

## **“Immersion and Defamiliarization: Experiencing Literature and World”**

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Analysis of narrative fiction’s capacity to induce immersion and defamiliarization has a long history in the fields of literary and aesthetic theory. Most theoretical treatments of the two concepts give privilege and normative impetus to one type of response or related type of text. In this article we set out to rethink the concepts of immersion and defamiliarization by bringing them into dialogue. This dialogue involves an investigation of overlaps and differences between two theoretical paradigms, cognitive narratology and unnatural narratology.

Our aim is to track evidence of, and to advance, understandings of the forms and functions of immersion and defamiliarization, which have been inspired by cognitive and unnatural approaches to narratology. Where these concepts have been associated with dualistic notions of cognition and purely mimetic notions of narrative, immersion and defamiliarization have come to seem in opposition in a way that we are seeking to show is too simplistic. The three literary texts, which provide illustrative material, share thematic or formal affinities with dreams and with grief, two issues themselves invested in the dialectics of the real and unreal. In Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*, a narrator’s dream vision brings him face to face with grief; in Borges’ “The Circular Ruins”, a character turns out to be not only creating with dreams but created from a dream, which produces grief; in Kafka’s “A Country Doctor” a narrative voice performs grief in an immersion-challenging setting that some readers refer to as dreamlike.<sup>2</sup> The article consists of the following parts: an introduction to the concept of immersion as seen from cognitive narratology and to the concept of defamiliarization as seen from unnatural narratology; the three readings of Chaucer, Borges and Kafka; and finally the conclusion.

Our discussion is framed by two sets of distinctions, which we have brought in to help distinguish some of the dominant aspects in play when experiencing narrative fiction. The distinctions originate from a famous passage in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s autobiography, *Biographia Literaria* (1817) where Coleridge tells the story about a mutual challenge between him and his colleague, William Wordsworth. They both agree to invest in one of what they call the “two cardinal points of poetry”:

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<sup>2</sup> As noted by a reviewer, the structural, thematic and functional affinities and differences between the phenomena of dreams and emotional states and the experience of narrative and literature holds potential for interesting investigations, particularly when approached from an unnatural or cognitive perspective. Such investigations, however, lie outside the scope of this article.

[Coleridge's] endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us...(Coleridge 1817, chapter XIV)

The first cardinal point, pursued by Coleridge, is what others have called verisimilitude. The challenge he faces is to make the unreal or supernatural seem real, to suspend the audiences' disbelief and make them empathize with the "shadows of imagination". While Wordsworth is to use the invented to restore the reader's experiences of what lies outside the text, to purge the numbness of perceptual habits and direct the attention of the reader to the "wonders of the world". Our take on these two strategies for securing the "sympathy of the reader" is to think of them not as oppositions but as continuums. Both the suspension of disbelief and the direction of attention can be seen as scalar phenomena, as axes; aspects of a text can suspend disbelief to a higher or lesser degree while other aspects of a text can be more or less interested in either steering the reader into the invented world or in returning the reader to the world outside the text. If one combines these two continuums, the following diagram of reader responses induced by textual strategies emerges:

<b>Suspension of disbelief</b>		
	<i>High degree</i>	<i>Low degree</i>
<b>Direction of attention</b>		
<i>Fictional text</i>	1	2
<i>World before us</i>	3	4

Traditionally, immersion has been conceived of as transparently directing attention towards what has been referred to as the "language-independent reality"<sup>3</sup> that is presented by the fictional text (position 1), while defamiliarization is seen as operating through directing the reader's attention to the artificial nature of the construction of the fictional world (position 2). Drawing on recent developments in cognitive narratology and unnatural narratology we want to question this view. It is our aim to show that it is productive to distinguish between different types of readerly engagement, typified under the continuums of suspension of disbelief and direction of attention, although dichotomous or oppositional understandings of the processes of immersion and defamiliarization over simplify matters. We will do this by arguing that immersion may also take place in texts with lower degrees of suspension of disbelief (position 2) and that immersion and defamiliarization can both serve to imitate and direct the attention

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan 2001: 14-15.

of the reader towards their immersion in the world (position 3) and by means of providing new perceptions lead the reader to question the nature of what lies beyond the text (position 4).

### **Immersion and Cognitive Narratology**

Where does the reader's mind stop and the book begin? Immersion, the concept that the reader is transported into, engaged with or absorbed by a book, in many respects seems to intuit and anticipate a distributed cognitive approach to literary experience.<sup>4</sup> Distributed cognition, which latterly has been renamed by narratologists as 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation cognition (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014), is the claim that cognition (or the mind) is distributed across brain, body and world, rather than being something merely brain-based or metaphysical. In the words of Andy Clark and David Chalmers, it asks the question "Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?" (1998). Empirical research in the cognitive sciences that have provided evidence of the ways in which cognition is embodied, embedded, enacted and extended into the world also serve to endorse, supplement and to interrogate our understandings of immersion in narrative, with narrative instantiations in turn illuminating scientific and philosophical insights and hypotheses .

Immersion in fiction has, at least since Plato, been compared with our immersion in the world. In twentieth century postmodern accounts, the notion that in life we are already immersed in fiction, is due to a view of language as an arbitrary symbolic system by which we are constituted and processed. Early cybernetic accounts more positively viewed humans as the processors, but the emphasis on cognition as equivalent to information processing again emphasised the virtual nature of constructs and elided the significance of embodiment and the physical environment. Recent distributed cognitive accounts, which often draw on earlier phenomenological notions, instead emphasise the mutually constitutive relationship of language, body and world. This more holistic notion of worldly immersion entails that narrative techniques and structures are formed in relation to, and give insights into, structures in the physical world. Notions of literary immersion that have arisen from distributed cognitive approaches extend the language-body-world circuit to include storyworlds (Anderson 2015). The cognitive enactment of a storyworld by the reader is also a cognitive enactment of the reader by the storyworld: reader and narrative bring forth one another. Predictive models of cognition that have recently emerged, simply echo these theoretical stances with Jakob Hohwy's predictive coding (2013), explicitly arguing for the virtual and fictional nature of our access to the world, as with classical cognitive science and postmodern accounts, while Andy Clark's predictive processing (2016), and Shaun Gallagher and Micah Allen's (2016) predictive engagement theory respectively argue for progressively more enactive understandings of our relation to the world.

