Part 2:
Literature

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Some Notes on Suspense

Years ago, I attended an Easter service in a megachurch somewhere on the outskirts of Chicago. It was an impressive multimedia event with a gospel choir, movie snippets, a light show, and even artificial fog on the stage, where the altar used to be. When, at the show's climax, the pastor exclaimed "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed," the thousands of churchgoers crowded into the huge, storehouse-like building started cheering, shaking hands, congratulating and hugging each other (at the time, Corona was still a Mexican beer), and even dancing around. The air was full of joy. However, something seemed odd to me. Since Good Friday is neither a federal holiday in the United States nor a very important day in the liturgical calendar—at least not in the Pentecostal church where I found myself—there hadn't been any solemn occasion to collectively commemorate Jesus's crucifixion three days before. Yet, celebrating his resurrection would require mourning him as having suffered and died in the first place. In Catholic regions, people fast and refrain from eating meat between Ash Wednesday and Easter Friday. Pious Christians even used to ritually weep every morning during Lent, as my own mother did when I was a child. Even though the Easter service included a movie describing the crucifixion in drastic detail, this seemed to me both a bit belated and somewhat too rushed. In a way, at least according to my expectations, the churchgoers were deprived of the true joy of Easter because they were only given the second half of the ritual: the happy ending without an extended period of mourning preceding it.

This omission is no "spoiler," of course. But it does cut into the story of redemption and hope; it removes the contrasts and flattens how it is experienced. It does so not by prematurely disclosing the outcome, but by skating over the counterpoint, the contrasting middle part of the story that makes the outcome meaningful in the first place. You could say it is an inverse way of curtailing the effectiveness of a story: reducing it to its happy ending, but leaving out the preceding dramatic event. At the same time, it reminds us that the way spoilers are said to affect the reception of a story does not apply in this case. The Passion story is structured around turning points—indeed extremely spectacular ones, from life to death and back to life—yet there is nothing in it that a spoiler could spoil. Anyone who is open to the message of

the gospels knows that Christ's triumphal resurrection is at their center. But even full awareness of this does not prevent true believers from going through days of sorrow and shared suffering during Lent, year after year.

Circular and Directed Narratives[1]

Spoilers are commonly understood as the undesirable disclosure of one or several decisive plot elements of a story. The disclosure deprives the story's now all-too-well informed receivers of an affect that is simultaneously tormenting and sensuous: suspense. However, in texts like the Easter Gospel, there are no moments of suspense or surprise that can be flattened by prematurely disclosing the ending. It is pointless to reveal the secret of a revealed religion: by definition, the truth is already known. But that does not impair the forcefulness of the narration; on the contrary. Holy texts may be based, as in this case, on a one-time historical event; but as canonized scripts of a ritual being repeated time and again, they have their own temporality. Although they follow a determined sequence in which every detail has its place, there is no temporal gradient, as it were. While the plot is evolving, all its parts from beginning to end are simultaneously co-present. Such stories captivate their audiences not by withholding a key piece of information, but through a sequential recollection and re-presentation (in the sense of the German term *Vergegenwärtigung*) of what is eternally there.

Rituals generally have a circular structure, and their cultural efficacy is based on their repeated re-enactment. Thus, we can establish a first conceptual distinction: between *circular* plots and those that are *directed* or *linear*; only linear plots can produce effects of suspense and are therefore prone to being spoiled. It should be noted, however, that this distinction is by no means clear-cut: even the consumption of directed narratives such as novels or feature films can take on a circular character by being repeated often, as will be discussed below.

Ritualistic narratives (or narrated rituals) are not the only story subgenre that is immune to "spoiler attacks." There are many other examples. Take fairytales: you would not seriously "spoil" them by letting their audience know beforehand that the hero will kill the dragon and marry the king's daugh-

1 The following remarks stem from my ongoing work on a general theory of narrative. They do not focus on specific literary or cinematic works, but rather attempt to provide a differentiated set of categories for their analysis from a literary historian's perspective.

ter. The same applies to other conventionalized plot structures. However, predictability is not the only reason why the concept of suspense, including its psychological implications, does not apply to these kinds of stories. A deeper reason lies in their being structured by a different kind of motivation and causality.

