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Narrative Interest as Cultural Negotiation

Why are people attracted to stories? What makes narrative texts appealing? These questions continue to divide narrative theorists and lead to fundamental discussions in which all parties keep searching for universals, be it of the text, its reception, or a mixture of both. A recent example of such a controversy can be found in Meir Sternberg's ("Universals I" and "Universals II") rejection of Marie-Laure Ryan's (1991) views on tellability, a term first proposed by William Labov (1972) to describe narrative interest. Ryan locates this interest mainly in (pre)textual elements such as themes and plots, whereas Sternberg emphasizes that universals of narrative interest (suspense, curiosity, surprise) are grounded in the reader's processing of the text. Our goal in this article is to advance the debate by broadening the scope of the discussion. For us, the interest of narrative text can take such a variety of shapes that the only way to theorize it properly is to cast the net as widely as possible. We will do so by locating narrative interest in what can be described metaphorically as the cultural negotiation characterizing any kind of confrontation between reader and (narrative) text. The novelty of our proposal is meant to reside in the specific description of this negotiation, which combines the impact of the (narrative) text with the activity and the cultural embeddedness of the reader.

While Sternberg's position on narrative interest is much more sophisticated as a theory of reading, we believe Ryan's must not be entirely discarded. Indeed, her descriptions of narrative interest reflect the experience of actual readers. If they find a novel interesting, they attribute this appeal to the book itself and not to their own

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processing. In our view, this implies that a theory of narrative interest must take into account the *idea* of intrinsically interesting textual properties. While we do not believe that a text on its own can force a reader to consider it interesting, we will nevertheless argue that narrative texts can induce narrative interest thanks to the network in which they circulate and in which the reader takes part. This reader participation will be elucidated with the help of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a homology between the domains of textual production and consumption. We will suggest that narrative interest arises as the result of a continuous mutual adjustment or negotiation between the two domains. We specify this process by making use of Stephen Greenblatt's notion of "cultural materials" circulating between various cultural domains ("Culture" 229–31). The more "cultural materials" a (narrative) text circulates and the more a text itself circulates, the more "empowered" it is. This does not necessarily mean that a specific reader will find this text interesting. For (narrative) interest to arise, the circulation on offer must to some extent coincide with the reader's disposition as it derives from his or her cultural embeddedness. The extent to which circulation and disposition coincide is exactly what the negotiation at the root of (narrative) interest is all about.

In order to clarify this proposal, we will conclude this article with a brief case study involving *Against the Day* (2006) by Thomas Pynchon and *Skinny Dip* (2004) by Carl Hiaasen. For the time being, we would like to stress that in our view (narrative) interest is not a quantitative issue. If a novel by X is translated and brought to the screen, this does not imply that a novel by Y which is not circulated as widely will be less interesting. Y's audience may be unimpressed with translations and films, but they will have a hard time denying X's impact. A member of Y's audience may even feel compelled to engage with X in writing. This is not a sign of (narrative) interest, but merely of impact. For some audiences, the two may be identical. High circulation in the form of hype may for some readers be the main attraction of a book. They might declare its narrative interest without even having read it. Impact may also turn into interest, for instance, if a reader who picks up a hyped novel discovers it to be one of the most interesting books he or she has ever read. Summing up, we distinguish between the impact a text has thanks to its circulation, and the (narrative) interest it generates thanks to the degree of coincidence with the reader's disposition. As opposed to Sternberg, we do attribute a degree of power to the (narrative) text; as opposed to Ryan, we do not locate this power in the text itself but rather in its circulation of materials.

Our emphasis on the circulation of texts and the attendant process of negotiation means that we do not need to define an ultimate reference or starting point, be it the text, the reader, or the "interpretive community" proposed by Stanley Fish ("Interpretive Communities"). Fish has recently ("Postmodern" 274–84) argued that such a community is a heuristic device rather than an empirical body of people, and that it may be changing continually. Still, the term and its usage suggest a pre-existing group of shared "assumptions" and presuppositions that are " 'internalized" (278). In our view, there is no pre-existing community. If common assumptions are involved, they are created and constructed in the process of negotiation. Groups, alliances, and communities are formed, reformed and transformed continuously in this

process. This view of narrative interest may be labeled "constructivist," but, as we hope to show, not in the sense that interest comes down to a free-for-all on the part of readers. If interest is construed, it emanates from the interplay between the various elements and parties entering the negotiation. No single element or party is ultimately responsible for narrative interest.

NARRATIVE INTEREST AND TELLABILITY

The tellability of a story is often conceptualized in terms of the weirdness that is said to characterize story elements such as events. William Labov (371), who is usually referred to as having coined the concept, stated that in reportable or tellable narratives "the events involved [are] truly dangerous and unusual. . . . Evaluative devices say to us: this was terrifying, dangerous, weird, wild, crazy; or amusing, hilarious, wonderful; more generally, that it was strange, uncommon, or unusual—that is, worth reporting." Later in the same decade, Mary Louise Pratt (140) introduced the tellability index, which boils down to a weirdness index as it indicates to what extent the story elements are "held to be unusual, contrary to expectations, or otherwise problematic" (136). Monika Fludernik (70), who regards narrative as the evocation of experience, sometimes equates tellability with weirdness, e.g., when she talks about "the reportability (i.e. weirdness) of the experience."

