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Abstracts

English

This thesis investigates the formal features, experiential effects, and ethical affordances of multiperspective narratives across contemporary novels, movies, and video games. At its most basic, multiperspectivity can be conceptualized as the juxtaposition of different perspectives around the same event. As such, it has often been praised as an antidote to oversimplification, resisting the neatness of a single, authoritative account, and giving voice to marginalized positions. Yet multiperspectivity should not be regarded as an unqualified virtue. In some cases, it can reinforce positivist closure, reducing multiple viewpoints to a totalizing truth; in others, it may drift toward incommensurable relativism, where all perspectives are treated as equally valid regardless of their ethical or factual grounding. In an era frequently described as "post-truth," marked by competing narratives and epistemic fragmentation, understanding how multiperspectivity works—and when it falls short—becomes an urgent task.

Drawing on cultural narratology, New Formalism, narrative hermeneutics, and the environmental humanities, this thesis examines multiperspective narratives as a privileged site to critically engage with complex present-day challenges. Rather than focusing on a single issue, I explore how multiperspectivity can prove instrumental in addressing a wide range of urgent topics—from school shootings and institutional heteronormativity to structural racism and the climate crisis. By prompting recipients to coordinate different values and beliefs, question their moral assumptions, and depart from clear-cut resolution, the examples of multiperspectivity I examine in this thesis can help us navigate the vast challenges raised by today's sociopolitical and climate crises.

Throughout the thesis, I offer theoretically engaged readings of novels by a diverse group of Anglophone authors (Ian McEwan, Junot Díaz, Rick Moody, Victor LaValle, and Jeff VanderMeer), as well as movies by Gus Van Sant and Hirokazu Kore-eda, and video games by Naughty Dog, Dontnod Entertainment, and Golden Glitch. By bringing together narratological theory building, contextual analysis, and close reading, this thesis contributes to the contemporary

literary and narratological debate about the role of storytelling vis-à-vis a variety of cultural settings and thematic concerns. Multiperspectivity, I ultimately argue, is uniquely positioned to demonstrate how narrative form matters not *despite* context but precisely *through* it.

Italiano

Questa tesi indaga le caratteristiche formali, gli effetti esperienziali e le implicazioni etiche delle narrazioni multiprospettiche in romanzi, film e videogiochi contemporanei. In termini generali, il multiprospettivismo può essere inteso come la giustapposizione di diversi punti di vista intorno a un medesimo evento. In quanto tale, è stato spesso elogiato come un potenziale antidoto alla semplificazione, poiché contesta l'autorità di una voce unica e dà spazio a posizioni marginalizzate. Tuttavia, esso non costituisce di per sé una virtù incondizionata. In alcuni casi, può infatti condurre a una chiusura di stampo positivista, riducendo i molteplici punti di vista a una verità totalizzante; in altri, può sfociare in un relativismo radicale, in cui tutte le prospettive sono considerate ugualmente valide, a prescindere dal loro fondamento fattuale o etico. In un'epoca spesso definita "post-verità", caratterizzata da una profonda frammentazione epistemica, comprendere il funzionamento del multiprospettivismo – e i suoi limiti – diventa un compito urgente.

Prendendo le mosse dalla narratologia culturale, dal New Formalism, dall'ermeneutica narrativa e dalle *environmental humanities*, la tesi considera le narrazioni multiprospettiche un terreno privilegiato per un confronto critico con le sfide del presente. Anziché concentrarsi su una singola problematica, il lavoro dimostra come il multiprospettivismo possa rivelarsi strumentale nell'affrontare una vasta gamma di questioni urgenti – dalle sparatorie scolastiche e l'eteronormatività istituzionale al razzismo strutturale e alla crisi climatica. Spingendo lettrici e lettori a coordinare valori e opinioni differenti, a mettere in discussione i propri presupposti morali e a rinunciare a soluzioni univoche, gli esempi qui analizzati offrono strumenti per orientarsi tra le complesse sfide epistemiche, etiche e sociopolitiche del nostro tempo.

Il percorso argomentativo si sviluppa attraverso analisi testuali di romanzi di autori come Ian McEwan, Junot Díaz, Rick Moody, Victor LaValle e Jeff VanderMeer, film di Gus Van Sant e Hirokazu Kore-eda, e videogiochi prodotti da Naughty Dog, Dontnod Entertainment e Golden

Glitch. Integrando gli strumenti della narratologia con l'analisi contestuale e il *close reading*, questo studio contribuisce al dibattito contemporaneo sul ruolo della narrazione di fronte a specifici contesti culturali e tematici. La tesi sostiene, in ultima istanza, che le narrazioni multiprospettiche dimostrino in modo esemplare come la forma narrativa sia rilevante non *a dispetto* del contesto culturale, ma proprio *attraverso* la sua interazione con esso.

Nederlands

Deze thesis onderzoekt de formele kenmerken, ervaringsmatige effecten en ethische mogelijkheden van multiperspectivische verhalen in hedendaagse romans, films en videogames. In de meest fundamentele zin kan multiperspectiviteit worden opgevat als de confrontatie van verschillende gezichtspunten rond eenzelfde gebeurtenis. Als zodanig wordt zij vaak geprezen als een remedie tegen simplificatie, omdat ze zich verzet tegen de eenduidigheid van één gezaghebbend perspectief en ruimte biedt aan gemarginaliseerde stemmen. Toch mag multiperspectiviteit niet als een onvoorwaardelijke deugd worden beschouwd. In sommige gevallen kan ze een positivistische afsluiting versterken, waarbij meerdere standpunten worden gereduceerd tot één totaliserende waarheid; in andere kan ze afglijden naar een onvergelijkbaar relativisme, waarin alle perspectieven als even geldig worden behandeld ongeacht hun ethische of feitelijke gronding. In een tijdperk dat vaak als "post-truth" wordt omschreven, gekenmerkt door concurrerende verhalen en epistemische fragmentatie, is het begrijpen van hoe multiperspectiviteit werkt—en waar ze tekortschiet—een dringende opgave.

Vertrekkend vanuit de culturele narratologie, het New Formalism, de narratieve hermeneutiek en de milieugeesteswetenschappen onderzoekt deze thesis multiperspectieve verhalen als een bevoorrechte plek om kritisch in dialoog te treden met complexe hedendaagse vraagstukken. In plaats van zich op één thema te concentreren, verkent het onderzoek hoe multiperspectiviteit kan bijdragen aan het begrijpen van uiteenlopende urgente onderwerpen—van schietpartijen op scholen en institutionele heteronormativiteit tot structureel racisme en de klimaatcrisis. Door lezers en toeschouwers uit te nodigen om verschillende waarden en overtuigingen met elkaar te verzoenen, hun morele aannames te bevragen en afstand te nemen van eenduidige oplossingen,

helpen de voorbeelden die in deze thesis worden geanalyseerd ons om de ethische en epistemische uitdagingen van de huidige sociaal-politieke en ecologische context te navigeren.

De thesis biedt theoretisch onderbouwde lezingen van romans van Ian McEwan, Junot Díaz, Rick Moody, Victor LaValle en Jeff VanderMeer, films van Gus Van Sant en Hirokazu Kore-eda, en videogames van Naughty Dog, Dontnod Entertainment en Golden Glitch. Door narratologische theorievorming te combineren met contextuele analyse en close reading, levert dit onderzoek een bijdrage aan het hedendaagse literaire en narratologische debat over de rol van storytelling binnen diverse culturele en thematische contexten. Uiteindelijk betoog ik dat multiperspectiviteit op unieke wijze laat zien dat narratieve vorm ertoe doet—niet *ondanks*, maar juist *door* haar context.

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I dedicate this thesis to my grandma, Nonna Gioia.

Introduction: Multiplying Perspectives

By the end of Costa-Gavras's genre-defining political thriller *Z* (1969), viewers have witnessed the same core event three times. Set in an unnamed Mediterranean country unmistakably modeled on Greece, the movie provides a fictionalized account of the assassination of Greek left-wing politician and pacifist Grigoris Lambrakis in 1963. Blending European political cinema and Hollywood action techniques, Greek expatriate Costa-Gavras crafts a harrowing cinematic account of state-sponsored violence, bureaucratic corruption, and the fragility of democratic institutions under pressure from authoritarian forces. Released at the end of a decade of rampant paranoia and political crisis—both in Europe and globally—*Z* resonated deeply with audiences attuned to the dangers of fascist repression, the manipulation of public truth, and the lingering trauma of successive political assassinations. The unconventional one-word title itself—a reference to the Ancient Greek verb *zei* (Ζει), shorthand for "He lives" in political graffiti following Lambrakis's death—signals the movie's dual commitment to historical memory and political resistance. Narratively, *Z* does more than recount a specific instance of political violence: it employs the tools of fiction to reveal how authoritarian regimes distort reality, systematically obscure truth, and transform individual and collective memory into a site of struggle. What is particularly striking in Costa-Gavras's movie, however, is how this thematic concern is mirrored on a formal level.

One of the movie's key formal techniques is its repetition of the political assassination from three distinct perspectives—that is, a formal strategy of narrative that this thesis explores under the heading of "multiperspectivity." Popularized by Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) few years before, this storytelling approach has since become a hallmark of courtroom dramas and political thrillers, where conflicting or partial testimonies are assembled to reconstruct a central event, ultimately leading to narrative closure. In its most conventional[1] uses—notably exemplified, as we

[1] Throughout the thesis, I will use terms such as "conventional" or "canonical" multiperspectivity interchangeably to describe this specific template, that is, a multiperspective storytelling grounded in a teleological progression toward narrative resolution. However, in chapter 5—dedicated to an econarratological conceptualization of alternative modes of multiperspectivity—my use of the terms becomes broader. As we will see, the challenges posed by climate change strain the limits of narrative forms—including multiperspectivity. My understanding of "conventional" and "canonical" examples of multiperspectivity in that chapter will therefore adopt a broader scope, encompassing not only the teleological drive toward resolution discussed here, but also two additional elements of ambiguity: the emphasis on a singular event and the subject/object dichotomy. In other words, examples of multiperspectivity

will see, by Pete Travis's *Vantage Point* (2008)—multiperspectivity thus follows a teleological trajectory, with a goal-oriented narrative progression that moves from fragmentation and ambiguity toward a clearer, more complete understanding of the events. Throughout this thesis, my preference will go to examples that resist and reconfigure this existing template. Costa-Gavras's deployment of the technique, for example, marks a unique departure from this conventional model. Rather than guiding the audience from partial or contradictory accounts of the assassination toward a complete picture, *Z* unsettles and inverts this trajectory: it first shows an objective depiction of the event from a nonfocalized perspective and then moves progressively toward concealment and fragmentation. This reversal not only challenges viewers' expectations of the technique but also powerfully resonates with the progression of the plot, that is, from an initial appearance of clarity surrounding the assassination to the systematic manipulation of truth by the military-dominated government.

The first section of the movie builds steadily toward its central plot point: it opens with a speech from the leader of the security police urging his forces to take a hard line against leftist movements; the scene then shifts to the preparations for a political rally organized by opposition factions. Audiences are soon made aware that this gathering is fraught with danger, as the movie carefully establishes the political stakes and the constant threat posed by the authoritarian regime, which has made repeated attempts to block the Deputy (Yves Montand)—Lambrakis's fictional counterpart—from delivering his speech in support of nuclear disarmament. When the assassination finally occurs, it unfolds in plain sight: outside the venue, the Deputy is struck down by a club-wielding assailant speeding past him on a delivery three-wheeler, while security forces stand idly by (see figure 1). What follows, as we have seen, is the regime's swift and systematic effort to obscure the political nature of the crime. Witnesses are manipulated, testimonies coerced, and a false version is circulated—that the Deputy was merely the victim of a tragic accident, run over by a drunk driver, with no political motive behind his death.

The conventional goal-oriented progression of multiperspectivity—from fragmented accounts to a totalizing knowledge—is then problematized and ultimately dismantled to echo the regime's tampering with evidence. As the Examining Magistrate (Jean-Louis Trintignant) starts investigating

considered ethically or culturally productive throughout the thesis fall short vis-à-vis the climate crisis, which requires, in my view, alternative modes more attuned to multiscalar and nonhuman phenomena.

Fig. 1. The assassination in the first, nonfocalized version. Two stills from *Z* (Costa-Gavras 1969).

and gathering testimonies, the event is visually revisited two more times: the first is an unreliable and blatantly false account offered by the General (Pierre Dux); the second retelling comes from a sincere but limited witness, Manuel (Charles Denner). In the General's testimony, the Deputy is depicted as waving to the crowd when the three-wheeler accidentally swerves into him—an unfortunate mishap, according to his version: as he narrates, the scene is visually represented in alignment with his false testimony, thus contradicting the previous depiction of the assassination to support his fabricated claim. Conversely, Manuel's version tilts toward the truth but remains

fragmentary, unable to fully grasp the event in its entirety: witnessing from a restricted spatial perspective, Manuel's view of the Deputy is partially obscured by the vehicle and the club-wielding man in the back of the truck. While the General presents an ideologically motivated falsehood, Manuel's limited vantage point foregrounds uncertainty, prompting other questions: "was the man in back standing? Could he have hit him? I can't say. It all happened so fast" (1:49:19). The two testimonies exemplify what I will discuss as *contradictory* and *complementary* types of multiperspectivity: in the former, an unreliable narrator or focalizer misreports the event, thus prompting the clash of incompatible versions; in the latter, truthful but partial accounts are juxtaposed in an attempt to approximate a more complete truth. Yet by subverting the sequential order of such testimonies, Costa-Gavras reveals how multiperspectivity's potential extends far beyond a clear teleological orientation toward totalizing knowledge or incommensurable relativism. It is precisely this type of multiperspectivity that I focus on in the chapters that follow—one that resists simple closure, challenges linear progression, and meaningfully realizes the potential of this formal strategy of narrative.

This thesis investigates how the experiential effects and ethical implications of multiperspective narratives in contemporary media are particularly well-suited to critically engage with complex present-day challenges. Rather than focusing on a single issue, I examine how multiperspectivity can prove instrumental in addressing a wide range of urgent topics—from school shooting and institutional heteronormativity (chapter 1) to the climate crisis (chapter 5). A focus on the value of multiperspectivity is especially pressing in today's political and cultural landscape—often described by journalists and scholars as a "post-truth" era, in which misinformation proliferates and consensus around shared realities is increasingly fractured. Allegedly, truth and facts have been replaced by the dynamic of competing narratives, which has become "the default mode of both enacting and analyzing political debate" (Dawson 2023, 78). By prompting recipients to coordinate different values and beliefs, question their moral assumptions, and depart from clear-cut resolution, the examples of multiperspectivity I examine in this thesis can help us navigate the vast challenges raised by today's sociopolitical and climate crises.

Naturally, I am not claiming that *all* multiperspective narratives are equally adapted to address these topics. The conventional typology of multiperspectivity that I have referred to is instead closely tied to structuralist and positivist ways of knowing and philosophies of science that have for a long time shaped Western culture. If Costa-Gavras thus surprisingly subverts this logic by

dismantling linear progression—from full picture to partial knowledge—a more recent political thriller, Pete Travis's *Vantage Point* (2008), can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of a formulaic, goal-oriented multiperspectivity. The movie's tightly choreographed repetition of the same event—an assassination attempt on the President of the United States in Salamanca—from the titular vantage points of different characters reduces the potential of multiperspectivity to a puzzle-solving device, where viewers are provided with a sum of partial views to combine in order to achieve a single, fixed resolution. If *Z* brilliantly mirrors its thematic concern on political misdirection through a manipulation of the technique, *Vantage Point* reaffirms the very positivist logic it seems to problematize—suggesting that truth, though fragmented, can be fully reconstructed through empiricist and Western ways of knowing.

A diametrically opposed stance to this positivist view is one that links multiperspectivity to relativism—the notion that no single account can claim epistemological authority, and that each perspective exists within mutually incommensurable bubbles or "prison-houses of language" (Jameson 1972), fundamentally disconnected from others. This risk becomes particularly urgent in the post-truth era, in which, as noted by Michiko Kakutani, "there are no more objective truths anymore—only different perceptions and different story lines" (2018, 160). Originally coined by Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in 1992, the term "post-truth" gained currency in the wake of Donald Trump's first presidential campaign and was famously named 2016 word of the year by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. While there is no univocal consensus on the definition of post-truth, the term is generally understood to designate both the structural conditions and manipulative strategies that shape a public sphere in which emotional appeal overrides factual discourse and trust in authoritative institutions of knowledge—such as academic and scientific communities—is deeply eroded. In this landscape of epistemic fragmentation, compelling stories can be exploited for their manipulative potential and appeal, laying bare what narrative theorists have recently explored under the heading of "dangers of narrative" (Mäkelä et al. 2021). As a narrative strategy inherently centered on perspective-taking, multiperspectivity can thus be vulnerable to reinforcing the current cultural emphasis on relativism and parochialism. While no knowledge or truth is perspectiveless, this does not imply that all perspectives are equally valid—regardless of their factual grounding, ideological orientation, or ethical stakes. The epistemological uncertainty elicited by many of the case studies examined in this thesis is far from a mere descent into relativism. Rather, these narratives foreground ambiguity and resist closure to challenge

readers' moral assumptions or interpretive frameworks, to disrupt the teleological drive toward clear-cut resolutions, and to reflect real-life conditions of epistemological and ethical uncertainty.

Scholarly research on post-truth has also emphasized that the phenomenon is not entirely new, but rather the intensification of longer-standing dynamics within political rhetoric, media representation, and public discourse. While the term has gained prominence in recent years—particularly in relation to digital media, populist politics, and the erosion of institutional trust—its underlying features, such as the strategic manipulation of fact and the undermining of the theoretical infrastructure of truth, have deep historical roots. This is the political environment that Costa-Gavras's movie brings to the fore through its unconventional progression. Two years before the release of *Z*, Hannah Arendt's essay "Truth and Politics," originally published in *The New Yorker* on February 25, 1967, sharply articulated a distinction between pre-modern and modern lies—illuminating the murky relationship between politics and truth. If the former made "no attempt to change the whole context," modern political lies are "so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture" and the making of "another reality […] into which they will fit without seam, crack, or fissure" (Arendt 2000, 566). Arendt's passage—more a description of post-truth than a lie, in Vittorio Bufacchi's terms (2021, 350)—is primarily referred to twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, and thus strikingly resonates with the military-dominated government depicted by Costa-Gavras—a system so invested in fabricating a seamless alternate reality that the General's unreliable version is visually enacted alongside the factual truth. What differentiates Arendt's conceptualization of modern lies from today's post-truth condition, however, is that the latter is no longer an exclusive tool of totalitarian regimes but has become pervasive across multiple levels of society, profoundly shaping public perception of complex issues, from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change, through race and gender discrimination and migration politics. Despite the undeniable relevance that works such as Costa-Gavras's movie still hold today, this thesis turns to *contemporary* narratives across media to investigate how multiperspectivity is taken up by authors who encourage readers' critical engagement with the political and ethical complexities of the present.

Multiperspectivity is at the center of cultural debates today that extend beyond its philosophical or literary conceptualizations. Broadly speaking, the discourse around multiperspectivity often highlights its inherent ethical and democratic values, as exemplified by the growing body of work on "multiperspective education" (Bombardelli 2024) and its integration in history teaching—an

initiative of particular relevance in the European Union. In a comprehensive booklet published by the Council of Europe in 2003, Robert Stradling defines multiperspectivity as "a way of viewing, and a predisposition to view, historical events, personalities, developments, cultures and societies from different perspectives," underlining how the approach can guide students to "accept that there are other possible ways of viewing the world than one's own and that these may be equally valid" (2003, 14). Similarly, the Erasmusplus Project ECCOPS "Education for Citizenship Competence to Participation and Sustainability" (2021-2023) emphasizes the relevance of multiperspectivity in civic education and provides Competence Cards for the students, including one on "Multiperspective Thinking" (see Bombardelli 2024). Here, multiperspective thinking refers to specific competences such as being able to "place each perspective in its temporal and spatial dimension" or to "recognize similarities and differences of the different perspectives based on criteria as: ethical principles, possible interests of lobbies, affiliation, etc." (loc. 9). Despite primarily emphasizing the ethical values of the concept, such as "acceptance of heterogeneity" or "intercultural dialogue" (loc. 6), these accounts also warn against the possible shortcomings of multiperspective education: "[e]nsuring multiperspectivity in teaching-learning processes does not mean […] that all opinions are equally sound" (loc. 9–10). In a recent article of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, Bridget Martin highlights how multiperspectivity can foster appreciation for contestability and ambiguity: despite the risks related to relativism, "it is only by supporting students to critically engage with multiple perspectives and narratives that we will combat the abuse and misuse of history by giving them the tools to identify this for themselves" (2022). The passage closely resonates with the recent academic interest in the use and abuse of storytelling, and, more specifically, with research developed by scholars such as Hanna Meretoja in the field of "narrative hermeneutics."

Described as an approach that offers "a perspective of narrative as a crucial form and practice of interpretive understanding" (Brockmeier and Meretoja 2014, 5), narrative hermeneutics plays a crucial role in investigating the role of storytelling vis-à-vis today's "death of truth" (Kakutani 2018). More specifically, Meretoja emphasizes the value of narrative hermeneutics in addressing the complex relationship between narrative and truth, arguing that interpretation and hermeneutics—the core concepts of this approach—do not imply the paralyzing relativism or subjectivism fostered by the current post-truth era. Conversely, following the Gadamerian hermeneutic tradition for which truth is essentially dialogic, Meretoja argues that it can only be

reached "through a dialogue of many different perspectives" (2023a, 81)—a dialogue that multiperspective narratives are particularly well-adapted to foster. What this thesis primarily borrows from narrative hermeneutics is precisely this emphasis on the interpretive dimension of truth and facts, as well as the belief that engaging with multiple perspectives can generally cultivate a deeper, more nuanced understanding of complex issues—provided we possess the necessary critical awareness, or, to use a more recent term, the "narrative literacy" (Moenandar, Alber, and Thirlway 2025) required to navigate, evaluate, and ethically engage with competing points of view. My understanding of multiperspectivity thus accounts for both its ethical potential and its inherent risks. This shift from the all-encompassing beneficence of the concept to a more critical stance recognizes the *ambivalence* of multiperspectivity, which I have exemplified so far through the two opposing dangers of Western teleology and post-truth relativism.[2]

The core claim here is that multiperspective narratives can realize their critical potential only if they avoid falling into these two opposing pitfalls: on the one hand, the tendency to reassert positivist, goal-driven frameworks that lead to totalizing forms of knowledge; on the other, the danger of collapsing into incommensurability and relativism, where all perspectives are treated as equally valid and the very notion of truth is rendered irrelevant. This potential is meaningfully explored by the narrative works discussed in this thesis. However, as I will detail in the next section, realizing the value of multiperspectivity in the context of today's fragmented epistemic landscape not only requires a clear understanding of this double risk but also demands sustained attention to the interpretive and ethical work that multiperspective narratives ask of their readers: the willingness to navigate contradiction, uncertainty, and complexity in order to arrive at a more critically informed engagement with the issues at stake. In other words, the critical potential of multiperspectivity requires both specific textual forms and readers' active interpretation.

Far from being something new, my insight into the value of multiperspectivity closely aligns with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's influential notion of "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), which cautions against the reductive tendency to represent an identity, country, or event through a singular, monolithic narrative. Reframed through the lens of this thesis, Adichie's concept may be understood as pointing equally to the danger of a single *perspective*: if every story necessarily emerges from a particular point of view, then the critical work begins with an awareness of—and

[2] This binary opposition is brilliantly captured by C. Namwali Serpell's notions of "*full*-tiplicity" and "*null*-tiplicity," which play a crucial role in my discussion of the ecological ambiguities of multiperspectivity (chapter 5).

movement between—multiple perspectives. This is why multiperspectivity occupies a strategic position as a key narrative device in postcolonial and feminist rewritings (chapter 4)—arguably one of the central formal strategies through which authors write back from the margins (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989), challenging hegemonic narratives and exposing the partiality of dominant and canonical discourses.

Adichie's idea has recently been taken up by scholars working in narrative hermeneutics, such as Mark Freeman. He defines "narrative homogenization" as "the reduction of multiplicity into singularity" (2023, 25) and contends that "it's imperative both to expose their totalizing singularity and to pluralize—that is, to seek and create counternarratives, ones that are more heterogenous and polyphonic" (28). Freeman's remarks are undoubtedly valuable vis-à-vis the danger of narrative homogenization and can generally be applied to discussions of multiperspectivity. Yet it is crucial to stress here that I do not regard multiperspectivity as a straightforward antidote to narrative homogenization and mononarrativity. To do so would mean to ignore Meir Sternberg's influential "Proteus principle" (see 1982), for which a particular formal strategy in narrative is relatively independent from its ideological meaning. In other words, no formal choice—including multiperspectivity—can be univocally mapped onto ideological functions in the abstract. In this light, the imperative to pluralize cannot be reduced to a formal checkbox: it demands critical attention to how narrative strategies operate in context and to what ends. Writing a multiperspective novel, for example, does not amount to challenging dominant narratives *per se*. Less trivially, while multiperspectivity may generally gesture toward heterogeneity, its ethical or political significance hinges on a complex interplay of formal choices and contextual factors. What multiperspective narratives do reveal, however, is a distinct affinity with a particular interpretive posture, that is, *narrative negotiation*. It is precisely in this emphasis on the interpretive gesture of negotiation that narrative hermeneutics shares common ground with the central theoretical framework of this thesis: cultural narratology.

Negotiating Perspectives

Recent discussions in the academic field of narrative theory (also known as narratology)[3] have frequently stressed that narrative form matters—that is, the formal strategies of narrative hold particular relevance vis-à-vis historical and cultural contexts. The intersection between narrative form and ideology has been explored under multiple headings, from "postcolonial" and "applied" to "cultural" narratology (see Sommer 2007). My preference for the label "cultural" here is motivated by the wide array of topics covered by the examples in this thesis, which can in turn be examined through the narrower lenses of "postcolonial" or "eco-" narratology. Where all these contextualist approaches converge, however, is in their shared conviction that formal features—such as focalization, temporal sequentiality, or spatialization, to name a few—carry ideological weight and shape the way stories mediate meaning in culture. In this light, cultural narratology aims to move beyond a structuralist conceptualization of narrative form as an abstract system of functions and relations, detached from questions of power, ideology, or social relevance. Rather than treating form as self-contained, it approaches narrative devices as culturally situated practices—ones that are shaped by, and help shape, the values, norms, and assumptions of the societies in which they circulate.

This entanglement of narrative form and context closely resonates with the broader movement in literary studies known as "New Formalism" (see Levinson 2007), whose main goal is to open up literary form to the extratextual forms of the social world. At its core, New Formalism challenges the long-standing divide between formalist and historicist approaches by arguing that literary form is not sealed off from the world but deeply intertwined with extratextual structures and forces. In this respect, cultural narratology and New Formalist accounts of literature—especially in Caroline Levine's influential conceptualization (2015)—share a common interest in bringing form back to the forefront of critical inquiry—a form understood, this time, as encompassing both texts and contexts. Following the decline of structuralism and the growing influence of cultural studies, literary scholarship has increasingly prioritized the "what" of representation—with its thematic content and sociocultural embeddedness—often at the expense of the "how" of form. This shift has at times sidelined the crucial role that authors' formal choices play for their broader interrogations of literature's and narrative's ideological dimension. Consider

[3] In this thesis, I will use the two terms interchangeably. However, as noted by many commentators (see Herman 1999), the label narratology often signals a closer continuity with structuralist traditions, whereas narrative theory suggests a broader, more interdisciplinary orientation—one arguably better suited to exploring the complex entanglement between narrative and culture.

Z once again: Costa-Gavras's formal choice—the undermining of multiperspectivity's linear progression—mirrors, and yet at the same time resists, the totalitarian regime's manipulation of truth. The formal strategy of multiperspectivity is thus positioned vis-à-vis the institutionalized form of the authoritarian government. Costa-Gavras's movie exemplifies how multiperspectivity can serve as a mode of political and ideological critique, thus underscoring the central claim of both cultural narratology and New Formalism: that form matters not *despite* context, but precisely *through* it.[4]

In cultural narratology, work by researchers including Erin James (2015), Divya Dwivedi et al. (2018), and Marco Caracciolo (2021a) has recently shown how formal choices are always closely tied to values and assumptions circulating in a culture. What they meaningfully emphasize, however, is that narrative's engagement with such issues can never be determined in a straightforward way: form can foster ideological meaning-making not through a fixed association with specific functions, but by offering certain affordances for narrative negotiation. Drawing on research at the intersection of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology (1990) and Stephen Greenblatt's new historicist approach to cultural dynamics (1988), narratologists Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck have developed a comprehensive theory of narrative negotiation,[5] that is, the process by which storytelling practices—not only in literary fiction, cinema, or other artistic expressions—are interpreted in light of a background of personal and cultural values and beliefs. In Herman and Vervaeck's words, "[t]his process involves a negotiation in two senses of the word. First, negotiation means coming to terms with cultural topics, some of which may be quite thorny, as a driver might negotiate a (sharp) curve. Second, negotiation indicates that the form, range, and freedom of the circulation is open to a continuous give-and-take" (2017, 613). Crucially, not all narratives prompt equally rich or critical forms of negotiation, and the value of a certain process of negotiation strongly relies on the practice of interpretation—a core element in my approach to multiperspectivity.

What process of meaning-making do multiperspective narratives invite or require? And how can readers effectively negotiate multiple character perspectives without collapsing into subjectivism or relativism? Building on Herman and Vervaeck's work, Caracciolo defines

[4] Despite this remarkable convergence, this thesis tilts more decisively toward cultural narratology, primarily for its capacity to situate narrative's cultural implications within a broader context.

[5] I will return to the notion of narrative negotiation in my discussion of moral complexity in multiperspective video games (chapter 2).

interpretation as "an attempt to extract the relevance of a story vis-à-vis a background of shared cultural issues" (2022a, 7). Similarly, I want to stress the significance of this personal and cultural background in shaping the reading practice of multiperspective narratives. Interpretation, in this sense, is not confined to literary criticism or academic commentary; it also encompasses the reader's situated, real-time negotiation of meaning, informed by lived experience, ideological commitments, and cultural norms. Multiperspective narratives are particularly revealing in this regard, as they encourage readers to coordinate, evaluate, and sometimes reconcile several character perspectives—a process that is inherently shaped by the reader's interpretive horizon. These perspectives are rarely neutral or interchangeable: they are enmeshed in a complex web of cultural values, power structures, and normative assumptions. Consequently, critically engaging with multiperspectivity is not just a cognitive task—it is also an ethical and cultural one. It requires not only understanding *what* each perspective articulates but also reflecting on *how* and *why* certain perspectives resonate more effectively or are positioned more authoritatively than others within a given cultural context.

Because every story is shaped by a particular perspective, and no perspective is ever culturally or ideologically neutral, multiperspective narratives foreground the very conditions under which interpretation and negotiation take place. This thesis argues that multiperspective narratives are especially well-suited to foster innovative forms of narrative negotiation: forms that not only engage readers in coordinating multiple perspectives but also prompt them to reflect on, and potentially revise, their own interpretive assumptions. Multiperspective narratives are uniquely positioned to open new pathways of meaning-making, exposing the ideological and affective stakes involved in how stories are read, understood, and valued. This unique interplay of multiperspectivity and negotiation can be effectively captured by slightly revising a key passage from Caracciolo's discussion of narrative negotiation: "narrative can invite audiences to shift from one viewpoint to another, contrasting or merging them in ways that are ethically and epistemologically productive. That multiperspectivity," he concludes, "is the product of narrative negotiation" (2023a, 15). Here, I propose that this relationship is not unidirectional. Rather than conceptualizing multiperspectivity solely as the *product* of narrative negotiation, we might also see it as its *trigger*: by challenging audiences to coordinate and evaluate different character perspectives against their cultural background, multiperspective narratives actively prompt the very interpretive movements that constitute narrative negotiation. Multiperspectivity, in other

words, discloses possibilities for the negotiation of cultural issues by unsettling and reimagining patterns of perception, judgment, and relationality. By fostering perspective-taking and the interplay of different characters' values and beliefs, multiperspective narratives invite us to reconsider taken-for-granted assumptions about identity, authority, and truth. In doing so, they open up narrative form as a space for ethical reflection and cultural critique.

Narrative, of course, cannot compel recipients to revisit any of their conceptual categories or moral assumptions. Multiperspectivity, therefore, calls for a receptive reader—one willing to embark on the cognitive and affective task of articulating different perspectives, exploring their formal and stylistic specificities, and comparing their differences and similarities. In watching *Z*, for example, audiences may overlook the subversive force of Costa-Gavras's formal inversion, following each version of the events in sequence without grasping the movie's negative teleology—a movement from truth to fragmentation—that it so pointedly stages. While multiperspective narratives have been regarded as a cognitive playground (see Nünning 2014, 194) for readers, they require skills that go beyond the simple cognitive capacity to articulate competing narratives, nonlinear plotting, and multiple focal points. This is because the perspectives that these narratives juxtapose are not merely epistemic but can involve affective or moral stakes. Negotiating multiple perspectives thus demands training in close reading and interpretive practices but also the willingness and patience to interrogate—and possibly revise—one's own beliefs, attachments, and conceptual frameworks. This multiperspective negotiation, however, is a crucial reading practice in our era marked by disinformation, polarization, and epistemic fragmentation. To navigate this cultural moment, we need to be able to hold multiple perspectives without dismissing them when diverging from our assumptions. Multiperspective narratives offer not just a *cognitive* playground but a training platform for precisely this kind of *ethical* and *affective* responsiveness. By challenging us to inhabit conflicting viewpoints and reflect on their cultural embeddedness, they help reframe how we engage with disagreement, ambiguity, and contested truths. And it is precisely through the close affinity with narrative negotiation, I believe, that this account of multiperspectivity's value avoids the charge of utopian naïveté often connected with the concept: rather than offering easy pluralism or an effortless celebration of multiplicity, a multiperspective negotiation demands active interpretation, critical reflexivity, and a sustained engagement with the ideological and affective frictions that shape our understanding of the world.

Introducing Multiperspectivity

Understanding the value of multiperspectivity in a narratological vein is no easy task: it entails the process of interpretation and negotiation of form and context outlined in the previous section; it also requires an operative definition of multiperspective narratives as characterized by the *juxtaposition of multiple character perspectives around the same event of the storyworld*. While this definition is admittedly broad, it calls for closer scrutiny of its key concepts. As summarized by Marcus Hartner's entry in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, narrative theory has investigated the notion of multiperspectivity in different and often incongruous ways—primarily, as a "basic aspect of narration or as a mode of storytelling" to highlight the "perceptually, epistemologically or ideologically restricted nature of individual perspectives" (2014, loc. 1). Far from considering it as a *basic* aspect of narration, I understand multiperspectivity as a *formal strategy of narrative*. My account of the concept thus departs from Hartner's own conceptualization of multiperspectivity as a mere "readerly effect that can be triggered by a variety of narrative strategies" (loc. 7). While Hartner believes that "there is no definable set of multiperspective text structures," I consider multiperspective narratives as emerging from the interplay of specific textual strategies and readerly effects. In chapter 1, I will thus focus on a set of key features and on two *experiential* effects—uncertainty and slowness—that these features are well-adapted to elicit. Similarly, chapter 2 will turn to the *ethical* implications of the form, by exploring the potential for perspective-taking, the coordination of characters' values and beliefs, and the foregrounding of uncertainty as multiperspectivity's central affordances.

While this thesis investigates the potential of multiperspective narratives across *contemporary* media, multiperspectivity is by no means an exclusively contemporary phenomenon. Historically, instances of multiperspective narration can be traced across a wide range of literary traditions and periods. In *Narrative Discourse* (1980), a landmark contribution to structuralist narratology, Gérard Genette offers an early theorization of multiperspectivity—though he does not use the term explicitly—under the rubric of "frequency," by describing it as "*narrating n times what happened once*" (115, original emphasis).[6] Among his examples we can find *Rashomon*, as well as a

[6] Actually, Genette describes the phenomenon twice in different sections of his essay: after the first appearance in frequency, multiperspectivity is described again as "multiple internal focalization" (190). However, by providing the example of *Rashomon*—with its intradiegetic narrators—Genette seems here to conflate narration and focalization.

modernist text (William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* [1929]) and the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century (e.g., Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* [1782]). Stretching the definition further, one could trace the roots of multiperspectivity back to the very origins of literature: consider, for example, the Gospels, which offer divergent accounts of the life of Jesus, or the Homeric epic poems, where the *Odyssey* revisits and reframes events already depicted in the *Iliad*. And yet, the current proliferation of multiperspective narratives—particularly in contemporary cinema (chapter 1)—appears especially attuned to the epistemic fragmentation that defines our post-truth era, inviting a reexamination of the form's cultural and political stakes in the present moment.

In one of the most comprehensive accounts of the concept, Monika Fludernik (2020) takes her point of departure precisely from the historical lineage of multiperspectivity, noting that the phenomenon has primarily been explored in relation to modernist literature and the nineteenth-century polyphonic novel. Closely related to multiperspectivity, though conceptually distinct, the notion of polyphony was influentially introduced by Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Drawing on a musical metaphor, Bakhtin adopts the term to describe Fyodor Dostoevsky's attempt to combine a multitude of voices or points of view without subsuming them under a single authorial control or mediation. For Bakhtin, the polyphonic novel foregrounds "a diversity of social speech types" and "a diversity of individual voices" (262), constructing a dialogic world in which unity emerges not from hierarchical subordination but from the dynamic coexistence of contrasting voices.

Despite the enduring significance of Bakhtin's account, the distinction between polyphony and multiperspectivity has been the subject of renewed scholarly attention. In her essay, Fludernik notably finds Bakhtin's notion "contradictory" (23) and traces how the term multiperspectivity—though underexplored in Anglophone scholarship—has gained conceptual precision in German-speaking academia.[7] In the introduction to their seminal edited volume *Multiperspektivisches Erzählen* [*Multiperspective Narratives*] (2000a), Vera and Ansgar Nünning develop a detailed typology of multiperspectivity based on the notion of "perspective structure," that is, the dynamic interaction of the characters' individual perspectives, the narrator's perspective, and the

[7] Anglophone academia presents different terms interchangeably with less theoretical rigor, from multiple viewpoints to multifocality, even conflating the concept of multiperspectivity with the narrower Rashomon-style narration (see next chapter).

perspective of the implied reader or narratee (2000b, 48–52). Their framework conceptualizes these perspectives as arranged in a hierarchical structure, in which each perspective occupies a distinct communicative level. Specifically, the characters' viewpoints are positioned as subordinate to the overarching perspective of the narrative discourse and the extradiegetic narrator, thus embedding character perspectives within a broader, narratively mediated structure. My take on multiperspectivity in this thesis works somewhat differently, as revealed by the choice of "juxtaposition" in my definition. By placing perspectives side by side, I isolate multiperspectivity from Nünning and Nünning's broader perspective structure, thus narrowing the scope of the concept to its "horizontal" dimension. In other words, the texts that I examine in this thesis present a juxtaposition of different characters' perspectives on the *same* diegetic level, without being subordinated to a "vertical" (or hierarchical) authority.[8] The intersection between the horizontal and vertical axes of perspective will be explored in detail through the notion of "pseudo-multiperspectivity" in chapter 3, devoted precisely to the relationship between form, mediation, and power in today's use and abuse of stories.