Jean-Marie Schaeffer's *Why Fiction?* describes immersion in fiction as a manifestation of the general human capacity for cognitive simulation:

...one cannot understand what fiction is if one does not take as a starting point the fundamental mechanisms of "doing-as-if" – of ludic-feint – and of imaginative

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<sup>4</sup> Use of the term immersion in narratology derived from discussions on virtual reality and digital media (see Ryan 2001)

simulation, of which the genesis is observed in the games of role-playing and the daydreaming of early childhood... (2010 [1999]: xii)

As with predictive accounts of cognition that have since emerged, “this modelling virtualization” is described as “one of the essential competences of human consciousness” (59). This virtualization is also a multileveled hierarchical account: what characterises fictional immersion is accession to a state of immersion, the effects of which are then neutralized at the level of conscious attention (163). Though the nature, extent and limits of the effects and of their neutralization are in need of more research, with cognitive approaches particularly promising greater insights.

Notably, this is similar in structure to notions of how the mirror neuron system operates via a combination of automatic sensorimotor resonance in observers of actions, emotions and action words, which is supplemented by super mirror neurons inhibiting actual imitation (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008). Furthermore, it suggests the partial nature of immersive states despite the apparently total nature of the fusion experienced between reader and narrative, which implies the polythetic nature of the self. Schaeffer also distinguishes between different forms of immersion postures induced in readers which relate to the distinctive types of immersion vectors offered by different media. The view then is one of both continuity and differences across cognitive processes, readers and media.

A focus on immersion type phenomena by cognitive narrative approaches has seemed to put cognitive narratologists at odds with the unnaturalists’ focus on works or elements in works that are in some way impossible or antimimetic and that may seem more in tune with defamiliarizing techniques. Immersion and defamiliarization have come to seem in opposition in a way that implies too simplistic a definition of both terms. Even in Auerbach’s seminal *Mimesis*, mimesis is not just immersive but also is the means whereby “man used his language to discover his world anew” which aligns it with defamiliarization ([1946] 2003: 183). More recently, Alva Noë’s *Strange Tools* makes an argument for art as a philosophical practice, which by making us aware of the ways in which we are organised by structures in the world, “gives us the possibility of reorganizing ourselves” (2016: xiii). The roots of such notions derive from the phenomenological tradition, which like defamiliarization seeks to reveal the ways in which we are always already caught up in mental panoramas. The notions of defamiliarization at the heart of mimetic and cognitive accounts throws into question any easy dichotomy between these concepts or between cognitive and unnatural approaches.

The close association of defamiliarization and immersion goes back to the emergence in Western European culture of narrative analysis from scriptural exegesis; this also forms the background context to *The Book of the Duchess*. The coming down to earth of exegesis, with the growth of commentary on contemporary secular *auctores*, was influenced by the thirteenth century revival of Aristotelian epistemological ideas which gave the human faculties and perception “a new dignity” (Minnis and Scott 1998 [1988]: 197). The epistemological underpinning to this hermeneutical development bears comparison with the recent cognitive turn’s emphasis on embodiment and science-based approaches: it suggests that there may be a connection between theoretical turns with more embodied and grounded notions of human

nature and an optimistic openness to the surface level value of language, its substance, style and matter. Dante (contra earlier scriptural hermeneutics) prioritises the literal meaning, the surface level, as the necessary foundation on which allegorical, moral or anagogical meanings are built, while Boccaccio figures narratives' polysemousness simulatively as a plurality of paths available to the reader (2001 [c. 1360]). Boccaccio asserts that it is poetry's very strangeness and opacity that makes it superior to philosophy: "...poesy...brings forth strange and unheard-of creations of the mind;...adorns the whole composition with unusual interweaving of words and thoughts; and thus it veils truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction" (258). It is its very strangeness, its capacity for defamiliarization, he argues, which enables its capacity to create immersive simulations, as poets "raise flights of symbolic steps to heaven, or make thick-branching trees spring aloft to the very stars, or go winding about mountains to their summits" (259). Fittingly Boccaccio's examples serve not only as pithy illustrations for his claim as to poets' God-like capacity for creation, but simulate an ascension towards the "high and noble", to which through practical effort, Boccaccio claims, poetry leads (259). This notion of poesy, so leads etymologically to poiesis, creation, and developmentally in turn on to autopoiesis, self-creation, with *homo viator* rising upward via fiction's scaffolding structures and transforming into the self-creating *homo faber*.

More recently, the most influential work in narrative studies on the concept of immersion, has been Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, which describes immersion as "the experience through which a fictional world acquires the presence of an autonomous, language-independent reality populated with live human beings", such that the reader's "consciousness relocates itself" to this other world (2001: 14-15, 104). This work originally published in 2001, has recently been revised and its addition of research and insights from cognitive science, reflects just how useful work in this area has been to fleshing out concepts of immersion. Nonetheless, it continues to define immersion as "a state of forgetting language and losing oneself in the textual world" (136). Therefore Rita Felski's observation in 2008 on the limitation of this definition remains valid, as she points out that Ryan

... fails to consider the possibility of being seduced by a style, assuming that any attention to language will be purely cerebral and analytical in nature... Here language is not a hurdle to be vaulted over in the pursuit of pleasure, but the essential means of achieving it. We need only think of those moments when a reader, on opening a book, is drawn in by a cadence of tone, by particular inflections and verbal rhythms, by an irresistible combination of word choice and syntax. (2008: 63)