The question is, of course, what is weird? In tellability theory, it is a property of the story elements, before these are articulated into a narrative. In her entry on tellability for the *Routledge Encylopedia of Narrative Theory*, Marie-Laure Ryan ("Tellability" 589) uses the word *inherent* to denote this pre-textual state: "Tellability is a quality that makes stories inherently worth telling, independently of their textualisation." Ryan seems to underwrite this view, even when she admits that it is unusual in the context of literary theory: "The concept of tellability presupposes that stories exist in a virtual state in the mind of the storyteller before they are actualised as texts in the storytelling (or writing) performance—a view that challenges the literary dogma of the inseparability of form and content" (ibid.). In her study on *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991), Ryan specifies these inherently tellable elements mainly in terms of the configuration of story components such as facts and events. "Not all plots are created equal," she says. "Some configurations of facts present an intrinsic 'tellability' which precedes their textualization" (*Possible Worlds* 148).

Ryan, following Wilensky, sees weirdness as part of the story's external and internal point of interest. Stories with an "external point" make their point through their links with the context. If that point is made via unusual plot elements, this means that it is unusual with regard to social reality. "According to this principle, events are tellable if they are unusual, problematic, or scandalous" with reference to the actual world (*Possible Worlds* 152). Ryan cautions that "unusual" elements may be "a prominent factor of tellability for information-oriented texts, but if unusual facts make good news, they rarely sustain interest in fictional communication: making up improbable events is just too easy to do" (ibid.). So, when measured against

our actual world, weirdness seems to lose its tellability force as soon as it is exaggerated. This simply begs our initial question: "What is too weird?" is just a restatement of "What is weird?"

On the level of the internal point, Wilensky and Ryan distinguish between a dynamic and a static point. Again, weirdness is a prominent factor: "A dynamic point is one in which a story event violates a previous expectation" (Wilensky in Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 153). Ryan does not seem too fond of pursuing this argument, because the violation of expectations involves not just the abstract plot, but also the actual discourse and even the reader. It leads her to acknowledge "the fuzziness of the borderline between theory of performance and theory of tellability" (*Possible Worlds* 154)—a fuzziness she wants to avoid. Consequently she limits herself to plot elements that enhance tellability. These may be found on the level of substance, i.e. themes and motifs that guarantee interesting stories, or on the level of form. The general rule here is: "A good plot must present a conflict and at least one attempt at solving it" (ibid.).

Still, these two levels, says Ryan, do not automatically lead to tellable stories. For a story to be tellable, it must have a great diversity of possible worlds in its narrative universe, and the best way to ensure this, is to use lots of embedded virtual narratives, i.e., "story-like constructs contained in the private worlds of characters," such as a character's dreams, plans and fears (*Possible Worlds* 156). A great diversity of possible worlds and a great amount of embedded virtual narratives produce a highly interesting narrative universe, that is: a tellable story. It is not just the amount that matters, but also the way in which they are intertwined, i.e., their configuration as "a network of virtual sequences" (*Possible Worlds* 162). Tellable stories have the most interesting configuration of possible worlds and embedded virtual narratives.

Meir Sternberg has criticized Ryan's attempt to locate "interest-ladenness" in a context-free pre-textuality ("Universals II" 605). He discards Ryan's clear-cut dichotomy between textual plot and contextual discourse, since, in his view, "narrative constitutes exactly a discoursed plot" (ibid., 595). Since discourse implies performance, interest arises in the "intersequencing of 'plot' and 'performance'" (605). Sternberg concludes that tellable elements exist only in the eye of the beholder. He "voices the simple truth: that the set of untellables is empty, the issue hollow, outside the contingencies of discourse" (608). Any narrative is tellable, depending upon the way it is told (i.e., its discourse) and the way it is perceived (by its reader). The potential that according to Ryan is contained in the diversification of possible worlds, is according to Sternberg a matter of interpretation: "The aesthetic potential does not reside in the outline under assessment but in the assessor's eye" (610).

Ryan's disregard for the assessor's eye harks back to classical structuralism. Her configuration of worlds can be linked with structuralist attempts to develop a plot grammar. Her diversity of possible worlds and embedded virtual narratives can be fitted in with Claude Bremond's (1973) three pivotal functions: virtuality, actualization, result. These three functions are linked to one another in various ways and allow for embedded sequences. For instance: before a virtuality is actualized, there may be an embedded sequence (e.g., to test the hero), which again involves the three

pivotal functions. From this perspective, a tellable story may be defined in terms of an unexpected function and/or an unexpected way in which the functions are linked to one another. For instance, if an applicant goes to a job interview, the virtuality function consists of his being accepted or rejected. If, however, he turns out to be applying to a mafia outfit, a whole new range of possibilities opens up. Acceptance or rejection may become a case of do or die.

Ryan's embedded virtual narratives and private worlds of characters may also be linked with Greimas's (1966) actantial model that consists of six roles supposedly inherent to all stories: subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, opponent. In terms of Ryan's possible worlds, every actant may be seen as possessing its own set of possible and actual worlds. Again, the weirdness may be in the nature of the actants themselves and/or in the way they interact. For instance, if the receiver is also the opponent, the story might be called unexpected and highly tellable. The receiver benefits from the action undertaken by the subject, so why should he oppose that action?

Though it might very well be feasible to elaborate tellability from this classical, structuralist viewpoint, the concept somehow seems to beg the question. Why, indeed, should one call a certain function or actant unexpected? Why should a certain combination of functions and/or actants be considered weird and therefore interesting? Why should one configuration of worlds and events be more interesting than another? This always entails an evaluation, which is not present in the abstract story elements. Weirdness involves at least two things: the deviation, no matter how small, from a certain norm, and the evaluation of that deviation by a subject (the reader, the audience).