The second term in my definition that warrants closer examination is, perhaps unsurprisingly, "perspective" itself. The terminological instability surrounding multiperspectivity undoubtedly depends on the long-lasting lack of consensus, in narrative theory, around the notions of "point of view," "focalization," and "perspective."[9] My preference for the term perspective—and by extension multi*perspectivity*—is here motivated by two main considerations: first, perspective allows me to encompass—following Nünning and Nünning's theorization—*both* narration and focalization; second, its broader scope compared to "point of view" (or "viewpoint") aligns with the multilayered stratification involved in our cognitive and emotional engagement with characters. In their typology, Nünning and Nünning draws a distinction between multiperspective narration and multiperspective focalization[10] (2000b, 43–46): "[m]ultiperspectivity arises […] not

[8] Of course, the arrangement of character perspectives is always shaped by authorial design. However, discussions around real-world authorship remain outside the scope of this thesis. The form of vertical authority I set aside here is thus strictly diegetic: it refers to the hierarchical relationship between narratorial instances operating at different diegetic levels within the narrative.

[9] See, for example, the edited volume *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization* (2009). For a transmedial account of the concepts, see Thon (2016).

[10] They also propose a third typology—multiperspective *structure*—in which the multiplication of events into several versions emerges through a montage- or collage-like combination of different textual forms. However, as the authors themselves acknowledge, multiperspective structure rarely exists in isolation. In practice, these texts frequently also include multiple narrators or focalizers, thereby overlapping with the two other typologies. In such cases, multiperspective structure is best understood as a specific manifestation of more conventional multiperspective

only when the events are depicted by more than one extradiegetic or intradiegetic narrator. Rather, in addition to this type of multiperspectivally *narrated* text […] multiperspective *focalization* is present when several characters function alternately as reflector figures (*sensu* Stanzel) or internal focalizers (*sensu* Genette)" (42, original emphasis, my translation).[11] Throughout this thesis, I will use the term multiperspective *narrative* to refer broadly to both multiperspective narration and multiperspective focalization. The distinction between the two typologies, perhaps more meaningful for literary and verbal texts, becomes problematic in the case of audiovisual and interactive media, which fall outside the scope of Nünning and Nünning's original taxonomy. In such cases, the representation of characters' subjectivity does not fully align with the structuralist binary of narration and focalization. By contrast, the broader concept of perspective offers a more flexible and inclusive framework for analyzing how subjectivity is constructed and communicated across media.

The choice of perspective over point of view is a crucial one and primarily depends on its "aspectual" stratification. Discussing readers' engagement with fictional characters, Caracciolo distinguishes five different "aspects" of perspective that we can imaginatively simulate: somatic, perceptual, emotional, epistemic, and axiological (2016, 39–40). In Caracciolo's theoretical account, recipients' "empathetic perspective-taking" (or its opposite, "cognitive dissonance") toward characters is stretched between basic responses (somatic, perceptual, and emotional) and more sophisticated abilities (epistemic, axiological). He thus describes empathy for characters not as "an on-off switch" (40) but as an aspectual phenomenon: readers may simulate a character's perceptual perspective without aligning with their ethical assumptions (see 47). This is a crucial insight for my account of multiperspectivity. As noted in the previous section, multiperspective narratives not only function as cognitive playgrounds for readers but are also uniquely positioned to challenge their ethical values and affective responses. Sophisticated instances of multiperspectivity can prompt readers to align with certain aspects of a character's perspective

narration or focalization. By contrast, if a particular textual element cannot be linked to a character perspective, it falls outside the scope of my definition. Such cases, I suggest, are better understood as instances of "multimodality"—that is, as narratives structured through the interplay of different semiotic resources rather than through perspectival variation alone (see Hallet 2009; Gibbons 2011). Accordingly, I do not treat multiperspective structure as a distinct typology in its own right, but rather as a subtype of formal variation of the two primary forms.

[11] "Multiperspektivität liegt […] nicht nur dann vor, wenn das Geschehen von mehr als einem extra- oder intradiegetischen Erzähler geschildert wird. Vielmehr sind neben diesem Typus des multiperspektivisch *erzählten* Textes […] multiperspektivisch *fokalisierten* Erzähltextes liegt dann vor, wenn mehrere Figuren alternierend als Reflektorfiguren (*sensu* Stanzel) bzw. interne Fokalisierungsinstanzen (*sensu* Genette) fungieren."

while simultaneously withholding full identification. While the term "point of view" is more closely associated with the perceptual and epistemic dimensions, "perspective" offers a more multilayered framework that encompasses not only what a character perceives or knows, but also how they interpret, evaluate, and emotionally respond to the events of the storyworld. More specifically, the following chapters will demonstrate how multiperspective texts can foster tensions between characters' ethical (Caracciolo's axiological) perspectives, rather than focusing exclusively on their epistemic differences. The central distinction between epistemological and ethical uncertainty, which I will introduce in the next chapter, is thus captured by this aspectual stratification of multiperspectivity.

The most controversial element of my definition, however, is perhaps the reference to the "same event," as it is strictly connected to the primary unanswered question in the scholarly research on multiperspectivity—that is, how to connect the "how" of the narrative mediation of perspectives with the "what" of the narrated content (see Nünning and Nünning 13–20). In other words, does multiperspectivity arise only when the same event in the story (or *fabula*) is recounted multiple times in the discourse (or *syuzhet*), each from a different character's perspective? I will devote an in-depth analysis to this complex issue in chapter 5, which focuses on three key limitations of canonical examples of multiperspectivity vis-à-vis the challenges raised by the Anthropocene. The first limitation I identify is precisely the narrow focus on one and the same event: this is particularly problematic from an ecological perspective as it risks oversimplifying climate change by reducing it to a single issue rather than acknowledging it as an intricate web of interconnected actors and phenomena. I will therefore propose an alternative mode—*nonrepetitive* multiperspectivity—which builds on a broader understanding of the same "event" to encompass characters, objects, and locations as the central focus of multiperspective narratives.

Nünning and Nünning's work, as well as Hartner's and Fludernik's contributions, has already started to investigate the formal features and cognitive challenges of multiperspectivity in literary fiction. Building on these insights, *Multiperspective Narratives across Media* is the first book-length study to foreground the experiential, ethical, and cultural implications of the form, and to conceptualize multiperspectivity as a transmedial category.[12] Narrative, as thoroughly highlighted

[12] A call for a transmedial approach to the phenomenon was already present in Hartner's entry: "[s]o far, there have been no comparative analyses between multiperspective strategies of narration in different genres and media. Furthermore, research needs to be extended to study of the phenomenon in new media products (e.g. computer games)"

by scholars including Marie-Laure Ryan (2006) and Jan-Noël Thon (2016), is a fundamentally transmedial phenomenon: however, its realization is shaped by medium-specific affordances and limitations. This insight explains why the broad definition of multiperspective narrative introduced in this section requires refinement for my discussion of multiperspective video games in chapter 2. While multiperspectivity can be confidently regarded as a transmedial category of narrative,[13] its occurrence in different media is contingent on their characteristics and constraints. At the same time, however, many of multiperspectivity's core features—from its experiential effects to its ethical implications—remain consistently relevant across literature, cinema, and video games, and are potentially applicable to other media not examined in this thesis, such as comics and television.

This transmedial approach further clarifies my focus on contemporary texts. Although, as we have seen, multiperspectivity is by no means a contemporary phenomenon and its history spans a wide range of literary traditions and narrative practices, its recent proliferation across diverse media platforms has foregrounded new aesthetic possibilities and cultural stakes. By zooming in on contemporary examples, this thesis investigates how both transmedial and medium-specific affordances shape the use and perception of multiperspective narratives today, particularly in response to shifting epistemological, ethical, and affective concerns in our unstable sociopolitical and cultural landscape. This narrower focus, however, does not imply that earlier instances of multiperspectivity cannot fruitfully address present-day issues—as illustrated by my comments on Costa-Gavras's movie in this introduction. Yet concentrating on contemporary works allows me to consistently examine how different narrative media respond to shared cultural challenges within a common historical horizon. Moreover, it provides a focus on contemporary narrative practices that were, understandably, absent from Nünning and Nünning's 2000 edited volume, almost exclusively devoted to nineteenth- and twentieth-century English literature.

Mainly because of this literary-centric body of work on multiperspectivity, the next two chapters will introduce form and experience (chapter 1) and the ethics (chapter 2) of multiperspective narratives by focusing on cinema and video games, respectively. Chapter 3 then turns to novels to explore the peculiar case of "pseudo-multiperspectivity" and its self-reflexive relevance vis-à-vis contemporary debates around the limits of storytelling. Chapter 4 examines

(2014, loc. 8). To my knowledge, this situation remains unchanged—aside from Valentine Robert's essay (2023) on cinema, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

[13] For an exploration of focalization and perspective as transmedial categories, see Thon (2016) and Fusillo (2020).

both a novella and a video game to reflect the contemporary transmedial expansion of the genre of minor-character retelling, explored here under the heading of "transtextual multiperspectivity." Finally, a novel will be the main example of my discussion of multiperspectivity's ecological potential and risks in chapter 5.

Most of the examples discussed in this thesis are drawn from Anglophone fiction, cinema, and video games, with the notable exception of Hirokazu Kore-eda's Japanese movie *Monster* (2023), whose inclusion reflects the remarkable prominence of multiperspectivity in East Asian cinema, particularly in the wake of the seminal example of *Rashomon*. Investigating the ethical and cultural significance of multiperspectivity vis-à-vis today's challenges is, admittedly, an ambitious undertaking. The specific set of narratives I discuss here cannot claim to capture the full range of this form across media, cultures, and contexts. Rather, *Multiperspective Narratives across Media* proposes a conceptual and analytical framework that can serve as a foundation for further inquiry into how multiperspectivity responds to the issues raised by our post-truth era. The selection of the corpus—ranging from already canonical novels such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) to a mainstream video game such as *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)—is thus primarily guided by the case studies' critical potential (as opposed to conventional examples of multiperspectivity), and by their capacity to foreground distinct affordances of multiperspectivity across different media and in relation to diverse thematic concerns. This engagement with literary, visual, and video game narratives that depart from the most conventional uses of multiperspectivity—as introduced by my earlier discussion of Costa-Gavras's movie—allows me to provide a hands-on demonstration of the value of this narrative strategy when employed in more innovative and sophisticated ways. The thesis does not aim to exhaust the possibilities of the form nor to establish a definitive taxonomy. Instead, it explores multiperspectivity's potential as a device for (multi)perspective-taking, a means of fostering epistemological or ethical uncertainty, and a narrative strategy uniquely suited to negotiating urgent cultural topics in a fractured and contested world.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundation for this thesis by offering a typology of multiperspective narratives in contemporary cinema and introducing two central experiential effects—multiperspective uncertainty and slow multiperspectivity—that inform the textual analyses to

follow. Drawing on Nünning and Nünning's influential taxonomy and research in complex cinema (see Buckland 2009), the chapter identifies four key features—type of interaction, magnitude, explicit resolution, and paratextual elements—as central to understanding how multiperspectivity functions across different audiovisual texts. Crucially, I draw a distinction between the so-called Rashomon-style (or Rashomon effect) narrative—defined by contradictory narratorial accounts ending in epistemological uncertainty—and the broader category of multiperspectivity, which encompasses a wider range of formal and experiential variants. In addition to this typological groundwork, the chapter introduces two experiential effects that shape how audiences engage with multiperspective narratives. While uncertainty is commonly associated with the formal strategy, I propose a more nuanced distinction between *epistemological* uncertainty (linked to knowledge and information gaps) and *ethical* uncertainty (linked to lack of moral resolution). Conversely, slowness is identified as a less frequent but deeply disruptive experiential effect of multiperspectivity: here, I explore four framing strategies adopted by multiperspective narratives to elicit a slow viewing (or reading) practice, from paratextual framing to the coordination of different character perspectives. These theoretical concerns are then brought into focus to analyze two recent works which foreground multiperspectivity for addressing complex school-related issues: the inexplicability of school shooting in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) and the heteronormative rigidity of Japanese school and institutional systems in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Monster* (2023). Both movies adopt multiperspectivity in ways that resist conventional narrative closure, deconstructing key tropes of the form, such as teleological progression and empathetic perspective-taking (in *Elephant*), or disrupting institutional boundaries through visual strategies, like camera movement and black screens (in *Monster*). While the focus throughout this analysis remains on movies, the features and experiential effects I investigate can be applied to the other media explored in this thesis.

In chapter 2, I turn to the interactive medium of video games to explore the ethical potential of multiperspectivity. Drawing on concepts from narrative theory and game studies, I suggest that multiperspectivity—when embedded in both narrative and gameplay—offers unique affordances for negotiating moral complexity. Here, a medium-specific definition is required to capture the peculiarity of multiperspectivity in interactive media: multiperspective video games, I argue, are characterized by the non-optional interplay of narrative and ludic multiperspectivity. To fully actualize their ethical potential, however, multiperspective video games need to be orchestrated

through specific formal and ludic strategies. Thus, in this second chapter I chart a convergence between the ethical affordances of multiperspectivity, and the ludic strategies associated with "ethical gameplay" (Sicart 2013a). Scholars such as Vera Nünning (2014) and Hanna Meretoja (2018) have already started to explore multiperspectivity's ethical potential: here, I follow their insights to identify three ethical implications of the form—that is, the foregrounding of uncertainty, perspective-taking, and the coordination of character perspectives. Through close analyses of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) and *Tell Me Why* (2020), I then explore how these affordances intersect with three key strategies of ethical gameplay: cognitive friction, the disruption of moral dichotomy, and the aggregation of choices. Together, these elements enable an effective negotiation of moral complexity, prompting predisposed players to navigate the lack of moral resolution through both narrative and ludic techniques.

If chapter 2 focused on the ethical potential of multiperspective narratives, limits and dangers of storytelling are the central concern of chapter 3. Turning to the literary medium, this chapter introduces the concept of pseudo-multiperspectivity to explore how the ethical affordances of multiperspectivity—such as perspective-taking and the foregrounding of uncertainty—can also be strategically manipulated. Discussing three examples of what Meretoja terms "metanarrative fiction" (2014)—Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)—I investigate how storytelling techniques can be co-opted to serve personal purposes or ideological agenda. Drawing on story-critical approaches and narrative hermeneutics, the chapter argues for a critical examination of the use and abuse of narrative practices vis-à-vis today's storytelling boom. As a hybrid form in which multiperspectivity is strategically staged by overarching narratorial instances, pseudo-multiperspectivity is well-positioned to expose and problematize the ethical ambivalence of vicarious storytelling and narrative mediation. The texts that I examine in this chapter challenge the assumption that multiperspectivity inherently fosters ethical engagement. Instead, they reveal how the same formal choices that elicit empathy and ethical reflection in chapter 1 and 2 can also be employed for questionable or even harmful ends. In doing so, pseudo-multiperspectivity invites readers to reflect not only on what stories are told, but also on how and by whom they are constructed and conveyed—underscoring the need for a story-critical lens in an era saturated with storytelling practices.

Chapter 4 shifts from ethical to cultural concerns, focusing on the distinctive form of transtextual multiperspectivity to explore the subversive potential of one of its key manifestations: the genre of minor-character retellings. Drawing on Gérard Genette's structuralist model of transtextual relationships (1998), the chapter begins by outlining a typology of transtextual multiperspectivity—conceptualized as the form of multiperspectivity extending beyond the scope of the single text—to account for the different functions this narrative strategy can cover across media and models of authorship. To effectively display its value, this form of multiperspectivity requires a transtextual reading practice, that is, a cognitive oscillation between the canonical work and the retelling capable of fostering readers' coordination of different character perspectives. This typological and cognitive revision of structuralist accounts lays the groundwork for discussing the ideological value of minor-character retellings, whose subversive potential, according to scholars such as Jeremy Rosen (2016), has been recently problematized by their ambivalent implication with market logics and economic capital. *Contra* Rosen, the chapter examines two recent examples of the genre—Victor LaValle's novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) and the video game *Elsinore* (2019)—whose use of self-reflexive devices both exposes and subverts the double-dipping logic of retellings, reassessing at the same time their disruptive potential. The two experiential effects introduced in chapter 1—uncertainty and slowness—make a comeback here: in both works, they are integrated with metafictional devices to unsettle the predecessors' questionable politics, serving as a foil to the horrors of racism and xenophobia (in LaValle's novella) and to the silencing and marginalization of female characters (in *Elsinore*).

The tension between ambivalence and potential is at the core of chapter 5, which takes up the question of whether multiperspectivity is a narrative form well-suited to engage with the complex challenges raised by the Anthropocene. Grounded in econarratological research and Erin James's call for an Anthropocene narrative theory (2022), the chapter argues that canonical examples of multiperspectivity—shaped by Western epistemologies of mastery—risk reinforcing reductive and anthropocentric frameworks. I thus identify three core ambiguities in traditional conceptualizations of multiperspectivity: the tendency to revolve around one and the same event (thus framing climate change as a singular phenomenon); the dualistic binary between complementary and contradictory multiperspectivity; and the rigid divide between human perceivers and the nonhuman world as an inert object of knowledge. These limitations reflect the epistemological assumptions underpinning many Western narrative forms, which privilege

teleology, closure, and the centrality of human experience. Employing Jeff VanderMeer's *Acceptance* (2014)—the third installment of his "Southern Reach" series and a paradigmatic example of climate change fiction (cli-fi)—as main reference, the chapter introduces three alternative modes of multiperspective storytelling: nonrepetitive, ambiguous, and ontological multiperspectivity. By attuning multiperspectivity to an Anthropocene narrative theory, these three modes highlight the form's ecological potential for grasping alternative ways of knowing and the entangled complexity of Anthropogenic climate change.

1 Form and Experience in Multiperspective Movies

Multiperspective movies are sprawling across contemporary cinema. While scholarly research has mostly focused on "complex narratives" (Buckland 2009) or "alternative plots" (Ramírez Berg 2006), little attention has been devoted to the proliferation of multiperspectivity as a significant formal strategy of contemporary movies. Conceptualizing multiperspective movies in a narratological vein can help us investigate the experiential effects and the ethical issues they raise, thus positioning multiperspectivity as a productive strategy in the context of present-day challenges. My first chapter, therefore, has a twofold aim: (1) it seeks to outline a typology of multiperspectivity in contemporary cinema by exploring four key features—type of interaction, magnitude, explicit resolution, and paratextual inserts; (2) it zooms in on two experiential effects closely tied to two of the key features previously outlined, that is, *uncertainty* as a potential consequence of the lack of explicit resolution, and *slowness* as a reading practice potentially triggered by segmentivity and paratextual elements. Crucially, I regard the foregrounding of uncertainty as a central feature of the ethical potential of multiperspectivity, as we will see in more detail through a close reading of the video game *Tell Me Why* (2020) in the next chapter. Both uncertainty and slowness will be then explored again in chapter 4, as they prove pivotal in foregrounding the ideological value of the genre of minor-character retellings.

What is important to emphasize here is that the two main takeaways of the chapter—the identification of the key features of multiperspectivity and the exploration of its primary experiential effects—go beyond the medium-specific scope of cinema. While my references and examples in this chapter will be drawn from movies, all four of my central features have a transmedial dimension. This initial focus on cinema is especially justified by the pivotal role Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950)—and its eponymous "Rashomon effect"—has historically played in narratological debates around multiperspectivity. As we have seen in the introduction, however, I regard multiperspectivity as a transmedial category (Thon 2016): this in no way implies that each medium is not characterized by medium-specific affordances, as the productive encounter between the ethical potential of multiperspectivity and the field of ethical gameplay will show in the next chapter. Yet the foregrounding of uncertainty or the slow reading practice elicited by multiperspectivity will be highly relevant elements in our close engagement with novels, movies,

and video games throughout this thesis. Similarly, the distinction between contradictory and complementary multiperspectivity (type of resolution), or the identification of a local and a global typology (magnitude), can be easily extended to a wide range of narrative media, even beyond the three I am focusing on in this work, thus including tv shows or comic books. The exploration of the formal features and the experiential effects of contemporary multiperspective movies provided in this chapter thus serves as a springboard for the theoretical and textual analyses I will offer in the rest of the thesis.

After discussing the four key features of multiperspectivity in movies and the experiential effects of uncertainty and slowness, the last two sections turn to a close reading of two case studies, Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) and Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Monster* (2023). Apart from displaying the same typology of multiperspectivity on a formal level, the two movies are also strikingly resonant on a thematic level as they both deal with school-related issues and the inexplicable complexities of adolescence. While other pairings in this thesis are thus mostly motivated by formal reasons, the connection between *Elephant* and *Monster* is explicitly addressed by Kore-eda himself, particularly in opposition with the canonical example of *Rashomon*.[1] *Monster* is also my only non-Anglophone case study of the thesis: the decision of including Kore-eda's work is not only driven by its close resonance with *Elephant*, but it also feels particularly necessary in a chapter devoted to multiperspectivity in cinema. Since Gérard Genette's discussion of the concept (1980, 115), *Rashomon* has always been considered as a paradigmatic example of multiperspectivity, as testified by the extraordinary popularity of the "Rashomon effect" in the broader cultural discourse (see Davis, Anderson, and Walls 2016). The movie's legacy in global cinema cannot be underestimated: yet the cinema of East Asia has undoubtedly displayed a particular resonance with the formal structure popularized by Kurosawa, as exemplified by recent movies such as Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002, China), Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* (2000, South Korea) and *The Handmaiden* (2016, South Korea), and the Japanese *Monster* itself. However, *Rashomon*'s legacy has been revisited and reinterpreted on a global scale: crucially, it is precisely the difference

[1] In an interview with Jordan Raup, Kore-eda has briefly referred to the difference between his work and *Rashomon*: "[e]verybody's raising this *Rashomon* thing, but I feel that it's fundamentally different from *Rashomon*, because in *Rashomon*, each character, when they go back through the story again, they actually end up being a different character within the film, within the story, whatever specific story it is. Whereas with this, the people don't change, but the monster who appears, appears in different places" (Raup 2023). Conversely, *Elephant* is regarded as a closer example: "I understand the comparison [with *Rashomon*], but the name of the film was not often mentioned during the development of the film between screenwriter and producers, and I believe they have fundamentally different structures. Instead, Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* [2003] has been brought up" (McCabe 2024).

between *Elephant* and Kurosawa's movie to direct Kore-eda towards the former. While *Rashomon* can be regarded as an example of contradictory open multiperspectivity, *Elephant* and *Monster* stand at the opposite side of the spectrum, as examples of a complementary and (epistemologically) closed typology. But if Van Sant's and Kore-eda's works provide narrative closure on the level of the plot, and thus deny the epistemological uncertainty typically raised by the Rashomon effect, *what kind of uncertainty* do they foreground? And why did the two directors choose this peculiar formal strategy of narrative to engage with complex issues such as school shooting and institutional heteronormativity? Answering these questions will allow us to recognize the powerful originality of *Elephant* and *Monster* in the broader trend of multiperspective movies.

Four Key Features of Multiperspective Movies

In recent years, an impressive array of complex narratives in popular cinema has proliferated around the world, as shown by a significant number of studies investigating "puzzle" (Kiss and Willemsen 2017) or "mind-game" films (Elsaesser 2009). Among the many innovations complex movies have popularized since the 1990s, experiments with the multiplication of character perspectives have perhaps been overlooked,[2] and there is no systematic account of their structure—with the partial exception of Valentine Robert's insightful essay, in French, on "the diffracted audiovisual narration" (2023). Such lack of attention seems to be at odds with the recent popularity of movies employing this narrative structure, exemplified by mainstream blockbusters, such as David Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014) or Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023), as well as international art cinema, such as the already mentioned *The Handmaiden* and *Monster*. One reason for this curious negligence could be that multiperspectivity has often been regarded as a conventional narrative strategy, derived from major literary texts: this is what David Bordwell has argued in detail in his last book, *Perplexing Plots* (2023), by drawing a link between "modernist innovations in literature, such as nonlinear plotting and dispersal of viewpoint" and "mass-audience fiction" (10). Since his first conceptualization of "forking-path narratives" (2002), Bordwell has always been one of the most ardent advocates of the "conventionality" of many

[2] For example, defining his concept of "mind-game film," Elsaesser underlines that it "does not involve a matter of ocular (mis-)perception […] nor are we presented with several versions of the same event, as in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950)" (2009, 20).

complex narratives' devices, while other scholars, such as Warren Buckland, have repeatedly emphasized their deliberate violation of classical narrative norms. While this may not be the case for multiperspective movies, whose cognitive challenges do not usually reach the peaks represented by what Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen have called "impossible puzzle films" (2017), it is important to recognize their proliferation as part of the wider phenomenon of complex storytelling, in which they may appear in different forms and functions, even as a pivotal element of mind-tricking or impossible puzzle films themselves.[3]

Moreover, as already discussed in the introduction, there is a terminological vagueness around narratives with a multiplication of character perspectives, well exemplified by Bordwell's essay, which adopts several expressions interchangeably, like "shifting viewpoints" (e.g., 1, 33), "shifting perspectives" (57, 210), "multiple viewpoints" (90, 114), "multivocal movies" (246), and so on. Bordwell's indecision clearly derives from the lack of common consensus, in contemporary narrative theory, around the terms "point of view," "perspective," and "focalization" (with the less narratological variant of "viewpoint"). Yet *another* expression describing multiple perspectives in movies has gained popularity in the last decades, although mostly outside of the academic debate, that is, the Rashomon effect (or Rashomon-style narrative). Here, it is crucial to emphasize once again that Kurosawa's *Rashomon* represents only a specific case of multiperspective narrative: a narratorial, contradictory, open structure, as we will discuss later in this section.[4] Following Robert Anderson's definition, the "Rashomon effect is a combination of a difference of perspective and equally plausible accounts, with the absence of evidence to elevate one above others, with the inability to disqualify any particular version of the truth, all surrounded by the social pressure for closure on the question" (2016, 71).

I have already discussed in the introduction my preference for the term "multiperspectivity" among the different variants, from "polyphony" to "multifocalization." Before delving into the four key features of multiperspective movies, I would like to stress that this chapter only considers those narratives that adhere to Meir Sternberg's "structure of repetition" (1985). In other words, I will narrow down the analysis to those movies in which the same event of the *fabula* is repeated more than once in the *syuzhet* from different character perspectives. This kind of "repetitive

[3] I have explored five categories of contemporary multiperspective movies more deeply in D'Amato (forthcoming).
[4] To discuss narrators in a transmedial context I will mainly refer to the theoretical framework developed by Jan-Noël Thon (2016).

multiperspectivity" is particularly common in cinema, where the supposed 'objectivity' of the camera lends itself more easily to report the same event with slight variations, or to piece together partial takes of a broader situation, as metaphorically exemplified by the dramatic role of surveillance cameras in Brian De Palma's *Snake Eyes* (1998). Moreover, I will not include forking-path narratives, such as Peter Howitt's *Sliding Doors* (1998), since their repetitions focus on *alternative* versions of the same event, nor what Charles Ramírez Berg has called the "Hub and Spoke Plot," where "multiple characters' story lines [*sic*] intersect decisively at one time and place" (2006, 39). Although Berg considers this category as a variation of the "repeated event plot" type (the one that more properly pertains to our analysis), I will exclude it because the repetition merely serves as a point of diegetic linkage between different and seemingly unrelated storylines.[5] However, in contrast with Robert's proposed typology (2023, loc. 5), I suggest to include a peculiar case of time loop narratives, namely those that feature character multiplications with no way out of the loop, as in Christopher Smith's *Triangle* (2009): here, events always repeat in exactly the same way, thus negating her observation that they "not only involve changes of point of view, but the plot itself is transformed with each loop" (loc. 5).

Type of interaction

The first key feature I am focusing on in this chapter is the *type of interaction between perspectives*: here I propose a simple distinction between *complementary* and *contradictory* narration. Conversely, Valentine Robert introduces three major functions, called "complément perspectif" ("perspective supplement"), "décentrement focal" ("focal decentering"), and "divergence subjective" ("subjective divergence") (loc. 4). Although Robert herself admits that this demarcation is open to many overlaps, my main issue concerns the distinction between the first and the second function, that I would propose to discard. In her account, the focal decentering is typical of POV-sequels (which I will discuss under the heading of "transtextual multiperspectivity" in chapter 4), but in her examples, such as the movies on the life of Jesus seen by different perspectives, there is no proper structure of repetition, since the intertextual link refers to an

[5] In the "Hub and Spoke Plot" there is no alignment between the diegetic knot and the focus, as the linkage between the different storylines is merely coincidental and does not converge with the overarching interest of the plot. I will discuss Berg's typology and its relationship with multiperspectivity in my econarratological analysis in chapter 5.

external narrative and many variations and contradictions can be found. In other cases, as in time travel narratives, it is difficult to distinguish between focal decentering and perspective supplement, since each repetition involves a certain degree of diegetic supplement. In general, I believe that all the instances of focal decentering can ultimately be encompassed under the complementary and contradictory typologies, and they do not constitute an in-between category in themselves. Thus, I would simplify this feature by limiting my account to complementary and contradictory narrations.[6]

For Robert, the notion of flashback is central in complementary multiperspectivity, "since it is through it that we revisit the scene (often a crime scene), each time from a new point of view" (loc. 5). However, Berg notes that if scenes are purposely shown out of chronological order, we should not speak of a (character's) flashback, as Quentin Tarantino adamantly declares in an interview: "it's not a flashback! No, it's just the order of the information that the author's decided to tell you the story in […] Literally, what a flashback is, it is a character thinking back on something. It's not me telling the audience [the story] in a different order" (qtd. in Berg 42). Thus, the complementary variant does not require the presence of flashbacks or narratorial accounts, since in many cases the diegetic supplement provided by other perspectives does not rely on characters' narrations. On the contrary, flashbacks are much more common in the contradictory type, where the divergence stems from mutually exclusive representations of the same event. Although Robert herself admits that "flashbacks are not intended here […] to construct the subjectivity of the one who remembers" (loc. 5), the claim around their centrality in her first function is quite misleading, since the structure of repetition always requires a violation of the linear temporality of the narrative. Moreover, an objective, complementary representation through characters' flashbacks is almost a theoretical concept, since it would present fully reliable characters that recount the exact truth with a sincere, unbiased memory; and that is not only unlikely—the exact opposite of the Rashomon effect—but also weak from a dramatic point of view.

Thus, despite the similarity with Robert's functions, my distinction among complementary and contradictory narration does not fully correspond to her classification, as it becomes clear by her prime example of her first function: Brian De Palma's *Snake Eyes*. Throughout *Snake Eyes* the multiplication of images on the central event—a political assassination—is self-reflexively

[6] I actually identify an in-between category—"ambiguous multiperspectivity"—that I regard as particularly productive in ecological terms (see chapter 5): however, to my knowledge, no movie presents this typology.

thematized; its setting, the Atlantic City Arena during a boxing match carefully covered by security cameras, strikingly resonates with Bode's hypothetical example of multiperspectivity mentioned in the introduction (2011, 198–199).[7] However, in De Palma's movie, we first experience the political assassination through the protagonist's focalization, Rick Santoro (Nicolas Cage), who then investigates on the event by gathering different characters' versions: among them, Kevin Dunne (Gary Sinise) purposely "misreports" the facts, in James Phelan's terms (2005a), to mislead Santoro about his role as the mastermind of the operation. Dunne is an intradiegetic homodiegetic unreliable narrator, and his story explicitly contradicts another version, which will be confirmed by the security cameras. Thus, by presenting (at least) two incompatible versions of its central mystery, *Snake Eyes* cannot be taken as an example of complementary narration.

Contradictory narration necessarily requires the presence of at least one unreliable narrator. The problem of theorizing the unreliable narration in a transmedial context has been widely explored in the last years (Brütsch 2015; Thon 2016), with lack of consensus around the extent of the concept. According to Volker Ferenz, for example, focalizers such as the protagonist of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) "cannot be held accountable for distorting the fictional world simply because they do not narrate it" (2005, 140). However, in Brütsch's analysis, the "filmic prototype" of unreliable narration "presents the events of the story in such a way so as to prompt the audience to make erroneous inferences about the reality of characters, events, or entire worlds" (222), thus restricting perspective to the central character and mostly employing heterodiegetic narrative situations: in this case, in stark contrast with Ferenz's proposal, *The Sixth Sense* would then be the prime example of unreliable narration in cinema. However, it should be noted that the label "unreliable narration" can only be applied metaphorically to movies such as *The Sixth Sense* or Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019), which present unreliable focalizers, not unreliable narrators, but which for our analysis work like the homodiegetic narration in Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999). In his reconsideration of the concept, Per Krogh Hansen identifies four different forms of unreliable narration: among them, "*internarrational unreliability* designates the situation in which a narrator's version of incidents is contrasted by another or several other narrators' versions" (2007, 241, original emphasis): this is the form of unreliability employed by multiperspective narratives.

[7] "One and the same event is recorded as though by differently positioned cameras in a stadium and then repeatedly replayed from these different points of view" (Bode 198–199).

Since Hansen himself expands his definition to also consider focalizers, I suggest including both narrators' and focalizers' accounts in our examples of multiperspectivity.

Finally, I would like to mention a hybrid typology that blends contradictory and complementary forms of narration: this is not the "ambiguous multiperspectivity" that I will discuss in chapter 5, but a medium-specific example typical of audiovisual media. In cinema, it is exemplified by Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* (2019), which presents a series of narratorial accounts about the night of Harlan Thrombey's (Christopher Plummer) death, revealing the truthful course of the events on a visual level. In this case, there is a rupture between the *verbal* and the *visual* representation of the events: while Harlan's family members lie verbally, the flashbacks unmask them by showing what they seek to hide. This peculiar rupture between image and word is thematized throughout the movie, in particular by Harlan's attempt to create a false alibi for his nurse, Marta Cabrera (Ana De Armas), who seems to be accidentally responsible for his death. Since Marta cannot lie without vomiting, Harlan instructs her to give true but incomplete answers: "Don't lie, tell fragments of the truth, in this exact order." In James Phelan's account, then, Marta would be an unreliable narrator who "underreports," while the other family members directly "misreport" the events (2005a): however, regardless of the form of unreliability they exhibit, flashbacks will reveal the truth in an objective, unbiased way. Thus, in this hybrid form we find a *verbally contradictory and visually complementary narration*.

Magnitude

The second aspect I analyze here is a quantitative feature that Sternberg and Tamar Yacobi, in relation to unreliability, call "magnitude" (2015, 416). In their account, magnitude is "the size of the discourse segment found troublesome and consequently integrated in perspectival terms" (416). Here, I adopt the term to discuss the *length* of the discourse segment that presents multiperspectivity. Like unreliability, multiperspectivity with repetition can come in all magnitudes, from the extremely local to the multipart global. Thus, after the small scale of the mind-tricking replay, we may find the local segment, represented by Park's *Joint Security Area*, or Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997), where the shopping-mall money exchange—and only that single scene—is presented three times from different character perspectives. As noted by Bordwell, "[t]he side-by-side replays make the whole money drop stand out as a block, as does the chapter title

("Money Exchange: For Real This Time") and the length (more than twenty minutes)" (2023, 369). In this case, with a reference to the concept of local fictionality in global nonfiction (and vice versa), I will speak of *local multiperspectivity* in a global framework of non-multiperspective narration (see Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh 2015). The opposite case would be perhaps a block of nonfocalized narration in a globally multiperspective work: for this typology, the segment must clearly stand out as a block, through extradiegetic tags or other paratextual markers. Take, for example, the third part of *The Handmaiden*, which—after two sections constituted by flashbacks narrated by Sook-hee (Kim Tae-ri) and Izumi Hideko (Kim Min-hee), respectively—adopts an impersonal narration that shifts between the three main characters without any perspective overtaking the other two.

The third level of magnitude is work-length multiperspectivity, most famously exemplified by *Rashomon*. However, it should be noted that *Rashomon*—as many similar examples of narratorial contradictory multiperspectivity, such as Zhang Yimou's *Hero*—presents a heterodiegetic frame. In fact, the presence of the frame is more common in narratorial, contradictory multiperspectivity, where the different perspectives are usually presented by intradiegetic homodiegetic nonframing narrators. In *Rashomon*, for example, the existence of the frame may lead one to prefer a particular interpretation of the movie: according to Berys Gaut, the framing story at the Rashomon Gate "is presented in an unambiguous manner" (2011, 187), thus prompting him to prefer the "moral degradation interpretation" of the movie over the relativity one. Therefore, I propose to consider the distinction between work-length multiperspectivity and *frameless* work-length multiperspectivity, in which the narrative completely relies on different character perspectives. In contrast to literature, where the frameless first-person multiperspectivity is quite common[8]—as in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930)—unmediated narratorial multiperspectivity in cinema seems to be rare. Rob Reiner's *Flipped* (2010) is perhaps the most suitable example for my frameless work-length multiperspectivity, as it regularly shifts perspectives between its two protagonists, presenting alternating sequences as blocks with extradiegetic homodiegetic narrators.

The fourth and final variable involves what Sternberg calls "multipart work," such as Christine Edzard's *Little Dorrit* (1987), Clint Eastwood's *Iwo Jima* diptych (2006), and Ned Benson's *The*

[8] As Vera Nünning points out, "[f]rom Wilkie Collins' novel *The Moonstone* onwards, there has been a tradition—which was recently revived—of featuring more than one homodiegetic narrator […] without the device of an omniscient voice that organises the tales and embeds them in its own discourse" (2015a, 89).

Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby (2014). While *Little Dorrit* and *Eleanor Rigby* seem to be expanded, multipart versions of those movies, like *Flipped* and *Gone Girl*, which present a "love" story from the two lovers' perspectives, the *Iwo Jima* diptych shows a historical event from different perspectives of characters who are part of two opposing sides.

Explicit resolution

The third key feature of multiperspective movies concerns the degree of openness or closure—a structural dimension directly tied to the experiential effect of uncertainty. This is a particularly slippery category, since there is no unanimous consensus on the meaning of narrative closure, "a familiar concept that is curiously undertheorized in scholarly work on narrative" (Caracciolo 2022a, 35). For the moment, I will thus limit my analysis to a relatively rough distinction between movies whose central event encounters explicit resolution and those that present more evident gaps of indeterminacy; I will return to this issue in greater depth in the following section on multiperspective uncertainty.

In general, narrative closure tends to be strongest in cases of contradictory multiperspectivity, where one version of events is ultimately designated as the "truth"—either through paratextual inserts (the fourth feature), as in Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel* (2021), or within the diegesis itself, as in Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995). This is precisely why many movies commonly cited as examples of the Rashomon effect ultimately do not fully qualify as such: in Anderson's definition, as we have seen, the Rashomon effect obtains if it is not possible "to disqualify any particular version of the truth," in a context of "social pressure for closure on the question" (71). This lack of closure seems to set *Rashomon* apart from Elsaesser's mind-game films, since they "offer narrative closure, albeit closure requiring an elevated effort on the viewer's part, where *Rashomon* does not" (Davis and Burnham 2016, 103). However, I would hesitate to draw such a general distinction between *Rashomon* and mind-game films in terms of closure: among the movies that are usually considered capable of producing the Rashomon effect, for example, Nolan's *Memento* (2000) plays a peculiar role, as it belongs to Elsaesser's examples of "productive pathologies" (24). Its protagonist, Leonard (Guy Pearce), has become the archetypal character suffering from amnesia: his condition, while different from Tyler Durden's schizophrenia in *Fight Club*, produces the same split self typical of pathologies of subjectivity (29–30). Thus, I would

argue, the repetition structure in *Memento*,[9] as in most mind-tricking movies with delusional protagonists, relies on a singular form of multiperspectivity: the repeated scene is seen (at least) twice during the narrative by the same character's perspective, which, given their condition, produces the cognitive challenge and readerly effect of multiperspectivity. Similarly, in Hansen's account of internarrational unreliability, "[t]he other narrator can, in this respect, be identical with the first if, for example, a span of time or gained knowledge occurs between the two positions" (241). A particular case of such "gained knowledge" can also arise, I suggest, when a pathological protagonist comes to recognize his own delusions—delusions that have shaped the narrative up to that point, as seen in Lars Bernaerts's concept of "narrative delirium" (2009). Therefore, the lack of closure on the fate of Leonard's wife may be considered one of the most famous examples of "egregious gaps" in cinema (Abbott 2013, 112), produced by the protagonist's contradictory memories.