Some explanatory remarks are in order here.[2] First, we should note that there are three basic linkages or "knots" between narrative elements, expressed in the conjunctions "and," "then," and "because." A text that consists merely of an additive sequence of elements will have difficulty passing as a narrative. Inventories, lists, timetables—and to some extent, chronicles—mark a lower limit of narrative organization. Even if they form the very base of narration, sequences in the "then" mode appear to lack something, as if they were underdetermined. Temporal sequence pushes past itself toward causal connection. At least in modern times, we rarely describe a sequence of events without attributing to it an implied causality that is, to use an expression by Fritz Breithaupt, "on the go" (137). Thus, juxtaposition tends to transform itself into causality, *post hoc* into *propter hoc*, although this causality might be unspecific and ambiguous. In general, "because" linkages in narrative make do with weak motivation. The elixir of narration consists precisely of this interference, in the not-fully-determined zone between the linkage's modalities. For just like the pure "and" and "then" sequences, strict causal junctures are ultimately not of a narrative nature; an unfolding mathematical proof hardly lends itself to presentation as a narrative. The spinning of a tale thrives on the *possibility of an alternative linkage*, that is, of another possible sequence, and hence of weakened motives and causalities that have been unsettled by countervailing forces. And it is precisely the availability of alternatives, the possibility that things could turn out otherwise, that makes a story potentially suspenseful. This applies likewise to the outcome (the "what") and the way in which events will unfold (the "how") (Pütz 15).[3]

It should be added that causality is a historically protean category: more an umbrella concept than one possessing stable validating criteria. Specifically, we need to distinguish between two temporal directions of causal relationships: between *causa efficiens* and *causa finalis*, that is, between an explanation on preceding grounds and one based on a goal to be realized. This is relevant to narrative theory in that stories can be motivated by a beginning

2 In the following, I draw on more detailed elaborations in chapter 2 of my study *Fact and Fiction*.

3 See also Simon Spiegel's chapter on this.

or by an end. What is causal in the narrower sense here is an embedding of the plot in a context of cause and effect. This contrasts with "finality" in the sense of motivation by a governing principle taking in the frame of action: a "numinous authority." Invoking German literary scholar Clemens Lugowski's 1930s theory of medieval prose fiction, narratologists have shown how with increasing representational realism the old plot motivation "from behind" is converted into motivation for a roaming space of action and protagonists' interpretive horizon. According to Armin Schulz and Harald Haferland, pre-modern narrative is characterized by an extensive process of "a-causal apposition," a process explained by the fact that "narration oriented towards the relation between partial aspect and totality either suppresses or at least neglects causal motivations." "Since older narration," Schulz and Haferland argue,

> is tied much more clearly and specifically to existing material, plot schemas, and motifs than modern narration, the plot is usually much more strongly motivated by final goals, thus by the ending. […] Correspondingly, in pre-modern narratives we find far fewer reasons given for something happening; rather, most events are only connected through simple succession. "Then" or "afterwards" would be the most appropriate conjunctions here, but not "therefore." (41–42)[4]

Again, there's a limit to the production of suspense here. Plot motivation "from behind" is not exactly what we would expect from a thrilling movie or book. Outcome-oriented suspense emerges from a different mode of motivation. To hook the audience by means of suspense, a story needs to unfold within an open horizon: against the backdrop of other paths the plot might take, as previously stated. In short, suspense depends on uncertainty and thus on risk—yet only to a certain degree. The uncertainty has to be channeled, as it were, by a limited choice of alternative endings. The most important limiting factor, at least in the modern era, is realism. If every turn of the story is possible at every moment without any narrative "costs,"—without any threats to the risk-taking protagonist with whom we identify—suspense equally evaporates. There would not even be any surprise because surprise is conditioned on reliable expectations. Surprise thwarts expectations, which must exist in the first place.

In this connection it is worth briefly mentioning a literary genre that emerged at the dawn of modernity and that contains an overdose of uncertainty. I am talking about the picaresque novel. Its protagonist, the picaro—

4 Translations from German are my own.

typically a figure from the lower stratum of society—is thrown into a world that undermines any endeavor to lead a predictable life. Consequently, the picaro's life story as told in the novel is ripe with sudden changes and unforeseen turns. The rules guiding their lives are dictated from outside, and even if they attempt to control these mightier forces—and they do so with the tools of the powerless: opportunism, deceit, frequently switching sides—they only succeed temporarily. One could say that there is a disconnect between the (external) causalities of the plot and the hero's inner motivation. This, again, is a limiting condition for suspense. The experience of a permanently changing fate limits the creation of suspense. As we see from this example, suspense is furthermore tied to *intention*, to pursuing goals which might fail but at least have a chance of being accomplished.