As well as supporting understandings of the mechanisms that enable our experience of being immersed into a text in the more conventional sense described by Ryan (position 1 in the reader response matrix), cognitive approaches suggest that immersion may also be produced by an aesthetic and affective engagement owing to techniques that do not efface but rather draw a reader's attention to the surface layer of the text (position 2 in the matrix). The foregrounding of the text's fictionality '*seeing* the represented object while *knowing* that one sees a mimeme' is what enables fictional immersion according to Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2010 [1999]: 165). Similarly, Merja Polvinen argues that "awareness of the fictionality of fiction does not

constitute an anomalous rational action that works against emotional immersion – instead it is...necessary for immersion to happen in the first place” (2012: 108-9). Marco Caracciolo’s empirical analysis of reader responses on Amazon shows that the emotions evoked are intertwined with readers’ judgements (2013). As Boccaccio earlier intuited, Keith Oatley similarly argues that emotional engagement is not opposite to but can instead be caused by defamiliarization, which through foregrounding texts and affording aesthetic effects, leads to “emotional reflection and reappraisal” (Oatley 2016; Miall 2008). Evidence that perceptual processes can be slowed down by features such as the weak implicatures, functional shifts and the rhetoric of literary language (Davis 2007; Wilson 2011; van Peer 2007) more generally suggests immersion and defamiliarization can be cooperative.

Yet, in line with more conventional notions of immersion as occurring via a see-through surface level text (position 1), distributed cognitive approaches often emphasise the importance of the transparency of the resource which we use as part of our mind. This tension as regards concepts about immersion can be helpfully compared with a tension between theoretical strands in the distributed cognition framework. For example, in relation to embodied cognition, more functionalist approaches such as Clark’s (2008) would argue that the specificity of the resource at the sensorimotor frontier may be negligible (position 1 or 3), while others, such as Damasio (2000) and Noë (2004), would argue for the special role that the specifics of a particular body or resource play (position 2 or 4, in terms of the attention demanded by, and the significance of, the role of the surface level of the text (2) or of the body and physical world (4)). We argue for a middle path between these, where while the particularity of the resource may have a distinctive consequence in one context or as regards one function, in another context or as regards another function, the difference may be negligible (Anderson 2015). In terms of immersion in a text this means that the surface level parameters, such as the stylistic features (position 2) or the physical specifics of body and world (position 4) may vary in terms of their significance to cognitive processing and outcomes.

Distributed cognitive approaches have led to a focus on the embodied nature of immersion, which is underpinned by new insights into our cognitive mechanisms. We can take the position of the narrator through references to bodily movements or sensations which trigger “sensorimotor perceptual simulations in the reader” (Bolens, viii). Furthermore, as has been shown in a number of experiments (Fischer and Zwaan 2008, Speer et al. 2009), immersion evokes our specific, though changeable, embodied self with the degree of immersion variably effected by our previous cognitive repertoire and enactive experience. To an extent, narratives simulate our everyday immersion in the world by triggering equivalent or parallel cognitive processes; there are elements of continuity across immersion in a text or the world (positions 1 and 3). When we process language referring to sensorimotor actions, “our sensorimotor cortex becomes automatically activated in much the same way as if we were acting out the represented actions and perceptions ourselves” (Kuzmičová 2014: 276; Caracciolo 2011). Moreover, it is not just fictional bodies that we are immersed in and enact but fictional environments, since it is through the body that we experience space and time (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 2006; Gallagher 2005; Caracciolo 2013).

Our perceptual modelling of the world has been shown to be transferred across to the ways in which we model narratives, for example, narratives which are mimetic of the salient

features of our cognitive processing, rather than of the objective dimensions of the referent, are the most vivid (Jajdelska et al. 2010). It has been observed that perception and memory particularly attend to spatial or temporal boundaries (Jajdelska et al. 2010; Conway 2005); this suggests that narratives that use such markers, which interrupt the flow of the text, can in fact be more vivid and immersive exactly through the use of such sequential structuring. There are also significant differences between world and narrative modelling, such as with action observation, for example, as when we read that the excited young woman swiftly “turns a page” the more exact nature of the simulation must wait for the arrival of the word “page” (Fischer and Zwaan 2008: 836). Thus as well as continuity there can be a distinctive aspect to our processing of narrative simulations.

Narrative simulations trigger inferences based on our prior personal experiences. The episodic memory underlies not only our capacity to construct counterfactual hypotheses about the future, but also our capacity to imagine fictional scenarios (Hassabis and Maguire 2007). Additionally, a narrative may in turn recalibrate our memories, so that the real world is made anew, as our memories both flesh out and immerse us further in the narrative and thereby shift our perceptions of the past not only in the storyworld but also in our own world, and alter perceptions of the present and future likelihoods and possibilities afforded by the storyworld and life revitalising our mental panoramas (Anderson 2016a). The particular term “immersion”, as with notions of “flow” (Montero 2016), has been taken to imply a more cognitively passive role than now often appears to be the case; we argue that readers bring to their immersion in the text their experience of the world (position 3), which through being enacted via engagement with the text may in turn be modified (position 4), despite or because of the text’s very fictionality. Our capacity to generalise away from particulars (Fischer and Zwaan 2008), means that though, for example, we may not have performed a pirouette we are to an extent able to understand the action through an experience of turning, with the types of vivid and detailed instructions provided by authors supplementing our capacity to take imaginative leaps beyond our usual cognitive constraints.

Felski helpfully emphasises the two-way nature of our relation to texts: “reading is far from being a one-way street; while we cannot help but impose ourselves on literary texts, we are also, inevitably, exposed to them” (Felski 2008: 3). Yet the terminology here, perhaps unintentionally, suggests unwillingness: “impose” and “expose”. Another way of framing this would be in terms of a notion of a literary distributed cognition that occurs via textual autopoiesis that bring reader and work forth together (Anderson 2016b). Enactivist notions of cognition as sense-making helpfully make clear the mutual implication of affective and evaluative responses (Colombetti 2014). The experiential emphasis associated with immersion and the more reflective stance associated with defamiliarization in our sense-making of narratives are intertwined cognitive phenomena. The mutual enactment of narrative by reader and reader by narrative is complementary to understandings of cognition as distributed across brain, body and world, which includes by extension the storyworlds, which add to the thousand virtual coordinates through which we more generally orient ourselves and enact our worlds.

