realism holds historical relevance, retaining connections to the events depicted (be they fictional or not), to the time it was written, and finally, as a continual affective unfolding in the moment it is read. Considering the novel in the light of this passage: we are not merely interested in the angel, nor the clouds, but instead the process of transformation between them; how a mundane or horrible reality becomes imbued with wonder and fascination; how such a *tour de force*

[94] Defoe 2012, 17
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.

of historical fiction continues to provide relevant insights into our contemporary world, and we owe this in part to its ability to remain indeterminable.

Chapter Two – Anti-realist Realism

A Wrench in The Cogs: Mrs Dalloway

Having proposed the potential connection between narratorial uncertainty and realism, we now hope to provide two brief sketches, two examples of what an emphasis on uncertainty can bring to critical analysis of works of vastly different character. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is often considered a groundbreaking work of modernism, capturing a complex psychological realism through Woolf's signature *free indirect discourse*—a floating narrative perspective presented as "mental quotations from start to finish".[98] This perspective at times hinges on omniscience, freely focalizing a multitude of characters during a single day in London, yet still intimately tied up with the mental processes and sensorial input of the individual. As Pam Morris suggests, Woolf's style of narration differs from both *interior monologue* and *stream of consciousness*, as it may "'look within' but it never stays within"—seeming to always imply an invisible third-person perspective.[99] An apparent rupture that appears in *Mrs Dalloway* is that despite having full access to a character's thoughts, uncertainty is still omnipresent. In this chapter we wish to examine how the inability to express thoughts and actions with certainty produces, and attempts to mend, the rupture between what one might deem "internality" and "externality". The driving motive here is to discuss how readers may attempt to naturalize these ruptures, and what meaning might be produced when naturalization seems to fail. In contrast to Defoe's narrative, *Mrs Dalloway* makes little claim to explicit historical events, which raises the question: what is then the function of these uncertainties?

Readers are greeted with uncertainty on the very first page: Clarissa Dalloway is standing by the curb, about to cross the road to buy flowers, "standing and looking until Peter Walsh said 'Musing among the vegetables?'—was that it?—I prefer men to cauliflowers'—was that it?"[100] We find here that some kind of uncertainty is made explicit by the speech markers "was that it?" and the following assertion that "He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace"[101]. This simple event is enveloped in mystery, by hedging phrases, which plummet readers into

[98] Cohn 1999, as cited in Hansen 2008, 319
[99] Morris 2013, 42
[100] Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 1925, 1
[101] Ibid.

a fleeting memory in Clarissa mind. How, if at all, might one attempt to determine what *actually* was said?

To begin to approach this problem, we might first discuss Woolf's relation to Realism. She is often noted as a stark opponent to older forms of representation, claiming in a review from 1919 that "We want to be rid of realism".[102] The meaning of this anti-realist sentiment is however not necessarily an escape from verisimilitude, but rather a call for the continual renewal of realism to represent the dynamism of any present day. Woolf is often celebrated for her inventive use of "interiority" yet in her essay "Modern Fiction" she critiques its potential overuse, placing herself, as Morris puts it, in opposition to both "Materialists" such as Arnold Bennett (focusing too much on the external), and "Spiritualists" such as Joyce (who fail too "embrace what is outside itself and beyond").[103] In *Mrs Dalloway*, we find an apparent merging of this divide: the internal and external are paratactically placed on the same orthographic level, creating a dizzying yet fluid movement between the events of the narrative, and the inner workings of her characters' minds. A reader may however attempt to separate these, trying to figure out what is *real* and what is not. One critic who seems intimately involved in this process is Melba Cuddy-Keane, who describes the experience of reading Woolf as a subconscious entry into what she refers to as "the modernist storymind".[104] Through this cognitive perspective, Cuddy-Keane presents a version of Woolf's London as comprised of a ubiquity of "networked patterns" which "breaks down the putative divide between the external realm and the interiorized self".[105] But what role does uncertainty play in this process, and is this "divide" successfully broken down, or, if not, what remnants remain of it?

This divide of externality and internality provides an entryway into discussing the types of uncertainty present in Woolf's narrative. What one might refer to as the external, is the world of London, the events unfolding and the words being spoken, all of which a reader is granted access to through multiple "*character-focalizers*".[106] The uncertainty we find here occurs firstly as an inability to parse sensorial impressions, such as in the previously mentioned cauliflower incident, where Clarissa seems unable to recall with certainty what has just been said. Yet another instance which exemplifies

[102] Woolf 1919, as cited in Morris 2013, 40
[103] Morris 2013, 41
[104] Cuddy-Keane 2020, 208
[105] Ibid. 224
[106] Ibid. 217

uncertainty towards external phenomenon can be found in the sudden sight of an aeroplane, writing letters in the sky: “But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L?” thrusting readers now into the minds of passers by attempting to interpret the letters:

> a K, and E, a Y perhaps? ‘Glaxo,’ said Mrs Coates in a strained, awestricken voice, gazing straight up, and her baby, lying stiff and white in her arms, gazed straight up. ‘Kreemo,’ murmured Mrs Bletchley, like a sleepwalker.[107]

Readers are faced with *uncertainty* in part through the explicit rhetorical questions, but also simultaneously *unreliability* through two moves. The first inference signal is contradiction, through having multiple characters provide different guesses, they are deemed unreliable when weighed against each other or against a reader’s referential framework—in this case, a presupposed market logic of advertisement which would assume legibility. The guesses continue: “It’s toffee” murmurs Mr Bowley, a well-off man with “rooms in the Albany”, seeming to with no uncertainty determine the meaning of the advertisement. Thereafter, out in the park with her husband Septimus, Rezia points to the sky, exclaiming “Look Look!” For Dr Holmes had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself”.[108] We are then delivered Septimus interpretation, he looks up, and thinks “they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty”.[109] In contrast to the well-adjusted gaze of Bowley, we are now given the paranoid artist’s vision, finding, not legible meaning, but beauty, offering itself to him.

The effect of these multiple perspectives with varying uncertainty in part unsettles the notion of *what actually happened*, but simultaneously this external fact is backgrounded in favour of displaying the effect it has on observers. If we are to briefly compare this external uncertainty to the one found in Defoe, we first find that this is a third-person narrative, and as the uncertainty occurs between character-focalizer and event, Woolf’s ‘narrator’ is absolved of any unreliability. The reliability of our narrator, the narrating entity, is never in question, as they are invisible. Therefore, a reader may tend to excuse oversights and omission as a form of characterization. The character focalization functions similarly to a secondary source, or rumour, in Defoe’s narrative.

[107] Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 1925, 15
[108] Ibid. 16
[109] Ibid.

It is excused, and naturalized, as it is realist; it depicts the cacophony and chaos not only of the city, but also in the individual.

While one could continue to list the many instances of external uncertainty, a move towards the internal may further explain the "putative divide between the external realm and the interiorized self" as a three-way street. What has so far been suggested is the difficulty of parsing external phenomenon, the problem of having full access to a character's sensorial inputs, yet still being unable to with certainty determine external occurrences. Woolf's narrative, however, suggests that interpreting even the inner workings of a character's mind leads us to ambiguity, thus we find our second direction in this three-way street: internality. To give one example, a recurring device employed by Woolf is a kind of rhetorical questioning, which at times seem to imitate the mental deliberations of a character, such as when Clarissa attempts to recall her first meeting with Sally: "Where could it have been? The Mannings? The Kinloch-Jones's? At some party (where, she could not be certain)".[110] This explicit uncertainty might easily be naturalized, in the same way as one will not blame Defoe's narrator for forgetting a detail here and there. Yet other instances prove more difficult to naturalize, such as when Clarissa early on in the novel ponders her existence, asking herself "Did it matter then, she asked herself […] that she must inevitably cease completely; […] did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?", so far these questions clearly emanate from her 'asking herself'.[111] This is followed however by the question, "But what was she dreaming as she looked into Hatchards' shop window? What was she trying to recover?"[112] It now becomes unclear whether these questions stem from a narrating entity being unable to fully penetrate Clarissa's mind, or if these are in fact her own thoughts. Comparing again to Defoe, we find that for his narrator, inner life, the rational being, is an opaque unquestioned substance, while the outside world is subject to continual ambiguity. For Woolf on the other hand, despite being utterly transparent, the human mind retains irrational elements, and it is only through this transparent matter that the external world can be viewed. The ambiguities of internal life should not, however, be seen necessarily as a hindrance, nor simply celebrated as a kind of psychological realism, but in fact (considering the Woolf

[110] Ibid. 25
[111] Ibid. 6
[112] Ibid. 7

household's interest in publishing Freud[113]) reflect new perspectives on human psychology. While some details of the mind are accessible and clear, others are shown to be utterly ambiguous, even to the subject, as shown most clearly near the end of the novel:

> They were young; that was it. Clarissa was pure-hearted; that was it. Peter would think her sentimental. So she was. For she had come to feel that it was the only thing worth saying—what one felt. Cleverness was silly. One must say simply what one felt. 'But I do not know', said Peter Walsh, 'what I feel.'[114]

In this way, Woolf questions not only the certainty of depicting external reality, but even more, the inability to know one's own intentions and feelings. However, in this passage, something more than just an inaccessible desire is apparent. As seen in the refrain-like repetition of "that was it", and "so she was", these phrases seem to exist in a social realm between Clarissa and Peter, and not simply present in an inaccessible dimension of one character's mind.