Lack of closure in multiperspectivity may occur in different ways: I will discuss later in the chapter the distinction between epistemological and ethical uncertainty, as both my case studies challenge the conventional lack of resolution of multiperspective narratives. Sticking here to narrative closure on the level of the plot, there is another typology to briefly address, namely "impossible puzzle films," which "do not allow a single interpretive resolution to achieve full closure," thus producing a prolonged quest that "can maintain a distinct interpretive multiplicity that viewers may appreciate for various reasons" (Kiss and Willemsen 185). Among them, never-ending loop narratives play a special role, as in *Triangle*, whose paradoxical structure produces character doublings and repetitions of events, with sequences seen repeatedly from different perspectives of the same focalizing protagonist. If it is true that the plot "does in fact remain linear, following one protagonist progressing through the looping world" (176), its paradoxical causality—with the actions of each Jess (Melissa George) causing events to happen to the other Jesses—generates a repetition structure where the same event is seen by different spatial perspectives occupied by the same Jess.

Paratextual inserts

[9] I refer here to the contradictory memories of Leonard pinching his wife to tease her or giving her an insulin injection.

The fourth feature is strictly related to the dialectic between openness and closure, since the presence of paratextual or "written inserts" (Thon 167) often marks one version of the events as the "truth," thus providing explicit resolution. At the same time, it also stems from another formal feature of multiperspective narratives—segmentivity—that I will discuss later in the chapter in relation to slowness. Paratextual inserts are usually employed to spatially or temporally locate a particular event into the diegetic storyworld (Thon 172); in multiperspective movies, they may also divide the narrative into chapters, or parts, each presenting a different perspective. In complex narratives, captions frequently work as orienting strategies for recipients to navigate across different time frames and flashbacks, without losing contact with the diachronic course of the plot. Moreover, in multiperspective movies the name of the narrator or focalizer may be added to the chapter label, as in *Elephant* or *The Last Duel*. Thus, I suggest that paratextual inserts serve two main functions, an orienting one and a compositional one: (1) they orient recipients through complex multiperspective narratives; and (2) they mark one version of the events as the truthful one.

I will briefly distinguish between different degrees of cognitive challenge produced by the presence or absence of written inserts, taking *Gone Girl*, *The Handmaiden* and *The Last Duel* as my examples. All three movies present some kind of paratextual inserts: in *Gone Girl* there are only temporal tags that keep track of the hours and days that pass from the morning of Amy's (Rosamund Pike) disappearance; *The Handmaiden* has a simple division in three parts through written inserts, while *The Last Duel* presents a more complex tagging, with both spatiotemporal and chapter tags. *Gone Girl* shares many features with the mind-game film (Elsaesser 2018, 15): however, like in *Rashomon*, where "[i]t is not until later in the film when the narrative truths start to conflict, with the second account of the events […] that the audience will even begin to realize their role as negotiators" (Davis and Burnham 96), in *Gone Girl* the main twist is the very existence of another, unexpected perspective: being the center of the mystery, Amy's perspective breaks in as a surprise, transforming the movie from a detective fiction into a "suspense thriller," thus problematizing its narrative closure (Buckland 2021, 38).

Conversely, *The Handmaiden* presents a lower degree of cognitive challenge, by hinting at its multiperspective structure. While the division into parts and the strategic gaps left by the first narrator serve dramatic purposes, they also subtly signal the presence of alternative perspectives from the outset. Finally, *The Last Duel* represents the most basic level of effort, as it denies both

surprise for the existence of other perspectives and cognitive challenge on its closure, explicitly stated through paratextual inserts. As a historical legal drama, the movie presents three contradictory points of view on the same event, marking each block with the number of the chapter and the title "The truth according to" the focalizing character, thus revealing since the beginning its contradictory multiperspective structure. Moreover, when the movie reaches the third and final chapter, Marguerite's (Jodie Comer) perspective, the words "according to Marguerite de Carrouges" start fading and ultimately disappear, leaving only "the truth" lingering on the screen. While certainly not the sole orienting device or indicator of closure, paratextual inserts can nonetheless play a central role in shaping and categorizing multiperspective movies.

Multiperspective Uncertainty

Uncertainty is perhaps the most significant and ethically productive among the experiential effects elicited by multiperspective narratives, particularly when considered through both cognitive and ethical lenses. While the popularity of the so-called Rashomon effect has led much of the critical discourse to focus on the epistemological side—that is, the impossibility of arriving at a single, authoritative version of events—this section will also address the ethical dimensions of such uncertainty. It is important to stress, however, that epistemological and ethical forms of uncertainty are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they often intersect and reinforce one another in complex ways.[10] In the next chapter, my reading of *Tell Me Why* will illustrate how epistemological gaps can serve as a trigger for ethical uncertainty, prompting readers to question not only what they know, but also to revisit their moral beliefs and assumptions and their empathetic engagement towards the protagonists. Similarly, *Monster* builds on a gap in knowledge—or a selective omission—that becomes ethically charged through the shifting positions of its multiple focalizers. In *Elephant*, by contrast, there is no significant epistemological gap: the movie's various sections are merely juxtaposed in a complementary manner, allowing the audience to witness the school shooting event from the perspectives of both victims and perpetrators. Rather than generating uncertainty about the sequence of events or the reliability of perspectives, the narrative offers a

[10] The entanglement of different types of uncertainty is effectively captured by philosophers Richard Bradley and Mareile Drechsler (2014), who distinguish between "empirical," "ethical," "option," and "state space uncertainty" to account for the multiple challenges faced in processes of decision-making.

coherent—albeit fragmented—chronology. However, this coherence does not translate into ethical resolution. On the contrary, Van Sant deliberately shifts the focus from the more conventional drive toward narrative closure typical of multiperspective narratives to a form of ethical uncertainty in which the absence of clear moral framing or explanatory motivation for the perpetrators' acts resists easy judgment, thus leaving recipients in a state of inexplicability. Before turning to *Elephant* and *Monster*, this section thus explores the idea of (narrative) closure as well as the epistemological and ethical dimensions of multiperspective uncertainty.

In a comprehensive overview of narrative closure, Tobias Klauk et al. observe that all accounts of the concept "rely on the notion of a recipient's attitude towards the text" (2016, 26). Following Noël Carroll's definition, for example, narrative closure could be regarded as a special kind of closure that involves the plot, "the phenomenological feeling of finality that is generated when all the questions saliently posed by the narrative are answered" (2007, 1), and narratives may also present other forms of closure. Klauk and colleagues thus propose a distinction between narrative closure—the type of closure concerned with the plot of a narrative—"thematic closure" and "tellability closure" (27). Like narrative closure, thematic closure is described as a feature of the plot: yet a novel "may feature narrative closure but no thematic closure" as the thematic point of the story does not necessarily need resolution on the level of the plot (29). Similarly, discussing the third typology, they argue that "it is obvious that narrative closure […] and tellability closure need not coincide," since "it may be the very point of a narrative to have no narrative closure"; and tellability—the reason(s) why a narrative is worthy of being told (see Baroni 2013)—does not necessarily "rest on the plot" (30).

While undoubtedly insightful, their taxonomy remains a bit murky, as concepts such as "theme" or "tellability" would require a more thorough exploration, and others—like narrative's ethical dimension—are completely sidestepped. What interests me here, however, is their problematization of the concept of narrative closure as a single phenomenon. In their view, one of the problems in defining closure lies on the difficulty of isolating a narrative's main plotline: some narratives appear indeed to feature "more than one plot," thus challenging a dichotomic conceptualization of closure and openness. Interestingly enough for our analysis, the example they take for discussing this point is Faulkner's multiperspective novel *As I Lay Dying*. In 59 chapters, as they summarize, "each of the fifteen characters tells his or her own story about the events," thus inviting the reconstruction of "many different plot-descriptions, depending on whose point of view

you take as a basis" (34). They go on noting that if, for example, one decides to focus on Anse's point of view, the novel would provide narrative closure: "[f]or Anse, the trip has the goal of getting rid of some burden and getting a new wife and new teeth"; by contrast, his illegitimate son, Jewel, sees the trip as a way of getting emancipated from Anse, "and the question whether he manages to do so in the end does not get answered" (34). In this way, a novel like *As I Lay Dying* challenges the dualistic distinction between openness and closure, thus hinting at a scalar reading of narrative resolution. After all, as highlighted by H. Porter Abbott, "most narratives of any complexity fail to close in some respects, however strong the sense of overall closure may be" (2005, 66). While a deeper exploration of narrative closure falls beyond the scope of this chapter, what is particularly relevant for my analysis is that multiperspective narratives provide a strong sense of closure when they foreground a central mystery to be solved.[11] In other words, by focusing on a single event reported from different perspectives, the repetitive typology of multiperspectivity is particularly well-suited to elicit a strong sense of closure in its resolution. I argue that this effect arises from a strong convergence between narrative and tellability closure: here, the different character perspectives are not simply additive but are orchestrated toward clarifying the highly tellable mystery at the heart of the plot.

In his discussion of narrative tension and Meir Sternberg's triad of "narrative universals" (2001)—suspense, curiosity, and surprise—Raphaël Baroni observes that multiperspective narratives are well-adapted to foreground the emotional interest of curiosity, largely because they often draw upon the generic conventions of detective fiction: "[t]he repeated narration of the same event (which may include contradictory or complementary versions) is a common device in mystery narratives and can therefore be linked to the dynamics of curiosity" (2017, 103). More specifically, the repeated event at the core of many multiperspective narratives frequently consists of an epistemic gap in the past: who killed the Defense Secretary in *Snake Eyes*? what really happened to Amy in *Gone Girl*? In such instances, the emotional interest of curiosity thus arises from the uncertainty triggered by these narrative gaps in the past. As David Herman argues, plots are generally set in motion by the so-called "world disruption" (2009, 19-21), an instability generating tensions that readers would expect to be resolved at the end of the narrative. As in detective fiction, the central mystery of multiperspective narratives is produced by this type of instability. Therefore, Eyal Segal's observations on narrative closure in detective fiction are

[11] I have discussed this typology under the heading of "single-mystery plot" in D'Amato (forthcoming).

particularly relevant for this type of multiperspectivity: "since the reader's interest is so exclusively focused on a single issue"—in our case, the true nature of the repeated event—"from beginning to end, his sense of 'relief' is especially powerful when this issue is at last resolved by the solution of the mystery" (2010, 169). Many multiperspective movies provide indeed a diegetic supplement through the multiplication of characters' perspectives as if they were pieces of a puzzle, thus producing an overall resolution of their central mystery. At the same time, when narrative closure is denied and the central event remains unresolved, the sense of frustration or cognitive dissonance experienced by recipients can be particularly intense, thus producing the epistemological dimension of multiperspective uncertainty.

After a period of relative neglect in the scholarly debate, the experience of uncertainty has, over the past decade, received renewed critical attention within narrative theory—particularly through cognitive and reader-oriented approaches (see, e.g., Abbott 2013; Serpell 2014; Caracciolo, 2022a). Uncertainty may be understood as a core feature of narrative itself, closely tied to Sternberg's narrative universals: each of the three arises from an epistemic gap, and, as such, is fundamentally rooted in the reader's experience of uncertainty. As we have seen with the Rashomon effect, the epistemological uncertainty raised by multiperspective narratives is particularly powerful when they foreground a central mystery with a strong pressure for closure on the question. The contradictory open multiperspectivity exemplified by Kurosawa's movie exploits the cognitive drive for coherence while ultimately frustrating it, thus reinforcing recipients' engagement and drawing their attention to the limits of knowledge and perception. For Kiss and Willemsen, *Rashomon* is a paradigmatic example of a movie whose unresolved mystery generates the psychological state of "cognitive dissonance": in their view, art cinema often keeps such mysteries "unresolved or unresolvable to preserve effects of ambiguity or dissonance" (151). Examining the effects of multiperspective narratives on the act of reading, Vera Nünning similarly describes multiperspectivity as a "readers' playground": here, recipients are brought to exercise their mind-reading skills, as it is often necessary to combine and coordinate different perspectives, construct chronological sequences of events, and understand the motivations of several characters (Nünning 2014, 194). Before Nünning, Wolfgang Iser had already drawn attention to the coordinating role played by the reader in multiperspective narratives—a role typically determined by the privileged position of having access to information from multiple sources (see Iser 1974, 75). However, as we have seen, there are cases in which even the most attentive reader is denied

such access: "[w]hen different interpretations are both possible and irreconcilable, readers have to deal with complexity and ambivalence, and accept a denial of closure" (Nünning 190).

Yet C. Namwali Serpell has significantly emphasized that the instability generated by multiplicity—her term for multiperspectivity—carries a distinctly *ethical* dimension (2014, 115–118). This insight invites a crucial distinction: the epistemological uncertainty typified by *Rashomon* is not the only form of uncertainty that multiperspective narratives can produce. In fact, as my two case studies demonstrate, multiperspectivity's lack of closure can also shift from the plot-driven need for resolution characteristic of epistemological uncertainty to the more open-ended, affectively charged confrontation with different ethical positions. As discussed in the introduction, Marco Caracciolo's model of "empathetic perspective-taking" offers a useful framework for analyzing such effects. He identifies five distinct aspects of perspective recipients can simulate: somatic, perceptual, epistemic, emotional, and axiological (2016, 39–40). While multiperspective narratives often invite the simultaneous engagement of several of these aspects, critical analysis tends to focus disproportionately on the *epistemic* dimension—typically associated with uncovering the "truth" of the *fabula*. However, in works like *Elephant*, *Monster*, or Yves Attal's *The Accusation* (2021),[12] the emotional and axiological dimensions become central.

As Rita Felski has noted in her distinction between "alignment" and "allegiance," one may adopt certain aspects of a character's perspective—such as the epistemic or perceptual—without necessarily endorsing their moral or ideological stance (see Felski 2019). In *The Accusation*, this distinction becomes crucial: the movie revolves around a rape accusation and is structured through alternating perspectives—from the accused, Alexandre (Ben Attal), to the victim, Mila (Suzanne Jouannet), and their families—inviting the reader to piece together what "really" happened. Initially, this structure foregrounds epistemological uncertainty: the narrative sets up a legal and moral mystery, echoing the logic of detective fiction discussed above, as readers attempt to reconstruct the events of the night in question. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that resolution on the level of facts—though ultimately offered by the judicial outcome—is insufficient to resolve the deeper ethical tensions at stake. Attal deliberately unsettles audiences' moral alignment by presenting each character's internal logic and emotional landscape, thus prompting them to simulate conflicting emotional and axiological perspectives. The ambiguity lies not only in *what* happened, but in *how* it should be interpreted. This shift from epistemological to ethical

[12] *The Accusation* is my main example to discuss the concept of ethical uncertainty in D'Amato (2024a).

uncertainty destabilizes binary thinking—guilt versus innocence, victim versus perpetrator—and demands a more nuanced engagement with questions of power, privilege, and consent. Thus, *The Accusation* exemplifies how multiperspectivity can unsettle explicit resolution even when the narrative's factual details are ultimately revealed. Before exploring the cases of *Elephant* and *Monster*, the next section turns to another key experiential effect of multiperspective narratives—slowness—primarily elicited by disruption of plot-driven multiperspectivity and formal strategies such as segmentivity and paratextual elements.

Slow Multiperspectivity

If uncertainty is linked to the third feature (explicit resolution), the second experiential effect I focus on in this chapter—multiperspectivity's potential for slowness—is closely tied to the fourth feature (paratextual inserts) and to the related concept of "segmentivity." Originally developed by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Brian McHale in relation to poetry,[13] and later adapted by Sean O'Sullivan in his theorization of serial storytelling (2019), segmentivity is defined as "the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments" (McHale 2010, 28). For O'Sullivan, segmentivity is critical to all serial forms: "the juxtaposition of distinct installments is constitutive to serial meaning-making, just as the juxtaposition of segments of language is constitutive to the designs of poetry" (51). In this context, I adopt this conceptualization of segmentivity as a central formal principle of multiperspective narratives, in which—to paraphrase O'Sullivan—*the juxtaposition of distinct character perspectives is constitutive to multiperspective meaning-making*. I have discussed this concept in greater detail elsewhere (D'Amato 2025a): in this section, I am interested in what way the interplay of segmentivity, paratextual elements, and the undermining of teleological progression elicits slowness in multiperspective narratives.

My understanding of slowness is deeply informed by Caracciolo's discussion of slow narrative within the context of the Anthropocene. According to Caracciolo, "slowness emerges when narrative becomes uncoupled from linear teleology and *still retains the audience's attention*"

[13] McHale proposes that segmentivity functions as the "dominant" compositional principle in poetry, analogous to the role "narrativity" plays in narrative (2010).

(2022b, 16, original emphasis). Naturally, the experience of slowness is not an inherent feature of all multiperspective narratives: on the contrary, most examples of multiperspectivity—as we have seen in the previous section—rely on the repetition of an epistemological gap, thus fostering a linear teleology centered on the resolution of a single, plot-driven mystery.[14] However, as the experience of uncertainty becomes particularly powerful when the urge for narrative closure is ultimately thwarted, slowness significantly emerges when multiperspective narratives refrain from foregrounding a central epistemological gap. In other words, while plot-driven multiperspectivity often adheres to a linear teleology—organizing character perspectives around the resolution of a central mystery—what I refer to as "character-driven" multiperspectivity typically departs from conventional narrative progression, emphasizing instead the intricate, multilayered interplay of distinct individual perspectives. When there is no central tellable event to explore and resolve—no gap in the past to trigger the emotional interest of curiosity—recipients' attention departs from the *what* of multiperspectivity and focuses on *how* and *why* the different character perspectives are built and juxtaposed. Therefore, when narrative progression is decelerated and the degree of eventfulness reduced, readers can focus on the small details of similarity and difference between perspectives, on the meanings of their juxtaposition, on the stylistic qualities that shape each character's voice or world construction, thus increasing the complexity of the ongoing negotiation of gaps. My analysis of *Elephant* in the following section will zoom in on this point: the movie deliberately avoids a clear epistemic gap that would work as the engine of narrative progression. Instead, it centers on the fragmented and often mundane episodes of various students' school day, subtly interlacing their experiences through a series of perspectives that gradually converge. This approach prompts audiences to reflect on the ways in which perspectives are constructed and juxtaposed, encouraging a more contemplative engagement with the characters' subjective experiences rather than a quest for an overarching narrative resolution.

The experience of slowness can emerge through a set of narrative strategies typical of multiperspective narratives. Here, I will focus on two formal features (segmentivity and paratextual elements) and two reading strategies (coordination of perspectives and rereading). As noted by Baroni, the "pace of the narrative artifact is also fundamentally regulated by the *material organization* of the medium" (2024, 40, original emphasis), that is, by its "stylistic components,"

[14] See, for example, Carolin Gebauer's argument that "fast-paced multiperspective present-tense novels […] seek to adjust to the shortened attention span of contemporary readers" (2021, 314).

which include segmentivity. For Karin Kukkonen (2024), segmentation in installments, episodes, or chapters can affect the pace of the reading experience, thus conferring a slower or faster rhythm to the narrative. While a high degree of segmentivity cannot be considered as a decelerating formal feature *per se*, segmented time tends to be experienced in a slower mode. Drawing on insights from psychology, Lars Bernaerts argues that "time seems to move more slowly when the narrative is complex and segmented" (2024, 100) and regards segmentivity as one of the principles that foregrounds the potential for slowness in novelistic cycles. In multiperspective narratives, segmentivity frequently works in accordance with strategies of temporal manipulation, such as repetition and variation, devices typical of slow novels in Roy Sommer's account (2024). The principle of repetition-cum-variation is the basic narrative structure of the repetitive multiperspectivity I am exploring here, and patterns of repetition—same setting, characters, events, motifs—dominate and decelerate the reading experience. Thus, I consider segmentivity as a decelerating narrative device when foregrounding multiperspectivity's manipulation of temporal progression, that is, when the gap between segments introduces a new character perspective on the same setting, characters, events, motifs, and so on.

The second formal strategy for slowness typical of multiperspective narratives is close to what Sommer calls "slow entry" (75), that is, paratextual elements and beginnings. Given their high degree of segmentivity, as we have seen, multiperspective narratives are frequently composed by complex paratextual framings, which are likely to decelerate the reading experience. More experimental examples of multiperspectivity can further problematize the access to a character's viewpoint through redundant paratextual framings, setting specific elements as pertaining to one of the perspectives. In the movie *Timecode* (2000), for example, Mike Figgis's use of a split-screen format—simultaneously presenting four continuous, real-time takes—functions as a paratextual device that actively decelerates audience's engagement. *Timecode* employs four 93-minute single takes, visually juxtaposed through the split-screen technique, offering a synchronous example of cinematic multiperspectivity. The four segments are interwoven, with characters crossing paths across separate quadrants, each captured by more than one camera, thus enhancing the interrelation of perspectives within a continuous narrative flow. This formal strategy foregrounds the segmentation of perspectives and prompts a slower exploration of their formal and stylistic elements, thus shifting recipients' attention from narrative progression to simultaneity, divergence, and the interplay between co-occurring storylines. Moreover, several multiperspective narratives

present more than one (framed) beginning. When shifting to a new character, narrative progression is frequently decelerated, and the plot may even start over by recounting the same events and phenomena from a new vantage point. This multiplication of beginnings is an important feature of slowness in multiperspective narratives and could also lead to boredom when the patterns of repetition become omnipresent and narrative progression is consistently disrupted. In multiperspective narratives, linear progression is frequently sidestepped in favor of circular repetition, thus prompting readers to adopt a slow-paced approach to the text.

Multiperspective narratives generally encourage two fundamental reading strategies which can decelerate our engagement with the text: the coordination of character perspectives, and an extensive act of rereading. In *The Implied Reader*, Iser argues for the active role of readers in multiperspective narratives: "the task of coordination is handed over to the reader, for he alone has all the information at his disposal" (75). Similarly, for Vera Nünning complex multiperspective novels prompt the reader "to combine and coordinate different beliefs, desires and wishes of a wide array of actors and perspectives" (2014, 193). Readers thus must confront and even adopt several perspectives to make sense of the text and the storyworld. The process of coordination can happen on different levels: while plot-driven multiperspectivity prompts readers to find clues and details in search for fulfillment and narrative closure, character-driven texts generally retain recipients' attention through a multilayered entanglement of perspectives. Here, coordinating several perspectives involves a "thickening of attention" (Caracciolo 2022b, 11) through which predisposed readers explore the different layers of character perspectives and their ways of intertwining and taking distance from each other. Readers, in fact, can simulate different aspects of a character's perspective, not only the epistemic one: when the teleology of the plot is disrupted and the goal-oriented narrative undermined, recipients are more likely to embrace or distance themselves from emotional, somatic, or axiological aspects of characters' perspectives. In complex multiperspective novels involving several viewpoints, we could find ourselves juggling from one perspective to another running the risk of being overwhelmed by the amount of emotional and axiological perspectives. Conversely, coordinating them in a slow mode can prove beneficial for grasping the multilayered entanglement of character perspectives.

Finally, rereading is by no means a defining characteristic of all multiperspective narratives. Many of them adopt a conventional, goal-oriented narrative progression, with perspectives juxtaposed in a linear way and no layers of entanglement to be exposed. However, more

sophisticated examples of multiperspectivity require readers to revise their earlier assumptions in light of the new viewpoint, thus inviting rereading and creating slowness. For Gary Weissman, "works that are designed to be reread from the start generate narrative slowness" (2024, 162). His example is Ted Chiang's novella "Story of Your Life," where three different strands of story are consistently fragmented and interweaved, thus confronting readers with a nonlinear progression that can only be navigated through double reading. Similarly, multiperspective narratives are frequently highly segmented and force readers to juggle from one perspective to the next, disrupting linear progression and fostering a systematic rereading from the start. When presented with a new version of an event, for example, recipients are invited to reread the previous account to look for incongruities and omissions, or to immerse themselves again into a certain character's emotional reaction or axiological position. In *Monster*, as we will see, the narrative shifts between the perspectives of a young boy, Minato (Sōya Kurokawa), his mother Saori (Sakura Andō), and a teacher, Mr. Hori (Eita Nagayama), each of whom provides a different interpretation of a traumatic event. As the story unfolds, each new perspective reframes the recipients' understanding of the characters' motivations and the central mystery, forcing them to revisit and reevaluate previous sequences. The story initially presents Mr. Hori as a potentially sinister figure, with Saori's perspective suspecting him of being a molester. However, as the narrative progresses and we shift to Mr. Hori's perspective, the audience is prompted to reconsider their initial assumptions. This gradual revelation of previous omissions invites a slow, reflective engagement with the narrative, as viewers are encouraged to revisit previous sequences to spot discrepancies and rethink their judgments about the characters, the event, and the moral questions at stake.

The two movies I explore in the next two sections are particularly well-suited to exemplify multiperspectivity's potential for slowness (*Elephant*) and uncertainty (*Monster*).[15] More specifically, *Elephant* deliberately undermines teleological narrative progression and challenges some of the key features of multiperspectivity to reflect on the inexplicability of school shooting. Similarly, *Monster* foregrounds the ethical dimension of uncertainty over the epistemological one, encouraging viewers to coordinate different values and beliefs and revisit their previous moral assumptions.

[15] Even though I focus *Elephant*'s potential for slowness and *Monster*'s foregrounding of uncertainty, however, both case studies hold promise for eliciting both experiential effects.

Long Takes and Maze-Like Hallways

By the end of *Elephant*, viewers are left with more questions than answers, as Van Sant resists any clear explanation or moral resolution for the tragic event depicted. Set in a suburban high school in Portland, Oregon, the movie centers on the events leading up to a fictional school shooting, heavily inspired by the infamous 1999 Columbine High School massacre, in which two twelfth graders murdered thirteen students and one teacher. Widely debated and critically recognized—winner of the Palme d'Or at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival—Van Sant's work has been discussed as a masterful example of deconstruction (see Little 2013) and ethical engagement with a complex issue (Braselmann 2019; Rich, 2012). By avoiding any straightforward explanation and subverting basic narrative and visual conventions, Van Sant prompts predisposed viewers to move beyond a purely epistemological inquiry, redirecting their interpretive efforts beyond a simple cause-and-effect framework. But why did he choose to adopt a multiperspective structure? And how does this multiperspectivity differ from the most conventional, teleological examples found in contemporary cinema? While the movie's multilayered complexity is conveyed through a broad set of formal and visual strategies, here I want to focus on the crucial role of slowness in foregrounding the ethical significance of *Elephant*. More specifically, the lack of closure and the undermining of linear narrative progression elicit the experiential effects discussed in this chapter and help create a space for recipients' ethical inquiry. At the same time, the movie strongly relies on the interplay of empathetic perspective-taking and cognitive dissonance—to borrow Caracciolo's terms again (2016)—that generate what Jennifer A. Rich has described as the "dialectic of association and disassociation" at the center of the movie (2012, 1313).

In her book on the fictional representation of school shootings, Silke Braselmann offers an insightful narratological analysis of Van Sant's movie, regarding multiperspectivity as the "most essential structural and formal aspect of *Elephant*" (242). She aptly notes how Van Sant's use of multiperspectivity differs significantly from the Rashomon effect, and links the movie's denial of closure to the "extratextual experience made in the aftermath of a school shooting" (237). What interests me in particular, however, is her claim that multiperspectivity serves here to highlight "incompleteness" and the "impossibility of ever seeing the full picture" (256). It is precisely the emphasis on incompleteness to set *Elephant*'s lack of closure apart from, for example, the openness of *Rashomon* or *Memento*. While Kurosawa and Nolan present contradictory accounts of the same

event—offering viewers an excess of information that includes both reliable and unreliable versions—*Elephant* resists the totalizing logic of complementary multiperspectivity by withholding crucial narrative elements and refusing to supply all the necessary pieces of the puzzle. It thus represents a rare instance of complementary *open* multiperspectivity—that is, a movie that juxtaposes partial perspectives and individual experiences of a shared event, yet ultimately resists assembling a complete or coherent totalizing knowledge, unlike more conventional examples such as *The Handmaiden*, *Dunkirk*, or *Oppenheimer*, which orient viewers toward a univocal understanding. *Elephant* foregrounds a lack of closure that is not strictly epistemological but instead emerges from the absence of epistemic gaps altogether, as the viewers' knowledge of what occurred—and of the perpetrators' identities—is never in doubt. This disruptive effect is achieved through the constant undermining of linear teleology and the refusal to adhere to the most conventional examples of multiperspectivity. More specifically, *Elephant* employs three primary narrative and visual strategies to subvert the conventional structure of the Rashomon effect: (1) it dismantles plot-driven multiperspectivity by avoiding a central epistemological gap—thus arousing a slow viewing practice; (2) it disrupts clear segmentation through fluid temporal and spatial overlaps and ambiguous transitions between perspectives; and (3) it complicates subjective representation, thus challenging viewers' empathetic engagement with the protagonists.

Unfolding over the course of a single day—with flashbacks from the perspectives of the perpetrators—the movie follows several students in a seemingly ordinary high school as they go about mundane activities—walking to class, taking photographs, attending a Gay-Straight Alliance meeting, and interacting with one another in fleeting exchanges. Interwoven with these aimless sequences are scenes featuring two boys, Alex and Eric, whose quiet detachment and methodical, routine preparations—ordering guns online, preparing for the massacre, playing Beethoven on the piano or a first-person shooter video game—slowly but inevitably lead to the tragic ending. As we have seen, Van Sant radically undermines teleological progression by denying the central epistemological gap that typically motivates a Rashomon-like narrative structure. In a hypothetical plot-driven version of the movie, for example, viewers might have followed several students without knowing the identity of victims and perpetrators, thus experiencing suspense around the question of *who* will carry out the massacre. Similarly, Van Sant could have adopted a more conventional procedural structure, with partial or contradictory intradiegetic narrators recounting various versions of the events, as it happens in *Rashomon*, *Hero*, or *Knives Out*. Here, however,

there is no epistemic gap about the core events: the audience knows—also relying on extradiegetic knowledge—who the perpetrators are, what they plan to do, and how their massacre will end. By sidestepping a narrative built around epistemic gaps, Van Sant disengages the viewer from a forensic or investigative stance. As noted by Holly Myers in her discussion of the director's so-called "Death Trilogy"—which includes *Elephant* as the central installment between *Gerry* (2002) and *Last Days* (2005)—"[t]aking the silence, the mystery, the essential unknowability of death as a given, Van Sant makes no attempt to interrogate or explain […] The result is closer to meditation than to storytelling" (qtd. in Little 116). If, on the level of narrative, this experience of slowness and meditation is elicited by the undermining of linear progression, the movie's visual strategies further reinforce this effect, especially through the pervasive use of extended long takes. In particular, the movie features a series of long takes that closely track various characters as they move through the high school's interior and exterior labyrinthine spaces.

Many scholars have focused on Van Sant's remediation (see Bolter and Grusin 1999) of video games in the movie (Boillat 2011; Rich 1327). In particular, the long tracking shots—despite presenting a "third-person perspective"—appear to echo the aesthetic and spatial dynamics of the first-person shooter game played by Eric and Alex, clearly modeled after *Doom* (1993). I will return to this maze-like spatiality shortly: here, I want to briefly mention another genre of video game that closely mirrors *Elephant*'s use of long takes, namely the "walking simulator." As we will see in the next chapter, the originally dismissive label of walking simulator refers to video games that sidestep mechanical challenges in favor of an exploration of the environment. Here, players are brought to a "Zen-like state of simplicity and awareness, making her more attuned to the physical act of walking by watching an avatar perform it, precisely because she lacks another distracting focus" (Kagen 2017, 283). It is no coincidence, then, that Caracciolo dedicates the last chapter of his book on slow narrative to the "radical environmental storytelling" foregrounded by this genre of video games. In *Elephant*, Van Sant seems to remediate the ludic strategy of walking simulators to dilute temporality and force viewers to stay with the directionless movements of the students, thus highlighting "long, meditative stretches spent traveling between locations" (Caracciolo 2022b, 161).

By resisting fast-paced editing, long takes produce a temporal stretch that compels recipients to stick with the aimless wandering of a focal character. The absence of narrative payoff and goal-oriented movements encourages a more contemplative mode of viewing—one that invites attention

to formal and stylistic elements rather than plot progression. In *Elephant*, this slowness reinforces the thematic resistance to causality and resolution already problematized by uncertainty, positioning viewers as witnesses of the passing of time. It does not surprise that one of the most influential theorists of the so-called "slow cinema," Lutz Koepnick, has devoted an entire monograph to long takes. In *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (2017), Koepnick explores the titular cinematic technique as a strategy which potentially "derails the drives of narrative and desire" (4), thus working as a crucial device to undermine linear teleology and elicit slowness in Caracciolo's sense. More specifically, long takes, "in their very probing of the durational, hope to clear attentional ground for a *radical rupture* in the temporal fabric" (4, emphasis added). In other words, they do not merely decelerate time but set a stage "on which we can retrain out attentional dynamics to encounter something unseen, unheard, or forgotten" and "to witness no less than a rupture in the very fabric of self-managed time" (246). This emphasis on the rupture of time and the emergence of something hidden is precisely one of the main takeaways of *Elephant*'s slowness, perhaps the only hopeful stance provided by the movie. Through the undermining of teleological progression and the diffused adoption of long takes, the movie thus produces a contemplative mode of viewing (see Koepnick 2014) that allow predisposed readers to go beyond the mere investigative dimension of multiperspectivity.

The second strategy I am focusing on brings us back to the remediation of first-person shooters and the foregrounding of a labyrinthine space. Although *Elephant* initially adheres to the conventional segmentation of multiperspective narratives, it soon complicates this structure through overlapping scenes and fluid transitions that blur the boundaries between individual narrative threads. Long tracking shots are once again pivotal to this effect, as the camera begins by following a focal character, only to drift seamlessly into another perspective, thus foregrounding the movie's dialectic of interruption and intersection (see figure 2). Each focal character is conventionally introduced through paratextual inserts—chapter-like title cards bearing their names—a key feature of multiperspective narratives, as discussed in previous sections, which serves to orient viewers through the shifting points of view. Yet Van Sant starts challenging this device by introducing small groups of students: if the first sections are dedicated to individual characters like John and Elias, the segments soon focus on couples, such as Nathan and his

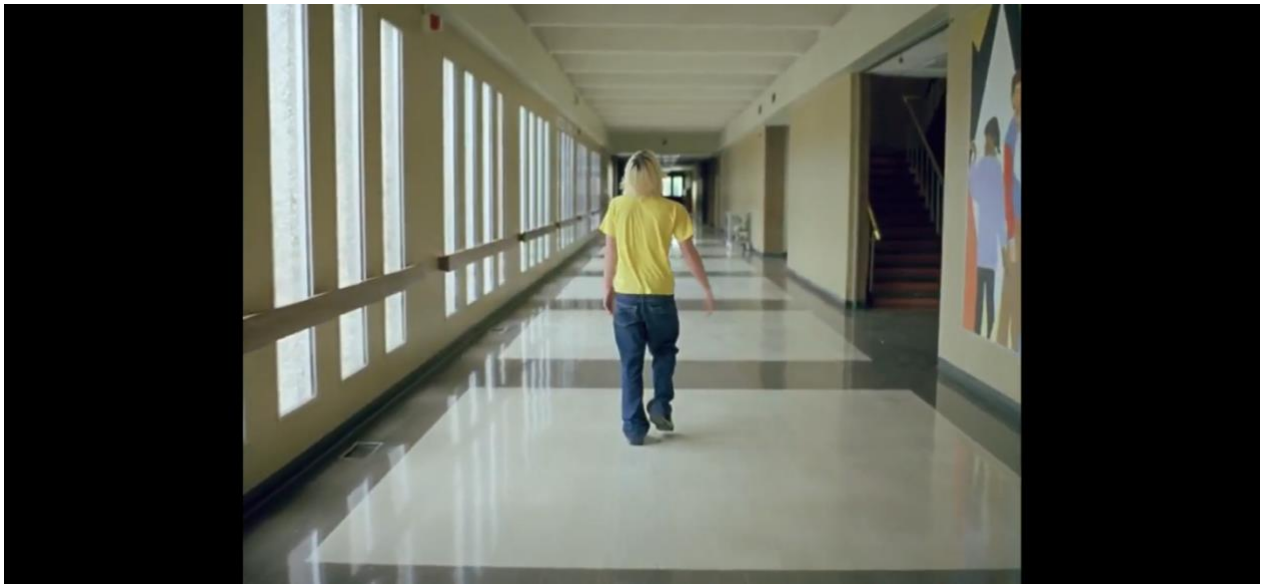

Fig. 2. Long tracking shot following the focal character (John). A still from *Elephant* (Van Sant 2003).

girlfriend Carrie, and the murderers, Alex and Eric, or a group of three friends, Brittany, Jordan, and Nicole, thus complicating, as we will soon see, viewers' empathetic perspective-taking. As the movie progresses, these paratextual elements seem to lose their traditional compositional or orienting function, serving instead merely to assign names to the focal characters—names that would otherwise remain unspoken in the sparse, almost improvisational dialogues.

Elephant thus blurs the boundaries between character perspectives through fluid transitions which are not signaled with traditional audiovisual cues like fades or music, or paratextual inserts such as chapter or temporal tags. Instead, they unfold organically within long tracking shots or stating observational compositions, making it difficult for recipients to pinpoint exactly when one narrative thread ends and another begins. Crucially, the spatial layout of the school contributes to this effect. As noted by many scholars, the hallways are filmed like a maze: for Rich, "[t]he labyrinthine character of the school building, coupled with its soul-numbing anonymity, disorient and alienate the viewer" (1318). She goes on identifying "spatial dislocation," alongside "interruption," "temporal dislocation," and "rejection of interiority," as one of the four key strategies adopted by Van Sant to foreground his dialectic of association and disassociation. Rather than organizing time and space to offer clarity or causality, the director thus invites recipients to experience the school day and the events leading to the shooting as a constellation of overlapping experiences—none of which are framed as definitely central.

Not surprisingly, the labyrinthine hallways are the most significant locations of first-person shooters in the wake of *Doom*, strongly thematized and formally remediated in the movie. For Michael Nitsche, the maze is a paradigmatic example of video game spatiality, one in which the "game world can become ambiguous" because "we lack necessary visual and spatial cues" (2008, 86). *Elephant* remediates this video game aesthetic by adopting the maze-like spatial logic of first-person shooters—not to enable goal-oriented action, but to evoke disorientation and detachment. By stripping the environment of clear visual cues and narrative purpose, Van Sant transforms the school into an ambiguous, uncanny space, echoing the spatial uncertainty of early FPS games while shifting from their mission-driven structure to the aimless wandering of walking simulators.