## **Defamiliarization and Unnatural Narratology**

So far, our attempt to illustrate the many overlaps and interdependencies between processes of immersion and defamiliarization has focused on getting an up to date understanding of immersion. In what follows we are turning our attention to defamiliarization. Through a return to Shklovsky's early texts, we aim to tease out productive revisions to common understandings of the term. Further, we shall use this rereading of Shklovsky to sharpen our understanding of what unnatural narrative elements might be. The term "unnatural" is used by us to designate rhetorical devices that de-automatize the reader's acts of perception and understanding through what we call processes of permanent defamiliarization.

Defamiliarization is traditionally presented as an aesthetic meta-device, often tied to normative ideas about the autonomy of experimental literature. Schmid finds that "defamiliarisation provides the formalist basis of the concept of deviation", where deviation entails artistic enterprises that "reject the ideas of imitation, reproduction, and mimesis" (Schmid 2005: 98). While Margolin states that the perspective of early Shklovsky and early Russian Formalism as such was "aestheticist, ahistorical, reductive, and mechanistic", with a narrow focus on analyzing artistic procedures capable of defamiliarizing "that which is or has become familiar or taken for granted" (Margolin 2004: 815). The concept of defamiliarization, emerging from such representations, would typically conceive of it as tied to what we have labeled position 2 in the matrix: defamiliarization is thus seen as directing attention to the artificiality of the work of art by resisting suspension of disbelief.

We want to question this understanding. Despite the insights they offer, these representations of the concept run the risk of reducing the explanatory power of Shklovsky's proposal by limiting the reach of defamiliarization to certain types of art, by downplaying its focus on readerly dynamics and, most importantly, by highlighting the formal rather than the functional aspects of the processes it attempts to describe. Our reading is in some respects comparable to other recent uses of the concept that stress that defamiliarization should be seen as a reading effect. Examples of such an approach are to be found in Robinson's *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht* (2008) and in "The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators" by Bernaerts et al. (2014). Bernaerts et al. consider defamiliarization as "the effect that literary texts can bring about on readers by challenging their ideas about what counts as 'normal' or 'predictable' in a given genre or narrative situation" (Bernaerts et al. 2014: 73).

What we want to present is a rhetorical reading of the concept or a reading of the concept as rhetorical.<sup>5</sup> This understanding of defamiliarization then becomes tied to a certain way of thinking about unnatural narratives. We shall move forward through a brief look at the role played by the concept in theories of unnatural narratives. Given the often experimental nature of texts deemed unnatural, it is no surprise that the term "defamiliarization" appears quite often among practitioners of unnatural narratology. Among other places it is referenced in Alber et al. 2010, in Richardson 2011, in Weese 2014, and discussed in Richardson 2015 (24-25). Only in one case has the concept been used to distinguish the unnatural (Iversen 2016). Reader dynamics, however, has played a significant role in the most elaborate attempt at explaining what unnatural narratives are and how they may function.

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of rhetorical refers in this context to an interest in intentions, purposes, functions and audience reactions, as well as in form and aesthetics.



In *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*, Jan Alber lists nine “reading strategies” (Alber 2016: 47), ranging from “more or less automatic” processes of world making to more interpretative “conscious or reflexive moves” (55), that “may be used by recipients to make sense of impossible scenarios or events” (47). Brian Richardson argues in his section on the “reader” in *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (2015) that unnatural texts give rise to a multitude of different types of ideal readers in that readers of strange literature “are required to perform several different tasks and perhaps take on several personae” (Richardson 2015: 44). Sometimes this entails taking different positions simultaneously, while at other times it means making a choice between mutually exclusive positions. An example of the former appears when a text produces a “dual-level reader” (44) who is invited to read the text both on a mimetic level and on a level where the principles behind the mimetic are violated or disrupted. Examples of the latter are to be found when reading self-contradictory narratives. According to Richardson such narratives give rise to different implied readers such as readers that attempt to “naturalize”, readers that experience the contradictions as “authorial free play”, or readers that on the basis of the text “reject the mimetic conventions altogether” (46). In Richardson’s gallery of possible implied readers we thus find both those who move towards re-cognizing the otherworldly and weird and those who for various reasons resist bringing unnatural elements back into the fold of the everyday and well-known.

It is to this second, non-naturalizing position that the following subscribes, moving forward through a return to Shklovsky. It is easy to see why the formalistic, work-directed aspects of Shklovsky’s thinking have been dominant in the reception of this work. *Theory of Prose* does in fact show, what was for its time, a revolutionary interest in the devices of literary art.<sup>6</sup> But we want to claim that the concept of defamiliarization is also, perhaps even primarily, invested in an inquiry into what Shklovsky calls “the purpose of art” (Shklovsky 1991: 6). This purpose is closely tied to what is referred to as the “economics” of understanding.

The basic dichotomy, guiding the argumentation in *Theory of Prose* (especially so in the first chapter, “Art as device”), is not between specific formal devices and conventional stylistic features but between two ways of making sense. Shklovsky talks about “the general law governing the economy of mental effort” (4) as something opposed to the processes initiated through interaction with works of art. In everyday sense-making, the guiding principle is efficiency, achieved through processes of shortcutting, fragmentation and habitualisation, which is an intuition that has since been confirmed by cognitive science and is what Shklovsky calls “automatization”. This form of automatic perception makes us faster at handling the everyday demands of the outer and inner world but at the cost of tangibility and sensibility: the “object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged” (5). The primary purpose of art, then, is to de-automatize our perception and sense-making: “The removal of this object from the sphere of automatized perception is accomplished in art by a variety of means” (6).

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<sup>6</sup> Several versions as well as several translations into English exist of Shklovsky’s “Art as device”, his key text on what he with a neologism called *ostranenie*. There is a considerable lack of consensus on what term to use in English. It has been argued that while the term “defamiliarization” has gained the most scholarly circulation it misses out on parts of what the original neologism set out to capture, most recently in an introduction to the newest translation, Berlinda’s from 2015 (Shklovsky 2015). In this article we draw mainly on Sher’s translation from 1991, however we use the term defamiliarization, rather than his suggested neologism “enstrangement”.