So far, we have examined the concepts of seeing (external), and thinking (internal), but a third avenue opens up between these two: that of *being seen*. Not only do we find the problem of a gap between the internal and the external, but also a gap which is formed by a social dimension. This we might conceive of as a problem of the connection between "internal" and "internal" as always mediated by the external. Woolf's narrative is brimming with instances in which characters attempt—and often fail—to either accurately gauge the inner life of each other, or to externalize their desires and feelings, through outward appearances or speech. This uncertainty we find in three forms: (1) *social méconnaissance*[115], (2) *failed expression* and (3) an overarching effect of this disjunct, which is best explained by the Lacanian term: *symbolic castration*.

[113] Virginia Woolf, together with her husband Leonard, became in 1924, the first to publish Sigmund Freud's complete works in English, under the banner of Hogarth Press. Woolf has however claimed that she did not read Freud until far later, in 1939 (Heyes 2016).
[114] Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 1925, 157
[115] Jacques Lacan initially employs this term to signify a disjunct between the mirror image an infant sees of themselves, and their direct physical being, as a "function of misrecognition that characterizes the ego" Lacan, The Mirror Stage 1999, 80. We further add a social (symbolic) dimension to this in order to suggest how the same effect is present in perceiving the outward appearance of another. Crucially, Lacan develops a similar notion of "the scopic field" where, as he puts it in Seminar XI, "the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture" Lacan, What is a Picture? 1978. But for the limited scope of this study, we chose instead to extrapolate this idea as an extension of méconnaisance,

In the first category lies the notion of *being seen*—incorrectly. This is exemplified in Peter Walsh's lack of insight into Septimus and Rezia's predicament as he passes them in the park, asking himself "what awful fix had they got themselves into, both to look so desperate as that on a fine summer morning?"—and chalking it up to them being "lovers squabbling under a tree".[116] In these situations, the uncertainty of a character works in tandem with a kind of dramatic irony, as the reader, who is provided complete insight into Septimus' mind, identifies the judgement partially as incorrect, as a reduction. We find in this *méconnaissance* a conflict between more traditional views of the psyche as a rational agent (when seen externally by Walsh, who attributes it to the familiar form of a lover's quarrel), and a newer more fragmented form of subjectivity (when Septimus a shell-shocked veteran, is focalized internally).

The inverse of *being seen* makes up the second category: *failed expression*. Here, readers, being granted access to characters' minds, are made aware of instances where they fail to express their true intentions. This gap between utterance and intention is a recurring theme, such as when Peter Walsh returning to Clarissa seemingly expresses his love for her: "'I am in love,' he said, not to her however, but to some one raised up in the dark so that you could not touch her but must lay your garland down on the grass in the dark".[117] A line of dialogue is first spoken somehow internally, and is then expressed aloud: "'In love,' he repeated, now speaking rather dryly to Clarissa Dalloway; 'in love with a girl in India.'"[118] A tension is made apparent, between what Peter is able to express (dryly), and what he represses (a poetic image of love). Readers are thus delivered a two-sided expression, rendering the tension of emotional impulse and social conditioning, a tension of the internal and external, between perhaps Edwardian and Victorian values.

Another similar example, seeming to echo this failed expression, is found later in the novel, when Richard Dalloway attempts as well to express his love for Clarissa: "He was holding out flowers—roses, red and white roses. (But he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words.)" ; despite this, "She understood; she understood without his speaking; his Clarissa". But whose voice is it that expresses this silent communication between them is unclear; who is claiming that "she understood", is it Richard, or Clarissa, or perhaps even some kind of social agreement,

[116] Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 1925, 57
[117] Ibid. 35
[118] Ibid.

an unspoken Other, which simply registers the symbolic meaning of his gesture? What hints the most at this final interpretation is that despite her understanding "without his speaking" the gesture seems to fall flat, and initiate a quotidian bout of small-talk: "And was it amusing, she asked? Had Lady Bruton asked after her? Peter Walsh was back. Mrs Marsham had written. Must she ask Ellie Henderson?".[119] Here, an incompatibility is shown, contrasting the amorous intention of Richard to the daily practicalities of bourgeois marriage.

This brings us thus to a turning point, why might Woolf be interested in depicting this gap, between the internal and external, if her goal is to 'be rid of realism'? In her essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown", Woolf identifies circumstantial realism as an older form of representation unfit to relay the reality of her present-day. She describes how in "December, 1910, human character changed"[120] providing thereafter a satirical description of how the Edwardian approach depicted a character: "He, indeed, would observe every detail with immense care […]; how Mrs Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth's bazaar"; however, Woolf asserts that "One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description".[121] While calling for a new set of tools, as she claims "those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death"[122]—she seems to concede to an aggregate view on literary realism; that these older tools cannot be fully discarded. In the compact metaphor of a hostess holding a party, Woolf suggests that external description is a necessary background:

> Both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest […] She begins by saying that we are having a wretched May, and, having thus got into touch with her unknown guest, proceeds to matters of greater interest. So it is in literature. The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy.[123]

[119] Ibid. 96
[120] Woolf, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown 1924, 4
[121] Ibid. 13,14
[122] Ibid. 16
[123] Ibid. 17

Whereas this view seems to unwillingly embrace an external realism as a compromise for the reader's sake, the external descriptions in *Mrs Dalloway* functions as far more than set-dressing, but instead is mobilized as a complex critique of the context it was written in.

The final category of uncertainty on the social level envelopes the core conflicts of the text: the gap between the internal and external manifested in the form of—to borrow a Lacanian term—*symbolic castration.* This term is used to signify the experience of a gap between, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, "my direct psychological identity and my symbolic identity", as exemplified in the image of a king: "if a king holds the sceptre in his hands, and wears the crown, his words will be taken as royal".[124] Thus the identity of a king is based wholly on external phenomenon, leading potentially to the hysterical question: "What is it that makes me a king? What remains of me if the symbolic title 'king' is taken away?".[125] This struggle can be found in the very title of Woolf's novel: *Mrs Dalloway*. Clarissa struggles with identifying fully with her symbolic title: "She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; […] this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway".[126] In her reflection on the disjunct between herself and her married name, *Clarissa* is posited as the authentic self of *Mrs Dalloway*, the pure, uncorrupted immanent self, before being cemented into a social identity.

The notion of Clarissa's lost identity is however further problematized when one discovers the same issue within not only Septimus, but also Peter Walsh, suggesting that struggling to identify with one's social identity is not a problem only faced by married women and shellshocked veterans, but a more fundamental schism in the modern individual. As he steps out into the street thinking of Clarissa's party, Peter Walsh encounters his mirror-image: "And there he was, this fortunate man, himself, reflected in the plate-glass window of a motor-car manufacturer in Victoria Street. All India lay behind him; plains, mountains; epidemics of cholera; a district twice as big as Ireland; decisions he had come to alone—he, Peter Walsh."[127] This reflection reads as an attempt to collect his identity through past actions, and the external unity of his body appearing in the mirror. Shortly thereafter, this stable identity is hysterically

[124] Žižek, How to Read: Lacan 2006, 34
[125] Ibid.
[126] Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 1925, 7
[127] Ibid. 38

questioned: “I haven’t felt so young for years! thought Peter, escaping (only of course for an hour or so) *from being precisely what he was*”[128]—Peter Walsh is briefly freed from his social identity, but by what? By the sight of a young woman walking across Trafalgar Square, invoking an “excitement […] which singled him out, as if the random uproar of the traffic had whispered through hollowed hands his name, not Peter, but his private name which he called himself in his own thoughts. ‘You,’ she said, only you’”.[129] This passage subverts not only Peters external identity (imaginary, in Lacanian terms), but also his social identity (symbolic) pointing towards the internal a (real, yet fleeting) subconscious desire. By applying this loose Lacanian reading, we find that Woolf renders a triad of human identity and experience, whose three poles seem continually irreconcilable. But what resolution is offered us in the final analysis of *Mrs Dalloway*; if this wound is shown to be unhealable, why is it shown at all?