Temporal Structure and Suspense

To summarize: suspenseful stories need a directional structure, and their elements (or "knots" as previously described) must be connected in a tentatively causal way, as opposed to a mere addition or temporal sequence, while being open to alternative outcomes—and provided that the range of alternatives is limited by the gravitational forces that genre and storyline activate and imply. Furthermore, such stories need a central character whose subjectivity is accessible to the narrator, who behaves intentionally and pursues goals that they may or may not achieve. In witnessing a protagonist's struggle, we are drawn into their existential condition and usually cannot avoid reacting with empathy. This makes us feel situationally vulnerable, which in turn triggers an uneasiness that is more physical, based in the body, than cognitive ("somatic empathy" as Simon Spiegel calls it in his chapter). And uneasiness, as an emotional state on the verge of fear, is the enabling condition for suspense.

All stories centered around a set of protagonists share an archaic principle: that the most relatable character—almost always the good actor in the story—will ultimately prevail. So the basic question such stories have to answer is whether the good will prevail. In their simpler versions, such stories give a positive answer from the outset, and this structure is never questioned. In their more nuanced realizations, the result is hidden, the process of receiving an answer is extended, and the protagonist faces hurdles and setbacks on their quest. The fact that we participate not only in the hero's quest and risk-taking but also in the uncertainty of the outcome makes these realizations suspenseful. They address a metaphysical question that has been broken down to its fundamentals: is the world good? Yet instead of a generalizing philosophical

answer, these stories offer a narrative one. That is, the answer depends on the fate of a particular character in a particular situation, whose perspective and horizon—and that means, whose uncertainty—we temporarily share.

That leads us to a phenomenon I call the dual temporal structure of narration. One of narratology's simple but consequential basic tenets is the nearly always retrospective nature of the narrative process. As a total composition, a narrative is determined by its end (which is different from the "motivation from behind" in medieval storytelling mentioned before), even when that end is initially hidden from the recipient—and often from its narrative voice. Both narrating and reading are thus located within a double temporal order: "Those who read narrative texts," observe Matias Martínez and Michael Scheffel,

> are doing something seemingly paradoxical: they take in the represented story as something simultaneously open and present and closed and past. The events appear to be past to the extent that, from the start, they are conceived as a closed whole and narrated in the preterit—as a chronological form in which the beginning is already coherently related to the end. (119)

It is only at the end of the reading, however, that the narrative's character as a "closed whole" reveals itself. While the reading process is ongoing, the reader experiences the narrated action as open and indeterminate—the precondition for understanding and empathy. As Martínez and Scheffel continue: "Because narrative texts are depictions of human action, as readers we have to reconstruct the protagonists' open horizon of possibilities in order to be able to understand their actions as actions in the first place" (121).

The rules of narrative attention-guidance demand that readers—and this even applies to repeated readings—block out their potential knowledge of the action's progression and ending and synchronize their consciousness with that of the hero. For readers to successfully identify with a fictional hero's existential situation and temporal horizon, they need to at least temporarily lose awareness of the composition's closure: of the coherent interrelatedness of its temporal elements, its inner stasis. The action's progress as a series of unspecified open moments steadily intersects with contexts that face backwards and forwards; the progress is ultimately cancelled out through its embedding in a completed textual form. But this reality cannot dominate the receiver's consciousness. Käte Hamburger observes that "epic fiction [is] the only place in cognitive theory" where the "subjectivity of a third person can be represented as a third" (115). This anthropological accomplishment of narration depends, on the receiver's side, on a capacity to operate on two constantly changing temporal planes. The receiver must be able to leap forwards and

backwards between the limited temporal world of the narrative agents and the free temporal organization of the narrative itself. Martínez und Scheffel describe this as the "doubled epistemic structure of narrative texts between the agent's and narrator's perspective": "Narrated texts unite […] two different epistemic perspectives, the protagonist's practical level of experienced life and the analytic-retrospective level of the narrator. For the reader, understanding a narrative text means being aware of both perspectives" (122).