Rather than try to establish a catalogue of those means, for instance in the form of a formalist poetics, our reading focuses on Shklovsky's idea of the ends and effects of defamiliarisation, on what could be called the rhetorics of defamiliarization. What might be the purposes of literature's tendency to submit readers to anti-efficient perception? Early Shklovsky offers what at first sight seems like two radically different answers. The first answer is that "the tool of art" has been given to man in order "to make us feel objects", "to make a stone feel stony" (5). The second answer is that "the purpose of art" is to make "perception long and "laborious" because "the perceptual process in art has a purpose all of its own" (5). So do we undergo processes of defamiliarization in order to escape habitual semiosis and return to the realness of reality or do we undergo processes of defamiliarization in order to expand and experience semiosis itself? Robinson claims the former: "the reader's ability to sense or feel the slightest deviations from the ideosomatic norm gives literature's impact on us the intensity Shklovsky says we need in order to deautomatize our perceptions, to restore sensation to life, to make the stone stony" (Robinson 2008: 127). This notion equals what we call position 4 in our matrix. The purpose of strange fiction with a low suspension of disbelief is to return us to the stoniness of the stone. Margolin, however, could be seen as taking the other position: "perceptibility of the medium and its patterns, of the artfulness of the artistic object, is a major goal of art" (Margolin 2004: 815). Here, the point of art that suspends disbelief, is to let the reader dwell in the artistic process itself, equal to position 2 in the matrix.

In our view, what seems like an either-or conundrum is better thought of as a both-and scenario. Defamiliarization, understood as a state of mind, as a set of cognitive phenomena originating from the meeting between aspects of a reader and certain textual phenomena, may lead perception beyond or towards itself, may lead out of or further into aspects of a text. It may even, and this is where our position differs somewhat from that of Shklovsky, through a low degree of familiarity, compared to everyday occurrences, and through a radical suspension of disbelief, propel the reader towards parts of the extra-textual that are not easily or not at all recognizable or graspable.

Our reading of Shklovsky's concept reaffirms what our reflections on immersion established: defamiliarization is not the opposite of immersion. In some situations (position 4), defamiliarization propels the reader through the text and gives her back the thing (her "clothes", her "furniture", her "fear or war" (Shklovsky 1991: 5)) in its full thingness; in other situations (position 2) it offers a form of immersion, not by bracketing out knowledge of the artificiality of the invented but by diving into the very process of invention, into the process of making and unmaking perception, staged by the work of art. Sher translates this process as "*the process of creativity*" (6, italics in original)<sup>7</sup>. In others again, it confronts us with repressed images or thoughts, realities unheard of, the reality of the absurd or the negative sublime. So while defamiliarization describes reading experiences that differ from that of feeling transported into another world, it does so by offering different possibilities: some leading back to a more real reality, some leading into experiencing and appreciating the artwork's meta-perceptual laboratory, and others again that push the reader to experience not the reality but the unreality of what lies beyond the text.

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<sup>7</sup> Robinson translates it as "*a way of experiencing the making of a thing*" (Robinson 2008: 89, italics in original), whereas Berlina suggests "art is the means to live through the making of a thing" (Shklovsky 2015: 162).

How do these acts of defamiliarization tie in with what we called “textual phenomena” and with the idea of the unnatural as presented in this article? A common thread in Shklovsky’s readings of the mystery in Dickens, the parody in Sterne and the digressions in Rozanov is the notion of belaboring. To Shklovsky, estrangement is a temporal thing that comes about through prolonging, stalling, hindering, intruding and obstructing automatized perception; the erotic riddle serves as one of his returning examples. Most of these improper obstructions are to be overcome or solved, given proper reader attention and time. We use the term unnatural to designate a subset of such devices that readers experience as unsolvable, as producing permanent defamiliarization. Using the matrix, these appear in position 2 and 4. An unnatural text or unnatural textual elements present “the audience with unsolvable riddles that constantly resist recognition, with perpetual unrecognizability” (Iversen 2017: \*). Examples from the level of the story could be events that both happen and do not happen, impossible temporal or spatial constructs, or beings not normalizable by generic conventions (see Iversen 2013a for a reading of such devices). On the level of discourse, perpetual unrecognizability may, for instance, result from de-automatized types of narrators or narration (“we,” “you,” radically dehumanized “I’s, backward narration), or never-ending metaleptic loops.

We shall now discuss three fictional narratives as a means of illustrating how our rethinking of these concepts supports and is supported by this analysis. Although any fictional narrative might have served, and there is insufficient space here for us to fully elaborate, our case studies represent a broad chronological range, and we move from what appears the most mimetic and immersive of the texts to the least, in order to show that despite this, all three make use of a range of immersive and defamiliarizing techniques.

### ***The Book of the Duchess***

Like a parapet in a Book of Hours’ illustration that depicts a virtual reader reading the book as a model for the actual reader to imitate, the narrator frames our progression into his book. The melancholic narrator begins by wondering why nature allows us to suffer. His insomnia leads to his reading a story about sleepless Alcyone pining for Ceyx’s return. Alcyone prays to Juno, who sends her to sleep and sends a messenger to tell Morpheus to take up Ceyx’s body to explain he’s “but deed” (l.204) and consequently Alcyone dies. Omitted is Ovid’s description of their metamorphosis into birds. The narrator prays to the Gods for sleep, and awakens in his dream in a room filled with birdsong and with scenes from Troy, *The Aeneid* and *The Romance of the Rose*. He hears the horn of a hunt and sets off with the unsuccessful chase for the “hert” (l.381), then follows a black dog into a greenly harmonious forest, counterpointed by a greenly lamenting knight in black. Despite eavesdropping, the narrator prompts the knight to explain his sorrow to ease it, yet after recounting the failures and eventual success of wooing his beloved Blanche, the knight finally simply announces “She is deed” (l.1309). The narrator confesses this is pitiful, upon which they part, the knight to his castle, whose bell ringing twelve awakens the dreamer. Omitted is any promise of Christian consolation hereafter. The narrator finding himself lying in his own bed book in hand decides to put his dream into rhyme, which brings the reader abruptly to the end and back to the beginning point at which they entered the book, as the *homo viator* of the dreamworld becomes the *homo faber* of the storyworld we are reading