Before attempting to summarize Woolf’s stance on realism, I wish to provide a close-reading of a passage which relays the death of Septimus. His character is perhaps the ultimate symbol of the conflict between internal psychology (a traumatic incoherence), external appearance (a coherent body), and social identity (a model to conform to). The conflict Septimus experiences is one of reconciling his inner life with the outer world. His inner life is shown to be irreconcilable with older forms of medicine which perceive only the external appearance of unity, as in Dr Holmes diagnosis claiming “There was nothing whatever the matter” with him, “Why not try two tabloids of bromide dissolved in a glass of water at bedtime?”.[130] Or furthermore, as Rezia, struggling with to reconcile his changed mental state with her prior memories of him, claims: “No; I can’t stand it any longer […] having left Septimus, who wasn’t Septimus any longer”.[131] Septimus faces a violent dissonance, being overwhelmed by his internal state, and unable to reconcile it with his social identity as a husband, nor with his direct external experience of the world as of beauty, he is forced to externalize his inner feelings through an act of self-annihilation.

Initially, the scene preceding the death of Septimus is narrated in realtime using him as a focalizer. Yet once the deed his done, once he leaps from the window to his death, “violently down on to Mrs Filmer’s area railings”—his perspective is lost,

[128] Ibid. 41, (emphasis added)
[129] Ibid. 42
[130] Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway 1925, 73
[131] Ibid. 52

begging the question, how can someone experience what occurs around them after their death?[132] The moments thereafter are relayed through the flurry surrounding the aftermath, freely flowing between the multiple characters. Perhaps the most important perspective here is Rezia, who drifts off into a kind of daydream, ellipsing and fleeing the traumatic event of her husband's suicide. The death of Septimus is for two apparent reasons omitted: firstly, because he is not around to experience it, but secondly perhaps, because it is simply too traumatic for Rezia to process, and she is shielded by Dr Holmes, who hands her a drink. A pertinent detail is however that this event seems to return later on in the novel, now from an outside perspective, larger temporal distance, yet interestingly in greater detail. At the Dalloway's evening soiree, Clarissa overhears talk of a young man who had killed himself, and is then thrust into a vision of the event:

> Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party![133]

With respect to Septimus' death, what is significant is that we can never access it in the narrative's present, but only after the fact; moreover, such access is always mediated, in this case, reflected through Clarissa, who is precisely not 'omniscient' or one who could have access to this information. Nevertheless, is all of this to suggest that the passage is simply a 'false' rendition of 'reality'? Septimus may in certain aspects be thought of as more reliable as a focalizer of his internal reality, his hallucinations and emotive state, whereas externally he may be less reliable, concerning 'actual events' and more importantly the moments following his death. Clarissa on the other hand, provides a richer rendition of what may have occurred, describing in greater detail the events themselves. Whereas the real-time narration of Septimus' death is limited in some respects, the retrospective projection of Clarissa provides a more detailed understanding of what may have occurred. This retelling functions similarly to Defoe's rumour: we are delivered a first a subjective experience, and then potentially inaccurate but more formally realistic retelling. This is not to say that Clarissa's version is more correct, but only that the two seem to depict two different modes: the internal and the external.

[132] Ibid. 122
[133] Ibid. 150

A similar reiteration occurs later on at the party, with the mentioning of Cauliflowers. Calling us back to the very first page of the novel, the uncertain line which Clarissa mishears, about cauliflowers or cabbages, returns in the final scene when Peter is seen reminiscing with Sally. It refers to "the scene by the fountain" in which he and Clarissa had ended their relationship: "Last time they met, Peter remembered, had been among the cauliflowers in the moonlight"[134], the memory concludes with the line "But no; he did not like cabbages; he preferred human beings".[135] Just as Septimus' death returns now from an outside perspective, the uncertain lines of dialogue from the very first page of the novel now return with no uncertainty, placed firmly in a scene marking their departure from each other. This return, with a slight change in diction, from preferring "men to cauliflowers" to *preferring human beings to cabbages*, seems to mark a twofold statement. The details, that of which vegetable is being compared to a human, are irrelevant, yet indicate a shifted focus, wherein Clarissa's memory of the statement contains uncertainty as to which vegetable he was referring to, whereas the certainty of Peter's version seems to imply that Clarissa has more interest in the garden than in him.

Septimus is often thought of as Clarissa's counterpart, and what they perhaps share is a difficulty with identifying fully their immanent being with their external and social identity. The difference, however, lies in how they solve these issues. While Septimus seems to fully externalize his inner identity, by living out the inner turmoil, he is torn apart. Clarissa reflects on his fate, thinking "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate".[136] Yet still, Clarissa settles somehow in her position as hostess, reflecting before the party on a desire to "to go deeper, beneath what people said" contemplating the social titles of her party guests:

> Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; someone up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?[137]

[134] Ibid. 153
[135] Ibid. 158
[136] Ibid. 151
[137] Ibid. 99

The party thus functions as an equalizer, as a meeting point promising to sum up the internal, the external, and the social. This may be the fundament of Woolf's social engagement: to blend both high and low, granting both prime-minister and traumatized veteran an inner life, which is shown to be incompatible with the external and social. Yet this last question "to whom?" is one which seems to implicate the reader. To whom is this struggle to combine, to break down the divide?

This forms perhaps the main impossibility of Woolf's project: it is possible only inside a work of fiction, and less conceivable without the work of art as mediator. We find several hints in the novel that suggest that there is no implied reader: such as Peter confessing how Clarissa has made him suffer before and adding "For hours at a time (pray God that one might say these things without being overheard!)"[138] or perhaps the meta-fictional wink found as Clarissa spies on her neighbour: "that old woman looking out of the window, quite unconscious that she was being watched" creating an uncomfortable voyeuristic *mise-en-abyme*: "There was something solemn in it — but love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, *the privacy of the soul*".[139]

It is through uncertainty that these gaps are recognized, through the complex ambiguous interplay of immanent self, external appearance, and socially constituted identity. Some of these gaps are shown to be irreconcilable, but a constant struggle towards merging them is inevitable. In the same gesture, however, Woolf seems to emphasize this divide, to embrace its irreducibility, and suggest that while we might attempt to break it down, we must simultaneously affirm it. And perhaps the only way of doing so is to bring attention to the continuous failure of objectivist description, and full cognitive insight. Woolf shows us these problems, but does not fully resolve them, her resolution is instead to shine a light on them, but not to make them disappear. Woolf helps us thus realize that that the goal of a discussion on realism is, similarly to conventional therapeutic measures, not "the patients well-being, successful social life or personal fulfilment" (i.e., *solving* realism), but rather instead bringing "the patient to confront the elementary coordinates and deadlocks of his or her desire"—examining realist terminology to confront ruptures in artistic representations of the world.[140]

This is the social change Woolf seems to strive for, and this is the fundament of her *discursive realism*. Her way of depicting the deadlocks and newly opened avenues

[138] Ibid. 64
[139] Ibid. 103, (emphasis added)
[140] Žižek, How to Read: Lacan 2006, 4

of social life can be read as a response to the burgeoning urban cityscapes, a crumbling social order, the confusion of a post-war society, but also as a response to the aspirations of modernity itself. The aesthetic dimensions and thrusts of experimentation figure as a plea for a new type of expression, and an openness to the mysteries and ambiguities of the mind and of every-day life. The attention afforded to "the ordinary or uneventful" is not, however, as Michael Sayeau suggests, in reference to the advent of realist novels, only "permitted under the condition that it is structurally determined as the subsidiary backdrop against which significant, revelatory action can occur"[141] but instead functions as a significant battleground in which an ever-changing conception of the human psyche confronts the social orders in which it is entangled. While a movement towards internality is made, this movement itself is inherently in dialogue, and only apparent in relation to the external and everyday.

Ultimately an authoritative account of events is only possible after it has occurred. But Woolf, as well as Defoe show us that this is not enough, that answering the question of realism depends on what reality one is looking for. The major shift between an author such as Woolf and Defoe is that for Woolf it is no longer simply the issue of carefully doing the work of a sceptical historian. As she phrases it in her essay titled "Defoe": "The novel had to justify its existence by telling a true story and preaching a sound moral".[142] But Woolf further claims that Defoe was not "a mere journalist and literal recorder of facts"[143] but instead "[h]aving at the outset limited his scope and confined his ambitions[,] he achieves a truth of insight which is far rarer and more enduring than the truth of fact which he professed to make his aim".[144] We find a final concise metaphor in Woolf's first publication, a short story titled "The Mark on The Wall", in which she muses on causality, memory, and imagination. At first, she ponders imaginatively what may have caused a mark on her wall: "If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature—the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations".[145] Thereafter, she considers the impossibility of judging its origins: "if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a

[141] Sayeau 2013, 27
[142] Woolf, Defoe 2002, 55
[143] Ibid. 56
[144] Ibid. 57
[145] Woolf, The Mark on The Wall 1919, 1

thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened".[146] The conclusion appears to be that while the cause of an event may be unattainable, the effect it has on one's mind is far more interesting, and this effect is impossible without its unattainable cause.