That we are able to lose sight of the "closed whole" of a story while synchronizing our perspective with that of the protagonist, through whom the narration is focalized, explains why we can experience suspense even if we already know the story by heart. Which means that this experience can hardly be "spoiled." Apparently, withholding relevant information is only one aspect of making a story suspenseful, and often not the most important one. This corroborates the claim noted above: that there is not only a cognitive, but also an affective dimension to suspense. The more the narration invites us to identify with our hero's sorrows or triumphs, the more we invest emotional "work," the more a text keeps its secret even when we know the outcome, thus making the re-reading more pleasurable. To solve the riddle of why—and based on which factors—a repeated reading or viewing can still be suspenseful (see the respective discussion in Spiegel's chapter), it might be useful here to establish a distinction between re-readable and "one-shot" stories, where only the latter are prone to consequential spoilers.[5]

A dynamic interaction unfolds between the overall frame of a story and the process that its protagonists undergo. There are many possible arrangements. In some, as discussed, the preponderance of the framing significantly weakens, even freezes the narrative progression. In those cases, the plot structure might still contain moments of suspense and surprise, but they are put into brackets by the conventions guiding the overall narrative. The story's "loose elements," so to speak, might guard their secret until the final resolution and thereby cause impatience and a feeling of insecurity in the receiver, but they are counterbalanced by a fixed and stabilizing scheme bringing the story to a predictable end. The fact that Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple will eventually help to convict the perpetrator is guaranteed by convention: that is how detective stories end. The only open question is how they reach their conclusions. This brings us to one more conceptual distinction: between

5 On re-reading, see also Dana Steglich's chapter.

"flexible" and "firm" elements of a narrative. The former put the audience in a state of unrest, while the latter allow them to still feel reassured.

Redundancy and Variance

We have now turned from a typology of narratives—some suspenseful, others not—to opposing forces within the act of storytelling as such. To elaborate, we can call the two driving forces redundancy and variance. Redundancy consists in fulfilling a given genre and narrative schema: for instance, of fairy-tales or detective stories. It satisfies a need for confidence in the way events will unwind. But of course, pure redundancy would be boring, making the reassuring predictability that comes with it meaningless and dry. A narrative schema only comes alive in being tangibly realized. It thus needs variance—deviation from the schema—to draw attention to the specific story being told. The appropriate Latin expression here is *variatio delectat*, "variation gives delight." Stories grip their audiences through the promise held by each specific case, which is to say by concealing their redundant side. They thus spark a pleasure that has a double origin and that comes from a conflicted feeling related to what psychoanalysis terms "Angstlust" (Balint): a pleasure derived, on the one hand, from the distance between an intradiegetic world and an extradiegetic situation untouched by it; and on the other hand from the combination of surprise and satisfied expectation. Consequently, the tension felt by those hearing or reading a story is not only grounded in wanting to know what comes next. As mentioned before, stories with a totally open horizon of possibilities, where everything can happen at any time, are not exciting. Rather, excitement results from whether awakened expectations are fulfilled in line with the logic of a particular plot, and if so, how.

An emphasis on the dimension of redundancy seems to contradict the view that the purpose of narrating lies chiefly in imparting news, that is, singular events. The pleasure of storytelling gravitates towards what is unexpected, not what is expected: deviation from the familiar, stepping outside a cultural or group-specific norm. Conformity with expectations fails to catalyze conscious exertion; accordingly, it merits no special mention. But a sequence of reactions contradicting a typical behavioral pattern stimulates the inventive narrative spirit, causing it to either "normalize" the deviation through choice of another mental schema or render it plausible through a narrative bridge. "Stories fill the breach when typification fails," (180) narratologist David Herman observes. It is not possible to discuss here in detail with what kind of

means this occurs. But we should take note of one particular tendency of narrative schemas that seems especially important: the dissolution of anomalies. In the interplay of scheme and variation, we can understand redundancy as the moment of inertia within stories, which, in order to nevertheless attract attention, consistently require and generate new material.[6]

What is the function of narrative redundancy? We can refer here to the value of recognizability of narrative patterns as a psychological factor; this leads in turn to the reliable fulfillment of expectations, a factor with strong emotional resonance. The charm of uniform narrative constructions is evident in simple literary genres that use a limited number of formulas into which a theoretically infinite number of possible combinations can be inscribed. Take again the fairy tale as a prime example. Regardless of what takes place in a fairy tale and how horrific individual episodes may be, our trust in the stability of the formulaic system is never disappointed. The genre's pop-culture variants make use of the same effect. Something similar is common in extra-literary contexts as well: satisfied expectations of order offer so much protection that denying portions of reality is preferable to abandoning one's bond with a narrative that has been adopted by the receiver.