We are immersed in the narrative through a number of techniques. The narrator's first-person framing addresses the reader, his emotionally wrought insomnia is a common experience, and he is transported first via the supplementary resource of book then by the inner world of the dream while physically remaining, like we readers, largely stationary. The immersion of the narrator in melancholia, book, and dream, and of characters in the book he reads in sleep, dream, and watery underworld are juxtaposed, with the repetition of postures, features and motifs across domains. Given the multi-layered nature of medieval poetics, these varieties of immersion operate as refracted reflections, which collectively simulate the passive engulfment conventionally associated with immersion (and melancholy). Yet the oscillating rhythm and moods, more pronounced than in life in general (except through exactly such events as grief), continuously jolt the reader into conscious awareness, with the disorienting and revitalizing shifts from dark to light and torpor to haste, as depictions of emotionally saturated spaces alternate with vivid sensorimotor triggers. We are shaken from a somnolent soundscape of birdsong by the rousing horn of the hunt. Then our immersion via stylistic devices, such as alliteration and assonance, that suggestively evoke a soporific gloomy descent into the deadly underworld of Morpheus's cave of sleepers, is punctured by the comically abrupt demand of the messenger that they awake:

...“O ho! Awake anon!”  
 Hit was for noght; ther herde him non.  
 “Awak!” quod he, “who is, lyth there?”  
 And blew his horn right in hir ere,  
 And cryed “awaketh!” wonder hye.  
 This god of slepe, with his oon ye  
 Cast up, axed, “who clepeth there?”  
 “Hit am I,” quod this messagere... (179-86)

The comedy is thus heightened by the chillingly deadpan response that fails to subdue the guileless messenger. The book repetitively shifts us into quiescent immersion in its tale and prosody, only to brusquely jostle us awake again through a manoeuvre that while itself vividly mimetic is defamiliarizing through its unexpectedness, providing a new perspective on the atmosphere cumulatively created (positions 1-2). In this way the narrative causes us to reevaluate our established perspective on the fictional world, thereby ruffling our accustomed perspectives and immersion in the world more generally (position 3), as is modelled intradiegetically by the motivating effect of book and dream on the narrator, as well as by their inspiring of wonder and compassion in him (position 4).

We may feel that a lack of immersion in the superlative top-to-toe list of Blanche's “pre-packaged” features is typical of a modern reader encountering an outdated convention (position 2). Yet Helen Phillips general intuition that the focus is on “the emotions of mourners, not the fate of the dead” (1982: 30), can be supported by comparison with Jajdelska and colleagues' analysis of a similar description of *The Canterbury Tales'* Prioress, which does not lead to a vivid experience of a beautiful face so much as to a sense of the describer's experience of it (Jajdelska et al. 2010: 449). So despite the lack of immersion in the referent, this is

emotionally engaging because it drolly draws on the tedium of having one newly in-love extol their beloved's wondrousness. In terms of the narrator's mediation of our engagement with the narrative, Schaeffer can contribute further: it is "our look itself that is saturated with emotion: very often immersion is engaged there not so much through our empathy with what is represented...as through our identification with a subject that sees, that looks, that is in the position of a witness (or even a voyeur)" (161). The narrator's persistent metadiegetic asides disrupt and inflect our reading. He parodies himself as boastful author, moved reader, curious wanderer and guileless voyeur; emotionally reflects on the story and dreamworld action and their relation to his own state; and presents a spiralling process that extends out towards the reader: we loop round from the narrator's reading, to his writing, to our reading his book, as the inner storyworld and dreamworld Mobius-like become the story told by the presenting narrator who addresses us.

Though not the view presented here, unnatural narratology has been used to describe narrative's deviation from real world processes or from expected generic conventions in the story world (Alber et al. 2013). So while fairy tales do not accord with real world processes, to the extent that the motifs and plots were conventionalised within the genre they could be argued to not be defamiliarizing. Conversely, *The Book of the Duchess* provides an instance where what might be termed defamiliarizing is its deviation from generic literary (and theological) conventions exactly because of its realistic portrayal of the experience of grief and loss. In a conventional medieval dream vision, such as *The Pearl*, the inconsolable dreamer dreams of the lost beloved and is reconciled to their loss (Spearing 51; Phillips 1982: 13-27). This is an unnatural text to the extent that it presents the readers with the unsolvable question of death and refuses conventional closures, instead creating a yawning metaleptic loop. The jarring nature of this otherworldly omission is signalled by frequent use and misuse of theological or philosophical references; such as, the birds' "solempne servyse" (302). The book stands in to save him from death (221-4), but it would be reductive to read the work as just an allegory of reading and its value, as a plethora of intertwined causes and issues are left hanging. Lines between fiction and fact are blurred, since this is a portrayal of John of Gaunt's suffering after the loss of his wife Blanche. Yet the bell that awakens the dreamer is in the dream: the awakening out of melancholic immersion is through a partly book-borne dream vision of the ever shifting joys and sorrows that weave the pattern of our waking world.

### **"The Circular Ruins"**

In some textual encounters, defamiliarization, even of the permanent unnatural kind, may offer its own kinds of immersive effects, transporting the reader into the very "*process of creativity*", as Shklovsky calls attention directed towards the textual or aesthetic mechanics. We suggest reading "The Circular Ruins", a short story by Borges, as a meditation (on a meditation) on how such a dual complicity of processes of immersion and sustained defamiliarization operate in certain situations.