Finally, the movie subverts the Rashomon-like structure of multiperspectivity by challenging recipients' empathetic perspective-taking with the focal characters. Here, as emphasized by Rich and Braselmann, audiences do not have access to characters' inner consciousnesses and the movie resists any device of subjective representation (Braselmann 242; Rich 1319). Following Caracciolo's aspectual stratification, we could say that viewers align with the characters' *perceptual* perspective without being granted insight into their emotional positions or axiological evaluations. *Elephant*'s protagonists have thus something in common with what Porter Abbott calls "unreadable minds," that is, characters whose consciousness and identity remain opaque and unknowable despite our effort to read them (see 2013, chap. 6). Once again, Van Sant resorts to formal strategies that reinforce the thematic concern with unreadability, unknowability, and inexplicability. This device is particularly striking in the depiction of the shooters: despite their longer screen time, Alex and Eric are never psychologized or framed as complex or tragic figures, as in many recent examples of "negative empathy" towards the perpetrators (see Ercolino and Fusillo 2026). On the contrary, their actions are shown with chilling matter-of-factness, without explanatory commentary or emotional framing. Similarly, the victims are not idealized or individually framed in ways that would invite deeper perspective-taking or even a facile empathy for the suffering.[16] Instead, Van Sant withholds dramatic cues and sentimental direction, leaving the audience in a state of emotional and ethical uncertainty. *Elephant* thus redefines the use of multiperspectivity by stripping it of its conventional epistemological function and reconfiguring it as a device for ethical inquiry and affective disorientation. Through the lack of narrative closure, the slow, meditative pacing of long takes, the fluid transitions, and the undermining of empathetic

[16] I will discuss what Glenda Carpio refers to as the "limits of empathy" (2023) in chapter 4.

perspective-taking, Van Sant resists moral resolution, formally mirroring the movie's thematic emphasis on the inexplicability of school violence and its skepticism towards cause-and-effect explanations.

Black Screens and Normative Boundaries

If *Elephant* foregrounds fluid transitions and blurs the boundaries between its different segments, *Monster*, in contrast, relies on a rigid demarcation into three distinct narrative blocks. This separation is not merely a formal choice, but it closely reflects the movie's key thematic concerns, namely the incommunicability between disparate worlds and the marginalization of non-heteronormative identities. Here, I suggest that multiperspectivity primarily functions as a device that seeks to bridge the gap between these otherwise isolated segments. The rigid boundaries presented by *Monster*—three different sections recounting the same events from the perspectives of a mother (Saori), a teacher (Mr. Hori), and a young boy (Minato)—are demarcated by a black screen serving as a visual paratextual insert. In this way, the black screen not only works as an orienting strategy that articulates the movie's tripartite structure by signaling the temporal and perspectival shifts, but also operates as an interpretive device, hinting at the binary logic and heteronormative dimension of the society portrayed by Kore-eda and the screenwriter Yuji Sakamoto.[17] Much like Van Sant's rejection of reductive explanations and teleological quests, Kore-eda seeks here to problematize the adult compulsion for clarity and resolution. In *Monster*, what falls outside normative and societal frameworks—particularly non-conforming identities or behaviors—is either pathologized, denied, or forcibly rendered legible through the instruments of institutional authority. Apart from the crucial role of segments and boundaries, I am also interested here in two significant formal strategies adopted by the movie's multiperspectivity to deal with complex issues such as bullyism, homophobia, and institutional normativity. On a narrative level, Kore-eda positions Minato's concealed queerness as the traditional epistemic gap of multiperspective narratives. In other words, the boy's inability to articulate his homosexual interest, and the adults' incapacity to make sense of his non-conforming behavior become the

[17] Twenty years after Van Sant's Palme d'Or win, Kore-eda's movie was honored at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival with the Best Screenplay award for Yuji Sakamoto, as well as the Queer Palm, which recognizes the best LGBT-themed work in the selection.

engines of narrative progression. The movie thus soon shifts its focus from *what* happened to Minato to *why* we were unable to understand his behavior: that is, from a purely epistemological to a primarily ethical uncertainty. On a visual level, Kore-eda reinforces the divide among perspectives through framing and camera work: in particular, Saori's and Mr. Hori's sections are dominated by a static camera work, while Minato's segment presents more dynamic camera movements. In the first two sections, the narrow and static framings mirror the adults' restricted understanding of the events; conversely, Minato's part is marked by a fluid visual style, underscoring his perspective's emotional and perceptual openness.

The movie opens with a partial glimpse of someone's legs lying in the grass, followed by a series of atmospheric establishing shots of an unnamed Japanese city at night. This apparent calm—reinforced by a delicate, minimalist piano score—is abruptly disrupted by the blare of a fire alarm, drawing the viewer's attention to a building engulfed in flames. Notably, the music, composed by Ryuichi Sakamoto, is at odds with the visual narrative. Rather than heightening the drama, building suspense, or signaling alarm, the out-of-tune score maintains a restrained, almost meditative quality. This dissonance creates a sense of emotional ambiguity, refusing to anchor the viewer in a clear interpretive stance. Moreover, the repetitive, looping nature of the main melodic line subtly introduces the movie's central formal principle: the nonlinear circularity of multiperspectivity. Just as the music returns to the same motif with slight variations, the movie itself will revisit the same series of events from different perspectives, layering meaning through repetition rather than linear progression. Sakamoto's score thus becomes a first formal and thematic signpost, foreshadowing Kore-eda's concern with partial perspective, misunderstanding, and uncertainty.

Similarly, the burning building serves as both a visual and a diegetic anchor, linking the movie's three distinct sections. Each time the story resets from a new perspective, the transition is marked by the black screen followed by a recurring image of the fire—each time captured from a different spatial vantage point. Repeated motifs—both narrative and audiovisual—thus imbue the movie with a sense of temporal suspension and recursive motion, resisting linear progression in favor of an ever-deepening exploration of ambiguity. If the burning building marks the opening of each narrative section, it is a rainstorm that brings each of them to a close: as we will see, only Minato's segment extends beyond the diegetic boundary marked by the storm, leading to an ambiguous ending whose interpretive openness suggests both a tragic reading and the possibility of hope.

Interestingly, the burning building and the rainstorm also allude to a broader thematic concern of the movie, namely the rigid dichotomies embedded within the Japanese school system and, more broadly, within society at large. Similar binary oppositions—fire and water, light and darkness, human and monster—permeate the narrative and are reinforced by the movie's sharply segmented structure. The movie thus establishes a productive tension between symbolic dualisms and narrative circularity: the disruptive potential of *Monster*'s multiperspectivity lies precisely in its ability to challenge and expand viewers' awareness beyond the constraints of normative binary thinking, particularly the reductive opposition between normality and "monstrosity."

Each time the titular term "monster" appears in the movie, it carries a different meaning, reflecting the shifting perspectives and moral assumptions of the characters. The story opens with Saori, a single mother who becomes alarmed when her son Minato begins to behave erratically—he returns home with a shaved head, grows increasingly withdrawn, and starts posing weird questions: "if a human gets a pig brain transplanted, is it a human or a pig?" (02:45). This question operates on multiple levels: on the surface, it reflects Minato's confusion and emotional distress, but more deeply, it gestures toward the instability of identity and the anxiety surrounding rigid boundaries. Implicitly, it raises the question of what constitutes "humanity" within a normative framework, and by extension, what renders someone a "monster." The metaphor hints at Minato's own sense of alienation, as he struggles with feelings he cannot articulate, and which others misinterpret or reject: "it's a pig's brain. My brain has been switched with a pig's. That's what's strange about me, I'm a monster" (14:25).

Alarmed by her son's emotional withdrawal and cryptic remarks, Saori thus begins to suspect that something traumatic has occurred at school. Minato's teacher, Mr. Hori, quickly becomes the prime suspect—the "monster" harming Saori's child—despite the absence of direct evidence. The mother's efforts to advocate for Minato place her in opposition to a school system portrayed as opaque, defensive, and complicit. In particular, the bureaucratic rigidity of the school system is reflected in its reliance on formulaic, repetitive language. When consistently pressed by Saori to clarify what exactly happened, the principal (Yūko Tanaka) keeps repeating that "we accept your opinion with seriousness" (28:23), or similarly formulaic expressions. Saori, in contrast, demands unambiguous answers—most strikingly in her direct question to Mr. Hori: "did you hit him, or didn't you hit him?" (21:33). From her perspective, the term "monster" appears to take on a clear referent: the presumed abuser—an adult in a position of power who may have violated a vulnerable

child—and the sclerotic school system that seems to prioritize procedural neutrality over moral clarity. In a subsequent encounter, Saori attempts to capture the principal's attention by redirecting Minato's earlier question about humanity toward her and her colleagues: "am I talking to human beings?" (27:22). Aligned with Saori's perspective, viewers may initially feel compelled to seek a clear-cut resolution to the epistemic gap at the center of the narrative: what exactly happened to Minato? is Mr. Hori guilty of abuse, and what was the nature of their interaction? Yet Saori's demands run the risk of reinforcing the binary thinking problematized by the movie: as she asks Mr. Hori to "answer yes or no," the principal states that "we have confirmed that there was contact between the teacher's hand and Mugino Minato's nose" (21:40). As the subsequent segments reveal, reality resists the simplicity of binary logic: while Saori instinctively interprets the contact as a form of abuse, Mr. Hori's and Minato's perspectives gradually complicate that assumption, showing the teacher's concern with Minato's disruptive behaviors and his misunderstanding of the boy's relationship with another student, Yori (Hinata Hiiragi).

Far from the predatory figure Saori envisions, the second section presents Mr. Hori as a well-meaning yet socially awkward man, whose interactions with Minato—previously framed as suspicious—now read as hesitant, compassionate attempts to connect with a troubled student. While the narrative initially centers on resolving the epistemic gap—uncovering the truthful course of the events around Minato's behavior—the viewer's attention is gradually redirected toward understanding how differing assumptions, beliefs, and misperceptions among the characters shape their interpretations of the same events. If Saori suspects of Mr. Hori, the teacher starts in turn to regard Minato as a potential bully, misinterpreting his attitude toward Yori. Recipients soon become aware of the countless number of red herrings, subtle clues, and recurring motifs displayed by the movie to undermine any straightforward resolution. Thus, for example, the term "monster" shifts again in meaning across the second section—from its earlier associations with Minato's non-normativity, the allegedly abusive teacher, or the sclerotic school system, to a new referent: the students' parents. While discussing upcoming parent meetings with a colleague, Mr. Hori is stunned by the word the colleague uses to describe the parents: "they're more trouble than the kids, these days […] They're monsters. Teachers are being crucified, these days" (45:51).

Yet there is another powerful motif I would like to focus on, that is, Yori's "flipped" thinking. When he is first introduced in Saori's segment, Yori invites Minato's mother in his house and starts

writing on his notebook: Saori immediately notes that "this letter here is flipped"[18] (33:08) and that Yori is writing backwards. Naturally, she cannot help but correcting him. As the following sections dramatically reveal, Yori is relentlessly pressured by his alcoholic and homophobic father to be "cured," corrected. In response, he begins to imagine a world turned upside down—a reality where linear time is disrupted by reversed temporality, and events can be flipped over and reinterpreted from *alternative perspectives*. In one of his runaways with Minato, Yori further discusses his flipped reality: "time will go backwards. It will turn back, so clocks, people, trains and cats will all move backwards. Beef on rice will turn back into cows, and poop goes back into your butt" (1:31:23). Yori's reversed temporality thus reinforces the tension between rigid boundaries and nonlinear circularity formally foregrounded by the movie's multiperspectivity, directly challenging what Elizabeth Freeman has influentially called "chrononormativity" (2010). For Freeman, this temporality is relentlessly teleological and progressive, strongly built on a causal framework and organized toward "maximum productivity" (3), "event-centered, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies and major transformations" (5). Similarly, Judith Roof argues that time asserts its normativity through the teleological "narrative's heteroideology" (1996, xxvii), while Lee Edelman's "queer negativity" is precisely built around a refusal of "history as linear narrative […] in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—*as itself*—through time" (Edelman 4, original emphasis).[19] For Freeman, a possible solution to chrononormativity consists in reversing the axis of time: "[n]ow I think the point may be to trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things" (xiii) and to foreground "temporal drag" as "a productive obstacle to progress, a usefully distorting pull backward" (64). By reversing temporality and resisting the binary, corrective logic of adults and institutions, Yori's flipping reveals the underlying tension of the movie's multiperspectivity. The tripartite structure initially appears to reinforce rigid boundaries, inviting viewers into a mystery that demands epistemic resolution. Yet, as each perspective reframes prior events, the movie gradually unravels its own truth-seeking impulse. Multiperspectivity thus becomes a mechanism of ethical destabilization: it shifts the narrative from a linear, causality-driven quest for answers toward an open-ended, affectively charged space where meaning remains provisional, partial, and contingent. The ethical

[18] Interestingly, *Flipped* is the title of Rob Reiner's 2010 multiperspective movie, presenting the same love story from the alternating points of view of a boy and a girl.

[19] For a recent problematization of queer theory's skepticism toward narrative see Bradway (2021) and D'Amato-Xausa (forthcoming).

Fig. 3. Mr. Hori and Saori clear the window to look inside the train car. Two stills from *Monster* (Kore-eda 2023).

dimension thus lies not in solving the mystery of Minato's behavior, but in recognizing how the teleological demand for explanation itself can be a form of violence when imposed on identities that resist legibility within dominant cultural frameworks. In doing so, Kore-eda's narrative strategy compels the audience to reconsider their own interpretive assumptions, positioning multiperspectivity not merely as a tool for investigation, but as a space for ethical reflection.

Monster thus initially appears to establish rigid boundaries, only to ultimately challenge them and offer a quietly hopeful perspective. As we have seen, Kore-eda visually shapes Saori's, Mr.

Hori's, and Minato's points of view by adopting two different cinematic syntaxes. The first two sections primarily rely on static framing and subtle camera movements, often featuring establishing shots and confined settings, such as the normative spaces of the home and the school. This formal choice hints at the limited perspectives of the two adults, their rigid interpretive frameworks, and their constrained understanding of the world. In contrast, Minato's segment features more dynamic camera movements, a lighter color palette, and is predominantly set in open, abandoned areas on the outskirts of the city. Here, Minato and Hori find refuge in the re-functionalization of abandoned spaces and discarded objects, most notably in the derelict train car that becomes their shared sanctuary. Once a symbol of movement and connection, the train car is now stationary and forgotten: by infusing a new purpose to this space, Minato and Hori carve out a world that operates outside adult surveillance and normative expectations. The train car thus becomes a site of quiet resistance, where alternative forms of kinship, communication, and identity can emerge, free from the pressures of correction or conformity. The train car is also the site of the most striking convergence between the formal strategies and the thematic interests of the movie.

In the final moments of the second section, after realizing the true connection between the two boys, Mr. Hori and Saori rush to the train car amidst the outburst of a rainstorm. Kore-eda frames the two adults from inside the train car, capturing their attempts to clean the window from the rain and dirt. Here, the screen seems to fade to black, thus mirroring the sharp division between the movie's segments, and symbolizing the impenetrable separation between the worlds of the boys and the adults. In an image of rare emotional and symbolic power, Mr. Hori and Saori continue to wipe the rain-smeared window of the train car, their futile gesture symbolizing a desperate attempt to see inside, to bridge the cultural and narrative gap that separates them from the boys (see figure 3). This act can be read as a powerful example of their effort to disrupt the rigid boundaries established by the movie's segmented structure—an attempt to connect across perspectives, generations, and emotional worlds, even as the glass remains clouded, the divide unresolved, and the screen then fades to black to introduce the third and last section. It is only Minato's segment that ultimately manages to go beyond the diegetic boundary represented by the rainstorm. After the storm subsides, Minato and Yori emerge from beneath the train car and wonder if they have been reborn. They run freely through an open field, where a previously gated-off path—once blocked and filled with wreckage—is now clear. Rather than tying the narrative threads together, Kore-eda's ending refuses closure, allowing the boys to inhabit a space beyond adult interpretation

or institutional authority. In doing so, *Monster* transforms its multiperspectivity from a mere narrative device into a radical gesture—one that resists moral resolution and embraces uncertainty beyond the rigid boundaries of normative frameworks.

Both Van Sant's and Kore-eda's works display the disruptive and ethical potential of multiperspectivity by challenging its more common, event-centered structure through the undermining of teleological progression, narrative closure, and causal framework. Crucially, both *Elephant* and *Monster* address their complex, school-related topics—from school shootings to bullying, through non-heteronormative identities and homophobia—by exposing the limitations of the (supposedly) totalizing knowledge offered through complementary multiperspectivity. If Van Sant primarily resists viewers' demand for explanation through slowness by dismantling the common tropes of multiperspective narratives—plot-driven progression, clear segmentation, and empathetic perspective-taking—Kore-eda stages a productive tension between rigid boundaries and nonlinear openness through a wide set of formal strategies, from visual techniques such as camera movements and black screens, to the narrative destabilization of chrononormativity and the foregrounding of ethical uncertainty. It would be simplistic to say that, in these movies, multiperspectivity serves as a remedy against a narrow, causality-driven understanding of the issues they address. Yet the power of this narrative strategy, in *Elephant* and *Monster*, lies in its capacity to transcend these conventional uses of the technique. By defying narrative and ethical closure, challenging epistemological quests, and hindering facile empathy, both movies adopt multiperspectivity not to explain or resolve their epistemic gaps, but to deepen ambiguity, challenge interpretive certainty, and foreground the multilayered complexity of their subjects.

Apart from exploring original and powerful examples such as Van Sant's and Kore-eda's works, the goal of this first chapter was to provide a typology of multiperspective movies in contemporary cinema, by identifying four key features, and exploring two central experiential effects that will shape the close readings offered in this thesis. The first section has thus investigated concepts such as type of interaction, magnitude, explicit resolution, and paratextual inserts, by providing several examples from contemporary cinema, while maintaining their transmedial value. Here, I have also drawn a crucial distinction between the so-called Rashomon-style narrative and the broader concept of multiperspectivity in cinema, by showing how the former constitutes a peculiar example—a narratorial, contradictory, open typology—of the latter. I have then introduced the

experiential effects of "multiperspective uncertainty" and "slow multiperspectivity," which play a pivotal role in several textual analyses I will provide in the following chapters. While uncertainty can be considered as a common effect of multiperspective narratives, my analysis has focused on distinguishing between different types of uncertainty—examining varying concepts of narrative closure in narrative and drawing a distinction between epistemological and ethical uncertainty. Conversely, slowness is not frequently elicited by multiperspectivity: however, more experimental or sophisticated uses of the technique—as *Elephant* aptly exemplifies—provide a set of strategies especially conducive to a slow reading or viewing experience. I will discuss the subversive potential of slowness in greater detail in chapter 4, in the context of contemporary minor-character retellings and their cultural significance. In the next chapter, I return to the foregrounding of uncertainty as one of the three key ethical affordances of multiperspective narratives—focusing more specifically on how it operates in the encounter between multiperspective video games and ethical gameplay. In particular, I will focus on two case studies that place ethical uncertainty face to face with ludic techniques such as players' interactive choices and cognitive friction. One of these case studies is *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), a game that powerfully juxtaposes two antagonistic perspectives by forcing players to switch between the two avatars; the other is *Tell Me Why*, in which a central epistemic gap generates ethical uncertainty with no clear moral preference.

2 Moral Complexity in Multiperspective Video Games

I have discussed in chapter 1 how the ethical potential of multiperspective narratives can be actualized in movies through their foregrounding of experiential effects such as uncertainty and slowness. With this chapter, I shift the focus to video games to examine how multiperspectivity can similarly serve as a powerful tool for moral inquiry in interactive media. While literary studies and ethical criticism have often characterized multiperspectivity as an inherently ethical or democratic phenomenon, its role in video games has been largely overlooked. My core claim here is that, when orchestrated through specific narrative and ludic strategies, multiperspective video games are particularly well-suited to engage with moral complexity. Drawing on Marco Caracciolo's definition, moral complexity can be found "whenever moral tensions arise within a situation that is intimately experienced or imagined: experienced or imagined, that is, through close familiarity with its history, its affective stakes, and the stories of the individuals implicated within it" (2024a, 127). In this chapter, I argue that multiperspective video games are uniquely positioned to negotiate such complexity by intersecting the ethical affordances of multiperspectivity with the ludic strategies associated with "ethical gameplay" (Sicart 2013a). In other words, while strategies of ethical gameplay—e.g., "cognitive friction" (Sicart 93)—are not sufficient on their own to negotiate morally complex scenarios, I regard their encounter with multiperspectivity's ethical affordances as strikingly productive. I will dedicate separate sections to both the ethical potential of multiperspective narratives and the concept of ethical gameplay before showing their effective interplay in my two case studies: *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020) and *Tell Me Why* (Dontnod Entertainment 2020).

Understanding the ethical potential of multiperspectivity in video games requires a definition of multiperspective video games as a form that integrates narrative and ludic multiperspectivity. Throughout this chapter, I will thus focus on a specific type of video game, namely "narrative-focused" video games (Caracciolo 2015, 234), in which the foregrounding of storytelling encourages players not to ignore their narrative dimension. As the challenge of the game cannot neglect its storytelling dimension, the gameplay cannot be separated here from multiperspectivity on the level of narrative. The games I discuss in this chapter foreground player-controlled

characters as fully characterized avatars[1] whose experiences and values players are brought to simulate. Since multiperspective narratives require audiences to meaningfully negotiate character perspectives through their constant interplay, video games must provide player-controlled characters with distinct motives, emotions, or values for players to engage with.[2] Game characters serve at least three different functions, identified by Jonas Linderoth (2005) in "roles" (their narrative dimension), "tools" (their ludic dimension), and "props" (their social-communicative dimension). Similarly, Felix Schröter and Jan-Noël Thon propose three modes of representation related to three ways of experiencing video game characters: in their "narrative experience," players perceive game characters "as identifiable *fictional beings* with an inner life," while in the "ludic experience" characters are seen as "game pieces" defined by game-related properties, and in the "social experience" as "representations of other players" in a multiplayer setting (2014, 50–51). Since this chapter does not consider multiplayer contexts, my focus will be on how the "fictional being" and "game piece" dimensions interact in multiperspective video games.

Narrative and gameplay are distinct experiential dimensions that multiperspective video games seek to integrate. In *The Last of Us Part II* and *Tell Me Why*, players engage in a complex interplay of different character perspectives in both ludic and ethical terms, thus bringing the negotiation of ethical complexity on a thematic level. Before delving into a close reading of the two games, I will introduce, in the next section, my understanding of multiperspective video games as the non-optional interplay of character perspectives on the levels of both narrative and gameplay. I will then contextualize my case studies within recent debates in game and narratological studies on ethical gameplay, thus emphasizing the role of multiperspectivity in negotiating moral complexity in narrative and (especially) video games. While the ethical potential of literary multiperspectivity

[1] Throughout the chapter, I will use the terms "player-character" and "avatar" interchangeably. For a recent and thorough account of characterization in video games see Vandewalle et al. (2023).

[2] It is crucial to regard subjectivity as a transmedial concept (Thon 2016, 223) which appears throughout video games as well as novels, movies, and other narrative media. To understand video game characters' internal consciousnesses, for example, game studies have borrowed the notion of "focalization" from narratology and literary studies. However, early theorizations of focalization in video games—such as Michael Nitsche's (2008, 146)—ended up equating focalization and visual perspective, thus prompting scholars to replace this conventional term. Thon is particularly harsh in criticizing the absence of medium-specific expansions of concepts such as "perspective," "point of view," and "focalization," deploring a "terminological sloppiness" in game studies (2016, 235). Therefore, he proposes to distinguish between "subjective," "intersubjective," and "objective" modes of representation across media, concluding that "video games may use the full range of strategies of subjective representation" (324) with specific ludic and narrative functions.

has been object of scholarly attention, the peculiarity of video games' affordances needs to be explored more deeply.

Introducing Multiperspective Video Games

In an influential definition, Marie-Laure Ryan describes computer games as "an art of compromise between narrative and gameplay" (2006, 198). The relationship between these two elements can differ in many ways, with some games completely sidestepping the narrative dimension and others foregrounding storytelling as a crucial element to the experience of the game. The two video games I focus on in this chapter, for example, differ from this point of view. *Tell Me Why* offers minimal ludic challenges and foregrounds what games scholars call "environmental storytelling," that is, the reconstruction of the game's narrative on the basis of cues and features scattered in the environment (see Jenkins 2004). Conversely, *The Last of Us Part II* is an example of an in-between category, that is, a game that can be played in a narrative-focused mode—which is strongly encouraged by its sophisticated storytelling—but that can also be enjoyed solely for its action-oriented gameplay. This is certainly not the only way the two video games differ, and their divergence provides valuable opportunities for examining different examples of multiperspective video games. However, where they converge is in their foregrounding of multiperspectivity on the levels of both narrative and gameplay. Conceptualized in this way, multiperspective video games align with Ryan's definition of video games as an art of compromise between narrative and gameplay. Multiperspectivity is neither the mere inclusion of multiple playable characters, nor the thematic exploration of different character perspectives on a narrative dimension. Instead, it arises from the dynamic interplay of the two elements, thus providing a ludic and a narrative friction between the different character perspectives. Two elements are crucial for a definition of multiperspective video games: first, as should be clear by now, my understanding of multiperspectivity refers to the *interaction of playable character perspectives*; second, multiperspectivity should not be an optional or a post-game feature, but a *core design element*. I will discuss them in turn.

In game studies, other forms of multiple perspectives have been analyzed: drawing on Torben Grodal, for example, Daniel Vella refers to the mutual exclusivity of "game as experiential route" and "game as a map and as a system" as "dual perspectival structure" (2015, 64). Focusing more

specifically on gameplay mechanics, Thon distinguishes between three dimensions of perspective (2009, 280): (1) "spatial perspective," which is determined by the spatial position in which the game space is presented; (2) "actional perspective," which is determined by the "point of action" (see Neitzel 2002); (3) "ideological perspective structure," which is determined by the positions from which the events are evaluated. While discussing spatial perspective, Thon further distinguishes between "subjective," "semi-subjective," and "objective" points of view. In particular, he observes that "many contemporary games not only combine various forms of spatial perspective but also allow their players to control camera movements […] and switch between different perspectives themselves" (2009, 285–286). Then, while exploring strategies of subjective representation in video games, he notes how *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady 2009) allows players "to switch between an intersubjective mode of representation and what is called 'the detective mode': a kind of (quasi-)perceptual overlay that activates a number of enhancements in Batman's cowl" (2016, 313). Naturally, the perspective switches mentioned by Thon are different from the one I am discussing in this thesis. Thus, I need to distinguish between three different understandings of "perspective switch" in video games.

In *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018), for instance, players can switch between Arthur Morgan's first-person perspective (subjective point of view) and different degrees of "semi-subjective" perspective, regulating the distance of the camera from the avatar. They can also activate similar subjective modes of representation—or (quasi-)perceptual overlay—with the "tracker vision" and the "dead eye." In addition to that, *Red Dead Redemption 2* includes a "cinematic camera" which puts the game in wide screen and alternates between sharp and bird's-eye-view angles around Arthur. The latter is a good example of a perspective switch for a specific affordance: since it makes the gameplay very difficult, the "cinematic camera" is probably not intended for complex playing but for capturing screenshots or idly riding around the game space, thus momentarily sidelining ludic mechanics. This wide array of perspective switch techniques was already present in Rockstar's previous game, *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013): here, however, strategies of subjective representation are also integrated as specific affordances of three playable characters. The game features three player-controlled characters: Franklin Clinton, a young black man seeking to escape poverty; Michael De Santa, a wealthy white man grappling with existential crisis; and Trevor Philips, a psychopathic white man driven by entrepreneurial ambition. Each character possesses unique abilities that activate specific modes of subjective

representation. Therefore, *Grand Theft Auto V* allows us to identify three different types of "perspective switch": players can switch between (1) subjective and semi-subjective points of view (first- and third-person camera angles); (2) subjective and intersubjective modes of representation; (3) three playable character perspectives.[3] While multiperspective video games specifically require the third type of perspective switch, the other two can be crucial in representing characters' internal consciousnesses, thus emphasizing their characterization and conflictual interplay. A high degree of subjectivity, in fact, is particularly suited to stage multiperspectivity. In other words, while perspective switch between characters is a defining feature of multiperspective video games, the other two types can meaningfully contribute to the quality of multiperspectivity.

In his discussion of focalization in video games, Fraser Allison refers to the characters' subjective modes of representation in *Grand Theft Auto V* as specific abilities that change the visual presentation of the game world "in a way that reflects the character's mental state" ("Whose Mind" loc. 10). However, he concludes that *Grand Theft Auto V* is a "game with three perspectives, but not three points of view" (2015, loc. 11). Although the distinction between perspective and point of view is sometimes slippery in his analysis—with point of view referring to a more "subjective" representation than perspective—Allison aims to show how the game presents three playable characters and makes them interact in the storyline but does not build an effective multiperspective structure. *Grand Theft Auto V*'s multiperspectivity, I suggest, is undermined by its open-world structure, which creates an irreconcilable dissonance between Michael, Franklin, and Trevor's "fictional being" and "game piece" dimensions. While it is true that instances of internal focalization can be identified in the game through characters' specific abilities (Allison 10), their interchangeable affordances disrupt their specific narrative attributes and identities. Conversely, as I will discuss in detail, my two case studies effectively withhold agency from the player, thus preserving coherent characters' identities in both narrative and gameplay. This does not mean that open-world games *cannot* actualize the ethical potential of multiperspectivity in video games: however, unrestricted and interchangeable agency over characters' actions, as in *Grand Theft Auto V*, runs the risk of discarding any of their specificities, thus sidelining their narrative identity in favor of the "game piece" dimension.

In *Grand Theft Auto V*, PC-switch is not always a non-optional feature. While the main story missions force players to switch from a character to another according to narrative reasons, the

[3] Throughout the chapter, I will refer to this third type of perspective switch as "PC-switch."

open-world structure allows players to (almost) freely switch between Franklin, Michael, and Trevor, thus placing fewer constraints on the player's agency. In video games, PC-switch is frequently provided as a post-game feature, particularly common in game expansions (downloadable content or DLC, as they are known in gaming terminology). The website *TV Tropes*, for example, has an entry on "Another Side, Another Story" which brings together examples of "perspective flips" after the main game's ending. The website considers this trope as narratively motivated: "[w]hilst unlocking new playable characters is fairly common in games, especially for beating them, these usually just give the player a different playstyle and moveset if not just a different appearance. Some games, however, give the newly unlocked character a different path through the game, possibly with entire levels of their own, revealing a side of the story you never knew before."

The first typology can be observed in *LEGO*-themed action-adventure video games, such as *LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game* (Traveller's Tales 2005): here, players can switch between dozens of playable characters, replaying levels with different avatars to explore new areas and reach collectibles through their peculiar affordances. Therefore, PC-switch is a core gameplay mechanic and the only way to hit the 100% completion of the game: however, the compromise between gameplay and narrative strongly tilts in favor of the former, thus foregrounding characters as game pieces with specific affordances and abilities only intended for ludic purposes. In this case, multiperspectivity is not optional but does not arise from the interplay of gameplay and narrative, sidelining the latter in favor of the former.

The second typology described by *TV Tropes* is exemplified, for instance, by the DLCs of the mainstream first-person shooter *Half-Life* (Valve Corporation 1998), "Opposing Force" and "Blue Shift," which return to the settings and events of the main video game but portray the story through the eyes of other characters. Similarly, in "Separate Ways," the DLC of *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2005), players follow Ada Wong's path, thus experiencing the storyline from another perspective and occasionally intersecting the journey of Leon, the original protagonist. Here, however, multiperspectivity is an optional element, not fully integrated into the main narrative progression. Conversely, I suggest that multiperspectivity in video games is effectively achieved when it is a core design element. Put otherwise, players should not be allowed to avoid the perspective switch and progress the game: the only way would be to quit the game. As we will see, forced PC-switch is a crucial element in the way in which *The Last of Us Part II* negotiates moral complexity. This

does not imply that "optional" examples of multiperspectivity should be discarded as ethically or culturally unproductive: in chapter 4, I will focus on "expanded" multiperspective narratives, that is, a typology of multiperspectivity typical of expanded storyworlds (see Ryan 2013), as in sequels, spin-offs, or retellings of a canonical text. As a sequel and the second installment of a series, even *The Last of Us Part II* presents this kind of expanded multiperspectivity, which contributes to its overall narrative complexity. However, for the peculiar negotiation of moral complexity I focus on in this chapter, forced PC-switch stands as a key feature of multiperspective video games' ethical potential.

Therefore, I propose an understanding of multiperspective video games as the *non-optional interplay of narrative and ludic multiperspectivity*. Multiperspective video games enhance players' engagement with storytelling multiperspectivity by integrating the technique as a gameplay mechanic. In *The Last of Us Part II*, a forced PC-switch alternates between Ellie and Abby as player-controlled characters with both peculiar affordances (game piece) and strong characterization (fictional being). This ludic multiperspectivity emphasizes a range of storytelling techniques—from cinematic cutscenes to paratextual elements—presenting conflictual character perspectives as the core theme of the game plot. Similarly, in *Tell Me Why*, a game about two twins who are reunited after ten years, the player controls both Alyson and Tyler, with scripted perspective switches as the narrative progresses. While *The Last of Us Part II* enhances narrative multiperspectivity through gameplay, *Tell Me Why* presents a unique approach to environmental storytelling that blends a mode of storytelling with a gameplay mechanic, by employing, in Ryan's terminology, both "exploratory" and "ontological interactivity" (2006, 108). Before offering a close reading of my two case studies and the ethical issues they raise, I will discuss the moral significance of multiperspective narratives and video games, thus paving the way for an intersection of the two strands of research.

The Ethical Potential of Multiperspectivity

In a recent experimental study on the potential of interactive digital narratives (or IDN), Renske van Enschot et al. take their point of departure from the statement that IDNs have the capacity to stage multiperspectivity, thus foregrounding the "potential of the form to improve the representation and understanding of complex topics" (van Enschot et al. 2019, loc. 1). However,

the hypothesis that multiperspectivity leads to narrative complexity was only partially supported by the results of the study, in which audiences were exposed to both single and multiple perspectives versions of their case study, the interactive documentary *Last Hijack Interactive* (2014). The work proved an ill-suited example of interactive multiperspectivity, especially because "the hijacker remained a flat character throughout the different versions of the documentary," prompting the authors to state that "further studies on other IDN with well-developed characters are much needed to better understand the potential effect of comprehending complex situations through exposure to differing perspectives" (van Enschot et al. loc. 11). The multiperspective video games I concentrate on in this chapter provide such well-developed characters whose perspective players are likely to engage with, thus realizing the potential of the form for negotiating complex topics and, more specifically, ethical issues. In fact, I am not claiming that *all* multiperspective video games are well suited to capture narrative and moral complexity. As this empirical study exemplifies, it is not sufficient to stage multiperspectivity to foster a broader understanding of complex phenomena. In this case, the absence of a good characterization for the hijacker did not produce any difference in audiences' reaction to single and multiple perspectives versions of the documentary.

Following Hanna Meretoja, I consider the ethical value of multiperspective narratives in terms of "potential": the "ethical potential of narrative fiction lies more in the questions it poses and in shaping or refining our sense of the complexities of the moral space we inhabit than in the answers it proposes" (2018, 135). As argued by Caracciolo, literary form—and complex forms more specifically—plays a peculiar role in evoking moral complexity: "[n]arratives evoking moral complexity are uniquely capable of fostering self-reflection in moral reasoning, and thus of bringing to light the often-covert values and assumptions that underlie moral experience" (2024a,127). Caracciolo goes on raising a "seemingly simple question: what are the narrative forms that are most conducive to this exploration of complexity in ethical terms?" (126). While he focuses on the interaction between narrative representation and creative metaphor, I propose here to regard multiperspectivity as another form well-suited to create experiences of moral complexity in narrative fiction. Therefore, I argue that multiperspective narratives—and video games specifically—hold particular promise vis-à-vis the negotiation of moral complexity because of their inherent ethical potential. However, their potential needs to be actualized through a set of

narrative and ludic techniques displayed by my two case studies—that is, through the encounter of multiperspectivity's ethical affordances and the strategies of ethical gameplay.

Before analyzing this encounter, there is another question to consider: what are the key aspects of multiperspective narratives' *inherent* ethical potential? In chapter 1, I have examined the foregrounding of epistemological and ethical uncertainty as one of multiperspectivity's most powerful affordances. I will exemplify the productive encounter of multiperspective uncertainty and ludic strategies in my reading of *Tell Me Why*. Here, I focus on two additional, closely entangled ethical affordances of multiperspective narratives—that is, the potential for perspective-awareness (and perspective-taking) and the coordination of characters' values and beliefs. According to Meretoja, "narratives that create awareness of different perspectives on the same phenomenon or situation are generally ethically more productive than ones that present only one perspective as worth considering" (2018, 131–132). In her book-length discussion, Meretoja explores six aspects of the ethical potential of storytelling: among them, she argues that narrative can cultivate our "perspective-awareness" and capacity for "perspective-taking": "[t]o me it seems far more plausible to argue that literature cultivates our ability to perceive the world from multiple perspectives, or at least increases our awareness of and sensitivity to such multiplicity […] than to argue that literature makes us ethical in the sense of causing us to engage in moral action" (4). She goes on considering "perspective-awareness" as a "*necessary* condition for moral agency, even if it is not a *sufficient* condition" (4, original emphasis). Here, I argue that multiperspective narratives not only showcase narrative's capacity for perspective-awareness but, more importantly, amplify it through the interplay of multiple perspective-takings. In other words, they *inherently* require readers to articulate and coordinate different perspectives, thus encouraging a constant shifting from a perspective-taking to another. Moreover, multiperspectivity can be regarded as crucial for democracy, "which depends on the recognition of a plurality of perspectives" (125). Since in the real world we rarely have the conditions of "mutual perspective-taking, and our competence to adopt different perspectives is put to a difficult test when we encounter temporally or culturally distant worlds" (125), narratives that display a plurality of perspectives become particularly relevant vis-à-vis present-day challenges.

Meretoja is not alone in claiming the ethical relevance of multiperspective narratives. Martha Nussbaum, for example, influentially argued for the power of narrative fiction to foster our perspective-taking. More specifically, she praises multiperspectivity's capacity for displaying a

more complete picture. In her discussion of Henry James's multiperspective modernist novel *The Golden Bowl* (1904), she states that "the fact that is written from several among many possible points of view, reminds us again and again that the whole of the relevant reality is more complex yet than the text" (1990, 78). More recently, in a collected volume on *Values of Literature* (2015), edited by Meretoja et al., three contributions recognize the ethical value of multiperspective narratives. While speaking of "polyphony" rather than "multiperspectivity," Angela Locatelli even claims that modern literature's "contribution to ethics comes largely from the polyphony of voices and points of view it orchestrates" (2015, 61).[4] The other two chapters are written by Vera and Ansgar Nünning, who resort to their early theorization of multiperspectivity to discuss its ethical and social value. Vera Nünning refers to the complex process of perspective-taking that characterizes multiperspective narratives, which generally imply "the choice of which character to empathize with, and from which to distance oneself" (2015b, 110). Similarly, Ansgar Nünning focuses on how George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874) effectively evokes empathy and sympathy through multiperspectivity and shifting points of view (see 2015, 125). In all these accounts, multiperspective narrative emerges as a literary form inherently conducive to perspective-awareness and the coordination of character perspectives. As observed by Meretoja, "[t]he ethical and political significance of such perspective-awareness is indisputable" (2018, 125). The ideological and ethical meaning of this fictional interplay of perspectives can be further examined through a concept already encountered in the introduction, that is, narrative negotiation.