Applied to our own model of Realism, three different approaches and answers are available. Firstly, examining sociohistorical realism: one would ask the carpenter who made the mark about the circumstances of its origin. From this, one might learn something about the intentions and the life of this person, but ultimately not getting to relive the making of the mark. Secondly, seeking discursive realism: one might examine the mark, comparing it to other marks in the same house, contemplating why and how these kinds of marks are made, and seeing how this one seems to differ from others. Thirdly and finally, considering the reality effect: one may consider how this mark affects us, how we try to make sense of it, how it perhaps annoys us today, and how we might try to mend it.

[146] Ibid. 2

Chapter Three – Metamodern Miscommunication

"Talking an Angel to Death"[147]*: Taipei*

We have so far suggested how Daniel Defoe's uncertain narrator provides both a sceptical depiction of historical events as well as entertaining yet unreliable accounts of rumour, diagnosing and relaying the social unease of the time depicted. We have proposed how Woolf (writing about the same city two centuries later) discards the notion of reliability and historical claims in favour of a psychological depth which is shown to be at odds with communication and observation, yet ultimately provides a deeply insightful and committed portrayal of the human mind at odds with modernity.

The authorship of Tao Lin can in a similar way be contextualized in a *metamodern* landscape. Metamodernism is designated by a dynamic of oppositions, of being in constant dialogue with the opposing poles of sincerity and irony, modernity and postmodernity, enthusiasm and scepticism, or perhaps even more broadly, between the expressive and the reflexive. Along this axis, we find structural similarity within the movement between certainty (enthusiasm) and uncertainty (scepticism). By examining the work of Tao Lin, a leading voice often associated with the *Alt-Lit* or *New Sincerity* movement, through the lens of uncertainty and realism, its mimetic qualities figure as a critical statement on the aesthetic project of contemporary authors.

Lin's third novel, *Taipei* (2013), follows Paul—a thinly veiled author-surrogate for Lin himself—along sleepwalking drug-laden ventures through New York's art and literary scenes, book-tours, Gmail-chats, Twitter, and romance. Lin provides us (in a manner similar to Defoe and Woolf) with a depiction of a city, or rather two cities: New York and Taipei. Yet this is far from an urban pastoral, and more akin to a reflection of the ambivalent sentiments of contemporary culture, perceived through the lens of technology, and the internet.

Tao Lin has by some been heralded as a 'Kafka of the iPhone generation' while others have decried his novels as uninspired narratives of ennui and alienation. One main critique which is raised by reviewers has been referencing Lin's "Deadpan realism", as the title of one review reads: "'Taipei' Is Lifelike — But That's Not Necessarily A Compliment".[148] This description is revealing of the ambivalent

[147] A fitting phrase borrowed from exhibition by Burrau 2019.
[148] Quinn 2013

reactions which *Taipei* incites, as the review further suggests: "deadpan realism is a clever shield against criticism: If the novel is bad or boring, well, life is bad and boring".[149] Another reviewer comments on his style of narration as "continually aroused but perpetually dulled", claiming that "Paul [Lin] has nothing much to say, but he says it anyway", concluding that for this "shtick to succeed a very particular kind of contractual bond is required with the reader: a form of masochistic collusion".[150] There seems to be something missing here though: as Lin's popularity suggests, the 'boring' aspects of his work obviously speak to a new generation of readers and perhaps this contractual bond is rooted in something more than masochism. One conversation in the novel exemplifies this sense of ennui mixed with enthusiasm, as Paul distractedly hears his friend Daniel say "'a Mexican place' and something about 'six tacos' to Mitch":

> "Eight tacos," said Paul absently.
> "I said six tacos," said Daniel.
> "Six tacos," said Paul.
> "Was it, like … a taco platter?"
> "No. This place has small tacos."
> "It wasn't a taco platter?"
> "It wasn't a taco platter," said Daniel.
> "I don't get it," said Paul without thinking.
> "Bro," said Daniel grinning.[151]

Following the logic of Lin's reviewer, one may ask: why are these 'pointless' scenes depicted in the novel? What seems to be both a point of contention and a unique facet of his writing is its use of aridity, boredom, and miscommunication, which at times serve to depict a paralyzing alienation, and at times a celebratory humoristic account of contemporary culture. The riddle of Lin's novels is phrased succinctly by one of the prior reviews: "It's boring and harrowing; dull and wildly creative".[152] By examining these points of friction, asking the questions "why is it boring?", and "what makes it humorous?", through the lens of realism and uncertainty, one can begin to intuit the social change which *Taipei* enacts.

[149] Ibid.
[150] Sansom 2013
[151] Lin 2013, 55
[152] Quinn 2013

Far from solely depicting confusion and uncertainty, *Taipei* is ripe with a kind of overcoded realism: a pedantic certainty which may well be the most provocative element of Lin's narrative. In examining the aspects of certainty in Tao Lin's style, we notice three peculiarities: (1) deadpan realism, (2) overdetermined hyperrealism, and (3) hypertextuality.

The first of these categories — deadpan realism — takes the form of describing meaningless scenes, such as an "inattentive Paul, seated in the same chair as earlier, not apparently doing anything"[153] or "looking at his phone, sometimes staring at its screen for ten to twenty seconds without thinking anything".[154] These sections almost beg to be read as a pastiche of realism, which serves to portray a snapshot of today's youth, at times humorous, and at times as a mocking gesture against the desire for realism. What lies at the core of this tension seems to be the expectation of having a novel "be interesting", yet *Taipei* at times reads as a refusal of this very expectation. More than just depicting uneventful occurrences, *Taipei* seems to languish in a kind of hyperrealism, with its narrator describing in minute detail how many seconds a character laughs, or the exact time of a "thirteen-hour twenty-nine-minute flight to Narita, where they would transfer to a three-hour fifteen-minute flight to Taiwan."[155]

So why is all this detail here? What is its rhetorical purpose? One might read this richness of detail as 'taking a stab' at realism, as unveiling the arbitrariness of realist endeavours, echoing the Barthesian notion of "insignificant notation". Yet there seems to be a devil in the details: discourse. The style which Lin employs evokes the impression of "online prose, contemporary, unmediated, and sincere", as A.D Jameson puts it in an article on the *New Sincerity*, referencing Lin's first novel *Richard Yates.*[156] An oft launched critique against Lin, and other similar writers, is an artlessness, an aesthetic of 'found art', solely based on online material. Jameson, however, predicts this as a growing pain, suggesting that in "twenty more years, Lin's writing […] will look just as mannered and artificial as the minimalist realists of the 1970s and 80s".[157]

The link to online material is, however, not merely stylistic; in *Taipei*, explicit references to self-published videos and tweets abound. Not only are readers presented with a barrage of neutral declaratives which serve as markers of realism, but also direct

[153] Lin 2013, 27
[154] Ibid. 73
[155] Ibid. 162
[156] A.D Jameson 2012, 6
[157] Ibid. 7

references to material available online, bringing into question the purpose of the novel. For instance, in a scene where Paul and his girlfriend Erin are seated on the floor of a Las Vegas Casino in front of "Erin's Macbook to record themselves talking about their relationship", a verbatim transcription of a video published on Vimeo follows.[158] This kind of hypertextual material seems to beg the question, what is this novel based on, actual experience or recorded material? Moreover, how would this alter our perspective towards the depicted events? One effect of this hypertextual material is that readers are placed at the same distance from the events as Lin. In a similar manner to how Defoe presents second-hand sources, Lin provides references to his own published material. The novel form, of course, affords something more than a transcription, in effect, a different kind of attention to detail. One detail from this scene which might go amiss in the original video is our narrator's microscopic notation: "'Uh, I thought you were hugging me hard', said Erin seeming frightened, then for about around five seconds [she] didn't breathe".[159]

Lee Konstantinou notes how authors such as Tao Lin turn away from "ironic forms typically associated with postmodernism" in order to depict postmodern reality itself, as if attempting to apprehend "an underlying reality that postmodern theories of mediation took to be inaccessible".[160] He refers to this type of "relational art" as providing "postmodern reality by means of non-postmodern form", suggesting that Lin "deploys realist conventions—designating characters, settings, times and situations—towards unconventional ends".[161] Yet, what are these unconventional ends?