The insistence that tellability involves norms and readers is widely displayed in Sternberg's critique of Ryan. However, it can already be found in the first writings on the subject. We started by quoting Labov (371), and paid no attention to a crucial phrase in the quotation: "Evaluative devices say to us: this was . . . weird." "Us" refers to the audience as an evaluative body. From the very first, tellability involved the non-inherent properties of the story. It involved the audience along with the way the story is presented or told. In other words, it involved reader, narrative (our translation of Genette's *récit*), and narration. The weird story becomes tellable only thanks to the narrative in which it is presented, the narration by which it is formulated, and the perceptive listener.

Not just Labov, but also Pratt recognized that from the outset. The evaluative audience shows up in her description of tellable stories as stories that "deal with states of affairs that are held to be unusual and problematic, in need of experiential and evaluative resolution" (140). Her frame of speech act theory leads her to study narratives as forms of linguistic interactions involving various evaluations and appreciations. Even Ryan's search for pre-textual and context-free tellability is filled with the realization that this search may never reach its goal because of the "fuzziness" that characterizes the border between text and context, plot and discourse. In her entry for the *Routledge Encylopedia of Narrative Theory*, she states that "tellability involves a wide variety of principles: context-specific and context-free" ("Tellability" 590).

NARRATIVE INTEREST AND NARRATIVITY

Bertram Bruce's discussion of the question "What Makes a Good Story?" combines the so-called inherent tellable elements with the reader's predisposition and activity. According to Bruce (461), an interesting story is distinguished by continuity (i.e., "ideas connect with one another") and by "conflict, either within a character or between characters." A classical "story grammar" would relate these elements to "a setting plus a number of episodes, where an episode comprises an event and a reaction to the event." However, Bruce argues, both continuity and conflict are perceived and constructed by the reader, especially via his or her "prior beliefs and expectations" (466), which enable him or her to assess the beliefs and expectations of the characters and thus to understand their actions and reactions to events. A good reader must have the ability to assess the views and experiences of the characters; a good, tellable story enables the reader to do so and thus rewards him for his or her work: "What makes this a good story is that the reader's work is rewarded" (463).

When readers make their appearance in narrative theories, the focus of these theories usually shifts from abstract story to concrete discourse and from minimal units such as actions and events to larger units such as sequences. This shift reflects the difference between tellability and narrativity. David Herman (*Story Logic*) links up the story's action grammar with the reader's mental models, especially dynamic scripts and static frames. From this perspective, "tellability attaches to configurations of facts" (e.g. "the facts surrounding a bank robbery are likely to be deemed more tellable than the facts connected with the gradual movement of a shadow across the ground over the course of a day"), whereas "narrativity [attaches] to sequences representing configurations of facts" (100). Herman defines the narrativity of a narrative in terms of the diversity of scripts evoked and the amount of deviation between narrative and expectation. More scripts and more deviations usually imply more narrativity: "The greater the number (and diversity) of the experiential repertoires set into play during the processing of a sequence S, and the more S nonetheless deviates from or militates against expectations about what was likely to occur or be done, the more narrativity will the processor be likely to ascribe to S" (92). The combination of deviation with adjustment seems to be of paramount importance to the interest narratives may produce.

While David Herman still maintains some distinction between tellability and narrativity, Meir Sternberg goes one step further and studies narrative interest from an in-between perspective. He contends that narrative "uniquely lives . . . not just in or over time, but *between* times," more specifically between "represented and communicative time" ("Universals I" 326). The former refers to time as it appears in the narrated world, the latter to the time of its narration. "From this unique in-betweenness, there necessarily arises a set of three master interests that constitute the universals of narrative . . . For short, I call them *suspense*, *curiosity*, and *surprise*, and the terms will do as long as it is understood that each encodes a distinct functional operation of the mind within narrative's overall intersequencing: the dynamics of prospection, of retrospection, and of recognition, respectively" (327). Suspense implies the reader's guesswork about rival scenarios for the future, curiosity implies the

reader's acknowledgement that he or she does not know something, and surprise unexpectedly discloses to the reader that he or she did not know something. The three interests depend upon the tension between the (time of the) narrated events and what the narration lets the reader know about these.

In his conclusion, Sternberg re-uses the term *narrativity*, but in a new way: "I [therefore] define *narrativity* as the play of suspense/ curiosity/ surprise between represented and communicative time" (328). While we would agree with Sternberg that these "master interests" reside in an in-between zone, and that they necessarily depend upon the reader, we would not regard them as universal. Instead of limiting the in-between to represented and communicative time, we would like to broaden it by linking it up with the wider process of what Stephen Greenblatt calls the circulation of cultural materials. In that way, we would like to avoid the idea that a reader is completely free to turn any narrative into something interesting. He or she may experience a freedom to do so, but the applied norms and preferences do not come out of the blue. Saying that narrative interest is in the eye of the beholder still begs the question: why is something interesting in the eye of the beholder?

NEGOTIATION

From her (pre-)textually oriented angle, Ryan ("Tellability" 589) claims that interesting narratives produce a "wow" reaction. Fludernik looks at "the production of discourse" and says that narrated stories "contend with the problems of the narrator's having to hold the floor" (62). We may conclude from these two views that an interesting narrative allows for an adjustment of the speaker's desire to grab the attention to the audience's desire to be entertained, perhaps even swept off their feet. This adjustment is not a given and not static: it has to be produced and it changes all the time. Readers may find some parts of a narrative terrific and others plain boring. We propose to view this adjustment as a continuous process of negotiation.