In this chapter, I have frequently referred to the "negotiation of moral complexity," an expression borrowed from Caracciolo (2024a), who has summarized the use of the term "negotiation" in recent narratological debate (see 2023a, 11–17) and effectively adopted it in his contribution to moral complexity in fictional narrative. For Liesbeth Korthals Altes, narrative negotiation is an interpretive gesture in which the values implicit in fiction interact with audiences' worldview and ethical predispositions (2014, 30). As noted by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, it was Jerome Bruner to provide the first narratological understanding of narrative negotiation as a "process of conflict resolution" (see 2019, 267). However, narrative negotiation should not be regarded solely as a "conflict-solving" process: the second meaning of negotiation deals with

[4] The ideological meaning of polyphony dates to Mikhail Bakhtin's first theorization of the novel as the polyphonic literary form *par excellence*. See also Moretti (1996, 56–57), for a different proposal. Similarly, according to Boris Uspensky, the first aspect of polyphony is the "ideological plane" (1973, 8–11).

contextual aspects, turning conflicts into productive instabilities rather than trying to resolve their tensions. Thus, Herman and Vervaeck consider negotiation in relation to the concept of ideology: narrative can question existing ideas and stage cultural conflicts, without resolving these tensions fully (2017, 619), as in Meretoja's understanding of moral complexity (2018, 28).

While it is true, as Caracciolo remarks, that "the open-endedness of narrative negotiation far transcends particular textual devices" (2023a, 12), some narrative forms—such as multiperspective narratives—are more adapted than others to stage ethical tensions and cultural conflicts. In Korthals Altes's words, a reader "has to cope with input of very different kinds and provenances, and with conflicting cues, from which meanings of texts are to be constructed" (2014, 30). As we have already seen with Meretoja and Vera Nünning, multiperspective narratives explicitly display this variety of input and cues, both on a formal and a thematic level. In line with Meretoja's discussion of perspective-awareness, Caracciolo concludes his focus on narrative negotiation stating that "narrative can invite audiences to shift from one viewpoint to another, contrasting or merging them in ways that are ethically and epistemologically productive. That multiperspectivity is the product of narrative negotiation" (2023a, 15). Multiperspectivity can certainly be a *product*, but also a *trigger* of narrative negotiation. By foregrounding uncertainty, perspective-taking, and the irreducible interplay of characters' values and beliefs, multiperspective narratives stand as a productive narrative form for negotiating ethical issues.

Ethical Gameplay and Multiperspectivity

Following Ian Bogost's influential work on the persuasive potential of video games (2006, 2007), a great deal of ink has been spilled in game studies on the ethical issues surrounding the medium. For years, video games have been associated with violent and antisocial behavior, with scholars asking whether a game could be "good" or "bad" in a moral sense.[5] More recently, game studies have turned to the ethical impact of games in positive terms, praising their capacity to cultivate "moral dilemmas" (Zagal 2009) or a specific "systemic approach to designing videogames [*sic*] that are morally engaging" (Formosa et al. 2016, 223). According to Bogost, the formal properties—called "unit operations"—of a certain artifact carry ideological meanings: in

[5] See, for instance, an early discussion on the controversial *Grand Theft Auto III* in Reynolds (2002).

Caracciolo's terms, there is a close relationship "between game mechanics and games' negotiation of ideological and cultural meanings" (2024b, 3). In *Persuasive Games* (2007), Bogost even argues for the power of games to "disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change" (ix). In my two case studies, I will explore a set of medium-specific techniques adopted by multiperspective video games to actualize their ethical potential. Through their peculiar interplay of storytelling and game mechanics, video games play a significant role in exemplifying the ethical value of multiperspectivity. More specifically, I focus on three key features of what philosopher and game scholar Miguel Sicart calls "ethical gameplay" (2013a). In his discussion of video games and the ethics of complexity, Caracciolo observes how Sicart's proposal is strikingly convergent with Meretoja's argument on moral complexity and his own understanding of negotiation: players who pay attention to ethical issues will benefit from the negotiation "not in terms of moral lessons learned but rather through heightened awareness of the values involved in everyday moral reasoning" (Caracciolo 2024b, 93). Once again, it is precisely the intersection of multiperspectivity's ethical affordances with the strategies of ethical gameplay that enables a meaningful negotiation of moral complexity in my two case studies.

In *Beyond Choices* (2013), Sicart argues that games have the power to explore ethically complex situations by foregrounding the tension between game rules and moral norms: ethical gameplay arises as a particular kind of encounter between predisposed players and a game foregrounding the ethical stakes of the situations they experience (15). While moral norms are flexible, game rules create "the values we have to play by" (Sicart 2009, 22). Ethical gameplay can be defined as a "pause in the fluidity of play—a caesura that forces players to evaluate their behaviors in light of ethical thinking, rather than ludic strategic thinking" (Sicart 2013b, 31). He goes on examining how a game can be designed to create such pauses, thus theorizing "cognitive friction" (2013a, 93) as a significant element of moral engagement in video games. Cognitive friction—the first strategy I am focusing on—is the tension between gameplay rules and representational devices: the ethical stakes of players' actions emerge from the dissonance between a gameplay mechanic and the representational meaning enabled by it. This idea is strictly related to Sicart's revision of the player's choice as the central ethical value of video games. In other terms, games can be more ethically productive when they take agency *away* from the player, by only offering ethically problematic options. This is a defining element in the design of *The Last of Us*

Part II—where forced PC-switch stands as a striking example of players' lack of agency—but with roots in its predecessor.

In the last sequence of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013), as Joel and Ellie reach Salt Lake City and the hospital, players experience a tragic example of cognitive friction. Up to that point, Joel and Ellie have traversed the United States, from Massachusetts to Wyoming, in order to bring the girl—the only known person to be immune to the virus that decimated the Earth's population—to a team of doctors who will examine her to create a vaccine. However, as they reach the end of their journey, both realize that the only way to create a cure will be to work on Ellie's brain, thus killing her. While she would find a meaning to her life in sacrificing herself to save humanity, Joel cannot bear to lose another "daughter"—after his biological one was killed at the beginning of the game—thus rushing through the hospital and killing guards, doctors, and whoever stands in his way to "rescue" Ellie. Crucially, this is a *playable* sequence. Like literary scholar Eric Hayot, many players could experience a strong cognitive friction in response to Joel's choice: "I did not *want* to kill the doctors, who, as far as I knew, are literally the only experienced medical professionals left on the planet. I did not want to rescue Ellie, and I did not want to remove her from the operating room. But the game treats any refusal to pursue *Joel's* course of action as a refusal to play" (2021, 186, original emphasis).

If players do not want to become directly complicit in Joel's actions, the only option left is to stop playing the game: "the player participates actively in the creation of a tragedy or must cease to play entirely" (186). As reminded by Amy M. Green, Neil Druckmann—the Creative Director for Naughty Dog and director of the game—originally intended the sequence to be a long cutscene: Joel would have rescued Ellie, killed doctors and guards, and shot Marlene to the head without players' complicity (see 2016, 760). Druckmann's change of mind precisely underscores the game's moral dilemma. Going back to Sicart's cognitive friction: in terms of gameplay, we are just shooting other people and saving a character (the only possible outcome of the scene); in terms of semiotic representation, we are killing the only people who could find an antidote and selfishly ignoring Ellie's choice, thus taking away her reason to exist. Without mentioning it, Hayot's interpretation largely coincides with Sicart's ethical gameplay and its takeaway around the lack of player's agency: "[w]hat makes *The Last of Us* interesting, then, is how it takes away the possibility of interactivity; in order to produce its tragic ending, it must keep the player from choosing any other ending" (2021, 186). In the next section, I will discuss in more detail the role played by

cognitive friction and lack of agency in *The Last of Us Part II*, and how it intersects with multiperspectivity's ethical affordances to address morally complex scenarios.

While partially overlapping with the first one, the second key feature of ethically charged multiperspective video games is the *undermining of moral dichotomy* between 'good' and 'evil' characters. Once again, this is a thematic concern of *The Last of Us Part II*, where players are forced to switch from a player-controlled protagonist to a (seemingly) antagonist. The moral complexity of the game, as we will see, strongly relies on its challenge of this dichotomy, thus disrupting the traditional hero versus villain opposition of many video games. Such opposition is usually related to the so-called "morality meter" system, one of the most visible ways in which ethical values are represented in video games. Morality systems are particularly common in role-playing games, such as *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2004) or *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007), and can be either implicit or explicit, that is, the player could not know the existence or the criteria of the system. However, after a rise of morality systems following the success of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003), they have been recently criticized by game scholars and critics alike, mostly because of their simplistic and dichotomous nature (see Bosman 2019, 546–548; Formosa et al. 212).

Naturally, the undermining of moral dichotomy is by no means an exclusive feature of multiperspective video games. In his analysis of *Dark Souls*, for instance, Caracciolo shows how ethical uncertainty can emerge from the resistance to any straightforward ethical evaluation. While based on a seemingly simple distinction between Fire and Dark, and thus between good and evil, the moral dichotomy of "Soulsring games" is "consistently complicated by gameplay and narrative mechanics that undermine the player's attempts to determine the ethical stakes of the game world and its characters" (2024b, 88). In the game, players have to decide between binary choices whose morality is far from dichotomous (97). Similarly, in *Tell Me Why*, we are consistently faced with choices, some binary other more nuanced, whose morality is not always clear-cut. The game does not directly challenge the hero versus villain opposition—as *The Last of Us Part II* explicitly seeks to do—but provides two player-characters whose relationship is frequently undermined by different values and moral assumptions, which players are contributing to shape. While *The Last of Us Part II* undermines moral dichotomy by means of sophisticated storytelling and lack of agency, *Tell Me Why* complicates the ethical significance of the game through players' *choices*. More specifically, through choices to be made with *two* player-characters. Alternating characters

and switching perspectives, here, is crucial to fostering the impression that neither twin is clearly right or wrong. Some choices seem *better* than others, but the game never provides unambiguous consequences. Through its constant negotiation of different character perspectives, the heightened perspective-awareness provided by multiperspectivity is well-adapted to challenge these ethical dichotomies.

Lastly, I refer to Sicart again for the concept of *aggregation of choices* as crucial to ethically charged multiperspective video games. As we have already seen, not every choice-making process implies complex ethical scenarios. On the one hand, the discussion on cognitive friction in *The Last of Us* has exemplified how games can be ethically stimulating precisely when they take agency away from players. On the other hand, explicit morality meters are frequently conducive to binary choices between good and evil, Paragon or Renegade (as in the *Mass Effect* series), Jedi or Sith (as in the *Star Wars* universe). Similarly, Sicart speaks of "tame" moral problems to define seemingly ethical dilemmas which "involve a decision that looks moral but is only a consequentialist calculation of outcomes" (2013a, 105). Drawing on social sciences (Rittel and Webber 1973), Sicart discusses *real* moral problems—the ones implicated by cognitive friction—as "wicked problems," that is, morally tangled situations with no easy solution. Frank G. Bosman borrows Sicart's terminology and draws a distinction between four kinds of wicked problems with increasing moral challenges to the player (2019): tame moral problems, semi-wicked, real wicked, and super wicked problems. In particular, I am interested here in the distinction between "semi-wicked" and "real wicked problems": according to Bosman, semi-wicked problems inspire ethical behavior, but the dilemma can be solved "relatively easily by exploiting the game's saving/loading system" (551). In other words, the player can empirically explore all the different outcomes of a certain scenario by simply saving and loading, thus circumventing the ethical stakes of the moral problem. The point was already stressed by Sicart: "the design of wicked problems for ethical gameplay clashes with the fact that almost any state in a game is often savable to memory and therefore reloadable" (2013b, 36).

For a problem to be wicked players' choices should not be easily reversible: "[g]ames are often designed to allow players to save a particular state; test a solution to a problem; and, in case of an unsatisfactory outcome, reload to the previous state. This reversibility of events is an obstacle in the exploration of ethical gameplay" (36). As noted by Bosman, this semi-wicked problem works especially well with "explicit morality systems with short-term consequences" (552), that is, when

players can easily try all the options and immediately see their consequences. Conversely, an elaborate system of long-term consequences can be ethically productive as it prevents the loading/saving mechanism, or at least makes it long and unwieldy. Sicart draws a distinction between branching narratives and "aggregation of choices": while the former are easily retraceable, the "aggregation of choices is a better fit for designing ethical gameplay because it places player in a narrative or world context in which many choices are offered all the time, and the consequence of each is not easily traceable to a particular choice" (2013a, 105).[6] Therefore, when game narratives emerge through the aggregation of multiple small choices, it is more difficult to sideline ethical thinking in favor of ludic strategic choices. While *The Last of Us Part II* does not present any relevant choice, building its morality on lack of agency and scripted elements, *Tell Me Why* exemplifies how the aggregation of choices with its long-term consequences interact with multiperspectivity to create an ethically notable video game. Moreover, multiperspectivity can enhance the complexity of a similar aggregation, by entangling one character's choices with another's and showing different outcomes for each character. As noted by Vera Nünning, multiperspective narratives "necessitate the interpretation, evaluation, and weighting of different perspectives" to arrive at an understanding of a situation presented by multiple perspectives: "this implies the choice of which character to empathize with, and from which to distance oneself" (2015b, 110). While effectively underlining the complex process of evaluation required by multiperspective narratives, Nünning ends up with a dichotomous choice between characters' perspectives. Conversely, ethically charged multiperspectivity is not that clear-cut but implies multiple perspective-takings as a complex entanglement and not a binary choice. Put more bluntly, I suggest that the potential of multiperspective narratives for negotiation and constant reevaluation emphasizes the convergence between multiperspectivity and the aggregation of choices envisaged by Sicart.

While by no means the only features of ethical gameplay, cognitive friction, undermining of moral dichotomy, and aggregation of choices strongly contribute to players' engagement with ethical issues in their encounter with multiperspectivity's ethical affordances. The two games I will discuss in the following sections present a productive interplay between the ethical affordances of multiperspectivity and the ludic strategies of ethical gameplay to effectively negotiate moral

[6] Sicart refers to *Fallout 3* quests "Tenpenny Tower" and "Oasis" as an example of this aggregation of choices. During these quests, "[t]he player does not have perfect information about the potential outcome of a dilemma" (105).

complexity. In *The Last of Us Part II*, the disruption of moral dichotomy as the core thematic concern is emphasized by gameplay mechanics that take agency away from the player. In *Tell Me Why*, the aggregation of choices intersects with multiperspectivity in creating an oscillating affective engagement with the two protagonists, which in turn implicates complex ethical values. In the next two sections, I will discuss other narrative and ludic strategies specifically adopted by the two games to further articulate the role of multiperspectivity in ethically charged video games.

Parallel Grief and Cognitive Friction

The first installment of the series, *The Last of Us*, offered a seemingly canonical representation of a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by a mutated Cordyceps fungus. The planet is here populated by mindless monsters—the "infected"—, smugglers, paramilitary groups, and scattered survivors trying to rebuild their lives after the collapse of political and legal institutions and the loss of technological modernity. The game, a third-person action-adventure with survival horror elements, was developed by a major studio, Naughty Dog, with a large budget, and fully adheres to the AAA label.[7] While critics usually consider AAA games more conventional than experimental "indie" games in terms of gameplay and storytelling, *The Last of Us* clearly stands—as my analysis of its "cognitive friction" has demonstrated—as a complex revision of canonical literary tropes and hardcore gaming conventions. For Hayot, "the emotional structure of the game takes part in the larger postapocalyptic imaginary characterized by films like *Mad Max* or *The Day After*, and by any number of novels, graphic novels, or television shows that fantasize the zombified future of ordinary life" (2021, 185). This abundance of intertextual references helps situate the game in a broader cultural and transmedial landscape. More specifically, in Astrid Ensslin's terms, we could consider *The Last of Us* as a "literary game," for its evocative, sophisticated storytelling and its use of stylistic strategies akin to those of literary fiction (2014). According to Ensslin, for instance, auteur games feature "sophisticated linguistic elements such as quotes from the Western literary canon," as well as dialogues or poetic elements (49). Before the release of *The Last of Us*, *Game Informer* magazine published a list of the game's inspirations, based on interviews with

[7] In gaming industry, "AAA" (pronounced Triple-A) is a term used to classify video games with high development and marketing budgets, and, typically, more conventional gameplay.

Druckmann and Naughty Dog staff: among them, for example, Druckmann explicitly mentioned the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), thus seeking to position the game within the high-brow canon of Western literature and cinema (see Spence 2024, 10). In his analysis of FromSoftware games, Caracciolo stretches Ensslin's concept even further, arguing that video games can be considered as "literary" when "they display remarkable complexity in gameplay, narrative, emotional, and ethical terms" (2024b, 3). While the first installment of *The Last of Us* was already a canonical example of a complex interplay of evocative writing and original gameplay strategies, I argue that the sequel further emphasizes its "literariness" through its multiperspective gaming, nonlinear storytelling, and moral murkiness.

In *The Last of Us*, the player mostly controlled Joel—with few sequences switching to Ellie[8]—in their fairly linear journey from Boston to Salt Lake City. The sequel is neither linear nor focused on a single protagonist, as a consequence of the first game's ending. The growing emotional intensity of *The Last of Us* reaches its peak in the already mentioned sequence in the hospital, which becomes the defining event underlining the whole narrative of the sequel. *The Last of Us Part II* can be defined as a deep exploration of the significance and implications of Joel's choice. As Steve Spence puts it, the sequel has an "unusually tangled relationship with its predecessor," returning repeatedly "to the site and time of the first game's climactic events" (2024, 3). Joel's choice thus works as the engine of the sequel's narrative progression, causing Ellie to take distance from him and Abby to seek revenge. Moreover, it becomes the central, highly tellable event that characterizes many multiperspective narratives, consistently revised and experienced differently throughout the sequel: "[r]eturning multiple times to the time and place of Joel's bloody rampage, *Part II* re-visions these events from multiple angles: adding scenes, adding characters, and tracing the long reverberations of that day in the lives of its survivors" (Spence 12).

After an opening sequence in which Joel—briefly controlled by the player—confesses his actions to his brother Tommy, a four-year leap brings us to Jackson, Wyoming, where the group has built a life, although Joel and Ellie's relationship is clearly disrupted by the events in Salt Lake City. Yet this is not the only reverberation of the first game's ending: while on patrol, Joel and Tommy rescue a stranger, Abby Anderson, already briefly controlled by the player. As the three reach a hideout of Abby's group, it becomes clear who she is and what her motivations are: the

[8] In particular, the DLC "Left Behind" is entirely dedicated to Ellie, providing a highly emotional experience of a crucial event of her past.

daughter of a Firefly surgeon who was about to operate Ellie, Abby seeks revenge for the murder of her father. As soon as Ellie, in search of Joel, enters the outpost, a cutscene from her perspective shows Abby brutally killing the man. Up to this point, the player has already switched from Ellie to Abby many times, with brief playable segments and focalized cutscenes. After this tragic prologue, the narrative unfolds over three days in Seattle from the perspective of both Ellie—seeking revenge in turn for Joel's death—and Abby, respectively. Through its multiperspective structure the game seeks to add layers of complexity to Joel's controversial choice. During the three days, flashbacks and nightmares from both Ellie and Abby are provided as playable sequences. As elements of subjective representation, characterized by (quasi-)perceptual overlay, they are likely to foster a complex engagement toward the two characters, thus undermining our previous, maybe uncritical alignment with Joel and Ellie. As noted by Spence, "[t]he weight of Abby's grief re-shapes our memories of Joel's actions" (13) as the game "seeks to destabilize our understandings of received events" (14). I suggest that multiperspectivity proves critical in enhancing our perspective-awareness and providing affective and experiential complexity to the moral dilemma of the game.

To describe the ethical dilemma faced by Joel, critics and gamers alike have referred to the philosophical thought experiment known as the "trolley problem."[9] In his discussion of moral complexity, Caracciolo takes distance from this thought experiment, arguing that its "sidelining of context is the main reason why the trolley problem may be a moral dilemma but isn't an expression of what I consider moral complexity: the setup is too clean and too artificial for complexity to emerge" (2024a, 127). As I have argued in the previous section, the first game problematizes its seemingly trolley-like problem by taking agency away from the player. But it is only the sequel, through the intersection of cognitive friction and multiperspectivity, to transform it into a morally complex scenario. Through its shifting perspective-taking, the sequel deepens players' immersion "in an affective, embodied context" (127), thus returning multiple times on the moment of the dilemma by letting (or forcing) players control Abby in the hospital in Salt Lake City. By intertwining playable flashbacks, harrowing hallucinations, and cutscenes in its multiperspective gameplay, the game consistently challenges our ethical and affective engagement toward Joel, thus showing the multilayered implications of his actions.

[9] Several Reddit threads, for example, revolve around the concept: see, e.g., https://www.reddit.com/r/thelastofus/comments/11qno3j/much_like_10_years_ago_some_people_arguing_the/.

Conceptualized in this way, the multiperspective structure of *The Last of Us Part II* closely aligns with Caracciolo's definition of moral complexity, which foregrounds the ethical and affective stakes of a "situation that is intimately experienced or imagined" (127). While the first game provided cognitive friction toward Joel's choice, the sequel adopts multiperspectivity to enhance players' familiarity with the stories and motivations of Ellie, Abby, and her father as individuals deeply implicated with the situation. This complex affective and ethical engagement is shaped by the non-optional PC-switch, the most defining feature of ludic multiperspectivity. For Stephen Michael Johnson, for instance, "[b]y leveraging the player's experience of the narrative through PC switches throughout the game, *Part II* forces players to reevaluate their own relationship to the characters of the game and their interpretations of the decisions made by those characters" (2023, 856). Interestingly, an empirical study on players' engagement with *The Last of Us Part II* showed how the forced PC-switch is a key element in explaining their polarized reactions. After in-depth interviews with twelve players, the authors conclude that "switching the PC can lead to strong reactions, whose causes are likely twofold. First [it] intrudes the only agency the player has in the game, namely, the control of the PC. Second, the player has to accept to take on the perspective of a new character whose personality, characteristics, and goals might not align with their own preferred outcome of the narrative" (Erb et al. 2021, 9). However, as we have seen with Sicart, it is precisely this cognitive friction that proves beneficial for ethical engagement. Taking agency away from the players and forcing them to switch their alignment is maybe the most relevant feature of multiperspective video games vis-à-vis the negotiation of ethical issues. Thus, while *The Last of Us* generated cognitive friction in a crucial plot point, the sequel stretches it even further, by extending such friction for the entirety of the game, forcing players to spend many hours with Abby and re-negotiating their previous beliefs and ethical alignments.

While some players cannot stand to align with Joel's murderer, others are more predisposed to accept the ethical stakes of the game, by interpreting the forced engagement with Abby as an experience specifically designed by the creators. Neil Druckmann stressed this point in an interview: "[i]f people don't like Abby, if people don't get Abby, this game fails. It won't work for them" (qtd. in Johnson 863). In this way, ludic multiperspectivity reinforces the game's foregrounding of the second strategy of ethical gameplay discussed above, that is, the undermining of moral dichotomy. As we have seen, players' empathetic perspective-taking with Abby is strengthened through elements of subjective representation: in the "Tracking Lesson" flashback

chapter, for example, we control a 14-year-old Abby running through the hospital in Salt Lake City. The surgeon murdered by Joel is not merely a random medical doctor, this time, but has a name, Jerry Anderson, and a narrative role, Abby's father. A cutscene provides a further layer of complexity, with a dialogue between Jerry and Marlene—another doctor shot by Joel—discussing the ethical stakes of operating Ellie: "and what if this was Abby? […] if this was your daughter, what would you do?"—Marlene asks Jerry. The chapter ends with Jerry's death from Abby's perspective and a sudden cut to Abby killing Joel.

While strategies of subjective representation are effective in fostering players' engagement toward a character, the main technique adopted by the game—emphasized by its multiperspective structure—is the focus on *parallels and similarities* between Ellie and Abby. Multiperspective narratives generally stage conflictual, even irreconcilable worldviews and ethical values between two or more characters. Audiences can thus juxtapose and experience vastly different perceptions of events or evaluations of moral issues. Sometimes, however, they can reveal strong similarities between seemingly opposed perspectives. *The Last of Us Part II* thematizes this concept, by forcing players to control the "antagonist" only to gradually reveal how similar Abby and Ellie are, thus blurring the seemingly dichotomous opposition of hero and villain. Through its segmented and nonlinear structure—consistently switching from a character to the other, jumping back and forth between flashbacks and present-day events—the game foregrounds a wide array of structural symmetries between Ellie and Abby's backgrounds, values, and motives. The most evident parallel concerns the representation of their relationships with their parental figures, and the consequent loss and grief experienced by both. In particular, Abby's flashbacks with her father clearly mirror Ellie's with Joel (or Tommy); similarly, her relationship with Lev—a transgender outcast member of a religious group called "Seraphites"—helps humanize her in the eyes of skeptic players by mirroring, as noted by Johnson (862), what Green called Joel's "ethics of care" (Green 761). In John Murphy and José Zagal's original definition, "[t]he ethics of care differ from traditional moral theory in that there is a greater focus on personal, partial and emotional experience" (2011, 71): this is what drives Joel to rescue Ellie, and brings Abby to risk her life, revisit her moral values, fight her allies to save Lev.

While Ellie's journey in *The Last of Us Part II* is largely driven by revenge, Abby is gradually humanized, prompting players to continually re-negotiate their allegiances throughout the game. Therefore, multiperspectivity not only foregrounds key similarities between the two characters but

also casts Ellie in a more critical light by highlighting their moral and emotional differences. Ellie's initial motives may resonate with players who deeply empathized with Joel in the first game, but certain actions she takes during her journey often generate significant cognitive friction. This is especially evident in the sequence where players are compelled to track down, torture, and ultimately kill Abby's friend Nora, a moment that can create considerable emotional distance from Ellie. The scene is partially scripted, and players, with limited agency, are required to press a button repeatedly thus enabling Ellie to torture Nora to death with a pipe. Similarly, players could find Ellie's killing of trained dogs problematic: in a scripted sequence, we are forced to kill Alice, Abby's dog; later in the game, another scripted scene requires players, as Abby, to play with the same dog throwing a toy. Like Alice, Nora is presented as a different, sympathetic character in Abby's sequences, thus enhancing our problematic response to Ellie's torture. Once again, this back-and-forth oscillation between Ellie and Abby illustrates that while ethical gameplay strategies like cognitive friction and the undermining of moral dichotomies can certainly be productive, they alone cannot fully engage players in moral complexity; it is their combination with the ethical affordances of multiperspectivity that truly enables a nuanced negotiation of such complexity. The game's most profound ethical work occurs precisely at this intersection: where the cognitive friction of forced actions (like Ellie's torture of Nora) collides with the perspective-awareness fostered by multiperspectivity (seeing Nora through Abby's eyes), and where unsettled dichotomies (the emphasis on parental grief on both sides) are given emotional weight through the interplay of multiple characters' values and emotions.

Lastly, I will briefly mention another strategy adopted by the game to thematize and represent the ethical significance of multiperspectivity by extending it to a broader community, that is, a particular approach to environmental storytelling. I will discuss environmental storytelling in more detail in the next section. For now, I am interested in what Caracciolo calls "media-based" environmental storytelling (2024b, 31–32), where players interact with verbal or audiovisual media distributed across the game world to gain "insight into the history of the game world and its characters' backstories" (31). While *The Last of Us Part II* does not rely on environmental storytelling in its purest form, it includes a wide array of handwritten notes, letters, and documents that offer glimpses into *other characters'* backstories, further emphasizing its "literariness" in

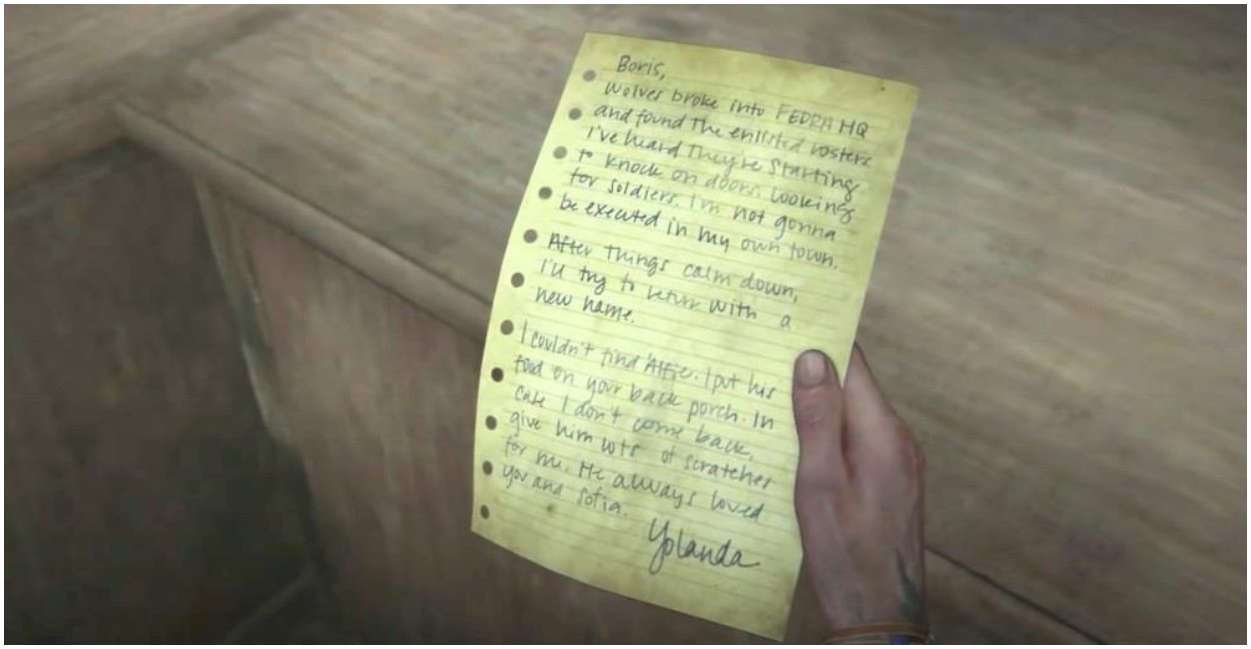

Fig. 4. One of the scattered letters in *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020).

Ensslin's sense (see figure 4).[10] While some letters provide crucial context and enhance players' experience—offering safe codes or valuable information—most of them are *not* critical to narrative progression: they are not significant artifacts to reconstruct the plot, nor typical collectibles for game completion. Conversely, these notes are easily ignored and completely optional. Paradoxically, it is precisely this seeming irrelevance what makes them meaningful on a thematic level. They are tales told in artifacts that contribute to build the game world and expand the multiperspective structure to the broader community of survivors. They offer glimpses into the lives of unnamed characters or people who are just a name signed at the end of a letter. Most of them narrate the last tragic moments of these people's lives, others are suicide letters, or goodbyes to loved ones; there are even multiperspective epistolary exchanges, highlighting once again conflicting values and motives. On the level of gameplay, they significantly slow down players' experience, prompting them to stop and consider other perspectives: perspectives of enemies, unknown people, father and son, husband and wife. This take on environmental storytelling, I suggest, works as a counterpart to the cognitive friction that shapes the multiperspective gaming of *The Last of Us Part II*: while players cannot avoid switching from Ellie to Abby, they can easily

[10] For more on the presence of verbal artifacts and literary elements in the game see Banfi (2022) and Rosenberg (2022).

ignore handwritten notes and letters. What the game finally seems to suggest is that Ellie and Abby's are by no means the only perspectives we can engage with, provided that we accept to slow down and consider the voices of unknown characters. Through scattered letters and other verbal artifacts, *The Last of Us Part II* extends its dual structure to a larger canvas of perspectives, thus offering an emotionally impactful experience to the players who are willing to expand their worldviews and re-negotiate their ethical values.

Choosing Memories and Multiperspective Uncertainty

If the ethical complexity of *The Last of Us Part II* emerges primarily through the encounter of multiperspectivity and players' lack of agency, *Tell Me Why* provides an aggregation of choices with long-term consequences, thus preventing the saving/loading system and making players' decisions meaningful. Developed by Dontnod Entertainment, *Tell Me Why* is a narrative-focused video game with limited mechanical challenges, where the narrative unfolds through cutscenes and environmental storytelling. The game is notable for being the first AAA game to feature a transgender playable protagonist, Tyler, and existing academic research mostly focuses on this aspect (see McLaren 2023). Like *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015), the French developer's most critically acclaimed and influential work, it can be considered as an interactive narrative game with elements of the "walking simulator" genre. As the origin of the term—coined in derision of a perceived absence of ludic challenges by hardcore gamers—makes clear, walking simulators propose an alternative style of gameplay with limited in-game actions or rewards, frequently foregrounding sophisticated narratives and thematic depth. In *Tell Me Why*, the immersion in space and the exploration of environment typical of walking simulators is at the service of narrative.

The game deploys environmental storytelling to explore the mysteries of Tyler and Alyson's past, two twins who are reunited after ten years spent by Tyler in a juvenile detention center to which he was sentenced for the murder of their mother, Mary-Ann. Determined to sell their house in the fictional town of Delos Crossing, Alaska, the twins interact with people and revisit places

from their childhood—general store, café, police station—recalling traumatic[11] memories and reconstructing the events that led to their mother's death. As in most walking simulators, narrative interests such as Meir Sternberg's "universals of narrative" (2001)—suspense, curiosity, and surprise—are central to players' experience. In Caracciolo's words, "they fuel the player's explorative activity and justify it on the basis of the protagonist's circumstances and motivations" (2022b, 173). In *Tell Me Why*, the curiosity around the night of Mary-Ann's death stands as the most relevant narrative interest for both players and characters: as the plot progresses, the game turns into a quest narrative to find the truth of what exactly happened that night of ten years before. As in most multiperspective narratives, there is a central tellable event to be recounted and revisited from several points of view. Thus, foregrounding narrative interests and quest narratives makes walking simulators particularly well-suited for staging multiperspectivity. Moreover, the close match between characters' wanderings and personal goals is likely to enhance players' perspective-taking, along with the convergence of characters and players' narrative interests. I thus consider *Tell Me Why* as a multiperspective variation of the traditional walking simulator. As in *The Last of Us Part II*, multiperspectivity is strongly thematized on the level of narrative. However, while the former was mostly concerned with the affective and ethical implications of Joel's choice, *Tell Me Why* raises epistemological as well as ethical questions around Mary-Ann's death. In other words, while in *The Last of Us Part II* we perfectly knew *what* exactly happened in Salt Lake City—since we were strongly implicated with it in the first game—*Tell Me Why* both undermines any absolute certainty around its central event and challenges players' moral assumptions. In this section, I focus on two aspects of the game's negotiation of ethical issues: its unique approach to environmental storytelling, and its lack of narrative closure.

Multiperspective video games, as I have argued, build on the non-optional interplay of narrative and ludic multiperspectivity. In *Tell Me Why*, narrative multiperspectivity is mostly displayed through cutscenes at key plot junctures. Through this cinematic technique the game closely aligns with the "Rashomon effect" discussed in chapter 1, a narrative strategy generally found in multiperspective novels and movies. The night of Mary-Ann's death is shown multiple times during the game—especially at the end of each of the three chapters—from the perspectives of

[11] As in many multiperspective narratives, trauma process is a shared thematic concern of both my case studies. However, since existing scholarly research has discussed the topic, I preferred not to focus on it. For the representation of trauma in video games, see Smethurst and Craps (2015).

Tyler, Alyson, and, finally, of a third character, Tom. As in multiperspective movies, cutscenes provide transmedial strategies of subjective representation to make audiences align with each version. Thus, the presence of multiple, unreliable focalizers—a strategy typical of literary fiction—helps position *Tell Me Why* in the "literary game" label. However, multiperspectivity is by no means limited to cutscenes. On the level of gameplay, the environmental storytelling of *Tell Me Why* foregrounds multiperspectivity in multiple ways. First, it keeps alternating between two player-controlled characters, Tyler and Alyson, for the whole game. While not strikingly dissonant as in *The Last of Us Part II*, the forced PC-switch equally challenges players' engagement and ethical values: both characters have their motives, worldviews, and backgrounds, which become relevant while making complex choices. If *The Last of Us Part II* meant to blur the moral dichotomy of hero versus villain, *Tell Me Why* does not offer any clear-cut position from the beginning. Second, as in most walking simulators, crucial narrative elements emerge from characters' interaction with the environment. Through letters, recordings, police dossiers, and other artifacts, Alyson and Tyler acquire meaningful, although sometimes contradictory information on the night of their mother's death. Like the scattered survivors' notes in *The Last of Us Part II*, these verbal artifacts are distributed across the game world and constitute Caracciolo's "media-based" environmental storytelling. In his distinction, Caracciolo refers to Clara Fernández-Vara's "interpretation of remains" (2011) to describe a second type of environmental storytelling "in which spatial stories are not tied to semiotic media but rather to physical traces that function indexically—that is, by materially pointing to an event that took place in the same environment" (2024b, 32). The defining game mechanic of *Tell Me Why*, I suggest, introduces an original (multiperspective) variation of this "indexical" environmental storytelling.

After reaching their childhood house, for the first time together after ten years, Tyler and Alyson experience a literal visualization of a shared memory. This supernatural tie, called "The Bond," allowed the twins to share emotions during their childhood but without externalizing them: as Alyson puts it, "we could share thoughts and feelings, but we never *replayed* memories like that." These externalized memories point to physical traces in the snow, highlight clues and hints, or directly provide valuable information through the voices of young Tyler and Alyson. However, as

Fig. 5. The visual representation of a shared memory in *Tell Me Why* (Dontnod Entertainment 2020), with the player forced to choose among two divergent recollections.

the game progresses, this share of memories stops to be as clear-cut as before. In a chapter strikingly titled "Rashomon," the twins experience divergent memories of an interaction between their mother and her friend Tessa while visiting the local general store. As in a canonical example of environmental storytelling, the player interacts with physical materializations of the two memories, choosing which to experience before. However, this is not the only choice players have to make: as it becomes clear that Alyson and Tyler will not agree on a shared memory, the player is called to decide for them (see figure 5). Crucially, the choice is made *by the player-character*, forcing players to consider the implications of their choice for the relationship between the two siblings. In other words, players' decisions not only affect the plot but also, and most significantly, directly shape the bond between Tyler and Alyson.

Throughout the game, players are forced to choose one memory over another with both characters: adopting long-term consequences and an aggregation of choices, the game does not

provide clear-cut solutions for its ethical issues. While always choosing the other character's memory would seemingly strengthen their bond, this supposition is not easily traceable through long-term consequences. Moreover, players could choose to trust the character they are engaging with the most, without thinking in strategic terms. Thus, for example, in a consequence statistics page tracking players' choices, the first memory choice scene is, at the time of writing, the most divisive one, with 52% of players choosing Tyler's memory, and 48% selecting Alyson's one. While these choices are *not* moral dilemmas in themselves, their aggregation helps problematize players' engagement in a constant negotiation between the two characters' affective and ethical values. Through this original game mechanic, *Tell Me Why* fully displays the interplay of narrative and ludic multiperspectivity. Here, multiperspectivity arises as a complex phenomenon that blends a mode of storytelling with a gameplay mechanic, employing both Ryan's "exploratory" and "ontological interactivity" (2006, 108). For Ryan, in the exploratory mode, players have to solve an epistemological gap, gradually discovering what happened before the events they are playing. In *Tell Me Why*, players uncover the twins' past through the exploratory interactivity provided by cutscenes and "media-based" interactivity: in this way, the epistemological uncertainty surrounding Mary-Ann's death is mostly—but not ultimately, as we will see—solved through exploratory interactivity. Conversely, in ontological interactivity players directly shape the game world and the development of the plot. As this usually happens in most choice-based games, such as *The Walking Dead* game (Telltale Games 2012) or the mentioned *Mass Effect* and *Life Is Strange*, the peculiarity of *Tell Me Why* consists in how it integrates multiperspectivity in this gameplay mechanic. Here, ontological interactivity is displayed through emotionally and ethically complex decisions, whose consequences are not easily traceable.