In contrast to the pedantic representation of details, some potential unreliability remains, although this is easily naturalized by a reader. For instance, the continuous drug-use of Lin's main focalizer, Paul, may easily excuse the lapses in reliability. When meeting a new romantic interest, Laura, "They seemed to be watching a foreign movie off her computer, then Paul noticed the light was on and that they were lying against a mound of blankets, kissing lazily, with eyes closed and long pauses, maybe sometimes asleep". With both characters having ingested Ambien and alcohol, these lapses in certainty serve to depict the hazy experiences of their drug use. Another section, which

[158] Lin 2013, 146
[159] Ibid. 147
[160] Konstaninou 2017, 148
[161] Ibid. 148, 149

brings to question the reliability of Paul's perspective can be found in a scene depicting an LSD-trip, in which Paul

> heard a partially metallic, imaginary-sounding noise. He stared without comprehension, but also without confusion, at Calvin's body, which was hunched close to the table with demonically jutting shoulder blades rising and falling in rhythm to what sounded like a computer-generated squawking. […] Paul thought he was witnessing a kind of special effect, then realized Calvin was imitating a pterodactyl.
>
> "I feel so much better now," said Calvin. "Just doing what I want … what I want to do … yeah. Before, I was holding back, so I felt bad. I feel so much better now."
>
> "You were making pterodactyl noises," said Paul in disbelief. [162]

Even in these surreal moments, the narrating entity remains aware of the "imaginary-sounding" elements of what occurs. And therein lies perhaps the main method of Tao Lin's narration; it is always uncertain.

There is a kind of constant poetic 'apostrophe' delivered to the reader, as the narrator fills in any potential gap of misunderstanding, converting them into *known unknowns*. Sometimes these take the form of explicit reflections on uncertainty, such as when Paul tries to overhear a distant conversation but "couldn't, and also didn't know what could possibly be said that he would want to secretly hear", or when being shown a lightbulb shaped candle, staring at it, "unable to comprehend […] why Daniel was showing it to him, with a feeling that he'd misheard, or not heard, something Daniel said a few seconds or minutes ago".[163] In these examples, it might be difficult to characterize Paul's perspective as unreliable, as the external uncertainty stems directly from his own reflection, and not due to any contradicting facts.

Another element of Lin's uncertainty relates to an anxiety over originality, a postmodern sentiment closely tied to the autobiographical nature of social media, leading to continued self-revision and doubt. Paul claims, for instance, in a discussion about the merits of honey versus agave that honey "was the healthiest sweetener […] based on what he currently knew, which could be wrong, he also knew".[164] This kind of self-revision seems to mirror a post-modern tendency of scepticism vis-à-vis one's

[162] Lin 2013, 96
[163] Ibid. 61, 68
[164] Lin 2013, 24

knowledge of the world, which somehow through being admitted strives towards a form of sincerity.

An anxiety over authenticity appears more acutely in relation to the endless supply of biographical data available online. When encountering Laura for the second time, Paul shows her prints of his art, "(which, according to StatCounter, she'd already seen on one of his websites)", and then indicates that "she seemed to reflexively feign seeing them for the first time […] and she made a noise indicating she was seeing something new, but when he asked if she'd seen them before she said 'yeah,' but seemed to continue feigning 'no'".[165] Not only does this neurotic worrying manifest itself in the form of mistrust towards other people, but also as a suspicion against the originality of events and phrases themselves: an aesthetic judgement of regular life occurrences. Paul finds himself in a bedroom, in which "six to ten people" watched a video "of obese people screaming in pain earnestly while exercising and being screamed at motivationally, in what seemed to be a grotesque parody, or something, of something".[166] Initially we find here an aversion to the perhaps distasteful content of the video but Paul goes on to feel:

> like he'd already experienced this exact situation—he remembered his aversion to the video and the way someone to his right was laughing—and wanted to ask if this already happened, but didn't know who to ask, then realized he wanted to ask himself.[167]

A double uncertainty occurs here. Firstly, Paul appears unsure as to what the intention of the video is, whether it is a "parody, or something, of something", seeming to highlight the bottomless vagaries of irony on the internet. Secondly, Paul expresses the ambiguous feeling of déjà-vu, of having experienced this before, in a confused redoubling of the parody-form.

A.D. Jameson expresses one of the central stylistic devices of the New Sincerity as a "professed hatred of irony", citing Tao Lin as a prime example of this.[168] While *Taipei* does provide several examples of the limitations of irony and sarcasm, the question of irony is far more nuanced than a simple disavowal. In a discussion about

[165] Ibid. 32
[166] Ibid. 49
[167] Ibid.
[168] A.D Jameson 2012, 3

artists with a character named Gabby, Paul exclaims "'you're too mainstream for us' in a loud, sarcastic voice while staring at Gabby—thinking that, by underscoring that he and Daniel were obviously too mainstream for her, he was sincerely complimenting her knowledge of the art world", showing how a sarcastic expression, when used playfully, provides a kind of double-negation, which ultimately points towards sincere intentions.[169] Paul explicitly expresses a disdain for simple sarcasm, when confronted by Daniel about a musician he likes, claiming that "he wouldn't pretend he liked something, or make fun of liking something, or like something 'ironically'".[170] The discussion of irony is in this way embedded explicitly into the dialogue of characters, yet still, in examining the style of Lin's writing, we find nuanced forms of irony to be a core aesthetic device.

One quirk of *Taipei* is its use of quote marks to indicate not only spoken dialogue but also vaguely external citation. Often times occurring as "placeholders" in Paul's mind, such as when referring to his increasing drug use "which seemed classically 'not a good sign,' he sometimes thought, initially with mild amusement, then as a neutral observation, finally as a meaningless placeholder".[171] This stylistic device manifests itself partially in relation to Paul's thoughts, distancing the narrative perspective, in an almost vivisectional approach to autofiction, neutrally observing the patterns of Paul's mind. Not only are his thoughts placed in quotation-marks but also certain metaphors and adjectival phrases are employed as vague citations, seeming to distance the narrating entity from the poetic reflections:

> "Paul thought of Taipei as a fifth season, or 'otherworld,' outside, or in equal contrast with, his increasingly familiar and self-consciously repetitive life in America"[172]
>
> "He reached outside his blanket and pulled his MacBook 'darkly,' he felt, toward himself, like an octopus might."[173]

Lin's use of 'placeholders' and citation seems to mark both an ironic distancing effect, yet also an unavoidable employment of these placeholder metaphors. This notion is brought to its edge in a section where Paul seems to struggle with finding an authentic way of expressing himself through a stock phrase: "Paul had wanted to tell Daniel he

[169] Lin 2013, 28
[170] Ibid. 63
[171] Ibid. 74
[172] Ibid. 19
[173] Ibid. 53

shouldn't want so much from life but couldn't remember the stock phrase for "don't want too much in life" and, after a long pause, had said, "you shouldn't want so much in life."[174] Paul provides a twofold move, at once failing to remember a stock phrase, a cliché, while still striving towards it. He instead reaches this stock phrase by negative reference, while providing an accidentally sincere statement. One can consider this use of metaphor as a kind of cultural "upcycling", as contrasted to the postmodern "recycling [...] by means of parody or pastiche".[175] To this end, Vermeulen & Akker suggest that metamodern artists "increasingly pick out from the scrapheap of history those elements that allow them to resignify the present and reimagine a future".[176]

While sceptically engaging in conventional metaphor, Tao Lin simultaneously embraces a technological poetic register which brings to light how the internet fundamentally alters human perception. Be it describing a character's eyes as appearing "farther away but of higher resolution than the rest of his face" or reflecting on "a brief sensation of helplessness—like if he'd divided 900 by itself and wanted the calculator to answer 494/494 or 63/63—that, in terms of leaving this social situation, he shouldn't have been born."[177] Lin is describing an intensely subjective experience in relation to depersonalized technological phenomena, seeming at once both unable to form a cohesive connection with this new type of metaphor, while, through apprehending his own alienation, achieving something akin to sincere expression. Lin thus invites readers to consider the significance of a vast new vocabulary for conceiving the human mind: the internet. His method of deadpan realism itself seems to correspond to the continual flow of data online, in one section directly referring to his memory as "an external hard drive that had been taken from him and hidden inside an unwieldy series of cardboard boxes", even going on to reflect that "some days he would begin to view concrete reality as his memory—a place to explore idly, without concern, but somewhat pointlessly, aware that his actual existence was elsewhere".[178]

Not only do technological metaphors figure in the form of *Taipei*, but also in its content. In multiple passages, characters interact with computers for seemingly pointless tasks, seeming to call for a re-evaluation of productivity in relation to digital media. We see Laura idly googling "sex tiger woods" and staring at "a photo of Tiger

[174] Ibid. 29
[175] Vermeulen and Akker, Metamodernism 2017, 29
[176] Ibid.
[177] Lin 2013, 20, 21
[178] Ibid. 75