Negotiation is a form of power play and always involves what we will call a *topic*—the subject of negotiation. For instance, if a minority group negotiates with the state about cultural independence, this independence is the topic. Settlement involves the recognition of the topic (which is the aim of the minority group) and, in turn, the satisfaction of demands coming from the other party (which is the aim of the state). Ideally, recognition and satisfaction go hand in hand. If a tale is considered interesting, its teller can, for instance, be recognized as a terrific speaker. This recognition satisfies the demands of his audience. It is in fact a form of investment that produces a return for both parties. It is an exchange of mutual interests. The teller wants his tale to be recognized as highly interesting; the audience will do so only if narrative and narration satisfy its norms and preferences. If a topic is not interesting to one of the two parties, negotiations will not start. If the state has no interest whatsoever in the cultural independence of the minority group, it will not open negotiations. If certain readers are not at all interested in psychology, they may refrain from taking up psychological novels, unless they have good reasons to start reading. If a novel is assigned to a reviewer who is in dire need of work, he will be only too glad to start reading.

Apart from a topic, negotiation also involves *assets and liabilities*, or strengths and weaknesses. One party's assets may be another party's liabilities, as, for instance, the independence of the minority group might be seen as a weakening of the state. In the case of narrative interest, there are many parties (e.g. the teller, the tale, the reader) and so there are many forms of assets and liabilities. On the story level they may consist of all the elements that come up in negotiation as a means to convince the reader of the story's value. We acknowledge that these elements will never convince a reader who is not predisposed to be convinced by them, but we still think it is essential that the reader will point to these assets or liabilities as strengths or weaknesses of the texts themselves. As we said earlier, a theory should not pretend to be talking about the reader while at the same time discarding his or her experience of so-called inherently textual interest.

Narratologists, of course, are readers too. Their theories of tellability and narrativity reveal what they consider to be assets and liabilities of narratives. As a reader, Ryan locates the strengths of narrative texts on the level of substance (themes and motifs), form (conflict and the attempt to solve it) and possible worlds. Many readers may follow her and find "themes of absolute interest" ("Tellability" 590) such as sex, danger, and death, to be substantial assets. Also in line with Ryan, they may feel that the diversity of possible worlds and embedded virtual narratives enhances the narrative's interest. If they follow David Herman (59) as a prototypical reader, they might point to the "constellation of story-like constructs" as elements that determine "the inherently greater tellability of plots." We would argue that this interest is not really inherent, but we would at the same time admit that that is how it is perceived by the interested reader. Like Ryan, Herman underscores the importance of opportunities and possibilities that may not have been realized at all. In line with Georg von Wright, he refers to these as "the state in which the world would have been had it not been for the action in question" (55).

So far we have approached assets from the combined perspective of text and reader. If we want to include the teller, it might be safe to start from the assumption that his or her use of assets only leads to success with the audience if the teller's view on assets is close to the one held by the audience itself. In terms of Pierre Bourdieu (*Questions* 214), there must be some form of homology between the fields of production (telling) and consumption (listening or reading). What a postmodernist writer considers to be assets, may prove to be liabilities with an audience keen on conventional romances or detective novels. The insertion of ideological or philosophical discussions will not go down well with an audience merely keen on entertainment.

As a result, we do not believe there are universal assets or liabilities. The definition of strengths and weaknesses depends upon the homology between narrative production and consumption. Armed with assets such as actions and possibilities, a storyteller might find it easier to come up with an interesting story, but this does not automatically lead to success with the audience. Conversely, a storyteller who uses dull elements that have no newsworthiness, no absolute interest and no complexity, may still succeed in producing a story that elicits a "wow" from his audience. The result may even carry a higher wow-factor than the one produced by the prototypically interesting story elements. An audience may well conclude that a storyteller who can

speak so interestingly about uninteresting things, must be absolutely brilliant. In literature, as Ryan ("Tellability" 590) suggests with a reference to *Madame Bovary*, this may often be regarded more highly than stories with lots of interesting events.

Negotiation takes on a different form in different *fields*, defined loosely as more or less organized domains of communicative activity. Narrative interest in the domain of literature may be vastly different from narrative interest in the field of the news media, or the domain of history. For the news media, interest will typically depend on newsworthiness, and less on a literary style or rhetoric. Every field has its own tradition, and this too influences narrative interest. In the field of literature, the tradition may take the form of genre conventions. Every genre imposes some form of limit on what is tellable and interesting. From a theoretical and cognitive viewpoint, David Herman has demonstrated how genres set up "preference-rule systems" (33) that influence the constellation of actions, events and states considered interesting. Epics, for instance, will tend to code "events as *accomplishments* gained" through long "periods of suffering and heroic endeavor" (36).

However, genre norms—and more generally: influences exerted by the field—are just like assets: they depend upon the reader for their functioning and evaluation. In a detective story, the use of flying dragons and mythic gods may be called weird, and most traditional readers may find this too much. But others may be thrilled by the transgression of genre conventions. Just how far transgressions may go, is open to negotiation. If a reader finds a narrative too weird, it will not have a high wow-factor for him or her. If it is not weird at all, he or she may call it stereotyped and clichéd. To give some indication of the boundaries set to this form of negotiation, we can refer to David Herman, who speaks of "an upper limit of tellability" and "the lower boundary past which a story devolves into a mere listing of results and ceases to be a story at all" (59). On the discourse level as well, Herman mentions a "lower limit" and "upper limit of narrativity" (103).