The second aspect of the game's ethical complexity consists in its lack of narrative closure. Multiperspectivity is here crucial in foregrounding irreconcilable versions of events and epistemological as well as ethical and affective uncertainty. At the end of the game's first chapter, a cutscene from Tyler's perspective reveals that Alyson, not Tyler, is responsible for Mary-Ann's death; then, at the beginning of the following chapter, we see Alyson, from her own perspective, holding a pair of scissors and stabbing her mother. Later in the game, Alyson's actions are confirmed by a shared memory and other material clues. While this element—Alyson and not Tyler killed Mary-Ann—can be deemed true, other narrative gaps remain unresolved at the end of the game. *Tell Me Why* thus features multiple endings reflecting players' choices throughout the

narrative and after the third version of events. The central unanswered question concerns why Mary-Ann was holding a shotgun the rainy night she was stabbed by her daughter in the dock in front of their house. While the twins have always been convinced that Mary-Ann planned to kill herself and her two children after a mental breakdown partly due to her incapacity to accept Tyler's gender identity, a third character, Tom—ultimately revealed as the twins' biological father—offers a contradictory memory of that night. In his version, Mary-Ann meant to kill herself, not her children. Moreover, far from denying Tyler's gender identity, she was working toward affirming it. The game thus ultimately faces players with an emotionally and morally fraught choice: whether to trust Tom or the twins' memory, for which Alyson killed her mother in self-defense. Accepting Tom's version would force Alyson to confront a devastating truth: that she killed her mother—depressed and in a confusional state—for no reason. The stakes of the choice are high, and far from unambiguous, as exemplified by the users' polarized reactions on Reddit.[12]

While the narrative progression seems to point toward Tom's version—mostly because Mary-Ann was clearly accepting Tyler's wish to transition—no epistemological certainty is provided by means of diegetic clues. This lack of narrative closure allows players to question and compare their ethical evaluations. As discussed on Reddit threads, for example, the revelation that Mary-Ann's motive for killing Tyler was not his gender identity does not mean that she had not planned to kill him at all.[13] For a Reddit user, for instance, Mary-Ann was going to kill the kids because "she loaded both barrels of the shotgun" (CheeseAndCrackers456). The user then goes on: "I don't think Mary Ann [*sic*] was violent cause of Tyler being trans, but because she was severely mentally ill and was angry with Tom […] It was definitely gonna be a murder suicide." While this user seeks to find epistemological closure by analyzing characters' motives and diegetic clues, others make their choice for affective reasons—in a sort of ethics of care for the characters they have empathized with. Thus, a user admits having chosen Tyler's memory because "honestly, they have enough trauma without having to readjust to facts so dramatically" (Natsume1999). Similarly, the original poster started the discussion by declaring to have chosen against their will: "I chose Alyson

[12] The discussion of the game is not based on data collection in any systematic way, but my analysis brings together formal analysis and players' commentaries found online. Such commentaries are especially valuable to explore players' empathetic and ethical engagement with characters. As stated by Caracciolo, "[t]he Internet is becoming an increasingly important venue for discussing fictional texts, and examining online reports can open fresh perspectives on how readers make sense of characters and integrate them into their worldview" (2016, 24).

[13] See, for example, the discussions on this subreddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/TellMeWhyGame/comments/iqcuk4/everyone_agree_with_final_decision/. The following quotes come from this discussion.

to remember it as she did, not the choice I wanted to make. She has had so many years of torture for killing her mom and leaving her sibling. Now she has to deal with more years of now knowing her mom was just depressed and she murdered her. Alyson deserves a better ending" (MadHatte9).

As exemplified by this discussion, the game does not provide an unequivocally *good* ending. Its multiperspective structure challenges all epistemological certainties, and even the most probable truth—Tom's version—cannot be fully demonstrated. This gap prompts some players to take their decision according to affective or moral reasons. As summarized by Caracciolo in his discussion of Cora Diamond's "difficulty of reality," "affective experience and ethical values are closely bound up: emotions are a route into the difficulty of reality, not in the sense that they can always help us adjudicate ethical questions, but because they lend a concrete, experiential form to the difficulty of reality theorized by Diamond" (2024b, 91). Foregrounding Alyson and Tyler's affective stakes and personal background through its multi-perspective-taking, *Tell Me Why* problematizes our worldviews and morality, ultimately making us question the preeminence of an epistemological truth. Some players, as we have seen, prioritize affective and ethical values over (supposed) factual truth, while others rely on rational reasoning to determine the most likely outcome. Still others state that, while deeply empathizing with Alyson, knowing and confronting a harsh truth, however painful, will be ultimately better than living in a lie. Through the ethical and epistemological uncertainty raised by multiperspectivity, *Tell Me Why* exemplifies how emotions can be a gateway to negotiating ethical dilemmas, without necessarily resolving them. The foregrounding of uncertainty thus emphasizes once again multiperspective video games' potential for negotiating moral complexity.

Like novels and movies, narrative-focused video games can stage multiperspectivity in order to engage with moral complexity. Foregrounding uncertainty, perspective-awareness, and the coordination of character perspectives, multiperspective narratives are well-suited for addressing ethical issues and challenging audiences' ethical assumptions. More specifically, I have argued in this chapter that the encounter between medium-specific strategies of ethical gameplay and multiperspectivity's ethical affordances proves especially productive for the negotiation of moral complexity in multiperspective video games. Conceptualized as the non-optional interplay of narrative and gameplay, this kind of multiperspectivity is unique to the medium, providing direct affective and ethical involvement with player-characters' worldviews. While many games can

stage multiperspectivity, providing both narrative and gameplay elements for shifting perspective-taking, not all of them will foreground ethical dilemmas or question players' morality. What makes my two case studies, *The Last of Us Part II* and *Tell Me Why*, stand out? How is their multiperspectivity *ethically charged*?

First, they both provide a forced PC-switch for which players cannot avoid shifting from one avatar to another. Through the non-optional integration of multiple perspectives into core gameplay mechanics, these games can deepen player's engagement with conflicting values and ethical considerations. Multiperspective video games can thus display their ethical potential when narrative elements—cutscenes and overarching themes—interact with crucial gameplay mechanics. In *The Last of Us Part II*, there is no way but immersing in the strong cognitive friction provided by the switch from Ellie to Abby or quitting the game. Through parallels and similarities, the game gradually blurs the moral dichotomy that (supposedly) characterizes the medium, thus undermining the opposition of hero (Ellie) versus villain (Abby). Cognitive friction is here provided both in a multiperspective fashion—forced PC-switch—and in a more traditional one, taking agency away from players in crucial plot junctures to destabilize their original assumptions toward Ellie (especially in the torture scene). Through strategies of subjective representation in both cutscenes and playable sequences, the game enhances players' complex alignment with both Ellie and Abby, emphasizing mirroring sequences and strong similarities between the two girls. Thus, in *The Last of Us Part II*, the interplay of narrative elements and gameplay mechanics affords an experience of cognitive friction that is crucial to the disruption of binary dichotomies and the creation of a grey zone of moral murkiness. While cognitive friction *per se* would not be sufficient to negotiate moral complexity, its encounter with multiperspectivity's ethical affordances proves to be strikingly productive.

The other key element I have discussed in my analysis of the games is their approach to environmental storytelling: while *The Last of Us Part II* presents scattered notes and letters to expand multiperspectivity to the broader community of survivors, *Tell Me Why*—a game closer to the walking simulator genre—integrates the traditional exploratory mode of media-based environmental storytelling with the ontological interactivity of its core gameplay mechanic. The aggregation of choices—and *memory* choices in particular—shapes the plot progression and (especially) Tyler and Alyson's bond, providing long-term consequences not easily traceable by players. Moreover, it provides an in-game, interactive representation of multiperspectivity—

explicitly thematized by the reference to the Rashomon effect—that further integrates narrative and gameplay. Lastly, I have focused on users' polarized reactions to the ethical dilemma provided by the game's lack of closure. The multiple endings create epistemological and ethical uncertainty by withholding an indisputable factual truth and unambiguous moral consequences: whether we trust Tom's version—that Mary-Ann did not mean to kill her children—and force Alyson to cope with the tragic consequences of her actions, or we trust the twins in a likely delusional thought, the game provides no reassurance of a good ending nor a clear moral preference.

Through the strategies I have focused on, both games display the medium's ethical potential, thus enhancing players' perspective-awareness and challenging their previous assumptions. Multiperspective video games, as I have argued here, integrate the ethical affordances of multiperspectivity—perspective-awareness, coordination of character perspectives, foregrounding of uncertainty—and key features of ethical gameplay—cognitive friction, undermining of moral dichotomy, aggregation of choices—to evoke and effectively negotiate complex ethical issues. In both games, this negotiation is enabled by the seamless, non-optional interplay of narrative and ludic multiperspectivity.

3 Pseudo-Multiperspectivity and the Limits of Storytelling

After the exploration of multiperspective narrative's ethical *potential* through video games, we turn to the ethical *risks* associated with the concept of multiperspectivity. More specifically, I do not focus here on the risks embedded in multiperspective narratives *per se*. Rather, I examine how the widespread assumption that such narratives are inherently beneficial makes them particularly liable to manipulation. This results in a peculiar formal structure that I explore under the heading of "pseudo-multiperspectivity," that is, a complex form of multiperspective narrative in which the multiplication of focalizations or narratorial stances turns out to be a formal or rhetorical strategy developed by a "first-person omniscient narrator" (Dawson 2013). In this form, what C. Namwali Serpell critically refers to as the "all-encompassing beneficence" of multiperspectivity (2014, 117) can be strategically devised to reinforce dominant ideologies, distort truth, or manufacture legitimacy. Therefore, the core claim of the chapter is that pseudo-multiperspectivity helps shed light on the risks of uncritically regarding multiperspectivity as an inherently ethical or democratic narrative strategy, thus highlighting the relative independence of form and ideological meaning (see Sternberg 1982). At the same time, pseudo-multiperspectivity shows how the productive affordances of multiperspectivity—such as perspective-taking and the foregrounding of uncertainty—can be strategically abused for a specific purpose. To do so, I investigate three novels that employ pseudo-multiperspectivity in different ways. In each case, however, a first-person omniscient narrator exploits their diegetic superiority to trespass multiple characters' fictional minds and manipulate the narrative through the illusion of multiperspectivity.[1]

The three examples I focus on in this chapter—Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)—come from a strand of contemporary fiction that is concerned with the very act of storytelling. As influentially explored by scholars such as Brian McHale (1987) and Linda Hutcheon (1988),

[1] The already blurry concept of omniscience is here adopted in a metaphorical sense: as I will detail later in the chapter, first-person omniscient narrators rely upon "the imagination rather than unnatural knowledge to authorize their stories (Dawson 23). Dawson thus speaks of a "relativized omniscience" (210) to account for 'omniscient' narrators who can also be unreliable, as in my three examples.

metafictional devices are pervasive in postmodernist fiction. Among the signature moves of postmodernism, one can find the adoption of "metalepsis" (Genette 1980, 234–7) and other techniques to lay bare literary devices and conventions. Pseudo-multiperspective narratives, however, problematize the idea that metafictional and metaleptic strategies only serve to expose the conventions of fiction for the purpose of self-referentiality. Therefore, I argue that my three examples go beyond the playful and often ironic aspect of postmodernism to critically engage with the ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of storytelling. In this way, as I will discuss below, pseudo-multiperspectivity is particularly well-positioned to reflect on the problematization of narrative in our "storytelling boom" era. By foregrounding their critical dimension, I consider my three novels as part of what Hanna Meretoja has conceptualized as "metanarrative fiction" (2014). In contrast to metafiction's traditional focus on the mechanics and processes of narration, metanarrative fiction extends beyond mere self-referentiality to interrogate the broader cultural, ideological, and ethical implications of storytelling. Rather than simply reflecting on how narratives are constructed, it actively examines how they shape, reinforce, or challenge societal beliefs, values, and power structures. As Mäkelä and Meretoja argue, metanarrative fiction foregrounds a "critical reflection on the significance and roles of cultural narratives in our lives" (2022, 206), emphasizing the ways in which stories influence perception, identity, and historical consciousness.

Within this framework, pseudo-multiperspective narratives become a powerful means of critical reflection. By simulating a multiplicity of perspectives while ultimately remaining under the control of a single dominant consciousness, these narratives expose the illusion of genuine multiperspectivity and highlight the risks of uncritically embracing its values. They interrogate the assumption that multiple perspectives necessarily lead to greater objectivity, inclusivity, or truth, revealing instead how narrative authority can be strategically wielded to manipulate, distort, or contain alternative viewpoints. In doing so, pseudo-multiperspective narratives critically examine what Mäkelä and Meretoja refer to as the "limits of problematic narrative practices" (206), calling attention to the ethical and epistemological stakes of storytelling in both fiction and broader cultural discourse. Before delving into a close reading of my three examples and their specific adoption of pseudo-multiperspectivity, the next section will explore in more detail the peculiar formal structure I am discussing in this chapter, by considering it as a "colliding form" (Levine 2015) that blends together two typologies of multiperspectivity, that is, vertical and horizontal

multiperspectivity. To better clarify this taxonomical distinction, I will also address the role of framing devices in multiperspective narratives. I will then discuss the narratological concepts of "first-person omniscient narrator" and the relationship of pseudo-multiperspectivity to the field of "unnatural narratology" (Alber et al. 2010).

The following section turns to the role of pseudo-multiperspectivity in contemporary cultural discourse. After an overview of the so-called "story-critical approach" to narrative (Mäkelä 2018; Mäkelä and Meretoja 2022), I will discuss pseudo-multiperspectivity as a form well-suited to expose the risks of "vicarious storytelling," in which a narrator reports a story that is primarily experienced or mediated through another perspective, thus producing a layered or secondhand narrative experience for the audience. More specifically, pseudo-multiperspectivity's narrators play on the ethical appeal of perspective-awareness by simulating openness and multiplicity while ultimately directing interpretation in subtle and strategic ways. In this sense, they engage in a calculated play on the trust readers place in multiperspectivity as an ethically charged form. To capture this deliberate narrative strategy, I adopt the term "strategic perspective-awareness," drawing on Suzanne Keen's concept of "strategic empathy" (2007) and Meretoja's notion of "perspective-awareness" (2023a). More precisely, strategic perspective-awareness refers to the narrator's intentional manipulation of the reader's capacity to recognize that every story is told from a particular point of view. As Meretoja puts it, this is the awareness "of how each narrative is told from a certain perspective and involves interpretation, selectivity, and meaning-giving […] of how each story can be told differently—from someone else's perspective, interpreted by someone else" (68–69).

The three novels I explore in this chapter critically address the ethical and epistemological dimension of storytelling through both thematic and formal means. In particular, *The Ice Storm* reflects on moral transgression and the self-reassuring "narrative" of the suburban way of life, by integrating pseudo-multiperspectivity as a key feature that formally mirrors its thematic concern. *Atonement* addresses more explicitly the manipulative power of storytelling, by ultimately exposing the strategic adoption of specific narrative techniques. While many scholars have focused on the ethical ambiguity raised by McEwan's novel (Phelan 2007; Dawson 2013; Tobin 2018), little attention has been devoted to the deliberate manipulation of a *specific* narrative technique, namely multiperspectivity. In other words, I will argue that the novel's ethical ambiguity is significantly channeled through exploiting the specific affordances of multiperspectivity. Finally,

I will discuss another example of narrative manipulation with my third example: in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, pseudo-multiperspectivity serves to critically reflect on the constructedness of a dictatorial form of storytelling. In Díaz's novel, the narrator, Yunior, blends the eponymous protagonist's story with a supposedly oppositional historiography of the Dominican regime under Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship by seemingly weaving together different character perspectives. However, the novel results in a particularly overt example of metanarrative fiction, with an explicit story-critical discourse that is formally sustained by the pseudo-multiperspective structure. What my three case studies ultimately achieve is thus a critical reflection on the limits of storytelling: the widespread assumption of multiperspectivity's "democracy, impartiality, tolerance" (Serpell 117) is here strategically manipulated by overarching narrators whose ultimate purpose is hidden behind the illusion of multiperspectivity. Exploring the formal dimension of such a critical reflection is the task of this chapter.

Colliding Forms and First-Person Omniscience

In her seminal *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine argues for a return of form in literary studies by understanding it as encompassing texts and contexts. In her terms, form can be described as "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (3). Paying close attention to complex formal patterns allows us to rethink political power and social formations, as the "primary goal of this formalism is a radical social change" (18). For Levine, narrative is particularly well-positioned to deploy multiple forms: "[t]he form that best captures the experience of colliding forms is narrative" (19). More specifically, she argues that "[w]hat narrative form affords is a careful attention to the ways in which forms come together, and to what happens when and after they meet" (19). In this chapter, I am precisely interested in this "collision" of forms as the crucial juncture that creates what I call "pseudo-multiperspectivity," which results from the encounter between the "horizontal" and "vertical" typologies of multiperspectivity.

Defined as the "strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology" (18), the phenomenon of collision is particularly productive in ethical and cultural terms. In their investigation of the "dangers of narrative" vis-à-vis the current storytelling boom—which I will return to later—Maria Mäkelä et al. refer to Levine's concept of formal collision to

tangibly examine the interaction between text and context: in their words, "the omnipresent urge to tell and share experiential stories results in collisions between the narrative form and other forms, such as those of the social media. Such collisions can generate unwanted or unsolicited effects that stem from the affordances of these forms" (2021, 142). More recently, Simona Adinolfi has discussed the encounter of binary time and the loop in her analysis of Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) as a particularly productive colliding form to address present-day issues such as migration, displacement, and relocation (2024). Despite their widely different objects of analysis, both Mäkelä and colleagues and Adinolfi foreground the political and contextualist value of Levine's concept, by understanding "the viral exemplum" (Mäkelä et al.) and the "postapocalyptic fiction of migration" (Adinolfi) as a collision of forms rather than a form in itself.

By bringing together horizontal and vertical multiperspectivity, pseudo-multiperspectivity emerges as a new form in which the affordances of the former are intertwined with and partially subordinated to the hierarchical structure of the latter. Vertical multiperspectivity, I suggest, shares a common ground with the form of the hierarchy—"the most troubling of all the forms" considered by Levine (2015, 82)—which frequently affords "gradation" and structural inequality. Here, I consider the hierarchy, in a narratological sense, as potentially affording "numerous ways of structuring inequality" (Levine 84) through the juxtaposition of multiple diegetic levels. Naturally, not all narratives distributed on different diegetic levels produce inequality nor critically engage with issues of justice and the exercise of power. Postmodernist fiction has frequently adopted metaleptic jumps for playful purposes, blurring the boundaries between narrative levels and challenging conventional distinctions between author, narrator, and character. But the existence of multiple diegetic levels has been a common feature of narrative since the origins of literature, from classical frame narratives to experimental metafictional techniques. What interests me here, however, is that pseudo-multiperspectivity explicitly thematizes the strategic manipulation afforded by the diegetic hierarchy. In other words, the form of hierarchy in pseudo-multiperspectivity is always an example of critical engagement with ethical or political issues. My three examples display such engagement in different ways, with *The Ice Storm* more closely reflecting on the moral decay of dysfunctional families and suburban communities, while *Atonement* and *Oscar Wao* directly questioning the ethical and the political ambiguity of the form. In this way, the three case studies can be positioned along a continuum that goes from the less to the more manipulative use of storytelling techniques. While the narrator of *The Ice Storm*, Paul

Hood, replicates with his act of narration the physical and moral transgression of the community he has been part of, Briony and Yunior, the narrators of *Atonement* and *Oscar Wao*, strategically fabricate a multiperspective narrative to address or hide their own moral or ideological flaws. Where the three works converge, however, is precisely in their critical reflection around this manipulative act in a metanarrative, or story-critical, vein.

As we have seen in the introduction, horizontal multiperspectivity concerns the juxtaposition of multiple character perspectives *on the same diegetic level*: this is the typology that I consistently explore throughout the thesis, from the cinematic example of Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Monster* to the video game *The Last of Us Part II* and Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Acceptance*. Vertical multiperspectivity, conversely, regards the distribution of perspectives or narrating instances *on different diegetic levels*, thus frequently mirroring the affordances of Levine's hierarchy.[2] While, drawing on Vera and Ansgar Nünning's proposal of a "perspective structure," both typologies have been analyzed as full-fledged multiperspectivity by existing scholarship (Nünning and Nünning 2000a; Wolf 2006; Hartner 2014), in this thesis I have limited my understanding of multiperspective narratives to the *horizontal* juxtaposition of several character perspectives around the same event of the storyworld (see the introduction). Effectively exploring the ethical and cultural implications of multiperspectivity requires a narrower understanding of this formal strategy of narrative to its nonhierarchical dimension. Conversely, bringing together widely different phenomena such as the frame stories of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) alongside the horizontal multiperspectivity I am exploring here would significantly reduce the operative function of the concept. Yet I want to stress once more that these two typologies do not automatically fulfill a democratic and a 'dictatorial' ideological agenda, respectively. On the contrary, a horizontal multiperspectivity runs the opposite risks of incommensurability and teleological totalization, as I will discuss in more detail in my econarratological reevaluation of the concept (see chapter 5). Similarly, the hierarchical structure

[2] In *Migration and Narrative: A Living Glossary* (2023), Roy Sommer distinguishes between horizontal and vertical multiperspectivity in the narrative around migration: horizontal multiperspectivity is described as the representation of the issue "from different angles, allowing for debate," such as in policy narratives or scientific research, or "when a wide range of migrant experiences […] are represented in migration discourses." Conversely, vertical multiperspectivity "occurs when different kinds of perspective (e.g., life stories and official narratives) are represented together" (51). While Sommer's horizontal multiperspectivity, defined as "the norm in democratic, open societies," partially aligns with my own understanding, his conceptualization of vertical multiperspectivity significantly differs from mine, which addresses verticality in more literal way as the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives on different diegetic levels.

of vertical multiperspectivity does not necessarily lead to oppression or ideological subordination, as exemplified by many productive forms of secondhand narration or vicarious storytelling (see Gebauer and Sommer 2023).

What happens in my category of pseudo-multiperspectivity, however, is the *unexpected* encounter of these two axes of multiperspectivity, and the resulting collision of the affordances of the two. Such a collision fosters a metanarrative reflection whose productive outcome is precisely realized through readers' unsettling realization of the hierarchical structure. Put more clearly, the delayed disclosure plays a central role in subverting readers' beliefs and negotiating their ethical positioning toward the narrative. Had they known from the beginning the true identity of Yunior in *Oscar Wao* or Briony's novel-within-a-novel in *Atonement*, the productive value of the (story-)critical reflection would have been significantly diminished. The delayed disclosure, as we will see, takes different forms in my three case studies: yet it is always crucial for the critical reflection foregrounded by the novels. While *Atonement* undoubtedly provides the most shocking effect—with a proper "mind-tricking" ending—both *The Ice Storm* and *Oscar Wao* subtly play with readers' expectations around the identity of the overarching narrator. In other words, while the readers of *Atonement* are unlikely to realize the existence of a different diegetic level until the last section of the novel, my other two examples reveal the diegetic distribution of the narrative early on but strategically conceal the identity of their narrating instances.

Such ingeniously devised structures are made possible through an effective display of framing devices. In a previous article (D'Amato 2025a), I have explored the role of frames and segmentivity in the "repetitive" typology of multiperspectivity, that is, the one relying on the repetition of the same event from different character perspectives. I have argued that, while attention has been devoted to the vertical frames in narrative theory (see, e.g., Wolf 2000, and Igl 2019), the function of horizontal frames is still undertheorized. Yet they play a crucial role in the formal structure of multiperspective and, even more significantly, *pseudo*-multiperspective narratives. Take, for example, the structural organization of *Atonement*. As I will discuss more extensively below, after adopting a third-person omniscient narrator for the whole novel, the last section, "London 1999," employs delayed disclosure to reveal that this apparent anonymous omniscient narrator is in fact a character, Briony, the author of the novel "Atonement" that we have just read. The last section thus crosses an ontological boundary, with Briony's character narration framing her fictional "Atonement" by Briony Tallis. This is a classic example of frame narrative

that triggers vertical multiperspectivity. According to Christoph Bode, one of the most sophisticated functions of multiperspectivity is the "hierarchization of narratives and perspectives" (2011, 200), that is, putting multiple perspectives on a vertical axis. Werner Wolf has discussed how framing devices can be considered as phenomena of multiperspectivity when a higher level of the text encapsulates and 'frames' the subordinate perspectives (2006, 195). This typically occurs through frame stories and any other kind of embedded narration: in *Atonement*, as in *The Ice Storm* and *Oscar Wao*, it is a novel written by a character who is part of the storyworld, which creates vertical multiperspectivity between Briony's point of view of the last section and the different focalizing characters who are juxtaposed throughout her own novel, including Briony as character of "Atonement." Multiperspective focalization dominates, in fact, Briony's "Atonement," and it is extensively thematized throughout the novel. In Part One, more specifically, a sequence around a fountain is reported through multiple perspectives: the section is segmented through chapter division, with each chapter framing a different focalizing character. The encounter of vertical and horizontal frames thus articulates the collision between the multiple focalizing characters of Briony's "Atonement" (horizontal multiperspectivity) and the diegetic leap from "Atonement" to *Atonement* (vertical multiperspectivity).

But what kind of narrator can trigger this collision of forms? And how can this overarching narratorial figure be more clearly defined? My term for the colliding form of pseudo-multiperspectivity is inspired by what Brian Richardson, in his seminal *Unnatural Voices* (2006), has called "pseudo-third person" narrative and "pseudo-focalization." For Richardson, the "pseudo-third person" is exemplified by Jorge Luís Borges's short story "The Shape of the Sword" (1944), in which the protagonist recounts in the third person the story of traitor and "only by the end of the tale do we realize that the narrator has been describing himself all along" (Richardson 10). A more complex case is represented by the category of pseudo-focalization, which can be found in *Atonement* itself. Richardson uses the concept of pseudo-focalization to address the "problem" raised by pseudo-third person narratives, that is, the narrator's "unnatural" knowledge of the thoughts of other characters. While "other narrators tend to be rather less scrupulous concerning the sources of their apparent knowledge of other minds," the case of *Atonement* "produces a kind of pseudo-focalization in which the thoughts of several individuals are presented as if by an omniscient third person narrator, but it is one who turns out to be merely a character who uses her imagination to attempt to intuit the probable or possible thoughts of the others" (11).

While the idea of pseudo-focalization effectively captures Briony's operation of giving the illusion of fictional consciousnesses, the ending of Richardson's passage does not make clear *how* Briony addresses the thoughts of the others: the reference to "imagination" does not perfectly align, in my view, with the use of the verb "to intuit," and the degree of "unnaturalness" of this operation thus remains unclear. Put bluntly, if Briony uses her *imagination* to write a novel in which she enters the thoughts and beliefs of fictional characters, there is no need to recur to the idea of "unnatural" narrative.

This is one of the points advocated by Paul Dawson in his critique of the unnatural narratological approach to first-person omniscience. All my three examples in this chapter provide this first-person omniscience, that is, the presence of character narrators "adopting the privilege of omniscience typically associated with authorial narration" (2013, 196). For Dawson, the "problem" of this category of narrative voice is ultimately a false concern. Theorists working in the field of unnatural narratology have referred to Genette's paralepsis—an infraction of the code of focalization in which a narrator offers more information that they should be aware of—to explain the violations of realistic norms provided by first-person omniscience (see Heinze 2008). Dawson argues, however, that a character narrator who enters the mind of other characters or reports unwitnessed events is not *reporting* but *inventing*, exactly like a novelist does. It is no coincidence that Paul Hood, Briony Tallis, and Yunior all aspire, in different ways and by different means, to become novelists: "[i]f the *authors* of unnatural narratives are able to imagine impossible storyworlds, antinomic temporalities, mind reading and unnatural narrative voices, presumably these imaginative acts are real-world cognitive activities. To put it bluntly, writing fiction is a natural act of communication, and this is the model first-person narrators invoke when performing omniscience in the act of narration" (Dawson 201, original emphasis). For Dawson, then, is precisely the narrators' *imagination*—as initially suggested but then discarded by Richardson—to undermine the supposed unnaturalness of homodiegetic omniscience. Building on this idea, the category of pseudo-multiperspectivity should not be regarded as an unnatural or mimetically inconsistent form. Rather, Dawson's emphasis on the narratorial invention of first-person omniscient narrators closely resonates with my understanding of pseudo-multiperspectivity as a type of Meretoja's metanarrative fiction. In other words, drawing their authority "from the figure of the novelist who creates rather than the memoirist who reports" (215), the narrators of pseudo-multiperspective narratives trigger a critical reflection on the role and function of narratives

themselves. This self-awareness embedded within pseudo-multiperspective narratives not only exposes the constructed nature of storytelling but also invites readers to question the ethical and epistemological implications of the form.

There is no violation of the conventions of literary realism (see Richardson 2015),[3] nor is there any overstepping of the physical or logical possibilities (see Alber, *Unnatural Narrative*) in pseudo-multiperspectivity. Conversely, the emphasis should not be on the transgression of mimetic norms but on the real-world values of the critical reflection foregrounded by the form through its problematization of narrative strategies. The dualistic opposition of natural and unnatural, of possible and impossible,[4] diverges from what Meretoja regards as storytelling's capacity—and story-critical fiction's more specifically—to expand our "sense of the possible" (2018, 90–97). To cultivate our sense of the possible, or "our capacity to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present" (20), is a pivotal outcome of the ethical potential of narratives: the dichotomies emphasized by unnatural narrative theory, in my view, are ill-suited to address the dynamic expansion (or reduction) of this sense of the possible advocated by Meretoja. The peculiar form I examine in this chapter does not present an "impossible" act of communication that stands in strict opposition to "natural" modes of narration. Rather, it fictionalizes a real-world storytelling practice—vicarious storytelling—through the encounter of vertical and horizontal multiperspectivity. In doing so, it highlights how a specific narrative technique—multiperspectivity—can be exploited and strategically manipulated. Before offering a close reading of *The Ice Storm*, *Atonement*, and *Oscar Wao* and their critical reflection, I will discuss the story-critical strand of narrative theory and propose the concept of strategic perspective-awareness.

Vicarious Storytelling and Strategic Perspective-Awareness

In recent years, narrative theory has devoted significant attention to the "dangers of narrative" (Mäkelä et al. 2021) and the limits or harmful effects of storytelling (see, e.g., Meretoja 2018; Meretoja and Davis 2018; Dege and Strasser 2024). These approaches emerge in contrast to the

[3] On the complex interpretive transactions between fictional worlds and literary realism see also Bertoni (2007).
[4] Among the main arguments against unnatural narratology there is the difficulty of establishing a "natural" standard from which the unnatural takes its departure (see Fludernik 2012), or the necessity of keeping the "mimetic bias always present as a default model to be challenged" (Dawson 201).

so-called "storytelling boom," that is, the contemporary proliferation of stories, narratives, and their significance in our "social media-induced narrative environments" (Mäkelä and Meretoja 192), ranging from stories of personal change to storytelling consultancy, from "narrative economics" to political activism, and so on. According to Mäkelä and Meretoja it is crucial not to overestimate the inherent value of storytelling nor to tilt towards the antinarrativist positions advocated by philosophers such as Galen Strawson (2004) and Crispin Sartwell (2000): "[t]here is a need for story-critical approaches that do not rely on such totalizing views of narrative as inherently ontologically or ethically questionable but which, rather, analyze different uses of narrative in social contexts" (Mäkelä and Meretoja 200). In the storytelling boom, the widespread celebration of practices of storytelling has been, for many narrative theorists, problematically uncritical. It is thus crucial to be aware that a formal strategy of narrative like multiperspectivity—whose ethical value is widely celebrated—can be put to uses that are dubious or even harmful. Drawing on Serpell's analysis of the concept, I will zoom in on the ambivalence of multiperspectivity itself in the last chapter, in which I address three ambiguities that make traditional conceptualizations of multiperspective narrative ill-suited for engaging with the ecological crisis. Here I am interested in her reflection around the widespread assumption of multiperspectivity's inherent value, and the risks related to such an uncritical belief.

For Serpell, ethical and cultural criticisms have sometimes superficially regarded multiperspectivity *per se* as a form of counternarrative, as a strategy for representing complex realities in a democratic vein: "[e]thical criticism tends to be enamored with the democracy, impartiality, tolerance, or all-encompassing beneficence that multiple perspectives imply. Multiplicity is said to present a more complete picture: each view adds another facet to a concept, character, or event" (Serpell 117). While multiperspectivity, as explored in the previous chapter, is certainly well-adapted to address complex ethical issues and challenge recipients' moral beliefs, uncritically overestimating its potential can lead to ethically questionable consequences. Pseudo-multiperspective narratives challenge this assumption and directly *expose* its risks. What makes this form particularly effective and sets it apart from other types of metanarrative fiction is that pseudo-multiperspectivity builds its critical reflection on the manipulation of a narrative strategy that is inherently valuable. In other words, I argue that pseudo-multiperspective narratives hold particular promise vis-à-vis our contemporary storytelling boom precisely because they critically engage with one of the most ethically charged narrative strategies, namely multiperspectivity. The

disruptive power of *Atonement*'s disclosure not only relies on Briony's fabrication but is significantly enhanced by her manipulation of multiperspectivity as a novelistic technique to present a more complex picture of her characters' values and beliefs. Similarly, Yunior exploits the inherent values of multiperspectivity to provide the illusion of a totalizing and respectful account of Oscar Wao's life. For Paul Hood, whose goal is less manipulative and more critical, multiperspectivity serves to make sense of the suburban and familial decay by fictionally replicating the acts of moral transgression. This exploitation of multiperspectivity, formally realized through the collision of vertical and horizontal multiperspectivity's affordances, is achieved through vicarious storytelling and a strategic manipulation of perspective-awareness.

In their analysis of vicarious storytelling in the context of global migration crises, Carolin Gebauer and Roy Sommer distinguish between different forms of narrative which are operative in different environments. These forms are positioned in a sort of scalar continuum from the least to the most committed to pursuing a full-fledged form of collaborative storytelling, with the "allied narratives" as specifically productive cases of vicarious narration (2023, 6).[5] As highlighted by Gebauer and Sommer, however, "[a]lthough the act of speaking on behalf of someone, which is at the heart of vicarious storytelling, typically pursues a good cause, it also incurs the risk of categorizing individuals" (9). Yet in the case of pseudo-multiperspective narrative, vicarious storytelling does not necessarily pursue a good cause: while Briony's project of atonement through vicarious storytelling is a "fascinating but flawed endeavor" (Phelan 2007, 130)—and thus can be considered as originating from a genuine, albeit misguided, desire for redemption—Yunior's act of storytelling is ethically more questionable and is far from serving a good purpose. My three case studies thus partially mirror Gebauer and Sommer's continuum but in reverse, from the least problematic (Moody's novel) to the most manipulative (*Oscar Wao*), through Briony's flawed project of redemption.

One of the most evident "dangers" of narrative frequently explored by story-critical approaches concerns precisely the ethical problem of the "instrumentalization of vicarious experience" (Björninen et al. 2020, 438). This issue is strictly connected to the concept of "narrative

[5] The four forms of vicarious storytelling identified by Gebauer and Sommer are: (1) case stories used in humanitarian campaigns; (2) documentary storytelling; (3) ambassadorial storytelling; and (4) allied storytelling. While the first two use testimony to support claims and illustrate facts, the third goes a step further by retelling and reframing specific individuals' lives, and the fourth provides a more complete form of collaborative narrative in literary and artistic work displaying the political potential of cultural artifacts (6–9).

entitlement" proposed by Amy Shuman in her *Other People's Stories* (2005), that is, the question of "who owns a story and who is entitled to tell it or hear it" (Shuman 2015, 38). As aptly emphasized by Shuman, "[t]he appropriation of stories can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding" (2005, 5). Shuman's words are crucial for pinpointing the ethical potential *and* risks of storytelling, as narratives and the act of narrating "do not necessarily change the conditions of marginalization that underlie access to speaking for oneself" (2015, 41). This is particularly true, as we will see, for Yunior's manipulation of Oscar Wao's personal story, an operation of giving voice to the voiceless that ends up preserving and reinstating, rather than subverting, power relations and dictatorial values that oppressed Oscar in the first place. I will return to these harmful effects of vicarious storytelling—and on the strategic exploitation of multiperspectivity they rely on—in the section on Díaz's novel. Here, I would like to introduce the concept of "strategic perspective-awareness" to better clarify in what way these narrators exploit multiperspectivity's ethical affordances.

The idea of strategic perspective-awareness clearly resonates with what Suzanne Keen has influentially termed "strategic narrative empathy" (2007, 2008), itself inspired by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of "strategic essentializing." Spivak uses the term to describe the deliberate rhetorical choices made by authors to bring readers closer to, or distance them from, subjects of representation for political purposes (see Spivak 1996). Like Spivak's concept, Keen's strategic empathizing occurs when an author adopts empathy in the crafting of fictional texts, in service of "a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak 214). In other words, such authors aim to evoke empathy and guide readers' engagement *for a specific purpose*.[6] As noted by Gebauer and Sommer, vicarious storytelling frequently draws on this kind of strategic narrative empathy, for different purposes and with different outcomes. Similarly, I argue that pseudo-multiperspectivity also mobilizes Keen's strategic narrative empathy—but it goes further by incorporating what I call strategic perspective-awareness, that is, the storyteller's calculated exploitation of readers' perspective-awareness for specific ideological or ethical purposes.

[6] Keen distinguishes three types of strategic empathizing: (1) "bounded strategic empathy," which occurs within "an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others" ("Strategic Empathizing" 481); (2) "ambassadorial strategic empathy," which "addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating for the in-group" (483); and (3) "broadcast strategic empathy," which "calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group" and stresses "common vulnerabilities and hopes" (488).

Crucially, whereas Keen locates strategic empathizing at the level of the author, strategic perspective-awareness in pseudo-multiperspective narratives operates *at the level of the first-person narrator*. Thus, by critically engaging with the significance of cultural narratives, pseudo-multiperspectivity explicitly reflects on the use of strategic perspective-awareness in their narrators' storytelling practices. But how does my idea of strategic perspective-awareness differ from Keen's strategic empathizing? And how can such awareness be effectively manipulated by the narrators of my case studies?

In her discussion of the significance of hermeneutic awareness vis-à-vis present-day challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the "post-truth" era, Meretoja develops a model of "narrative agency" to help us navigate our narrative environments (2023a, 2023b). According to Meretoja, narrative agency is what makes us able to use, (re)interpret, and address culturally available narratives, to challenge them, and to decide which narratives we use to engage with ourselves and the world: "[n]arrative agency refers to our ability to position ourselves in relation to cultural narrative models of sense-making" (2023a, 68). She then goes on identifying three central dimensions of narrative agency: narrative awareness, narrative imagination, and narrative dialogicality. Here I am primarily interested in the first dimension, narrative awareness, described as readers' awareness of the "culturally available narratives that affect people's lives by functioning as models of sense-making" (68). More specifically, it includes *perspective-awareness*, the capacity to perceive particular events or situations from a variety of perspectives and to recognize the existence of this multiplicity of perspectives. I thus understand "perspective-awareness" as *recipients'* cognitive and ethical capacity to recognize the perspectival nature of storytelling and *not* as a self-reflexive feature of narrative texts. *Strategic* perspective-awareness, then, refers to how storytellers—and pseudo-multiperspectivity's narrators, in this case—intentionally manipulate this readerly competence.