Woods, smiling on a golf-course" adjacent to "blocks of text in which 'Ambien sex haze' was in bold around ten times".[179] These scenes appear to align with a kind of "found poetry"-aesthetic which has been central to the New Sincerity but serve as a revealing statement about a logic of productivity in the information age. Where digital media grants possibilities of increased labour productivity, alongside it follows a vast arena for consuming entertainment. One can conceptualize this in terms of Theodor Adorno's notion of leisure: where "free time is shackled to its opposite" enveloped in a "social totality", where it is conceived of as a break from work, and a chance to consume entertainment with the "in order to summon up the strength for work".[180] Lin's representation of pointless interactions with digital media attempts instead to short-circuit this dichotomy, depicting a refusal against both the impetus for productivity as well as a refusal of leisurely consumption of media. We find a kind of *détournement,* condensed in another 'pointless' computer interaction:

> Paul typed "hi" and his eyes unfocused. He typed "," and saved "hi," as a draft. He minimized Safari and saw his face, which seemed bored and depressed, his default expression. He maximized Safari and imagined millions of windows, positioned to appear like one window. He closed his eyes and thought of the backs of his eyelids as computer screens; both could display anything imaginable, so had infinite depth, but as physical surfaces were nearly depthless. Paul typed "ppl are powerful computers w 2 computer screens & free/fast/reliable access to their own internet" in Twitter, copied it, closed Twitter, pasted it in his Gmail draft of tweet drafts.

This interaction depicts a kind of artistic failure, i.e., of conjuring a poetic insight, yet not posting it, and also a social failure, that of being unable to respond to an email. Most importantly, the depiction of this failure results in a humorous and insightful affect.

A paradoxical element of Lin's realism is this recurring theme of miscommunication. As a pedantic narrator relays minute details with complete awareness of any potential unreliability, characters still fail to communicate with each other, often due to either not having much to say, or to being lost in the nuances of an irony-laden artistic jargon. This conflict between a surprisingly clairvoyant narrator and

[179] Ibid. 43
[180] Adorno 2005, 187, 192-93

a stuttering outward appearance proves to be one of the more compelling facets of Lin's authorship, a depiction of awkwardness. To give two examples: first a *failed joke*, and then an odd self-revision. At a restaurant, Laura says

> [S]he had been trying to eat better since meeting Paul, who grinned while saying 'you've been trying to eat butter?' twice, during which Laura began to blush. 'I thought you said 'butter'' said Paul grinning. Laura looked at her hand touching a fork on the table. 'I thought you said you're trying to eat butter.'[181]

Readers are delivered a failed joke, which is repeated multiple times, creating an awkward effect which undermines the joke and envelops it within a seeming intention of failure. In another example, Paul exclaimed:

> 'I kind of want to eat spaghetti,' said Paul, and laughed a little. 'Or something.' 'I'll make spaghetti,' said Maggie. 'No, I don't want to eat spaghetti,' said Paul. 'Oh, I thought you wanted to eat spaghetti.' 'I don't know,' said Paul quickly.[182]

Here we ask, why is this scene a part of the novel? One way of reading this awkward interaction may be that it is a depiction of the difficulties of navigating irony and artistic impulse, as if Paul expresses jokingly that he wants to eat spaghetti, which is then interpreted as an earnest desire by Laura, forcing Paul to realize that he does not know himself. Citing Adam Kotsko, Konstantinou describes how awkwardness becomes "a powerful aesthetic" which can be "incredibly uncomfortable to read or view", yet with a purpose rooted in something far more than being uncomfortable.[183] The awkward aesthetic, he claims, surfaces as a response to postmodern irony, which "as a defence against the awkward reality of capitalism, eventually 'exhausted itself', leaving the rawness of awkward relationality exposed".[184] Tao Lin's precise renditions of awkward and at times meaningless events reflects an exhaustion related to the endless stream of data online in a blog-like form. As all facets of human life become available, as near infinite knowledge lies at one's fingertips, the difficulty fundamentally becomes identifying with this endless barrage of input. Online-media allows access to unlimited data, yet it needs to be sorted, and in this process, communication is lost. What Tao Lin

[181] Ibid. 50
[182] Ibid. 224
[183] Konstaninou 2017, 148
[184] Ibid.

displays is that despite endless certainty, human interaction, especially in the form of art, seems to always contain uncertainties that need to be addressed.

Central to Tao Lin's depictions of ennui lies the crisis of a lost aesthetic project. Yet, as one critic puts it, "The contemporary novel's unbinding from any clear aesthetic decree is not adequately described as a blissful release into pluralism"; instead, the depiction of the alienated confusion of our contemporary world faces "struggle for historical meaningfulness" and "[t]hat it will never finally win that struggle is the guarantee of its continued historicity".[185] Tao Lin stages this crisis both formally, in his unembellished deadpan style and its attempt to discard artifice in favour of sincere direct communication, as well as qualitatively, in the rendition of a bored youth, which seems unable to communicate in any meaningful fashion. Lin even reflects on an unmediated form of expression in a passage where Paul "openly said 'I want to comfort myself with food'" with "a bleak sensation of unsatisfying catharsis from having accurately, he felt, expressed himself". This disappointment of having accurately expressing oneself points to the need for the metamodern detour into irony—it functions as a way of both creating artifice and then tearing it down, to face what Lars Iyer refers to as "the gloom and bitter humour of our situation".[186] However, far from simply accepting a defeatist perspective, Tao Lin's writing seems instead to question not the failure itself, but the expectations. What Lin demonstrates, through the recurring themes of social and artistic failure, through the pointless interactions with digital media, and the boredom of today's young generations, is that this boredom should be embraced, not as a kind of failure, but as a luxury.

[185] P. Vermeulen 2019, 321-322
[186] Ibid. 322

Epilogue – Embracing Failure, Dying in style

The Aesthetic Project of Metamodernism

As we continually chip away at notions of unreliability, we find that the broadening taxonomy of unreliable narration might eventually encompass all forms of narration. It therefore becomes important to separate what might be uniquely unreliable and what is perhaps universally uncertain. We have shown how uncertainty evolves through paradigms, partially due to differing stances held by authors towards realism. What remains to be asked is, in a contemporary paradigm that is increasingly sceptical of the "disruptive and potentially paralyzing effects"[187] of self-referentiality, what rhetorical effects does uncertainty have?

To illustrate the unexpected rhetorical implications of self-negation, we may paraphrase a joke often cited by Žižek, and attributed to Jacques Derrida, of a scene in which a group of Jews in a synagogue express "their nullity in the eyes of God":

> First, a rabbi stands up and says: "O God, I know I am worthless. I am nothing!" After he has finished, a rich businessman stands up and says, beating himself on the chest: "O God, I am also worthless, obsessed with material wealth. I am nothing!" After this spectacle, a poor ordinary Jew also stands up and also proclaims: "O God, I am nothing." The rich businessman kicks the rabbi and whispers in his ear with scorn: "What insolence! Who is that guy who dares to claim that he is nothing too!"[188]

Žižek frequently cites this joke, claiming that "to say you are nothing" is not innocent; "it may appear as an utter self-humiliation" but this gesture of "denying all your particular features, of abandoning your identity"[189] moves instead to an "extraordinary position of authority precisely as negating [your] particular identity [you] stand for universality".[190] The important thing to note in this example is how a claim to uncertainty, a reflexive self-negation, does not necessarily help in the rhetorical aim of

[187] Liu 1995, 333
[188] Žižek and Mortensen, Žižek's Jokes 2014
[189] Žižek, University of Dundee | Philosophy Lecture Series 2019, 49:30
[190] Ibid., 54:20

convincing an audience of a fact, but rather instead, as Liu puts it, marks a "radical departure from the persuasion-based norm of rhetorical practice".[191]

The intentional failure employed in metamodern works mobilizes a debate over an aesthetic crisis, an interrogation of the paralyzing state of modern artistry. This debate is easily shunned as a bourgeois practice which intentionally avoids dealing with larger topics such as climate change, impoverishment and global capitalism, yet simultaneously stages a helplessness towards these topics, an aesthetic of evasion, as an acknowledgement of the failures of late capitalism and postmodern life as a method of overcoming its deadlocks. However, as Sianne Ngai phrases it, "bourgeois art's reflexive preoccupation with its own 'powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world' is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivalled by other forms of cultural practice".[192]