In the final analysis, it is up to the reader or, more generally, the *audience* to judge whether or not limits have been transgressed. But this is not a one-sided and subjective process. The reader is not completely free. He is influenced by the three other actors in the game of negotiation (topic, assets and liabilities, field) at the very moment he engages with them in the act of reading. For this mutual interplay to arise, we think the most general precondition is the homology mentioned by Bourdieu: if readers (as consumers) are not predisposed to find the narration and the narrative (as production) worthwhile, they will never engage in the negotiation. Bourdieu (*La Distinction* 112 ff.) traces this homology to similar "objective conditions" (including social, economic, and cultural capital) underlying production and consumption. Before we specify the homology with reference to the work of Stephen Greenblatt, we would like to look at it from a more traditional viewpoint found in literary theory.

NEGOTIATION AS A LITERARY PROCESS

The space for negotiation in the field of literature can be large or small, depending on topic, assets, field, and audience. A reader fond of postmodern rewriting, par-

ody and pastiche may well be swept off his or her feet by a detective novel that uses elements from the romance of chivalry and from myth, whereas a conventional reader might find the book uninteresting. This process of readerly evaluation can be described in terms of Jonathan Culler's naturalization (137) and Fludernik's narrativization (33 ff.). The narrative presented to the reader is transformed into something worthwhile and interesting by assimilating it to culturally encoded norms of what is natural, acceptable, and interesting. The assimilation depends upon the aforementioned homology between narrative production and consumption. This homology is not just a matter of the reader's experience (Fludernik) and cognitive schemes (Herman; Jahn); it is closely linked with the topic, the assets, and the field. For instance, an interesting tale may deviate from the genre tradition, but not too much (field); it may be intricately structured and phrased, but still accessible and comprehensible (assets); and it may get across to the reader just what it wants to make clear (topic).

As parts of the negotiation, naturalization, and narrativization are never complete. If, for instance, a short story is to remain interesting, it should never be fully absorbed or naturalized by the reader. Something intriguing is always supposed to remain, something that makes the story worth reading, rereading, and, of course, telling. This intriguing factor cannot be defined in general, let alone in universal terms. Nor, we think, can it be subsumed under headings such as suspense, curiosity, and surprise. It arises in the play of negotiation and it depends upon a degree of homology. For some readers, surprise may disqualify a story, for others it may be an indispensable asset. Along the same lines, we do not think it is correct to say that writerly texts are necessarily more interesting than readerly ones. As is well known, Roland Barthes (4) describes the readerly text as a "classic text" that "can be read, but not written," because it leaves almost no room for the active participation of the reader. The readerly text simply transmits traditional values such as "linearity of the narrative, transparency of meaning, and continuity of plot" (Bensmaia 484), whereas the writerly text turns the reader into "a producer of the text" (Barthes 4) and is constantly working against a complete appropriation by the reader.

In preferring the writerly over the readerly text, Barthes reveals his own preferences and norms. In our terminology: he shows what he considers to be assets and liabilities, and attributes them to the text itself, as if texts can force readers to become writers or passive recipients. His preference is informed by the field he operated in (e.g. the academic world and the intellectual tradition of structuralism) and the topic he wanted to negotiate (namely, that readers are essential ingredients, especially at a time the author was supposed to be dead). In our view, both readerly and writerly texts can be of narrative interest to readers with the right (i.e. homologous) predisposition. Using the concepts of Stuart Hall (1980) and John Fiske (1987), one might align the readerly text with the dominant reading, and the writerly text with the oppositional reading. Following Hall, Fiske (64) speaks of "negotiated readings" when "the meanings preferred by the dominant ideology" are "inflected" by the reader. We believe this to be the case for all readings. Both oppositional and dominant readings are extreme forms of negotiated readings. In the first case there is ample room for negotiation, in the second there is hardly any.

The four components of narrative interest as negotiation are interdependent. It is impossible to define one without recourse to the others. For instance, the topic and assets for reader A in field 1 need not be the same as for reader B in field 1 or even for reader A in field 2. As an example, let us envisage an autobiographical text that is keen on coming across as an authentic report of an eventful life. If a reader of this book sees autobiography as such a report, negotiations will be quite easy, and passages referring to interviews or television appearances will most likely appear as assets supporting the impression of authenticity. If another reader sees autobiography as a metafictional genre boiling down to writing about how to write about life, he or she will look for assets pertaining to these interests (e.g. philosophical digressions). His or her topic will not be the text's authenticity, but rather the success of its metafictionality. If the book convinces on this level, it may provide the second reader with a satisfying reading experience. Typically, such a reader may be part of the academic field where reading literature has become a profession, whereas the first reader might consider literature as a hobby.

To sum up, narrative interest is not a given nor a static point of departure. It is an evaluation arising in a complex and unending process of negotiation between topic, assets, field and the reader's expectations. These expectations derive from the reader's cultural predisposition as it informs experiential and cognitive schemes used to naturalize and narrativize the narrative as interesting. In the next section we will zoom out and consider the broad frame of negotiation in culture. In this way we want to elucidate the homology between production and consumption, and to account for the fact that narrative interest is usually perceived as an intrinsic characteristic of the text.

NEGOTIATION AS A CULTURAL PROCESS

In his "poetics of culture," Stephen Greenblatt (1988) studies the power of texts—of which narrative interest is just one aspect—not as some inherent and pregiven property, but as a form of "aesthetic empowerment" (5) that arises in a process of "structured negotiation and exchange" (6). We would now like to show how this process can be used as a broad frame for the more specific form of negotiation we have just described.[1] According to Greenblatt, literature transmits culturally dominant ideas, experiences, and practices, all of which he calls "cultural materials" ("Culture" 230). What we call assets and topics are specific examples of such (dominant) cultural materials. In the process of moving these materials from one field to another, literature succeeds in shaping and transforming the materials into aesthetic objects that acquire a "compelling force" (*Negotiations* 5). This compelling force provides literature with its aesthetic empowerment.