We have seen in the previous chapter how developing our perspective-awareness and our capacity for perspective-taking is considered by Meretoja as one of the six essential aspects of narrative's ethical potential. I have then argued that multiperspective narratives are particularly well-suited to actively foster this potential for perspective-awareness and perspective-taking. Here, I suggest that this potential for perspective-awareness is precisely what the first-person narrators of pseudo-multiperspective narratives strategically display and exploit. However, by ultimately laying bare their strategic manipulation of perspective-awareness, pseudo-multiperspective

narratives effectively foster readers' critical reflection. In other words, the metanarrative dimension of pseudo-multiperspectivity exposes strategic perspective-awareness as a technique deliberately adopted by the first-person narrator, thus critically engaging with its use.

My concept of strategic perspective-awareness encompasses Keen's strategic narrative empathy and Meretoja's perspective-awareness. It is not limited to the empathetic connection with one or more characters, nor to readers' awareness of their individual perspectives. Rather, it goes beyond a mere empathetic perspective-taking to include a broader understanding of perspective-awareness. As noted by Meretoja, ethically valuable outcomes of perspective-taking "cannot be reduced to the single outcome of empathetic concern for the other" (2018, 132). Similarly, the narrators of my three case studies do not simply resort to readers' empathetic engagement toward the different characters whose mental states they are brought to simulate. Rather, they strongly rely on the ethical value usually associated with perspective-taking and perspective-awareness. In other words, they strategically display readers' perspective-awareness—that a single event (the fountain scene in *Atonement*) or character (Oscar in the eponymous novel) can be perceived from different perspectives—for a specific personal or ideological agenda. For Briony, the evocation of perspective-awareness is crucial in providing the illusion of a more complete and detailed depiction of Cecilia, Robbie, and the other characters' values and personal interactions. In Yunior's case, perspective-awareness and perspective-taking are strategically displayed to disguise his heteronormative discourse beneath the claim of 'giving voice to the voiceless.'

Naturally, not all first-person omniscient narrators resort to vicarious storytelling and strategic perspective-awareness. As my three examples seek to exemplify, pseudo-multiperspective narratives present widely different examples of (story-)critical reflection, if they present it at all. Before delving into the three novels, I also want to stress that not all pseudo-multiperspective narratives are instances of metanarrative fiction. Even my three case studies are admittedly very different in their engagement with vicarious storytelling and the manipulation of multiperspectivity's ethical value. In particular, I do not deny that the inclusion of *The Ice Storm* may seem at odds with the other two novels, which more obviously converge in their strategic exploitation of multiperspectivity. Yet I am interested in the different ways the three novels adopt the affordances of the colliding form of pseudo-multiperspectivity, from the more local and personal agenda of Paul Hood's narration to the ideological manipulation of Yunior, through Briony's flawed desire of redemption. Where they all converge is in their identification of

multiperspectivity as the narrative technique most predisposed to strategic and effective manipulation. Ultimately, Paul, Briony, and Yunior—that is to say, Moody, McEwan, and Díaz—have indeed found in the uncritical assumption of multiperspectivity's ethical value a productive element for discussing the risks that underlie the contemporary storytelling boom.

Suburban Entanglement and Moral Transgression

Set in the "most congenial and superficially calm of suburbs" (Moody 1997, 3), *The Ice Storm* is a bleak portrait of two dysfunctional suburban families—the Hoods and the Williamses—in the tumultuous sociopolitical climate of 1973, defined by sexual experimentation, political uncertainty, and moral transgression. As aptly noted by Dawson, the novel's opening lines are particularly revealing in narratorial terms: "[s]o let me dish you this story about a family I knew when I was growing up. There's a part for me in this story, like there always is for a gossip, but more on that later" (Moody 3). After this early revelation about the narrator as homodiegetic witness, the novel moves into an authorial, third-person omniscient voice, "employing *variable internal focalization to shift perspectives* between the father, mother, daughter, and son" (Dawson 203, emphasis added): in other words, featuring a pseudo-multiperspective structure. For Dawson, this is the most "naturalizable" of homodiegetic omniscient narrators, which can be understood under the heading of "illusory paralepsis": the narrator "has *imagined* the 'consciousnesses of the past' rather than reported them" (204, original emphasis). But what is the point of this imaginative act? And why does Paul create a multiperspective canvas rather than focusing, for example, on the creation of a single fictional mind? In this section, I will focus on the novel's effective adoption of the affordances of horizontal and vertical multiperspectivity, and their respective alignment with the forms of the network and the hierarchy. While the convergence between vertical multiperspectivity and hierarchical structures has already been addressed, here I also consider the productive resonance between horizontal multiperspectivity and the network. Although the network is primarily a feature of the plot, it shares with horizontal multiperspectivity a nonhierarchical logic and a structure of multiplicity. In other words, not all multiperspective narratives are network narratives and not all network narratives present multiperspectivity, but this conceptual affinity allows horizontal multiperspectivity to echo or reinforce a network-like

plotting. In *The Ice Storm*, I argue, both the network and the hierarchy play a crucial role in formally mirroring a central thematic concern of the novel: the sexual and moral *entanglement* exemplified by the "key party" (the network); and the *transgression* of spatial and moral boundaries paralleled by Paul's intrusive narration (the hierarchy).

The Ice Storm takes place over Thanksgiving weekend and centers on two families, the Hoods and the Williamses, whose lives are entangled by proximity and, more significantly, by a shared undercurrent of marital dissatisfaction and emotional detachment. Following a pseudo-multiperspective structure, the novel is composed by three parts, each consisting of four sections entirely focalized—with rare exceptions—through each of the four members of the Hood family: the father Benjamin, the daughter Wendy, the mother Elena, and the son Paul, respectively. Paul, a 14-year-old boarding school student, is largely absent from the primary events of the novel, spending most of the weekend in New York City—an element that contributes to foreground his imaginative reconstruction of the story. His storyline follows his unsuccessful attempts to initiate a romantic relationship with one of his classmates as he gets lost in reading the *Fantastic Four* comics, whose themes of fractured family dynamics and supernatural crises mirror the dysfunctions within his own household. Meanwhile, back in New Canaan, the rest of the Hood family navigate the shifting moral landscape of their suburban community. Benjamin Hood is engaged in an extramarital affair with his neighbor, Janey Williams, the wife of Jim Williams and mother to Mikey and Sandy. His relationship with Elena is strained, marked by unspoken tensions and sexual frustration. Elena, increasingly disillusioned with her life and marriage, begins in turn to explore her own desires. Similarly, the daughter Wendy exhibits a precocious and rebellious attitude toward sex, engaging in provocative experiments with the Williams boys. She plays flirtatious games with both brothers, thus exposing the lack of sexual boundaries among the neighborhood's children, and the affective and sexual entanglement of the two families. The novel's climax takes place during a neighborhood "key party"—a diegetic element formally mirrored by the network-like plotting. Simultaneously, a severe ice storm descends upon the town: as the night unfolds, Mikey Williams ventures out into the frozen landscape, exploring the icy woods alone. He ultimately dies by accidental electrocution when he comes into contact with a downed power line: his death is discovered the following morning, shaking the entire community and forcing the characters to confront the consequences of their moral failings.

Before discussing the affordances of network and hierarchy, it is crucial to stress that, as should be clear from the very first lines of the novel, readers are here aware of the existence of an overarching narrating instance. Such awareness clearly distinguishes Moody's book from the disrupting, mind-tricking effect elicited by *Atonement*'s plot twist, as we will see in more detail in the next section. However, the novel retains its critical potential by concealing the identity of this homodiegetic witness and consistently defying and diverting readers' assumptions until its last pages. It is only in the last paragraph that the narrator reminds his audience of his presence and reveals his personal involvement in the story: "[o]r, that's how I remember it, anyway. Me. Paul. The gab. That's what I remember. And that this story really ends right at that spot. I have to leave Benjamin there with that news […] I have to leave him and his family there because after all this time, after twenty years, it's time I left" (Moody 279). The revelation of Paul, the son of the Hood family, as the overarching narrator of his community's story ultimately forces us to reevaluate his admitted personal bias and the extent to which he fictionalizes his family members' consciousnesses. As the last line of the above passage suggests, Paul's operation can be regarded as a way of coming to terms with the moral murkiness and suburban decay of the family and community in which he was raised. In other words, the novel adopts pseudo-multiperspectivity as a metanarrative reflection on the moral transgression of the suburban community, and on the attempt of making sense of its dysfunctions through the illusion of an omniscient multiperspective account. Paul's pseudo-multiperspectivity thus serves a dual purpose: through the adoption of a typically suburban narrative form, the network, he effectively captures the inextricable entanglement of families and communities. Yet this narrative strategy is ultimately destabilized by the delayed disclosure of his role as narrator, thus exposing the manipulative nature of his storytelling practice and mirroring the transgression of spatial and moral boundaries that defines the novel's thematic core.

Throughout the novel, horizontal multiperspectivity as a formal engagement with a group of focalizing characters—Benjy, Wendy, Elena, and Paul himself—is adopted to strategically convey a collective experience of the suburban space.[7] It is no coincidence that Bordwell's network narrative turns out to be one of the favorite formal engagements with suburban stories, as exemplified by movies as diverse as Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998), Sam Mendes's *American*

[7] I have discussed the formal strategies well-suited to convey a collective experience of the suburbs in D'Amato (2024b).

Beauty (1999), or Todd Fields's *Little Children* (2006). While traditional network narratives usually present vastly separate plotlines that contingently converge in diegetic "knots" (Schmitt 2014, 84), suburban network stories are often *local* in scope, with characters as family members whose lives are completely disconnected from one another. As highlighted by Levine, "[s]ome networks are densely local, such as relationships in a village; others, like shipping routes, put vast spaces between nodes" (114): suburban stories clearly rely on the former. Consider, for example, the way *Happiness* portrays US suburbs through three sisters and other characters' related yet separate plotlines to foreground the typical suburban form of interlinked and isolated disaffected relationships.[8] These networks thus consist of parallel story lines and several protagonists whose "projects are largely decoupled from one another, or only contingently linked" (Bordwell 2008, 192), an apt way for capturing the dysfunctional condition portrayed by many contemporary suburban narratives, and exemplified by Paul's family more specifically.

The two families' enmeshment thematically foregrounded by the narrative is thus formally replicated by the adoption of horizontal multiperspectivity and network-like plotting. In the first chapter of the novel, we are introduced to the Williams family house through the focalization of Paul's father and Janey Williams's lover, Benjamin. Walking through the empty house, Benjamin delusionally perceives himself like its owner. While the narrator presents the house as "belonging to Janey and Jim Williams" (Moody 3), Benjamin's strict focalization gradually turns it into his own property, from the room (23) to the whole house. Suddenly, as he is about to leave through the back exit, he hears a laughter of teenagers revealing his daughter Wendy and his mistress's son, Mike, clumsily fondling each other in the basement. The scene will be then reported through Wendy's focalization, thus revealing how the house was far from empty, far from his possession, and how Wendy's transgression was—both metaphorically and spatially—underlying Benjamin's own betrayal. The network-like structure thus replicates the entanglement of both moral and spatial transgressions: the Hood father has an affair with the Williams mother, while the Hood daughter sexually experiments with both the Williams sons, and, later in the story, the Hood mother makes love to the Williams father. This inextricable entanglement is replicated physically in the image of Elena Hood and Jim Williams having "trouble untangling themselves" (176) in the car where they make love. Throughout the novel, the suburban space thus emerges as a site of transgression and

[8] For Timotheus Vermeulen, the metaphor of the foam can effectively capture the constant flux consisting of "interconnections but interconnections changing from one second to the next" (2014, 78).

entanglement, where people swap and share all the traditional commodities of the suburban way of life, from partners and houses to keys and cars. However, the most striking convergence of thematic and formal entanglement has yet to come, namely the "key party."

A pivotal plot point of the novel, the key party is a form of swinger event where female partners randomly pick car keys out of a bowl in which the men placed them. By randomly connecting partners and families, I argue that the key party clearly replicates the network-like progression of the narrative. Like Briony relies on fiction and novelistic techniques to seek redemption for her acts, Paul adopts the affordances of the network to make sense of the sexual and moral entanglement of the families and communities in New Canaan. However, while Briony and Yunior's display of multiperspectivity, as we will see, is *uniquely* manipulative—as it primarily relies on strategic perspective-awareness—Paul seems here to effectively capture the community's enmeshment through the narrative techniques he employs. In this way, *The Ice Storm* shows a more productive example of pseudo-multiperspectivity, at least in epistemological and interpretive terms: Paul proves to be *a better writer* than Briony and Yunior as his adoption of horizontal multiperspectivity and the network is diegetically motivated by the entangled reality he seeks to come to terms with.

Yet, his narratorial position is far from ethically neutral, as he openly admits by comparing his role to that of a God-like figure. While acknowledging the uncanny coincidence of having the exact same dream as his father, Paul evokes the literary conventions of a God-like omniscience: "[t]his congruency—between Paul and his dad—is sort of like the congruency between me, the narrator of this story, the imaginer of all these consciousnesses of the past, and God" (206). Similarly, he draws attention to his hierarchically privileged position through the underlying reference to the Marvel comics. The convergence between the "narrator of this story" and "God" is thus extended to "Stan Lee" and "The Watcher": "[h]e felt certain then that Stan Lee was in some direct communication with the universe—in the way, say, that The Watcher, that most mysterious Marvel character, was content like some Gnostic entity merely *to know* of the machinations of creation—and that through Lee's spiritually advanced vision, Paul's own destiny was entrapped in the monthly serializations of these kitschy superheroes. He seemed both influenced and influencer in the world of Marvel" (Moody 194, original emphasis). Like Briony resorts to her juvenile passion for fiction to seek atonement, Paul's communicative act replicates his own investment with the *Fantastic Four* comics. The passage above thus subtly hints at the

structure of pseudo-multiperspectivity displayed by the novel, as Paul is both *influenced* (as a focalizing character) and *influencer* (as the overarching narratorial stance) in his own narrative. It is no coincidence that this convergence is reinforced by the association of his family members with the Fantastic Four: "[t]he Hoods trailed after the implications of these characters as if Stan himself pulled their strings" (79); "the F.F., with all their mistakes and allegiances, their infighting and dependability, told some true tale about family" (80); "comic books were indistinguishable from the truth" (279).

In their seminal introduction to the graphic novel, Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey point to the historical relevance of *The Ice Storm* in the popularization of comics' potential in literary fiction: "[w]hat Moody predicted and announced in his work was the potential for comics to become popular with readers of fiction looking to reconnect with their memories of youth and the immediate-but-now-fading past" (2015, 195). Here, however, Paul's relationship with comics goes beyond a mere reconnection with the past: it becomes the springboard for his own imaginative act, and, at the same time, a way of reflecting on the significance of narratives in our lives—as metanarrative fiction seeks to do. Both influenced and influencer, Paul can now enter the consciousnesses of his family members and find "some true tale about family." While the network was crucial in mirroring the entanglement of the community, this diegetic hierarchy is a figure of *transgression*: a narrative transgression that effectively replicates the moral and spatial transgression thematized by the story.

The enmeshment of public suburban space and adultery is made evident in Benjamin's attempt to explain his extramarital affair to his wife: "[l]ook around you, anyway. It's the law of the land. People are unfaithful […] At least we can get out of the house […] Let's just go and try to be part of the neighborhood" (71). In doing so, Benjamin explicitly ties adultery and moral transgression as inherent and inevitable element of the suburban community. In an apocalyptic reading of the novel, Anna Hellén notes that: "[i]n New Canaan, the spatial practices […] are at odds with representations of space. The characters seem to ignore or even subvert the authoritative plan behind the suburb intended to keep the family unit intact, to safeguard the integrity and self-sufficiency of each household: Each movement in space amounts to a trespassing, and each human encounter to a transgression" (2020, 36). She then underlines how the moral transgressions are parallel by "a pattern of spatial trespassing" that violates the boundaries of the suburban space. Drawing on this insight, it is possible to see how the novel links its patterns of spatial and moral

transgression to its formal construction, with Paul's homodiegetic omniscient narration literally *trespassing* the boundaries of his family's fictional minds.

Through Paul's imaginative act of fiction, pseudo-multiperspectivity's affordances are thus clearly displayed, from the entanglement of the network to the transgression of the hierarchy. The network-like plotting and the horizontal multiperspectivity allow Paul to capture the intricacies of the suburban community by formally replicating the random enmeshment of the Hoods and the Williamses. The vertical hierarchical structure provided by the revelation of his homodiegetic omniscience—self-referentially highlighted through a consistent comparison with comic books and God-like figures—speaks instead to the role played by transgression throughout the novel. At the same time, it prompts readers to critically reflect on the cultural role of narrative and on the adoption of storytelling techniques to strategically elicit specific effects. Paul's narration may not be a quest for redemption (*Atonement*), nor a manipulative reassertion of heteronormative values (*Oscar Wao*), but it is nonetheless a deliberate reconstruction of his family members' thoughts and actions, carefully crafted to create the illusion of multiperspectivity. For a further understanding of the ethical risks of narrative practices, let's now turn to one of the most sophisticated abuses of multiperspectivity in contemporary literature: Briony Tallis's "Atonement."

Three Perspectives by a Fountain

Few novels written in the twenty-first century have received as much critical and scholarly attention as Ian McEwan's *Atonement.* Many influential accounts of postclassical narrative theory have addressed the exemplary formal structure it provides as well as the ethical stakes raised by it, and it is no coincidence that James Phelan turned to McEwan's novel as a well-suited case study to discuss different contemporary approaches to narratology. In "Narrative Theory, 2006-2015," Phelan analyzes five "developments" in contemporary narrative theory—theories of fictionality, unnatural, cognitive, feminist, and rhetorical approaches—exemplified through their implications for a reading of *Atonement*. This plethora of approaches testifies to the novel's versatility, as its multi-layered nature remains particularly open to interpretation and each 'development' can productively shed light on a different aspect of the text. Drawing on this wide body of scholarly research, this section zooms in on *Atonement*'s story-critical dimension, with a particular attention

to its manipulative use of a specific narrative technique, namely multiperspectivity. McEwan's novel is a paradigmatic example of pseudo-multiperspectivity as it explicitly addresses the ethical risks connected to strategic perspective-awareness and to the abuse of storytelling practices. In this way, the novel aligns perfectly with Meretoja's metanarrative fiction as it revolves around the ethical and epistemological values of narratives in our lives and in our interaction with the world we inhabit. I will thus focus on the novel's formal features to show how its ethical ambiguity is significantly fostered by Briony's manipulation of multiperspectivity.

As introduced above in this chapter, *Atonement* consists of four parts: while the first three are narrated by a seemingly traditional third-person omniscient instance, the final section, called "London, 1999," suddenly reveals the whole formal fabrication of the novel. The first three sections are thus exposed as a novel-within-a-novel, "Atonement," written by Briony Tallis to seek the titular *atonement* for a terrible act she committed as a 13-year-old aspiring novelist. Set against the backdrop of a pre-World War II English Countryside, and different sites during the war—from the French Countryside during the Dunkirk evacuation to London—the novel starts in the summer of 1935, at the Tallis family's country estate. Part One is meaningfully focalized through four main characters: Briony; her sister Cecilia; the Tallis family housekeeper's son and Cecilia's childhood friend, Robbie; and Cecilia's and Briony's mother, Emily. This multiplication and alternation of character perspectives is far from a mere narrative device; rather, it is diegetically motivated, as a series of misinterpreted elements lead Briony to wrongly accuse Robbie of being the molester of her cousin Lola—who, along with her two younger twin brothers, is visiting the Tallis family amid her parents' divorce. More specifically, three main events—which readers experience from multiple perspectives—contribute to Briony's misidentification: an interaction around a fountain, the meaning of a letter, and the encounter in a library. The three moments crucially exemplify Phelan's reading of the novel through Lisa Zunshine's Theory of Mind (2006): "*Atonement* can be productively understood as a novel that exercises our mind-reading skills in the service of a narrative exploring the powers, and especially the limitations, of mind-reading" (2017, 190). However, as the three moments are strategically fabricated by Briony, I would add that the novel not only explores the powers and limitations of mind-reading, but also those of narrative practices *per se*. What I want to emphasize here is that this exploration is effectively realized via the affordances of pseudo-multiperspectivity, that is, through Briony's strategic manipulation of two key features of multiperspective narratives: (1) their potential for perspective-taking and

perspective-awareness; and (2) their foregrounding of uncertainty. While the former displays Briony's strategic perspective-awareness, the latter leaves room for an ongoing revision of the truth.

The fountain scene—the first pivotal moment—is particularly emblematic of Briony's flawed perception, as it encapsulates her tendency to narrativize events she does not fully comprehend. From Briony's distant vantage point of a nursery window, the interaction between Cecilia and Robbie appears inexplicable and indecent, yet readers who access Robbie and Cecilia's perspectives interpret it as a complex moment of tense and unfulfilled desire. Briony, however, lacks both the experiential knowledge and the emotional maturity to interpret the nuances of their interactions, leading her to construct an entirely erroneous reading of the event: as Phelan remarks, "Briony's misidentification of Robbie as Lola's assailant stems from her attribution to him of a permanent mental state based on her having read his profane expression of desire for Cecilia" (190). The scene unfolds when Cecilia and Robbie argue over a valuable porcelain vase that once belonged to her uncle. In a moment of frustration, the vase slips from Cecilia's hands, and a piece falls into the fountain. Determined to retrieve it, she impulsively removes her dress and steps into the water in her undergarments. Peering from an upstairs window, Briony views this interaction through the lens of her own burgeoning but juvenile understanding of gender, power, and sexuality. She does not see the underlying class tension or the mutual desire—only an ambiguous, mysterious moment that seems to confirm her preconceptions around Robbie's nature as a "maniac" (McEwan 2001, 112). The image of her sister standing disrobed in the water, coupled with Robbie's commanding presence, inevitably aligns with Briony's fictionalized fears, reinforcing her "permanent mental state" toward Robbie.

Shortly thereafter, tasked by Robbie with delivering a letter to Cecilia, Briony reads a wrong draft which the young man had mistakenly placed in the envelope, containing sexually explicit language, with the line: "[i]n my dreams I kiss your cunt, your sweet wet cunt" (80). Her juvenile naivety, combined with her inclination for dramatic storytelling, thus leads her to view Robbie as a harmful figure and a potential molester. The two initial misinterpretations are later reinforced by a third crucial moment. Unlike the fountain scene, which she witnesses from afar, the library encounter involves a more direct, closer observation, making it even more impactful in shaping her belief: Briony enters the library and stumbles upon an intimate moment between Robbie and Cecilia, who have finally acted on their long-suppressed attraction. Their encounter is raw but

consensual, yet to Briony's eyes the scene appears as an act of violence, "an attack, a hand-to-hand fight" (116). She sees Cecilia pressed against the bookshelves, seemingly trapped, and interprets Robbie's physicality as aggression rather than mutual desire. This misreading is critical because it reinforces her earlier suspicions from the fountain and the letter and confirms her belief that Robbie is capable of assault. Operating within her self-constructed narrative, Briony is unable to recognize Robbie and Cecilia's consensual desire, and she gets gradually convinced that Robbie, having assaulted her sister, is thus the most likely culprit of Lola's subsequent rape.

In these three sequences, the multiperspective structure provides readers with glimpses on Briony's delusions, particularly through the repeated scenes of the fountain and the library, which make Cecilia's love interest for Robbie and his good intentions clear. In Phelan's words, "[t]hrough several scenes dominated by the technique of internal focalization," Robbie is presented as "an admirable young man" (2005b, 329). Yet I believe that it is not internal focalization to primarily provide such an image, but another technique, namely multiperspectivity. In her flawed attempt to atone through fiction, what Briony most evidently relies on is the value of multiperspectivity for revealing her misdeeds and Robbie's good actions. In other words, the key formal feature of the novel is not Richardson's pseudo-focalization (2006, 11): it is pseudo-*multiperspectivity*, because Briony's display of such a narrative technique and her exploitation of its inherent ethical potential are the fundamental strategies of her manipulative storytelling practice.

In her analysis of *Atonement*, Serpell does not focus on "multiplicity" (her word for multiperspectivity) but on "mutual exclusion" and its peculiar mode of "enfolding" (2014, 79). Mutual exclusion is described as the "coexistence of opposed narrative events, or two different stories about what happened" (89): it is not merely a matter of *interpretation* but a factual opposition of two sets of events. As insightfully noted by Serpell, *Atonement* presents strict dichotomies like "yes/no" or "either/or" both at the sentence level (as in Briony's childish dialogues) and on the level of the formal construction of the plot, as exemplified by the two different endings to the story of Robbie and Cecilia (the fictionalized happy ending of "Atonement" and their deaths in *Atonement*). While Serpell brilliantly captures the novel's experiential uncertainty through the practice of rereading and the baroque paradigm of enfolding, I suggest that the emphasis on mutual exclusion reinforces the abuse of multiperspectivity as the core formal feature of the novel. In its contradictory typology, multiperspectivity is exceptionally well-suited to stage mutual exclusion, providing readers with incompatible sets of events and

epistemological uncertainty. Yet Briony is particularly aware of multiperspectivity's affordances and refrains from marking any version as the definitive truth. In doing so, while alluding to her misdeed, she leaves room for interpretation, thus manipulatively exploiting the uncertainty raised by multiperspectivity. Moreover, by staging a multiperspective retelling of the same sequences—most significantly, the fountain and the library—Briony displays strategic perspective-awareness, prompting readers to "continually […] revise their view of particular events and characters" (Matthews 2006, 151). This ongoing negotiation—a key affordance of multiperspectivity, as seen in the previous chapter—is intentionally raised to provide readers with a more sophisticated account of the events, as well as with "an iterative accrual of uncertainty" (Serpell 97). In Serpell's analysis, this novel's mechanism of experiential uncertainty hinges on three different rereading practices: the local rereading provided by the text's horizontal multiperspectivity, the "retrospective realization" triggered by the delayed disclosure of Briony's fabrication, and the global rereading of the whole novel from the beginning (96).

The second and third rereading practices are strictly connected: the global rereading is indeed strongly encouraged by the novel's plot twist. Consequently, much ink has been spilled on what Serpell calls retrospective realization and its significance for *Atonement*. H. Porter Abbott takes the novel as an example of Manfred Jahn's "garden-path narrative," "which start[s] out by leading the reader down a narrative garden path in one kind of world only to require that world's recursive reconstruction as another kind of world" (2013, 72). In *Atonement*, Abbott suggests, the entire narrative world is the product of a "sustained act of misleading" (73), as it follows a formal construction typically found in "mind-game films" (Elsaesser 2009) such as David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) or M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) (see Abbott 72–73). More specifically, the novel's rereading practice can be better understood through the lens of Cornelia Klecker's "mind-tricking narrative" (2013): in this scenario, a surprise revelation forces recipients to revise their understanding of the plot and reread or rewatch the whole work in light of the new knowledge they have acquired—in this case, that the first three parts are Briony's novel. In Klecker's terms, "[t]he twists in mind-tricking narratives always *resettle* previous events" (133, original emphasis): in *Atonement*, every element of the narrative is subverted in the final part, as it is not only the facts and events narrated in the first three parts that are called into question, but also the mode of narration itself. When we approach a global rereading of the novel, we do so by

keeping in mind that Briony has written the first three sections and that she has intentionally fabricated parts of them.

Yet less attention has been devoted to the significance of Serpell's *local* rereading in the novel. As she aptly notes, there are two major examples of local rereading in the first part: the fountain scene is first experienced through Robbie's and Cecilia's perspectives and then through Briony's (McEwan 27, 35); and the library scene first through Briony's eyes and then through Robbie's memory (116, 122). While the global rereading is triggered by the novel's delayed disclosure and its subsequent retrospective realization, the local rereading is a product of Briony's adoption of multiperspectivity. As I have suggested, her disposal of this technique is deeply exploitative as it serves a dual purpose: it manipulates readers' perspective-awareness; and it leaves room for uncertainty by proposing "equally biased views" (Serpell 97). In both cases, Briony's purpose is realized via the exploitation of multiperspectivity's inherent potential for narrative negotiation and perspective-taking (as seen in chapter 2) and for ethical and epistemological uncertainty (in chapter 1). In the novel, Briony offers crucial hints at her own manipulative act by self-reflexively pointing at the flawed use of specific modernist techniques. Most significantly, the description of her first draft of "Atonement," titled "Two Figures by a Fountain," explicitly addresses the link between multiperspectivity and the ethical risks of storytelling. Her adoption of novelistic techniques is mostly thematized in Part Three, in which the narrator hints at the work's fictionality by discussing Briony's literary ambitions. Her early draft of the novel in the form of a short story thus opens an additional diegetic level—a novel-within-a-novel-within-a-novel—and is significantly criticized by a magazine editor for the display of narrative and stylistic strategies typical of literary modernism.

The most relevant is precisely multiperspectivity, as the short story is a rewriting of the fountain scene from Part One, already narrated through the contrasting focalizations of Briony, Robbie, and Cecilia: "[t]he interminable pages about light and stone and water, a narrative split between three different points of view, the hovering stillness of nothing much seeming to happen—none of this could conceal her cowardice. Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream—three streams!—of consciousness?" (McEwan 302). This is, in my view, the crucial passage of the novel: multiperspectivity is here thematized and exposed as Briony's key narrative strategy to redeem herself, as a storytelling technique whose two central affordances (perspective-awareness and uncertainty) can be easily manipulated for her

own purpose. And Briony's *purpose* is what sets the novel apart from a mere postmodernist gimmick, thus making *Atonement* particularly well-suited to critically reflect on narrative's cultural and ethical value. Despite the widespread presence of metafictional devices and metaleptic jumps, Briony's homodiegetic omniscience, as noted by Dawson, can be regarded as a "post-postmodern move beyond metafiction," since "it draws attention […] to the artifice of the fiction, but locates the authorial figure within the diegesis, providing a characterological motivation for the reflexive experimentation with conventions of omniscience" (210). The abuse of multiperspectivity responds indeed to narrative motivations relevant to Briony's character and is not merely a ludic rhetorical artifice.[9] *Atonement* thus stands as a powerful example of pseudo-multiperspectivity's potential for critical reflection: through Briony's strategic manipulation of its affordances, McEwan addresses the risks of an uncritical overreliance on multiperspectivity's inherent value and prompts readers to question and revisit their relationship with narrative.

Uncertain Multiperspectivity and the Implicated Narrator

The characterological motivation shaping Briony's communicative act is even more relevant—and more harmful—in Yunior's reconstruction of Oscar Wao's story. Like *Atonement*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is one of the most widely discussed novels of this century: winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 2008, it has become a central staple of the contemporary postcolonial canon, described as a prime example of Afro-Atlantic (Figueroa-Vásquez 2020) and immigrant literature (Carpio 2023). The work's relevance and complexity would thus require a broader analysis than the one I am able to offer here. In this section, I am interested in the story-critical discourse fostered by the novel's pseudo-multiperspectivity, and in Yunior's manipulative use of multiperspectivity to construct a seemingly truthful account of another person's life. More specifically, drawing on concepts from memory studies, I will refer to Yunior's problematic role as an "implicated narrator." His use of multiperspectivity proves even more insidious than that of Paul and Briony, as it subtly reinforces the heteronormative values of Trujillo's regime while appearing to challenge them. While *The Ice Storm* and *Atonement* were local in scope, with Paul and Briony's display of multiperspectivity serving as a way of coming to terms with personal and familial disruptions,

[9] For Dawson, Briony's desire has two competing aspects: to access the thoughts of Cecilia and Robbie and to assert creative control over the lives of her characters (209).

Oscar Wao operates within a broader historical and cultural context. Yunior's manipulation of multiperspectivity extends beyond personal reckoning, intertwining with larger cultural issues such as Dominican history, migrant experiences, transgenerational memory, and the enduring impact of Trujillo's regime. Crucially, multiperspectivity is strategically employed here as the narrative technique that legitimizes Yunior's own writing. By incorporating voices beyond his own, such as Lola's—Oscar's sister—and Oscar himself, Yunior capitalizes on multiperspectivity's democratic value to create the illusion of a more objective and inclusive account. Yet the novel goes beyond the abuse of multiperspectivity's affordances: through its peculiar pseudo-multiperspective structure, *Oscar Wao* undermines readers' perspective-awareness and plays on another form of uncertainty, that is, the *uncertain multiperspectivity*. This section will thus zoom in on the story-critical value of the novel through the concepts of uncertain multiperspectivity and implicated narrator.

In the words of Richard Patteson, Díaz's novel is "at least three novels in one: the story of Oscar; a tale of immigration to America against a backdrop of tyranny […]; and a novel about writing and its power to construct and shape an alternative reality" (2012, 8). At its core, the novel revolves around the idea of the "Fukú Americanus," a powerful curse said to have plagued the de León family for generations. The origins of this curse trace back to the era of Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican dictator whose brutal regime casts a long shadow over the family's past. According to Yunior, Oscar's misfortunes—and those of his ancestors—stem from this inherited curse: his act of storytelling would thus become a "zafa of sorts," (Díaz 2007, 6), that is, a "surefile counterspell" (7). Yunior thus seeks legitimization on both thematic and formal levels: thematically, by presenting his writing as a literary zafa; formally, by seemingly integrating Lola's and Oscar's perspectives into his own narration. The novel then embeds the de León family personal narratives of migration within this broader history of forced diaspora: from Oscar and his sister Lola to their mother Belicia Cabral. Oscar, an overweight and socially awkward Dominican teenager growing up in New Jersey, struggles to fit into both American and Dominican cultures. Unlike the stereotypically hypermasculine Dominican men around him, Oscar is deeply sensitive, hopelessly romantic, and obsessed with science-fiction novels. His inability to find love becomes his greatest source of anguish. Parallel to Oscar's story, the novel delves into the histories of his mother, Beli, and his grandfather, Abelard. Beli, a fiercely independent and temperamental woman, endured a traumatic childhood in the Dominican Republic. Adopted by La Inca after her parents were

imprisoned and killed by Trujillo's regime, Beli falls deeply in love with a wealthy man linked to Trujillo, leading to a brutal beating that nearly kills her. She thus escapes to the United States, where she later raises Oscar and Lola, Oscar's rebellious and strong-willed sister, who mostly serves as his protector and counterpart. After a failed romance in college, Oscar travels to the Dominican Republic, where he falls in love with Ybón, a prostitute involved with a violent police officer. His persistence in pursuing her leads to tragic consequences: Oscar is beaten and sent back to the United States by Ybón's jealous boyfriend. Still, unable to let go, he returns to the Dominican Republic, where he is ultimately captured and executed.

Throughout the novel, Yunior's narratorial position is highly ambiguous and difficult to decipher. Unlike *Atonement*'s delayed disclosure, *Oscar Wao*'s readers are made aware from the very first lines of the fictionality of the text and the presence of a homodiegetic omniscient narrator. The structure of *Oscar Wao* is thus more clearly indebted to *The Ice Storm*, as explicitly acknowledged by Díaz himself, who admits having "stolen" the link between family members and the Fantastic Four from Moody's "incomparable novel" (The New Yorker 2010). While Paul's identity was concealed until the ending, Yunior exposes himself halfway through the novel as Oscar's college roommate and a former boyfriend of Lola's, thus revealing his intricate emotional and personal involvement with the story he is claiming to report: "after this disclosure, the image of the writer aiming to write a compelling story which is also an account of the atrocities committed in the Dominican Republic during the twentieth century intertwines with the image of the intimate friend" and the ex-boyfriend (Pennacchio 2020, 29). Yunior's intentions and narratorial position are thus difficult to univocally map: his homodiegetic omniscience indeed provides other discourses and perspectives, with two chapters even narrated in the first-person by Lola. Yet, in Delphine Munos's words, these voices "appear to be literally *devoured* by, and virtually indistinguishable from, Yunior's narrative" (2018, 88, emphasis added). Such a metaphor of consumption—almost depicting Yunior as a monstrous Goyaesque figure—is strikingly adopted by another scholar, Glenda Carpio: "[a]s a narrator, Yunior *cannibalizes* Oscar's story and uses it as a screen upon which to project not only his own condition under the Curse but also 'elements of his own intellectual and artistic development'" (168, emphasis added). Yet the novel's structure is not as clear-cut as it could appear.

What is striking in Yunior's homodiegetic omniscience is his attempt to adopt multiperspectivity to conceal his 'cannibalistic' narration. While *Atonement* foregrounded

perspective-taking and uncertainty as the key multiperspectivity's affordances abused by Briony, *Oscar Wao* provides another form of uncertainty: not the *multiperspective uncertainty* discussed in chapter 1—that is, the experiential effect of uncertainty elicited by the formal features of multiperspectivity—but the *uncertain multiperspectivity* resulting from Yunior's collage-like narration. Put more clearly, the novel leaves room for speculation around the authenticity of Oscar's—and, more specifically, Lola's—narrating chapters. While Yunior is the main narratorial instance, the inclusion of Lola and Oscar's voices would seem to *reduce* its authorial control over the narrative, by seemingly offering different perspectives on events and situations. This uncertainty around the reliability of Lola and Oscar's voices sets the novel apart from *Atonement*, in which the last section unequivocally reshapes the rest of the novel: after *Atonement*'s delayed disclosure, no reader would believe in the authenticity of Cecilia and Robbie's focalizations. *Oscar Wao*, conversely, leaves open the possibility that Lola and Oscar's voices may be genuine, thus creating a tension between what is presented as unmediated narration and what is manipulated through Yunior's writing. According to Carpio, for example, "[t]he fact that Lola twice takes over the narration reduces 'the totality of Yunior's control over the text' and over Oscar's representation"; yet, following Patteson, she goes on admitting that "at times 'her narrative seems to be taken directly from her journal,' raising further questions about Yunior's ethics" (169). Other scholars such as Lauren Jean Gantz seem to tilt toward the authenticity of Lola's voice: "Lola seems to be an exception to Yunior's tendency to mediate since she speaks to the reader in two large sections of the novel"; Gantz even reads Lola's sections as a "significant development in Díaz's typically male-narrated writing" and, after raising the question, explicitly states that Lola is "speaking directly to the reader" (2015, 135). Similarly, Kezia Page focuses on Díaz's (not Yunior's) adoption of multiperspectivity as a formal strategy that "releases the narrative from constraining strictures that could be read to mirror the impositions of the dictator" (2011, 231), thus interpreting Lola and Oscar's voices, as well as other passages written in the second person, as productively juxtaposed to Yunior's narrative by the author, Junot Díaz, and *not* by the mediating instance of Yunior.

It is thus possible to divide the wide body of scholarly research around *Oscar Wao* between those who believe in the authenticity of others' voices (such as Gantz, Page, and, at least partially, Carpio), and those who undoubtedly identify Yunior as "the only one who speaks, and while he endeavors to speak for the entire Cabral family within his novel, he, not them, narrates, shapes,

and constructs into a text their lives" (Sepulveda 2013, 27).[10] Here, I argue that this indecision among critics and readers[11] of the novel is strategically elicited by Yunior *and* Díaz. In other words, the difficulty of an unequivocal attribution of Lola and Oscar's sections to Yunior serves a dual purpose in the economy of the novel, and is both diegetically and ideologically motivated: for Yunior, this uncertain multiperspectivity is a powerful means of maintaining his authorial control over the narrative while creating the illusion of including other voices; for Díaz, it is a way of critically reflecting on the ethical ambivalence of vicarious storytelling and multiperspectivity. This uncertain attribution is far from meaningless, as exemplified by the clear divide in the novel's reception, nor is an unintended consequence of *Oscar Wao*'s formal structure: rather, it is the key affordance of the novel's pseudo-multiperspectivity. Put more clearly, I consider Yunior as the overarching narratorial instance and the mediator of the other characters' sections, and I regard this uncertain multiperspectivity as a key formal element in shaping both Yunior's identity and the novel's story-critical discourse.