Looking at a more localized perspective, Swedish artist Christofer Degrér articulates this powerlessness as a recurrent motif. In his mixed-media graduating project at the Royal Art Academy, viewers are invited to a convoluted tangle of physical installations and performance lectures, which culminate in a video work available online. He describes the project as an "evasion from a narrative reproduced by flashback-producing childhood trauma(s)" in which "two twins sublet the apartment in which they grew up in for one year" staging a "hobby-schizoanalytical ritual".[193] As the film depicts these rituals becoming increasingly complex, a narrating voice weaves in and out of vague reference to a lost father figure; and through this, the semblance of a narrative slowly takes form. He mentions a birthmark on his arm, which for him represents an island, and that he is, according to the internal logic of his work, supposed to travel to this island to meet his father, but this father "will not be [his] father, but a different father". The narrator's personal trauma is intertwined with explicit references to how the video will be edited. It is hard to deny that Degrér's work is enigmatic, despite trying its very hardest to be expository; constantly commenting and reflecting on its nature as a work, it also stages an inability to communicate. In one of his performance lectures, he claims explicitly that "I will be playing a character who is

[191] Liu 1995, 335-6
[192] As quoted in P. Vermeulen 2019, 325
[193] Degrér, (caps lock Moondialed No. +***** ***** "upright infinity symbol"□) Orbit-Uary 2018, project description

nervous about holding the presentation, but *I am also that character*”.[194] It is as if Degrér’s character attempts to exhaust every possible interpretation of his own work—and all that is left is an unutterable trauma. One way of understanding this work is that the artist is attempting to resolve a personal trauma through repetition and reflection, and this resolution perhaps requires an audience, and potentially offers a cathartic experience for said audience - or perhaps, it is shown to be unresolvable. Moreover, the audience is invited to conceptualize an artistic trauma—to imagine, what caused this; in effect what caused art?

What remains is the experience of an exhaustive meditation on the guilty self-reflections of bourgeoise art and aesthetic autonomy. Degrér’s work exists in a privileged space, a prestigious art-school in a well-off country. It is as if the work is driven quite clearly by an anxiety about this fact. Sianne Ngai speaks of how negative emotions are in a capitalist society transformed into “operational requirements”.[195] We might view the anxiety to create meaningful art, in Degrér’s work, as a display of an anxiety about the very fact that this anxiety has become an operational requirement. Ngai, quoting Feagin, calls these kinds of responses “meta-responses”—reactions to reactions, i.e., feeling ashamed of feeling ashamed. A chain of meta-responses could continue forever, as Degrér continually sees himself responding to his responses into infinitude, he is caught permanently responding to himself.

There is however a chink in the chain: enthusiasm. In the final film, as Degrér is instructing his accomplice to light a stack of candles in a particular way while asking them to make sure the light on a camera is on, then confusingly turning off the light in a room, in a recurrent worry about the “work”, he pauses for a moment. Staring into the reflection of his accomplice’s glasses, he exclaims “there’s a reflection in your eyes, there’s fire in your eyes”, causing a sudden moment of total fascination and silence. This moment creates a rupture in the neurotic meaning-creation, in the deconstruction of personal trauma and artistic drive, leaving a slight pause of silence, followed by the words: “that’s great”, and then a return to the ritual.[196] This fascination gains its strength precisely by being intertwined with the neurotically deconstructive mindset.

[194] From an unpublished performance lecture which I attended at the Royal Art Academy in 2017, entitled *“3"Audition *Free alcohol vernissage exhibition" audition 3.*

[195] Ngai 2005, 4

[196] Degrér, (caps lock Moondialed No. +***** ***** “upright infinity symbol”□) Orbit-Uary 2018, 9:53

Degrér furthermore instantiates a discussion of productivity, as his two characters enter a taxi, asking them to follow the car in front of them, then continually asking the driver to "take a right" in a prolonged loop, claiming that "time is of no essence".[197] The work here broadens out; against a logic of productivity, it seems to suggest that the "time" afforded a student to self-actualize at a prestigious art-school is time meant to be 'wasted'. Degrér phrases this sentiment most clearly on the opening page of his recent graphic novel *Subfinity:Redux*. A person awakes in a hyper-technological hospital chair, asking "wait, what happened? how long was I out?" and is answered:

> "58 years ma'am, I understand this might come as a shock to you but all of your friends and family members are still alive and everybody still knows everybody […] oh.. I almost forgot the good news… good news is that they've now made capitalism even better! […] some sort of greater power came along and made it so that we'll never have to worry about anything ever again and we can all now finally spend most of our time self-actualizing through smallish assemblage works about whatever you want them to be about…"[198]

It is here we return to the 'boring' elements of Tao Lin; what is conceived of by reviewers as meaningless, can be read as a call to reconsider the notion of wasted time. Both the social failure of miscommunication, and the artistic failure of 'deadpan realism' are framed and aestheticized in contrast to a culture of instant gratification. Similarly, the privileged position of an art-student is jarringly contrasted to notions of "productivity" in a way which ultimately begs the question, *what is the reason for productivity*, for work, if not to attain leisure-time, to be granted the ability to waste time. What does wasting time actually mean? And does it perhaps only exist when contrasted to productivity? What is questioned is not the notion of *wasting time*, but rather the premise of *spending time*.

The method for posing this question is one of a dialectical fusion of certainty and uncertainty. Daniel Defoe takes the sensible, apparent, the unreliable experience of rumour, and undercuts it with sceptical reason. Woolf subverts this order: the sensible is made ordinary, and it is infused and contrasted with an ambiguous internality. Tao

[197] Ibid. 6:25
[198] Degrér, Subfinity: Redux 2020, 4

Lin similarly lays bare the dull nature of contemporary life, yet in doing so, instils it with a humorous vein. Lastly, Degrér intermixes philosophical, artistic, and technological terminology with failed communication in the form of convoluted assemblage works relating to personal trauma and artistic failure. What they all have in common is a gesture of making ideal concepts (magical occurrences, sincere expression, or high theory) accessible by relating to them through a medium ordinary life (a morbid reality, failed expressions, or personal traumas), thus making the failures of ordinary life a necessary medium of accessing the ideal.

The goal of this paper was to establish a historical overview of the uncertain narration. We have sought out show how this both-neither dynamic is present three novels, each radically different owing to their historical contingencies. Using this genealogical approach, by symptomatically examining the epistemological gaps of older works, one can diagnose societal and cultural crises of an authors' context.

Today's aesthetic crisis—which metamodern artists such as Degrér and Lin represent—is a crisis of alienation and artistic anxiety which, through self-recognition, continues its struggle, both entertaining and critiquing our contemporary world. But what purpose does the label of metamodernism serve? Why not just analyze the author in isolation? Are we perhaps reducing or destroying the art by naming it? Herein lies a surprising antidote. Considering the core of today's aesthetic crises as the 'lack of a mission', by attempting to collect some of its disparate strands under the umbrella of metamodernism, we begin to treat this very longing for communality and historicization.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. 2005. "Free Time." In *The Culture Industry*, 187-197. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis.

Auerbach, Erich. 2003. *Mimesis - The Representation of Reality in Western Thought.* Princeton Classics.

Barthes, Roland. 1989. "Reality Effect." In *The Rustle of Language*, 141-148. University of California Press.

Bastian, F. 1965. "Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year Reconsidered." *The Review of English Studies* (Oxford University Press) 16 (62): 151-173.

Brott, Jonathan. 2018. "The Point of Play: Resuscitating Romantic Irony in Metamodern Poetics." *Stockholm University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of English.* http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1219552&dswid=1462.

Burrau, Elis Monteverde. 2019. "lilla smycket (talking an angel to death)." Free Standing Gallery Exhibit. *Ett fint kritiskt öga.* Stockholm. https://www.elis-burrau.com/lilla-smycket-talking-an-angel-to-death.

Burton, James. 2018. "Whose (Meta)modernism?: Metamodernism, Race, and the Politics of Failure." *Journal of Modern Literature* 41 (3): 60-76.

Cohn, Dorrit. 1999. *The Distinction of Fiction.* Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Cuddy-Keane, Melba. 2020. "Experiencing the Modernist Storymind." In *Modernism and Close Reading*, by David James, 208-227. Oxford University Press.

Defoe, Daniel. 2012. *A Journal of the Plague Year - Written by a Citizen Who Continued All the While in London.* Modern Library Paperback Classic (Set from original edition published in 1722). Everyman Library.

Degrér, Christofer. 2018. *(caps lock Moondialed No. +***** ***** "upright infinity symbol" □) Orbit-Uary.* Royal Institute of Art, Galleri Mejan, Stockholm. Mixed media installation available at. https://www.christoferdegrer.net/orbituary-2.

—. 2020. *Subfinity: Redux.* Vols. 1, (beta ver. IV). Self-published. Accessed December 16, 2020. https://www.christoferdegrer.net/subfinity-redux-1.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology.* Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hansen, Per Krogh. 2008. In *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*, by Elke D'hoker and Gunther Martens, 317-337. Walter de Gruyter.