For Greenblatt, the compelling force is not inherent in the cultural materials, nor in the transmission from one domain to another. To come up with an interesting narrative, it does not suffice to take a fashionable theme and transfer it into a fashionable medium, or more generally, a socially empowered field. There must be some form of collective recognition and production of those materials and transmissions. In other words, narrative interest is just one part of "the collective production of lit-

erary pleasure and *interest*" (*Negotiations* 4; our emphasis). The crucial question thus becomes: what form of collective recognition and production are we talking about when we are talking about narrative interest? With Greenblatt, "we can ask how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form, offered for consumption" (*Negotiations* 5). How do interesting narratives, as examples of manageable aesthetic forms, carry socially empowered materials into the realm of literature?

They can do so only by obscuring the collective recognition and production upon which they are dependent. Greenblatt's analysis of the "half-hidden cultural transactions through which great works of art are empowered" (*Negotiations* 4) can be likened to the half-hidden process of delegation that Bourdieu sees as the heart of literary and cultural empowerment. The power of literature—and more generally of *le langage autorisé* (Bourdieu, *Questions* 103–119)—lies in the transmission and transformation of socially dominant "materials" that are never presented as social but as purely literary. While this process moves cultural materials across borders into other media and fields, its efficiency greatly depends upon the dissimulation of that movement. Literary power is most effective when the reader perceives it as an aspect of the text itself.

This perception depends upon the homology we have discussed above. If such a homology is missing, the reader will most likely dismiss the text as uninteresting, merely fashionable, or plain boring. However, the verdict is open to negotiation. Before providing one concrete example of such a negotiation, we would like to link it up with Greenblatt's view of negotiation as a part of what we have so far called the process of transmission. Greenblatt describes this process more accurately in terms of circulation and exchange, which will enable us to refine our notion of narrative interest as a form of negotiation.

Greenblatt (*Negotiations* 7) investigates "the negotiations through which works of art obtain and amplify such powerful energy," i.e., the energy to transform social and cultural materials into materials that carry aesthetic force—in our case: into interesting narratives. He describes these negotiations as "complex, ceaseless borrowings and lendings," that "move certain things," including "well-worn stories," "from one culturally demarcated zone to another" (ibid.). The borrowings and lendings link up with Ryan's literary themes of absolute interest, David Herman's generic preferences, and other so-called inherently interesting narrative components. We would call them assets, functioning in particular fields.

Moving on from assets to fields, we would like to embrace Greenblatt's description of "the major genres" as "different types of negotiation" (*Negotiations* 20). Each genre has its own set of rules for negotiation. Since narrative interest arises in the half-hidden process of transmission and boundary-crossing, a crucial rule concerns the degree of concealment. We believe that the different types of negotiation Greenblatt mentions can be distinguished on the basis of the degree to which the border crossing is hidden, and also of the degree to which the wow-factor is perceived as inherent to the text. Thus a postmodern novel may very well lay bare the links between its narrative components and its cultural tradition, whereas a traditional novel may be at pains to hide it. In the first case, the wow-factor may reside in unveiling the dissimulation; in the second case, it depends upon upholding the pretence and dissimulation.

This means we do not think that narrative interest is merely a construct of a free subject and that "anything goes" depending on the reader. Narrative interest is one of those constructs that succeed in passing themselves off as a given—which is precisely what the "aesthetic power" of any narrative boils down to. This is what can be called ideology in the sense of Louis Althusser (*Marx* 59ff.) and, following in his footsteps, Bourdieu (*Pratique* for his concept of doxa), and Paul de Man (*Resistance* 11). The construction is perceived as a given; the conventional as something natural. From this perspective, what we have called the audience must be linked to Greenblatt's collective and to Althusser's ideology. So-called textual assets, such as a brilliant style, are embedded in the social, cultural, and ideological context. As Bourdieu (*Questions* 167–205) has argued, style plays a prominent role in this ideological transformation. As *mise en forme* (submission to literary norms), it operates as a *mise en garde* (safeguard) against reductive, non-literary readings. It draws the reader's attention to the aesthetic force of the text and dissimulates the wider process of empowerment that lies behind it.

Crossing boundaries involves some form of exchange. Materials from one domain or field are exchanged for materials from another. Here Greenblatt talks about "cultural capital" (*Negotiations* 12), a term he borrowed from Bourdieu (*Distinction* 128 ff.). From this angle, interesting narratives are "the products of collective exchange" (*Negotiations* 12). They are collectively recognized as inherently interesting, but this recognition is the result of an exchange that transforms social and cultural interests into interesting narratives. In this process of exchange, things circulate. As Greenblatt states, "we need to analyze the collective dynamic circulation of pleasures, anxieties, and interests" (ibid.). As we argued in our introduction, this circulation is not just a quantitative matter and does not automatically lead to interest. The wider the circulation, the bigger the impact. Impact may turn into interest if the audience has the right kind of predisposition for the circulation and exchange on offer. For such an audience, themes that circulate widely (e.g. in films, plays, novels, newspapers and television shows) may be easier to exchange and negotiate, and may be experienced as more interesting.