"The Circular Ruins" tells the story of a man, completely driven by a single purpose: he wants to "dream a man" and "insert him into reality" (Borges 2007: 46). The progression of the narrative is crucial to its effects. During his first attempt at transforming "the incoherent and vertiginous matter dreams are made of" into an actual being, the protagonist sees himself

as a teacher, first of many, then later only of one extremely talented pupil. Insomnia, however, sets in, thwarting this approach. After having given up on dreaming, a second attempt begins with the dreaming protagonist now in the role of a sculpting perceiver, looking at and forming first a heart, then a skeleton then slowly a complete male anatomy. This “complete man”, however, remains completely immobile, he is “dreamt as asleep” and “unskilful and crude and elementary” (48). In order to breathe life into this phantom the protagonist dreams of a god whose earthly name is “Fire”. Its incarnations are ever changing: “it was not an atrocious mongrel of tiger and horse, but both these vestments at once and also a bull, a rose, a tempest” (48), and it is capable of giving life to the “sleeping phantom” in such a way that anyone would “believe him to be a man of flesh and blood” (48). The only exception to this man’s life-likeness is that fire will know him as a phantom and thus not burn him. Shortly after, the dreamt one who is now referred to by the protagonist as “my son” and “the boy” wakes up and begins performing actions outside of the dreams of the protagonist – the phantom has transcended from the realm of the protagonist’s dreams to the realm of the protagonist’s reality. As a consequence, the protagonist’s “life’s purpose” is “complete”, at least until a group of men approaches him and tells the story of a nearby magic man who is able to walk on fire without being burned. This story fills the protagonist with doubts and fear, for he can think of nothing worse than for the creation of his dreams to discover the unreal nature of his being: “not to be a man, to be the projection of another man’s dream, what a feeling of humiliation, of vertigo!” (50). “The Circular Ruins” ends on a highly dramatic note: fire erupts in the ruins where the protagonist stays. While initially prepared to die in the flames, the protagonist to his “relief”, “humiliation”, and “horror”, instead discovers that he is only “caressed” by the engulfing flames, and so that he too is “a mere appearance, dreamt by another” (50).

The narrative progression of the short story, and the effects produced by its surprise ending, rest on three assumptions about the storyworld, assumptions that readers are led to construct during the unfolding of story, only to have them deconstructed by the ending. First, the reader is led to suspend disbelief in the possibility of dreaming forth a being in this particular textual world, as the text itself explicitly states, it is “not impossible,” only “supernatural” (46). Secondly, the story of the protagonist’s project contains many elements that are conducive to immersion in the created storyworld. Apart from the supernatural nature of the project and apart from the information given in the very last sentence of the story, the protagonist’s life reads like a recognizable if somewhat eccentric existence. He purposefully seeks out geographic and social marginalization, and while arguably sleeping more than most, he still appears attuned to human needs and habits: he eats, feels, thinks, exhibits and acts on known desires and beliefs. Thirdly, the progress of the story draws a clear line of demarcation between two spheres of being, the real/reality and the dream/the imagined, and these are hierarchically ordered with the former depicted as controlling the latter. The real is the realm of canoes, of temple ruins, of mountain tops, and of the awake protagonist, whereas the imagined or dreamt is the realm of bodies being slowly sculpted, of talking gods, and of sleeping phantoms and of the protagonist dreaming. The supernatural quality of the protagonist’s project comes from him wanting to cross this line of demarcation the other way, by bringing a dream into the realm of the real instead of just being a real being entering into a dream.

Going back to Coleridge's challenge, quoted earlier – to suspend disbelief when experiencing “shadows of imagination” – one might see the old man not only as accepting but also as radicalizing this challenge. By pouring all his intellectual and emotional resources into the act of dreaming, his purpose is to move beyond suspension of disbelief into producing actual belief; attempting to materialise the creative act by producing an embodied form. Up until the final sentence, his project moves towards completion, with the dream serving as a controllable resource and as a means to an end, with the reader invited to immerse herself into the project's progression. What becomes apparent in the final sentence is that the dream is not a means at all but an end (or more precisely an ever-returning beginning). Instead of securing the ontological hierarchy between dreamer and dreamt, the last words of the story create an unsolvable riddle of infinite regress by revealing that the dreamer himself is dreamt. The mimetic immersion produced by the narrative's progression is a prerequisite for the reader to experience the horror and shock of the protagonist's discovery; we understand the old man's vertiginous state by ourselves undergoing a destabilizing manoeuvre. Yet this manoeuvre leads the reader to experience yet another kind of immersion, one that no longer suspends but instead revels in disbelief: rather than a maker, dreaming something to life, we end up witnessing an endless chain of dreamt dreamers. The immersion thereby shifts from experiencing something seemingly real making something unreal into experiencing how both the seemingly real and the manifestly unreal share the same, ultimately invented characteristics. Thanks to this permanently defamiliarized textual riddle, the attention of the reader turn towards what Shklovsky called the “*process of creativity*”, towards, in this case quite literally, the “making of a thing” rather than towards the thing itself.

### **“The Country Doctor”**

In both *The Book of the Duchess* and “The Circular Ruins” the I that has the dream is also an I created by a dream. Through the dream in Chaucer's text, the protagonist learns about the nature of grief and loss, while Borges' protagonist turns out to be able not only to create from a dream but is created from dream, a discovery that produces grief, in this case in the protagonist's ontological loss of himself. Even a cursory look at the reception of our final case, Kafka's “The Country Doctor”, suggests that this is also a text about dreams: several readings focus on the topic, for instance “Dreams of Interpretation: On the Sources of Kafka's “Landarzt”” (Campbell 1987), “Franz Kafka: A Country Doctor: The Narrator as Dreamer” (Stockholder 1978), and “Impossible worlds”, where Ryan refers to the text as a “prime example of a narrative with a dream-like reality” (Ryan 2012: 377). It should be noted, however, that this focus on dreams is not directly corroborated by the actual content of the narrative. Nowhere does the text explicitly mention dreams or the act of dreaming. Yet it is not difficult to see why some readers take recourse to forms of analysis associated with dream interpretation upon encountering the narrative's disjointed, fragmented semantic clustering, typically associated with dreams, as a means to maximize the relevance and to ease the capacity to comprehend Kafka's text. In it and through it, permanent defamiliarization gapes.