Heyes, Duncan. 2016. "The Hogarth Press." *British Library.* May 26. Accessed December 15, 2020. https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/the-hogarth-press#.

Jameson, A.D. 2012. "Theory of Prose & better writing (ctd): The New Sincerity, Tao Lin, & "differential perceptions"." *HTMLGIANT.* May 28. Accessed December 10, 2020. http://htmlgiant.com/craft-notes/theory-of-prose-better-writing-ctd-the-new-sincerity-differential-perceptions/.

Jameson, Frederic. 1985. "The Realist Floorplan." In *On Signs*, by Marshall Blonsky, 373-383. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jongeneel, Els. 2008. "The Deconstruction of the First-Person Narrator in the French New Novel." In *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*, by Elke D'hoker and Gunther Martens, 304-316. Walter de Gruyter.

Konstaninou, Lee. 2017. "Four Faces of Postirony." In *Metamodernism - Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 133-154. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Lacan, Jacques. 1999. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the i as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In *Écrits*, by Jacques Lacan, translated by Bruce Fink, 75-81. New York: W.W Norton & Company.

Lacan, Jacques. 1978. "What is a Picture?" In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, by Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan, 105-119. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Lin, Tao. 2013. *Taipei.* New York: Vintage Books.

Liu, Yameng. 1995. "Rhetoric and Reflexivity." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 28 (4): 333-349.

Manfred, Jahn. 2017. *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative.* English Department, University of Cologne, May. http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm.

Mayer, Robert. 1997. "The Reception of a Journal of the Plague Year and the Nexus of Fiction and History in the Novel." *ELH* 57 (3): 529-555.

Morris, Pam. 2013. "Woolf and Realism." In *Virginia Woolf in Context*, by Pam Morris, 40-51. Cambridge University Press.

Ngai, Sianne. 2005. *Ugly Feelings.* Harvard University Press.

Nünning, Ansgar. 2008. "Reconceptualizing the Theory, History and Generic Scope of Unreliable Narration: Towards a Synthesis of Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches." In *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*, by Elke D'hoker and Gunther Martens, 29-76. Walter de Gruyter.

Olson, Greta. 2003. "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators." *Narrative* (Ohio State University Press) 2 (1).

Phelan, James. 2008. "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of Lolita." In *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*, by Elke D'hoker and Gunther Martens, 7-28. Walter de Gruyter.

Phelan, James. 2017. "Reliable, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration: A Rhetorical Account." *Narrative Culture: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.* 89-103.

Phelan, James, and Peter J Rabinowitz. 2012. "Authors, Narrators, Narration." In *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, by David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson and Robyn Warhol, 1-8. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Quinn, Analisa. 2013. "'Taipei' Is Lifelike — But That's Not Necessarily A Compliment." *NPR Book Review.* June 11. Accessed April 17, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2013/06/11/188897352/taipei-is-lifelike-but-thats-not-necessarily-a-compliment.

Sansom, Ian. 2013. "Taipei by Tao Lin – review." *The Guardian.* July 4. Accessed December 8, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/04/taipei-tao-lin-review.

Sayeau, Micheal. 2013. *Against the Event: The Everyday and Evolution of Modernist Narrative.* Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online. Accessed November 23, 2020. https://oxford-universitypressscholarship-com.ezp.sub.su.se/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199681259.001.0001/acprof-9780199681259-chapter-1.

Sbriglia, Russel, and Slavoj Žižek. 2020. *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism.* Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Shigematsu. 2018. "Defoe's psychological realism: The effect of directness in indirect consciousness representation categories." *Language and Literature* 27: 71 – 85.

Springett, Ralph. 2013. *How Sure Are You About That?: Narratorial Uncertainty in Third Person Fiction.* Manawatu: Massey University Manawatu.

Vermeulen, Pieter. 2019. "The End of the Novel." In *New Approaches to the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel*, by Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann, 317-336. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (imprint published by Springer Nature Switzerland).

Vermeulen, Timotheus, and Robin van den Akker. 2017. *Metamodernism - Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism.* London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Vermeulen, Timotheus, and Robin van den Akker. 2010. "Notes on metamodernism." *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, Volume 2* 1-14.

Woolf, Virginia. 2002. "Defoe." In *The Common Reader, First series*, by Virginia Woolf, 54-58. Mariner Books.

—. 1924. *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.* London: The Hogarth Press.

—. 1925. *Mrs. Dalloway.* Global Grey Ebooks.

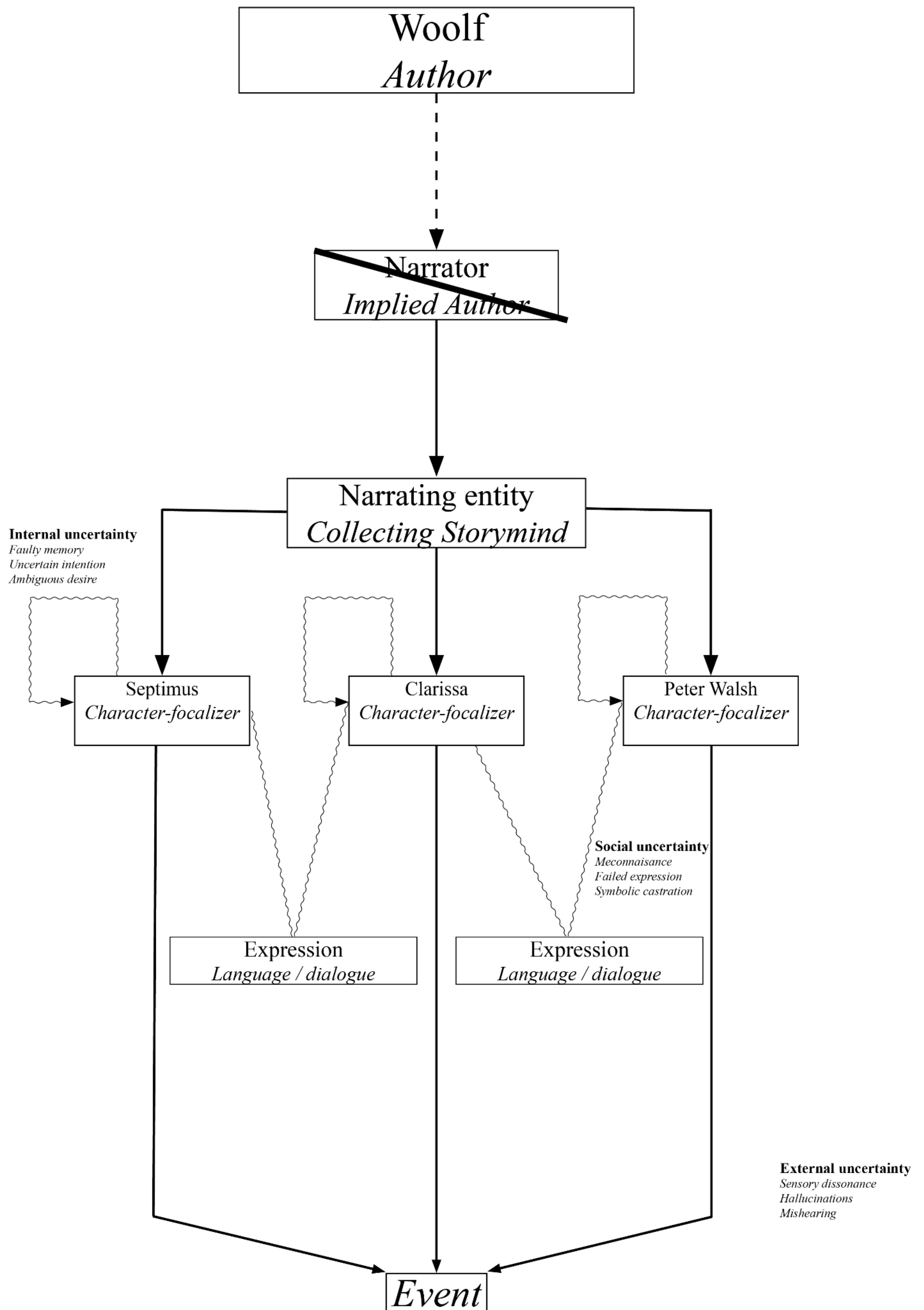
—. 1919. *The Mark on The Wall.* 2nd. Richmond: Hogarth Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2006. *How to Read: Lacan.* New York: W.W Norton.

—. 2019. "University of Dundee | Philosophy Lecture Series." *Youtube.* October 16. Accessed December 16, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XR8cxv_vdvg.

Žižek, Slavoj, and Audun Mortensen. 2014. *Žižek's Jokes.* Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Appendix 1 – Narratological schema of *Mrs Dalloway*



Appendix 2 – Narratological schema of *Taipei*