THE INTEREST OF PYNCHON AND HIAASEN

In order to illustrate the relevance of Greenblatt for an informed view of narrative interest, we will now briefly turn to one instance of negotiation. In November 2006, one of us was eagerly awaiting Thomas Pynchon's new novel, *Against the Day*, for review. Knowing that the book was going to be more than 1,000 pages long, and that its author was, after all, Pynchon, this same reader prepared for life after *Against the Day* by deciding he would consume an easy-going detective novel immediately following the Pynchon blockbuster. That book turned out to be *Skinny Dip* (2004) by Carl Hiaasen, described as "a screwball delight" with "a caper plot" in just two of the review quotes included in the paperback edition. For some long stretches devoted to a western plot set in Colorado, *Against the Day* turned out to be relatively boring, so the compensation sought for in *Skinny Dip* took on more and more importance during the reading of Pynchon's novel. Expectations were pretty much sky-

high by the time it was finished. Hiaasen delivered—his book (about a wife's exquisite vengeance after her husband has not been able to kill her) provided great relief. Should one conclude from this that there is more narrative interest in *Skinny Dip* than in *Against the Day*? Not necessarily—it all depends on the specific circumstances of negotiation.

The pressure of a review deadline (as an aspect of the field) caused the quick start of negotiations with the new Pynchon novel. The narrative interest expected of Pynchon's blockbuster testified to a positive predisposition, which may have been grounded not only in exciting encounters with the writer's previous work, but also in a broader set of cultural preferences (informing the audience in question). Indeed, one of us is a Pynchon specialist, who has reviewed *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, who mostly delights in a reading challenge, and who has become used to letting so-called important literature inform his world view. Part of his image of Pynchon's narrative interest is constituted by the author's widely respected capacity to turn extreme and hilarious story material into the logical parts of a narrative that is extremely relevant to the present day. To mention just two of Pynchon's themes or topics, both rampant paranoia and the specter of a global heat-death suggest that even older Pynchon novels such as *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) may still matter. In the terms we have borrowed from Greenblatt, this would amount to saying that Pynchon's topics are socially empowered and therefore produce and transfer a lot of social energy. Their aesthetic force transforms dominant cultural materials into narratives that are considered powerful. They have a huge impact. *Against the Day* displays a similar social relevance, since Pynchon once more deals with subjects that are highly important to the fashioning of our present-day culture, and which thus circulate widely. Terrorism is perhaps the most pressing of them. Using the genre of the western, the author challenges the contemporary semantics of terrorism by evoking one of its older embodiments (anarchism in the United States) and linking it up with 9/11 in a superb prolepsis set on the island of Manhattan. In this way, terrorism is moved across various fields; it circulates and acquires highly interesting properties.

For one of us, and he is sure he is not alone, the fact that Pynchon does not allow for easy consumption only adds to the author's narrative interest. In other words, the taxing complexity of Pynchon's narratives would be one of his widely recognized assets. This complexity is valued as an intrinsic property of the literary text, and not as a translation of some dominant cultural material. To many members of Pynchon's audience—not least academics professionally interested in the author—it might even appear essential for truly interesting narratives in contemporary literature. This type of audience and field would seem to be predisposed to find *Against the Day* thoroughly absorbing and interesting as well. The socially empowered topics mentioned above would, in all likelihood, be negotiated fairly easily, because they might well be evoked and dissimulated in a satisfyingly difficult way.

While these expectations were not entirely overturned by *Against the Day*, it does seem that the novel has not occasioned a smooth continuation of Greenblatt's "collective production of literary pleasure and interest" instantiated in Pynchon's past work. Before returning to the individual negotiation already alluded to, let us

first look at the collective production of interest generated by reviewers. Judging from the reviews, the novel somehow seems to fall short of contemporary standards of narrative interest inside and outside of the academy. One of Pynchon's most outspoken academic champions, Tom Leclair, tries to find positive sides to the book, but he ends his review for *Bookforum* (2007) on a minor note typical of many first-line reactions:

> But *Against the Day* lacks the ferocity and fear of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the long-developed characters and the comedy of *Mason & Dixon* (1997). The only readers (besides responsible reviewers) I can imagine finishing *Against the Day* are the Pynchonists, the fetishizing collectors of P-trivia. I hope I'm wrong. I hope some future scholar will read the novel twenty times and either illustrate how it recapitulates the whole history of narrative or demonstrate how every piece fits together into a fourfold design that will replace four-base genetics as a model of all life. As the author himself says in his abstract, 'visions of the unsuspected.' ("Lead")

Another Pynchon specialist, Bernard Duyfhuizen of the academic journal *Pynchon Notes*, does not feel the need to express the "hope" with which Leclair seems to apologize (ever so sarcastically!) for his negative verdict of the novel. Taking in both the many expectations of a Pynchon novel and some of the early reactions to *Against the Day*, Duyfhuizen explains part of the negative impression created by the book by unmasking it:

> In some respects, the knock against the style of *Against the Day* may be that it is too accessible. That seeming accessibility, however, can be deceptive, masking an implicit critique of how the various narrative styles that Pynchon parodies have aided the powerful in maintaining a culture of containment as opposed to the culture of anarchy that *Against the Day* celebrates and questions in turn. ("Exact Degree")

In our terminology, Duyfhuizen considers Pynchon's accessibility a liability. He acknowledges the problem of interest posed by the new novel, but he decides to give it an academic twist that remains in line with Pynchon's assets as seen in the academic field. The "accessibility" of *Against the Day* appears as an essential part of its ideological configuration and thus meets the expectations of an audience reading Pynchon to experience a combination of sophistication and relevance.