Depending on the receiver's perspective, then, a story modelled upon a recurring and recognizable pattern is either a variation of the same, or something singular and different from every other version. The first can make you feel safe, while the second can make you feel thrilled. The first tells you that the fictional world you are immersing yourself in accords with your world view and cognitive orientations; the second challenges you in a way that is mostly sensuous, yet oftentimes also disturbing. Usually, it comes down to a mixture of both, on two different levels: one level is attached to the plot and a "naïve" absorption into what is going on; the other level invites the learned readership or movie audience to a kind of meta-consideration of the narrative techniques, psychological plausibility, causal links, and affordances of the respective plot schema or genre.

Displacement of Frames

Having described the conditions for suspense in a general way, I'd like to conclude with a look at more recent developments. If we consider the media environment of today's storytellers, we might assume that it shifts the equa-

6 For further elaboration, see my study *Fact and Fiction*, chapter II.3.

tion towards redundancy. Every possible storyline, every generic convention seems to have been exploited, if not exhausted in manifold ways. Looking at the industrialized mass production of fiction around the globe every day and reducing it to its basic patterns, we find iteration again and again. Authors, playwrights, and filmmakers will have trouble lending their oft-repeated stories an unheard-of twist.

This, however, has driven them to expand the range of variations. They are encouraged by a postmodern condition of storytelling that opens up a combinable set of narrative realizations. Furthermore, postmodernism has conditioned producers of fiction and their audience to deploy irony and thus deliberately play with conventional expectations. As Spiegel outlines in his chapter, the change of media environment plays a decisive role here: in the digital era, "forensic fandom" (Mittell 128) and active participation of the audience open up space for negotiations and "departure from established forms."

Or, seen from a different perspective, those established forms have lost their pertinence. We can observe a dissolution of guiding narrative patterns at work across the board. Once again, we should call to mind the archaic principle of narration mentioned above: namely, that the character closest to us—almost always the good actor in the story—will ultimately prevail. As Noel Carrolls argues, the value system established by the respective work and the audience's respective moral evaluation play an important role. However, that presupposes that we know the difference between good and evil, where the protagonists stand, and which side we are on. And most fundamentally, that the distinction can be upheld in the first place. In many popular narratives, this is no longer the case; popular heroes who fight for the good cause are increasingly ambiguous. Take the case of James Bond, who, in his most recent iterations, has become a traumatized perpetrator of violence. Or look at the other side of the spectrum, at an anti-hero like Arthur Fleck in Joker (US 2019, Director: Todd Phillips), who nevertheless demands empathy, even compassion.

The secret that the narrating instance withholds from listeners in order to capture their attention no longer pertains only to the stories' outcome within a predetermined frame. It concerns the frame as well. If the protagonists' career constantly blurs the line between the good side and the bad side, the metaphysical riddle that stories are supposed to solve becomes unanswerable. Thus, in this type of story there is more at stake than whether the good heroes will prevail in their quest. And since there might be no solution to the question of good and evil, asking it—enduring it, constantly bearing it in

mind—becomes more important than superficially answering it. Hence, we are dealing with a kind of "two-storied" suspense, which concerns the plot on one level and the frame encompassing the story on another. This, in turn, has an impact on the consequences of potential spoilers. They not only uncover how things in a particular case will turn out, but also cut into the tension (in the double sense of the German word *Spannung*) between story and frame.

We should add, of course, that the perpetual displacement of the frame has become a predominant generic feature in today's commercial storytelling insofar as filmic narratives, especially, are spread across several sequels. As a rule, every sequel shifts the frame of reference in a different direction. Thus, what I have described as a metaphysical loss of security in popular storytelling is reflected in its formal arrangements, too: the need to keep viewers, who are no longer synchronized by a fixed broadcast schedule, in a state of suspense in order to make them long for the series' continuation. A spoiler here is simply a threat to the business model of film production firms and, to a lesser extent, the book industry.

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Filmography

Joker. Director: Todd Phillips. US 2019.

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