From a distance, something akin to a progression is observable in the text. The beginning of the discourse resembles the beginning of a story, in that we are presented with a narrator, the country doctor, who “is completely at a loss” on his way out to a late call. The

doctor appears in possession of everything necessary – “a carriage”, “light”, “medical bag”, “fur coat” (60) and a purpose for his journey; he has everything expect a horse. By the end of the discourse, after having visited the patient, a boy who at first wants to “die” even though the doctor finds him “healthy”, but then later turns out to have “an open wound the size of a palmprint” (63) in his side, the narrator has horses, but now lacks everything else. He wanders “aimlessly around”, naked in “the frost” (65), thus making the first sentence of the discourse, being “completely at a loss”, serve more comprehensively as a description of the final state of the story. While the text consists of mostly recognizable elements – a doctor, a patient, sickness, horses, conversations, travel, relations between people, feelings of panic and uncertainty – they seem to conform to different rules than those guiding our everyday understanding, as does the ways in which they interact in the text. The space of the presented world is simultaneously too vast and too confined: the patient is supposed to be “ten miles away”, yet his “yard opened up right in front of” the doctor’s “own gate” (61-62). The identities and physical appearances of the persons and animals are blurred and strangely interchangeable: the patient first appears well, then suddenly has an “open wound” (63); the doctor takes the place of the patient; the groom in the stables is crawling on all four like an animal and bites Rosa, the maid; the horses “have thrust open the windows” (62) to look in on the sick boy’s room. The causal links between the events of the story are sketchy at best: during the nightly visit, a choir of schoolchildren suddenly show up and sing “an extremely simple song” (64) to the now undressed doctor. The homodiegetic narrator seems too detached and too attached to the events, as even though his trip begins with a purpose, things continue to happen to him rather than because of him, and to the other characters, as even though the groom lives in the doctor’s stables, he is a “stranger”, and the doctor has to “save” Rosa even though she has lived in his house “without [him] noticing her” (61).

While some of the epistemological uncertainties arising from the events and the reactions to them could be said to resemble a dreamlike state, others do not. At times the narrator appears acutely aware of the strangeness he finds himself immersed in, yet at others he offers gnostic utterances and aphorisms: “writing prescriptions is easy, but all other communication with people are difficult” (63), “That’s how people are where I live” (63). These features, combined with the fact that the text does not include any direct references to dreaming or sleeping, makes the dream-interpretations not very convincing attempts at naturalizing the text. Whatever this doctor is immersed in, it is not something he is about to wake up from.

In “The Circular Ruins”, the unnatural element, the unsolvable riddle gains much of its effect through a meticulous design and implementation. Anyone reading that text will be sucked into its black (w)hole and experience its particular vertigo by reliving the deconstruction of ontological hierarchies of creation and being. By contrast, “The Country Doctor” contains a fragmented plethora of defamiliarizing elements and what is more important, these dispersed riddles do not add up to a whole, not even a black one. Kafka’s text does not lend itself to allegorical readings, not because of a lack of semantic layers, but because of too many. The events and the narrator’s reactions to the events are too strange, erratic, and sudden to sustain suspension of disbelief over any length of time. The incitements to become immersed are there initially and reappear in glimpses but despite these local pockets of potential engulfment,



globally familiarity continues to erode. The reader, like the country doctor, ends up in a state of permanent irresolution, which is produced through a process of epistemological defamiliarization that obstructs immersion in the invented world, in the act of creativity, and in the world outside the text.

### **Conclusion**

In this article we have aimed to bring into dialogue insights from both cognitive and unnatural narratology, without smoothing away their specific features, their underlying formation and overarching commitments, or flattening the diverse voices, that together give these movements shape and impetus. Cognitive research has begun to give us insights into the ways in which a broad range of mental states and processes can be generated by language, and into the continuities and variations between real life versus narrative experience and across different forms of media. Unnatural narratology makes evident the importance of aspects of texts that refuse closure, and by reexamining Shklovsky's description of defamiliarization we hope to have shown that it has a wider range of functions than previously argued. Notions of defamiliarization have been shown to be intertwined with immersion from the emergence of hermeneutics in vernacular medieval literature, and is also evident in cognitive approaches, particularly those which emerge from phenomenological roots. All of our case studies thematise immersion and defamiliarization and present narrators whose acts of creation and of suspending disbelief image within the narrative our experiences and engagement as readers. What has become most apparent and what we have attempted to convey through the matrix is the complex range of positions, responses and vectors that immersion and defamiliarization rely on and produce, through ranging between suspending disbelief to the puncturing of any such suspension, either primarily in relation to the fictional narrative or the world before us. Narrative experience is created through textual techniques that trigger a range of cognitive mechanisms in the reader, so that rather than just being lost in the text, the reader is reconstituted by the narrative, in either trivial or substantial ways, as they themselves reconstitute it. The reader is distributed across the realms of world, book and storyworld, with different aspects of the self sometimes more grounded or directed consciously or non-consciously towards one than the other in complex, nuanced and potentially creative fusions and fissions.

Led by a shared interest in sharpening our understanding of reader engagements with strange or unconventional literary texts, we have focused on an area where potential for synthesis exists between the fields of cognitive and unnatural narratology. Alongside what has turned out to be, we think, productive conceptual agreements concerning the different types of interdependencies between immersion and defamiliarization, methodological and interpretative disagreements were also evident even if they have not been given centre stage. The two theoretical sections clearly hint at some of them. Cognitive narratology is influenced by research from cognitive science and philosophy of mind combined with the traditional close reading of texts. The interest in unnatural narratives presented here opts for a more hermeneutical (partly post-hermeneutical) approach, substantiated through a close reading of a classic text from the field of literary aesthetics. Dormant disagreements on a methodological level could be about the relevance of bringing (or not bringing) results from the cognitive

sciences to bear on the understanding of literary texts. Likewise, interpretative or rhetorical disagreements could be lurking behind the way our different reader interests ultimately attach meaning and value to the texts in question. Despite such discordances, we end on a constructive note. Not only can these two still developing theories of how and why literary narratives function in the way they do be fruitfully brought into dialogue; they are important resources for getting at why literature gets us.

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