Outside the academy, reviewers also struggle with what they see as Pynchon's strengths when phrasing their judgments. Some wrap their doubts in a declaration of respect, like Richard Lacayo for *Time*:

> More than in any of Pynchon's previous books, just what it all means is a problem in *Against the Day*, where plots and ideas and fantastic developments pile up in exhausting profusion. You've been vouchsafed once again his vision of a bright, beleaguered world, this one with more than its share of resemblances to

> our realities post-Sept. 11. With another few decades of reading and decoding, you may even get the work's largest intentions to snap into focus. Or maybe not. For all its brilliant passages, this is the book that makes you wonder whether even Pynchon knows what lies behind all those veils he's always urging us to part. But wouldn't you know it? Even when he jumps the shark, he does it with an agility that can take your breath away. ("Toaster")

The doubts of this reviewer rest on the ambiguity between, on the one hand, the aesthetic force of the novel (its "exhausting profusion" of plots and ideas, "its brilliant passages" and its "agility") and, on the other hand, the socially empowered materials that may be hidden too much (perhaps not even the author "knows what lies behind all those veils") or too little (the book has "more than its shares of resemblance to our realities post-Sept. 11"). The negotiation has not yet taken a decisive turn, hence the doubt.

The New York Times settles the matter by publishing two reviews. In the daily paper, while appealing to Pynchon's reputation for complexity and to the concept of the "big" novel of which he is supposed to be one of the central practitioners, Mitchiko Kakutani (2006) is extremely negative: "Thomas Pynchon's new novel, *Against the Day*, reads like the sort of imitation of a Thomas Pynchon novel that a dogged but ungainly fan of this author's might have written on quaaludes. It is a humongous, bloated jigsaw puzzle of a story, pretentious without being provocative, elliptical without being illuminating, complicated without being rewardingly complex." In the literary supplement on Sunday, Liesl Schillinger (2006) essentially works with the same assets and liabilities, but she suggests that "this time [Pynchon's] fevered reveries and brilliant streams of words, his fantastical plots and encrypted references, are bound together by a clear message that others can unscramble without mental meltdown" ("Dream Maps"). The indecision of *The New York Times* may well result from the combination of strong authorial assets with the practical difficulties of negotiation in the field of newspaper reviewing. Because of its proportions, *Against the Day* defies any kind of quick intake, exasperating some and delighting others.

Now back to Pynchon and Hiaasen. In his own review of the novel (for the literary supplement of an upscale Flemish newspaper), one of us struggled to interpret his intermittent boredom as an effect risked by Pynchon. Positively predisposed towards the book, this reviewer sought to explain his own uneasiness away by linking the novel's main theme of the multiverse (already central in the work of the British fantasy author Michael Moorcock) with the necessity for constant textual expansion. The multiverse functioned in the review as Pynchon's latest answer to his old concern with entropy. If the world is as infinite as the notion of the multiverse suggests, then it will not die the heat-death that is now part of the popular imagination surrounding global warming. With constant expansion turned into the key to an overall interpretation of the book, it logically followed that the various genres instantiated in the novel (including the western) would be pushed to their limits in order to illustrate the possibility of constant expansion.

While this argument worked for the purposes of a coherent review, it did not go such a long way in compensating for the actual tedium during the reading of the

novel. Maybe Pynchon's western in *Against the Day* lacked the aspect of fun; maybe one of us just does not like the western enough to enjoy its presence in Pynchon's novel; maybe Pynchon simply pushed the genre too hard by going on and on about the characters and events surrounding the murder of Webb Traverse, a labor activist in Colorado at the end of the nineteenth century. Going back to David Herman's "preference-rule systems" (33), we might say one of us felt Pynchon had pushed these rules too far, thereby transgressing what David Herman (59) called the upper limit of narrative interest. Global warming may be a dominant cultural topic, but for this particular reader, its literary transformation failed to produce the required aesthetic force.

By trying to account for his lack of enthusiasm in terms of the textual make-up, one of us clearly tried to turn a liability into an asset in his review of the novel. He negotiated with *Against the Day* in such a way that a pressing contemporary concern (global warming) warped into the center of an aesthetically unified view of the novel. However, the aesthetic force just seemed too small in parts of the text, more specifically those parts where the circulation of cultural materials was not sufficiently hidden by their literary transformation and its interpretation. Carl Hiaasen provided this reader with a more conventional experience of narrative interest in that he beautifully managed to circulate social energy by reinforcing a latent sense of justice in the audience. He did so by describing a complicated and illegal vengeance on the part of the person cast as the victim. Compared to *Against the Day*, *Skinny Dip* may be a lot easier to recuperate as yet another example of a simple, undemanding homology between what is on offer and what is demanded. It may even be close to Barthes's disdained readerly text. Nevertheless, Hiaasen's book managed to endear itself to one of us because of its high craft and especially its measure in terms of plotting and dialogue.

Coming after the perceived lack of control in *Against the Day*, these assets of *Skinny Dip* restored a belief in what was experienced as classic narrative interest. Paradoxically, while reading Hiaasen, and perhaps motivated by the recognition of craftsmanship as a central asset of narrative interest, one of us started feeling he had done Pynchon an injustice. He even vowed he would reread the novel, or worse: teach it, which would imply a switch from one domain to another. By moving *Against the Day* into the field of academic endeavor, the novel might easily become more interesting, and if it does not, teaching it might at least enable one of us to locate more precisely the reasons of his boredom.

ENDNOTES

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1. For our discussion of Greenblatt's notion of negotiation, we have made use of Leinwand (1990) and Pieters (2001).

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