Although gathering testimony from multiple characters, Yunior thus mediates their experiences through his hierarchical position, replicating the "discursive practices of the regime it denounces" (Gantz 123). What is crucial to note here is that Yunior himself is a victim of that regime and an interesting example of a homodiegetic omniscient narrator, one who has internalized dictatorial standards of masculinity and thus cannot escape them. Discussing the different appearances of Yunior across Díaz's oeuvre—which also include the short story collections *Drown* (1996), and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012)—Carpio argues that he is "both a victim and a perpetrator of toxic masculinity" (167). As a victim of the regime and a perpetuator of a heteronormative form of storytelling, Yunior does not occupy a clear-cut role. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's influential notion of "implicated subject," I suggest that Yunior could be regarded as an "implicated narrator." For Rothberg, implicated subjects "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (2019, 1). Implicated subjects are less

[10] Apart from Munos and Fremio Sepulveda, the latter interpretation is also advocated by Filippo Pennacchio: "[t]wo sections in the book (the second chapter of Part I and the beginning of Part II) are told in first-person by Lola, Oscar's sister. However, since they are part of the book written by the narrator, they could be interpreted as his imitation of this character's voice" (39).

[11] I had a firsthand experience of such indecision during a conversation with Katherine Weese, whom I wish to thank for her inspiring discussion, when I presented an early draft of this work at the 2024 Annual Conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative. While I took Yunior's manipulation for granted, Weese believed in the authenticity of Lola's sections.

actively involved than perpetrators but help nonetheless "propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present" (1), as Yunior's narrative manipulation clearly exemplifies. Like implicated subjects, Yunior is a diasporic nationalist subject who help "*perpetuate* nationalist projects that are based on the subordination of others" (17, original emphasis), by silencing Oscar's queerness, replicating Trujillo's systemic *machismo*, and stealing his former girlfriend's voice. Moreover, the self-reflexive mode of homodiegetic omniscience exposes Yunior's narcissism as soon as his metafictional comments about the limits of his narrative start flourishing: for Rothberg, "recognizing ourselves in the position of the implicated subject […] will not automatically make us better people; such self-reflexivity can indeed become a form of narcissism or solipsism that keeps the privileged subject at the center of analysis" (19), as in a novel where the title character disappears behind his narrator's adherence to hyper-masculinity.

Yunior's complex implication can also be understood through his blending of what Aleida Assmann calls the passive and active forms of "cultural forgetting": the former is related to "non-intentional acts, such as losing, hiding, dispersing, neglecting, abandoning" (2008, 98); the latter implies intentional acts such as persecution and censorship. In his reconstruction of Oscar's identity, Yunior deliberately omits elements of queerness and non-heteronormativity that would not be acceptable following Trujillo's hyper-masculine cultural regime, thus perpetuating a stereotypical image of the Dominican man. In other words, as his narrative becomes more and more self-reflexive, Yunior seems to struggle with remembering and forgetting, but what he actually does is to *actively* omit Oscar's queerness to ensure his conformity to the requirements of the regime, while pretending to *passively* forget some key elements.

The novel thus critically examines the role and function of storytelling in relation to complex cultural issues, such as the de León family's forced migration, and Oscar's non-heteronormative identity. By foregrounding the risks of vicarious storytelling, Díaz reflects on the ideological intricacies of narrative mediation and raises questions relating to the ethics of entitlement and Yunior's problematic positioning vis-à-vis normative discourses.[12] The core affordance of pseudo-multiperspectivity here lies in its capacity to disrupt readers' perspective-awareness: by

[12] Positioning is a complex topic, and I will not be able to discuss it further here. On positioning theory see Deppermann (2015); on its relevance for narrative theory and in relation to the limits of storytelling, Mäkelä et al. (2021).

foregrounding an uncertain multiperspectivity through the dubious authenticity of Lola's perspective, the novel hinders our ability to recognize a narrative as told by a specific vantage point among others. Yunior thus adopts multiperspectivity to conceal his authorial control over the narrative but makes it ambiguous to leave room for speculation around his manipulative act. Similarly, this uncertain multiperspectivity becomes a powerful device for Díaz's story-critical agenda. In a famous interview, the author explicitly addresses Yunior's complex implication: "what's ironic is that Trujillo is this horror in this book, but the readers don't even recognize that the person telling the story is Trujillo with a different mask" (qtd in Ahn 2020, 216). Despite Díaz's own words, I would say that this is far from ironic, but rather a direct consequence of Yunior's manipulative act: his strategic perspective-awareness and the dubious authenticity of Lola's chapters both contribute to the interpretive openness of the work—an openness exemplified by the widely different reactions among readers and critics. Only through a (story-)critical reading of the novel can readers fully recognize Yunior's strategic use of multiperspectivity and complex implication. In this way, *Oscar Wao* can be regarded as a striking example of pseudo-multiperspectivity's potential for a critical reflection around the values and significance of narrative practices and techniques.

In this chapter, I have introduced the concept of pseudo-multiperspectivity to describe a narrative form particularly well-adapted to critically examine the limits and dangers of storytelling vis-à-vis present-day storytelling boom. Drawing on story-critical approaches to narrative theory and narrative hermeneutics, I have focused on the ethical risks of uncritically regarding multiperspectivity as an all-encompassing beneficial formal strategy. Conceptualized as the collision between the horizontal and vertical typologies of multiperspectivity, pseudo-multiperspectivity displays unique affordances potentially well-suited to engaging with the abuse of narrative practices. More specifically, I have focused on three novels in which multiperspectivity is strategically manipulated by first-person omniscient narrators for different personal or ideological purposes. In all my three examples, the concept of pseudo-multiperspectivity is crucial to foreground the ethical ambivalence of vicarious storytelling and narrative mediation. Aligning with Meretoja's notion of metanarrative fiction, these three novels expose the abuse of multiperspectivity to critically reflect on the value and significance of narrative practices and storytelling techniques in our lives and cultural contexts.

Moody's *The Ice Storm* centers on a decaying suburban community and adopts the affordances of pseudo-multiperspectivity in a unique way: its homodiegetic omniscient narrator, Paul, seeks to retrospectively come to term with the dysfunctional environment of New Canaan, and finds in the network-like plotting and horizontal multiperspectivity the fitting formal strategies for capturing the inextricable enmeshment of his family, the Hoods, and the Williamses. By intertwining different fictional consciousnesses and points of view, Paul replicates the toxic entanglement between the Hoods and Williamses family members. Even more strikingly, the formal strategy reinforces the main plot point, that is, the key party—a swinger event in which community members randomly pick car keys to swap sexual partners. The affordance of the network is then counteracted by the revelation of Paul's overarching mediation of perspectives: his hierarchical position foregrounds the act of trespassing his family members' fictional consciousness, thus formally replicating the underlying thematic concern of the novel with spatial and moral transgression. While less explicitly concerned with the risks of vicarious storytelling and narrative mediation than my two other case studies, *The Ice Storm* still effectively blends the affordances of horizontal and vertical multiperspectivity to address both thematic and story-critical issues: it helps Paul come to term with the dysfunctional suburban community he grew up in, and allows Moody to discuss the power and risks of storytelling and the fictional recreation of others' minds.

In McEwan's *Atonement* the harmful effects of the manipulation of multiperspectivity's affordances are more directly foregrounded. In particular, the mind-tricking revelation of Briony as the author of the first three sections of the novel creates a space of ethical ambiguity which is reinforced by her abuse of multiperspectivity. In her flawed attempt to atone, Briony not only enters Robbie and Cecilia's fictional minds but adopts the narrative strategy of multiperspectivity by exploiting two of its key features: (1) its potential for perspective-taking; and (2) its foregrounding of uncertainty. The former is manipulated through what I have referred to—blending concepts from Keen and Meretoja—as strategic perspective-awareness, that is, the narrator's intentional exploitation of our capacity to recognize a text as told from a certain perspective. By relying on multiperspectivity's potential for uncertainty, the latter leaves room for an underlying epistemological and ethical ambiguity strategically elicited by Briony to downplay her responsibility in Robbie and Cecilia's tragic story. On the level of the plot, Briony's manipulation of multiperspectivity is then further thematized through the embedding of a short

story, “Two Figures by a Fountain,” that hints at her strategic adoption of this specific narrative technique.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao extends the abuse of multiperspectivity from the local scope of Moody and McEwan’s novel to encompass a wide range of cultural issues, such as migration, diaspora, transgenerational memory, and queerness. In my analysis, I have focused on a specific form of uncertainty raised by the novel to problematize Yunior’s narratorial position and critically address the risks of vicarious storytelling. Taking my point of departure from an interpretive divide in the novel’s scholarship, I have argued that Yunior strategically employs an uncertain multiperspectivity to seek legitimization for his overarching writing practice. This uncertain multiperspectivity concerns the difficulty of unequivocally determining the authenticity of other characters’ perspectives—particularly the supposedly unmediated nature of the two chapters narrated by Oscar’s sister, Lola. In my understanding, this interpretive openness is motivated both on a diegetic level—Yunior’s attempt to legitimize his authorial control through the illusion of multiperspectivity—and on an ideological one, that is, Díaz’s story-critical agenda. I have further problematized Yunior’s role through the notion of the implicated narrator, by showing how his narrative mediation ends up reinstating heteronormative values close to Trujillo’s dictatorial regime.

The pseudo-multiperspective structure I have examined in this chapter allows my three case studies to expose the ethical risks of narrative, by foregrounding the ambivalence of vicarious storytelling and the abuse of multiperspectivity. The ethically charged affordances of multiperspectivity explored in the previous chapter, such as perspective-taking and the foregrounding of uncertainty, can be strategically employed for other, harmful purposes. By critically engaging with these risks, Moody, McEwan, and Díaz challenge the assumption that multiperspectivity inherently fosters ethical engagement. Instead, the three novels demonstrate how storytelling techniques can be co-opted to serve personal, ideological, or even oppressive ends. Ultimately, the concept of pseudo-multiperspectivity highlights the necessity of a story-critical approach—one that remains attentive to the power dynamics and ethical implications embedded in narrative structures. In doing so, these works encourage readers to adopt a more reflexive and critical stance toward storytelling, both within fiction and in the broader cultural landscape of narrative production and consumption.

4 Transtextual Multiperspectivity and the Value of Minor-Character Retellings

In chapters 2 and 3, I have examined both the ethical potential and the risks of multiperspective narratives through a "process-oriented approach" to narrative theory (Sommer 2012). I now turn to what Roy Sommer terms "corpus-based approach" to explore multiperspectivity's value in engaging with pressing contemporary issues—specifically, structural racism and gender discrimination in this chapter and the ecological crisis in the next. Here, I focus on a particular form of multiperspective narrative: the *transtextual* multiperspectivity brought about by minor-character retellings of canonical texts. In the tradition of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), literary retellings show a tendency to shift narrative perspective to a previously marginalized figure. In narratological terms, this happens through an intertextual strategy that Gérard Genette first defined as "transfocalization," that is, a transtextual shift in focalization that "would afford opportunities of responding to questions left unanswered by the gaps in the hypotext" (1998, 287). More recently, Jeremy Rosen has identified this tendency as a distinct literary genre, which he terms "minor-character elaboration" (Rosen 2016). In his book-length discussion, Rosen considers "the conversion of a formerly minor figure into a narrator-protagonist who 'tells her own story'" as the principal convention of the genre (13). While acknowledging the genre's origins as a "revisionary paradigm for feminist and subaltern responses to the canon," Rosen ultimately casts doubt on its current subversive value, arguing that these retellings often lapse into a "broad spirit of liberal pluralist inclusiveness" and repeat "some postmodern banalities (there is no truth, only perspectives; everyone deserves a voice)" (5). Central to his critique is what he terms the "triumphant" return of the canon (5): by foregrounding a new perspective against the backdrop of a previous literary text, the genre would run the risk of reinstating and popularizing the canonical work, with its morally and culturally questionable politics.

This chapter takes Rosen's insights as a productive point of departure but ultimately argues *against* his reductive account of the genre's cultural politics. While he rightly identifies potential elements of ambivalence in minor-character elaboration—such as the risk of reinforcing the canon in the marketplace, writers' opportunistic use of its cultural capital (30), or their reliance on postmodern banalities—his account underestimates how some retellings directly engage with and

subvert this dynamic. *Contra* Rosen's skeptical assessment, I argue that minor-character retellings hold significant cultural and political relevance, particularly in a context marked by ongoing racial and gender discrimination.[1] The two examples I discuss in this chapter—the novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016), by American writer Victor LaValle, and the indie video game *Elsinore* (2019), developed by Golden Glitch—demonstrate how minor-character retellings can move beyond Rosen's critique by actively reflecting on the ethical and political stakes of narrative perspective. In particular, both texts strategically deploy two experiential effects of multiperspectivity encountered in chapter 1: slowness and uncertainty. Far from reaffirming the canon, they use these effects to problematize inherited dominant narratives and unsettle the authority of the hypotext.

Beyond the peculiar genre of minor-character elaboration, which builds on multiperspectivity as its defining formal feature, a convergence between multiperspective narrative and adaptation can be observed in the structure of *repetition-cum-variation*, with its potential for eliciting a slow reading experience. For Linda Hutcheon, one of the most influential scholars in adaptation studies, adaptation can be defined as a "form of repetition without replication" (2013, xviii) or "repetition with variation" (4). She then goes on arguing that the appeal and "pleasure" of adaptations and retellings in the process of reception come precisely from this structure of repetition with variation, "from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (4). While taking distance from this escapist experience, the politically charged disruption of canonical perspectives in postcolonial and feminist retellings[2] partially relies on the same formal device: the persistence of recognizable characters, settings, plot points—of a "storyworld," in narratological terms—is undermined by a "material variation" (Hutcheon 4). However, in this case the variation extends beyond the narrative world and is embedded with real-world values. In minor-character retellings,

[1] See also my analysis of Percival Everett's *James* in D'Amato (2025b).

[2] To call a minor-character retelling "feminist" or "postcolonial" is to recognize its critical orientation toward the dominant ideology of the original work, such as a patriarchal or imperialist framework. These retellings go beyond simply giving voice to previously silenced, marginalized, or stereotyped characters; they also foreground their complexity and intervene in the dominant narratives and historical power relations embedded in the canon. Feminist retellings, for example, may expose the androcentric politics of a canonical text, offering a narrative centered on the subjectivity, agency, and lived experience of gender-marginalized characters. Similarly, postcolonial retellings often reconfigure colonial or imperial narratives by centering the perspectives of racialized characters who were peripheral or stereotyped in the original, thus challenging the ideological assumptions of Western dominance. Naturally, feminist and postcolonial retellings stand both as productive sites of literary revision and political resistance, and their specific targets can powerfully converge, as exemplified by *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a paradigmatic text for both feminist and postcolonial scholarship (see Spivak 1985).

as we have seen, this variation is predominantly in character perspective, although by no means limited to it.

Similarly, repetition-cum-variation is a central feature of multiperspective narratives: as discussed in chapter 1, multiperspective works which strongly build on this pattern of repetition are more likely to elicit an experience of slowness in the reading practice. Repetition-cum-variation works hand in hand with *rereading* as another decelerating strategy typical of multiperspective narratives. As we will see in more detail in the next sections, recipients' knowledge of the canonical text is a crucial element for the effectiveness of adaptations and retellings. While authors cannot certainly expect recipients to read or reread the transposed work, the accessibility of the precursor—whether due to its brevity, as in my first case study, or its cultural relevance, as in my second example—plays a significant role in their retelling choices. Naturally, following the previously encountered Proteus principle (Sternberg 1982), it would be delusional to assume that a subversive potential is inherent to this literary genre (and to its key formal feature). As such, I take seriously Rosen's skepticism toward the genre as a fashionable label or a ready-made tool adopted by writers and critics to assign an ideological value to a wide array of literary works. However, when orchestrated through specific formal strategies, minor-character retellings can effectively unsettle the ethical and political assumptions of the canonical works they engage with. Therefore, my first suggestion here is that the foregrounding of intertextuality and repetition-cum-variation can create a decelerating reading experience that prompts recipients to pay attention to the formal and stylistic construction of the new perspective against the backdrop of the canonical text. Put more clearly, repetition and rereading form a common ground between multiperspectivity and adaptation, and a slow mode of reading can productively bring out the qualities of the variation.

Slowness is not the only experiential effect of multiperspectivity that I return to in this chapter. As I aim to demonstrate with my two examples, the foregrounding of uncertainty and lack of closure—or, more precisely, of a clearly ideal outcome—succeeds in addressing and ultimately overcoming the potential ambivalence of the genre. By analyzing an experimental video game alongside a more conventional literary text, I seek to show how medium-specific affordances (including the uncertainty encountered with *Tell Me Why* in chapter 2) can enrich the value of a genre so far considered predominantly, if not exclusively, literary. Both my examples foreground self-reflexivity to unsettle the conventions of the genre and metafictionally engage with its ambivalent nature. The realization of the potential risks of the genre is channeled by formal

strategies that include the double-layered multiperspectivity and the blurring of ontological boundaries between authors' and characters' perspectives (in LaValle's novella), the recursive nature of the temporal loop and the medium-specific agency of the protagonist (in the latter work), and the explicit foregrounding, in both *Black Tom* and *Elsinore*, of the role of gaps and openness as opposed to the establishing of the *truth* through perspective reversals.

Typologies of Transtextual Multiperspectivity

In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, originally published in 1982, Genette offers a seminal introduction to transtextual relationships, from parodies and pastiches to continuations and transpositions. While discussing the transformation of narrative mode on a transtextual level, he coins the term "transfocalization" to refer to "operations that modify the narrative 'point of view' […] or the *focalization* of the narrative" (*Palimpsests* 287). More specifically, transfocalization concerns the adoption of a new character perspective to shed light on elements of the storyworld previously presented through a different point of view or left unexplored. Genette's early theorization could not fully capture the genre of minor-character elaboration, since, in his own terms, "transfocalizing writing has been little practiced as yet" (288). A few decades later, however, things have changed, and Rosen's comprehensive overview of this peculiar subgenre of rewriting takes its point of departure from Genette's concept to illustrate the rising popularity of minor-character retellings in the contemporary marketplace. In most of Rosen's examples, however, the retelling is not only focalized through but also directly narrated by the minor-character: in this case, it would be reductive to speak of trans*focalization*. Therefore, I propose to use the concept of multiperspectivity—which encompasses both narration and focalization (see introduction)—to include the different typologies of minor-character retelling. Moreover, the term multiperspectivity points to the inextricable relationship between retelling and precursor: the new perspective works *against the backdrop* of the hypotext, thus creating a readerly effect of a multiplicity of perspectives on the storyworld. But what kind of multiperspectivity is this? Is there a difference between minor-character retelling and, for example, a POV sequel (see *TV Tropes,* "P.O.V Sequel")? Or between the two examples I focus on in this chapter, *The Ballad of Black Tom* and *Elsinore*? Here, I discuss two typologies of transtextual multiperspectivity, that is, a form of multiperspectivity which extends *beyond the scope* of the single text: autographic and

allographic multiperspectivity. Both autographic and allographic multiperspectivity can further be described as either transfictional or transmedial.

In his seminal theorization of possible-worlds theory, *Heterocosmica* (1998), Lubomír Doležel discusses what he calls "postmodernist rewrites" by providing an outline of three kinds of relations between fictional worlds: expansion, displacement, and transposition. With *Wide Sargasso Sea* as the main example, *expansion* extends the scope of the original storyworld, or "protoworld," by adding more existents and "filling its gaps" (1998, 207). *Displacement*, exemplified with J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), posits a different version of the original storyworld, radically rewriting structures and story events. Conversely, in *transposition* the design and main story of the protoworld are preserved but located in a new temporal or spatial setting (206): Doležel's example here is Ulrich Plenzdorf's retelling of Goethe's *Werther* in *The New Sufferings of Young W.* (1973). While Rosen's minor-character elaborations can cover all the different relations between fictional worlds, expansion—in the tradition of Rhys's novel—seems to be the typology most commonly adopted by contemporary authors, as exemplified by *The Ballad of Black Tom*, but also by Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2013), Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* (2015), or Percival Everett's *James* (2024), which rewrite *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Stranger*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, respectively.[3] Moreover, a degree of overlap can be found between the different categories: while displacement, or "modification" in Marie-Laure Ryan's terminology (2013, 366), foregrounds counterfactual sequences of events, thus presenting evident contradictions between the new world and the protoworld, expansion seems equally unable to avoid logical contradictions. According to Ryan, for example, the relation of expansion is "much more world preserving than modification and transposition, because it does not require changing any of the facts asserted in the original story" (367). However, as she goes on arguing, one could draw a distinction between expanded storyworlds written by the same author (Cervantes's *Don Quixote*) or by a different author (Avellaneda's apocryphal sequel).

[3] In Doležel's postmodernist rewrites and Rosen's minor-character elaborations, the distinction between expansion, displacement (or modification), and transposition can be better understood in scalar terms: expansion, while still presenting some contradictions is much more world preserving than the other two typologies. In other words, in expanded storyworlds the interplay of repetition and variation tilts in favor of the former, with a high degree of repetition and contradictory elements that do not redesign the structure of the protoworld. This is why I consider expansion as the most productive typology for minor-character retellings, one in which the juxtaposition of the new character perspective against the backdrop of the precursor is more effectively realized.

More recently, Armelle Parey has adopted the Genettian terminology of "allographic" and "autographic" to discuss the same distinction between authorial and nonauthorial expansions in prequels and sequels (2019, 3). In *Paratexts* (1997), Genette introduced the term "allographic" to refer to nonauthorial paratexts, as opposed to authorial and authorized ones (8–10). In Parey's reappraisal, autographic encompasses both authorial and authorized works, thus creating an opposition similar to that between canonical and apocryphal, or licensed works and fandom creation, in the contemporary transmedial landscape. For Mark J. P. Wolf, for example, "for a work to be canonical requires that it be declared as such by someone with the authority to do so" (2012, 271). Following Ryan's distinction between authorial and nonauthorial expansion, while the former extends the *same* storyworld, the logical contradictions of the latter create a different world that contains the protoworld (2013, 367). In other words, for Ryan the expanded storyworld would be the *same* storyworld only if the author is the same. Therefore, despite Doležel's adoption of Rhys's novel as the main example of expansion, in the genre of minor-character retellings the new storyworld is never the *same* storyworld of the canonical text. How can we speak of multiperspectivity then? If the storyworld is *not* identical to that of the first text, the new (minor-)character perspective cannot be on the 'same' event of the storyworld.

Yet Ryan argues that the nonauthorial expansion *contains* the protoworld, thus suggesting that *part* of the storyworld of the hypotext remains present in the retelling. This is what Hutcheon referred to as "repetition with variation," meaning that part of the storyworld is repeated—and the events, characters, settings on which the new perspective focuses *with a variation* pertain to that part of the storyworld. Similarly, for the worlds of modifications and transpositions, "the relation they bear to the original world is one of overlap" (Ryan 367). While outlining his three typologies of relations between worlds, Doležel focused on postmodernist rewrites, that is, a peculiar kind of adaptation that is never written by the same author and thus always presents a degree of contradiction with the protoworld that cannot be motivated, as in contemporary transmedial storytelling, through the authority of an authorial figure or alternative "external explanations" (Thon 2016, 61). Therefore, in our case of minor-character retelling we will never find the "same world, just growing bigger" as in Ryan's "expansion by the same author" (367). Conversely, the genre triggers, in Birgit Spengler's words, a process of "intertextual world-making," which establishes not only "an as-if relationship to the reader's experiential world" but also "a similar as-if relationship to the pre-textual diegetic world and conceptual horizon by using the pre-text as a

sustained intertextual matrix" (2017, 7). In other words, multiperspectivity is here possible because recipients engage with the protoworld *as if* it were the same storyworld. I will return to this concept in the next section. Here, given the different ontological status of this expanded storyworlds, I suggest drawing an initial distinction between *autographic* and *allographic* multiperspectivity. I propose to consider the former as the authorial expansion typical of (POV-)sequels, spinoffs, and cinematic franchises, while the latter refers to postmodernist rewrites and minor-character retellings, as well as to unlicensed and fan works.

Autographic multiperspectivity describes "canonical" expansions of the same storyworld through different character perspectives. This is the common structure of "POV sequels" (point-of-view sequels) or spinoffs, which are the equivalent of minor-character elaboration in a cinematic franchise, novelistic cycle, or other forms of autographic transtextuality. In this case, the storyworld of the new text is ontologically identical to that of the hypotext, with inevitable contradictions—usually motivated through internal or external explanations[4]—which do not disrupt the ontological status of the expanded storyworld. One of the classic examples of "multipart" multiperspectivity (Sternberg and Yacobi 2015, 475), Lawrence Durrell's tetralogy *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–1960), fits into this first category: it is a novelistic cycle of four books by the same author, set in the same storyworld, with each installment recounting the same events by a different character perspective. Similarly, in cinema, Clint Eastwood's Iwo Jima diptych, *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), is an example of expanded multiperspectivity, with the same wartime events represented through focalizing characters from the American and Japanese side, respectively. As for video games, *The Last of Us Part II*, as we

[4] According to Thon, recipients attempt to find internal or external explanations to make sense of the contradictions of a narrative. While external explanations typically involve authorial intentions or representational conventions, internal explanations refer to reading strategies which make sense of the unnatural on a diegetic level (Thon 2016, 61). A possible internal explanation for the logical contradictions of transtextual multiperspectivity would apparently be what Tamar Yacobi defined as "perspectival principle," namely the attribution of divergent elements and inconsistencies to the "peculiarities and circumstances of the observer through whom the world is taken to be refracted" (1981, 118). Since multiperspectivity refers to individual characters' subjectivity, a version of events can always be deemed unreliable without undermining the ontological status of the storyworld: in *Rashomon*, the juxtaposition of contradictory perspectives produces an irresolvable epistemological relativity but does not affect the storyworld as such. In this case, Ryan's distinction between authorial and nonauthorial expansions could easily be overcome by adopting an unreliable narrator or focalizer as "internal explanation" of the contradictions of the storyworld. However, the adoption of this reading strategy is hindered by the fact that it would dismiss *all* minor-character retellings as unreliable: since variation is a central feature of the genre, the only way to preserve the same storyworld would be to attribute every inconsistency to the subjectivity of the new narrator.

saw in chapter 2, presents a double-layered multiperspectivity: between Abby and Ellie in the sequel, and between Abby, Ellie, and Joel in the relationship between the two installments.

As in minor-character retellings, multiperspectivity is also a central feature of "coquels": the term was first coined by Paul Dean Daniggelis to refer to "a fabrication of the author to describe events set in the 'same' time frame as an earlier literary work" (2013, 136), as opposed to sequels and prequels. As noted by Parey, coquels "are illustrations of Rosen's minor-character elaborations but the reverse is not true (as the latter are not contained by a set time frame)" (2019, 4). Similarly, while a distinctive element of coquels, multiperspectivity is not limited to it: as exemplified by *The Last of Us Part II*, for instance, flashbacks from Abby provide playable sequences which revisit episodes of the first video game, thus showing the 'same' time frame through another character perspective. Moreover, with the contemporary rise of adaptations and franchises, the distinction between prequels, coquels, and sequels is frequently blurred, as demonstrated by a tv show like Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould's *Better Call Saul* (2015-2022), a spinoff of *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) centered on a minor character, the 'criminal' lawyer Jimmy McGill/Saul Goodman. Indeed, the show works both as a prequel and a sequel of the precursor, with few episodes set in the same time frame.

The second category, *allographic* multiperspectivity, is perfectly represented by the genre of minor-character elaboration. As noted by Parey, allographic novel expansions are often based on culturally relevant texts or classics: "the source texts must be well known enough, whether the aim is to challenge them or to pay homage" (8). Both the examples of postmodernist minor-character rewrites described by Doležel in his relations between worlds, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Foe*, exemplify this category of allographic multiperspectivity. Similarly, a simple search for "POV" on the website FanFiction will yield countless results of fan works rewriting popular texts—mostly classics or contemporary bestsellers such as the *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games* series—from the perspective of different characters. While postmodernist rewrites generally aim to revise the hypotext by unsettling its cultural or political assumptions, fan fiction, by definition, tends to pay homage rather than challenge the precursor. However, as Parey again points out, "[t]he rise of fan fiction may also be seen as an indication of the change that has taken place regarding the untouchability of the literary canon" (15). The popularity of multiperspective retellings in fan works can also help explain the proliferation of autographic POV sequels of contemporary bestsellers, such as Stephenie Meyer's *Midnight Sun* (2020), a retelling of the first installment of

her *Twilight* series from the perspective of the male protagonist, or even a whole new set of parallel novels by E. L. James to retell the original *Fifty Shades* trilogy, with each volume subtitled "as told by Christian." An in-depth exploration of the proliferation of multiperspective expansions in contemporary literature and fan fiction would go beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet recognizing the phenomenon can help us understand how the effects of a peculiar formal strategy in narrative—in our case, transtextual multiperspectivity—are always contingent on the wider context in which the technique is used.

Naturally, transmedial storytelling has effectively adopted this narrative strategy, and minor-character retellings have expanded beyond the boundaries of the literary text. Following Ryan's account, I would like to draw a further distinction between transfictional and transmedial multiperspectivity. In an entry of *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Richard-Saint Gelais defines the concept of "transfictionality" as the relation created when "two (or more) texts […] share elements such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds" (2005, 612). For Ryan, as we have seen, expansion, modification, and transposition are the "three fundamental operations" that articulate this relation (2013, 361). Crucially, these three operations hold a promising potential for transmedial storytelling, which Ryan regards as a "special case of transfictionality—a transfictionality that operates across many different media" (366). While Ryan remains skeptical on the definition of "same world" for transmedial adaptations—since different media have different affordances and expressive power—Jan-Noël Thon describes in more detail the relations between worlds in a transmedial context. In his theoretical account, Thon distinguishes between "work-specific storyworlds," "transmedial storyworlds," and "transmedial universes" (2015, 32). While the former refers to the storyworld of a single installment of a transmedial franchise, the difference between transmedial storyworlds and universes is once again a matter of canonicity and contradiction. In other words, transmedial universes can be conceptualized as "contradictory compounds of ontologically distinct work-specific, transtextual, and/or transmedial storyworlds" (46). Conversely, transmedial storyworlds are noncontradictory converging worlds, which can be regarded as the canonical core of a broader transmedial universe. The flexibility of the concept of transmedial universe, Thon argues, enables "not only [its application] to the analysis of the apocryphal and/or unlicensed periphery of a given transmedial franchise—allowing for the analysis of its 'fanon' in addition to its 'canon'—but also to come to terms with various kinds of crossovers between the storyworlds and/or universes that were

established by different franchises" (46). Therefore, in Thon's terminology, a transmedial storyworld includes autographic transmedial adaptations and expansions, while a transmedial universe encompasses all the allographic operations on a transmedial level.[5]

While transmedial adaptations and retellings of classical texts are as old as cinema, comics, or video games themselves, my second example, *Elsinore*, presents a unique case of minor-character elaboration on a transmedial level. As a retelling of *Hamlet*, it is part of an immense constellation of cinematic adaptations, literary rewrites, and interactive experimentations which aim to revive, problematize, and engage with one of the cornerstones of Western literature. Yet *Elsinore* manages to create something original through the medium-specific affordances of video games and its overt self-reflexivity, effectively challenging the genre of minor-character retelling. Therefore, while often confined to the boundaries of the literary text, minor-character elaboration reclaims its cultural potential by engaging with the contemporary transmedial landscape. Rosen himself recognizes the transmedial expansion of the genre he theorizes. However, rather than exploring its medium-specific potential, he interprets such expansion as a mere marker of its commercial success: "[p]erhaps the most visible marker of the genre's success as a vehicle for contemporary cultural production […] remains Gregory Maguire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995) and the hugely popular Broadway musical adapted from that novel" (2016, 3).

The video game *Elsinore*, the musical *Wicked*, and other similar examples fall into the *allographic transmedial* typology of transtextual multiperspectivity. Conversely, an autographic transmedial expansion through a minor-character's perspective can be found in the action-adventure video game *Enter the Matrix* (2003) developed by Shiny Entertainment as an authorial expansion of *The Matrix* film series, Henry Jenkins's prototypical example of transmedial storytelling (2006). The game can be considered a coquel and a spinoff of the second installment of the film series, since its story is set in the same time frame as *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) but players control two minor characters from the movies, Ghost and Niobe. Similarly, Pixar has often produced POV shorts as transmedial expansions of its animated feature films, originally intended for home video, and, more recently, for the streaming platform Disney+. Among these feature-

[5] However, the distinction between autographic and allographic is not always clear-cut, as exemplified by contemporary "transmedial multiverses" (D'Amato and Diani 2024, 609), such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which adopts the peculiar ontology of the multiverse as an internal explanation to weld contradictory, allographic storyworlds into an autographic one.

related shorts, *BURN·E* (2008) focuses on the titular repair robot as a minor character of *WALL·E* (2008), and *Jack-Jack Attack* (2005) recounts the events of *The Incredibles*' (2004) last sequences from the perspective of the babysitter Kari. More recently, Disney appears to be employing this narrative strategy even in its feature films. Tobias Kunz and Lukas R. A. Wilde, for example, have connected the traditional "Rashomon-Style" to the "perspective flip" of these transmedia franchises, like Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent* (2014) and Craig Gillespie's *Cruella* (2021), live-action retellings of the animated movies *Sleeping Beauty* and *101 Dalmatians* from the perspectives of their respective villains (2023, 39).

Table 1 sums up the various typologies of transtextual multiperspectivity that I have discussed in this section. Apart from a mere taxonomical distinction, this overview of transtextual multiperspectivity should help us understand the disparate functions of this formal strategy in contemporary narratives. While autographic transfictional and transmedial multiperspectivity generally expand the precursor's storyworld for creative or commercial purposes, allographic multiperspectivity adopts the same narrative strategy to engage with the hypotext in a comparative and sometimes corrective way, ranging from homage (fan fiction) to radical critique (postcolonial and feminist rewrites), but often blurring the distinction between the two, as we will see with *The Ballad of Black Tom*. It is no coincidence that Rosen takes its point of departure by recognizing "the wide range of uses to which the techniques made famous by Rhys's novel have been adapted in the decades since its publication" (2016, 2). Similarly, he acknowledges the broader cultural network of minor-character elaboration: "[t]he fact that minor-character elaboration may be closely related to other practices, folded into larger designs, or deployed in multiple media suggests that focused analysis of the genre can illuminate the significance of nearby and related phenomena" (20).

Here, more than in genre itself, I am interested in the formal strategy the genre builds on, that is, a peculiar typology of transtextual multiperspectivity that I have called allographic transfictional multiperspectivity, or—when crossing the boundaries of the literary text—allographic transmedial multiperspectivity. Of course, not all postcolonial rewrites, minor-character retellings, or feminist POV expansions effectively critique the ideologies underlying their hypotexts in the same way, nor do they always intend to. Following Sternberg's Proteus principle, adopting a certain form (or "technique," for Rosen) cannot determine ideological functions but only opens up a potential for ethical and cultural engagement. As discussed by

Monika Fludernik specifically for postcolonial narratology, "in most cases the various aspects of narrative that lend themselves to a critical or subversive interpretation in postcolonial texts are not *inherently* critical techniques but can be found in equal measure in colonial and conservative narratives. Their subversive quality, that is, accrues to them from their specific context and their semantic and thematic quality in individual texts" (2018, 202, original emphasis). In contrast to Rosen's negative teleology of minor-character retelling, I aim to reassess its cultural potential through works that clarify and subvert their potential elements of ambivalence. Before turning to a close reading of my two examples and the cultural potential they hold, I will discuss more in detail the cognitive reading practice and the ambivalence of negation raised by minor-character retellings.

Transtextual Multiperspectivity	**Transfictional**	**Transmedial**
Autographic	*Better Call Saul* (2015–2022) *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)	*Enter the Matrix* (2003) *Maleficent* (2014)
Allographic	*Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016)	*Wicked* (1995) *Elsinore* (2019)

Table 1. Types of transtextual multiperspectivity.

Between Resistance and the Ambivalence of Negation

In the last decades, Adrienne Rich's concept of feminist "re-vision" (1972) as well as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's influential *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) have meaningfully shaped the critical discourse around contemporary inter- and transtextuality. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, argues that "[t]he general mode for the postcolonial is citation, re-inscription, re-routing the historical" (1990, 41), and ever since Barbara Harlow's seminal *Resistance*

Literature (1986), postcolonial studies have emphasized the resistant and real-world effects of literature and other forms of artistic expression.[6] As summarized by Elleke Boehmer, the authors of these works believed "that textual effects such as realism, syncretism, or hybridity might have the effect of changing not just minds, but also structures, though *how* they might do so was often left under-examined" (2018, 44, original emphasis). In narrative theory, Fludernik has recently examined, in a chapter of an edited collection on *Narratology and Ideology* (2018), a group of key narratological features which "lend themselves to be 'turned against' the colonizer," including person, focalization, and "generic revision and rewriting of classic Western texts" (201). Literary retellings have become a privileged site for feminist "resistant reading" (Fetterley 1978), a reading practice that—alongside the poststructuralist opening of the text—"rely on an active reader turned writer who gathers up the threads of earlier texts and weaves them into a new form" (Rosen 80). In minor-character retellings, indeed, multiperspectivity primarily works as a readerly effect triggered by the accessibility of the repetition: the more a recipient can recognize the precursor's storyworld, the more effective the juxtaposition of former and new character perspectives becomes. In Rosen's words, "the entire level of intertextual meaning depends on the reader's recognition of a character's origins in an earlier text" (66). Doležel himself stressed this point while discussing the complexity of the rewriting's meaning: "[i]n the standard case of semantic processing the reader of, say, *Foe* reconstructs the fictional world of Coetzee's novel, but at the same time he or she activates as cognitive background the fictional encyclopedia of *Robinson Crusoe*" (1998, 222).

The foregrounding of this "intertextual world-making" practice (Spengler 2017, 7) creates some common ground between retellings and multiperspective narratives. Similar to the repetition-cum-variation structure, both multiperspective narratives and retellings are built on a cognitive oscillation between different textual segments. In the former, this oscillation is linked to what I have described as an *intratextual* "negotiation" between characters' values and beliefs. In adaptations, it becomes an intertextual world-making process, which, in the case of minor-

[6] For a detailed discussion of the convergences and divergences between Harlow's and Ashcroft et al.'s works on the postcolonial political spectrum, see Boehmer (2018, 43–50). Crucially, Boehmer also highlights the contradictions already embedded in these 'resistant' approaches: "critical approaches foregrounding active resistance, such as those of Harlow, on the one hand, and those emphasizing cultural and textual adaptation and appropriation like Ashcroft et al.'s, on the other, *both* paradoxically ended up homogenizing and flattening out in practical terms those local, subaltern, and above all *anti-colonial* particularities that they at the same time sought in principle to emphasize and encourage" (45, original emphasis).

character elaboration, takes the form of a similar *intertextual* negotiation between character perspectives. Where the two typologies differ, however, is in the different levels in which this negotiation takes place. In her discussion of literary spinoffs (almost overlapping with minor-character retelling), Spengler emphasizes their "particular form of reader activity, which consists of a trans-textual oscillation" (2015, 39). The genre of rewritings is, for Spengler, particularly interesting from a cognitive perspective: "[w]hereas the opening up of cognitive, discursive, and ideological orders by means of an as-if relation to the world […] is a general characteristic of works of fiction, the strategy of temporarily *and* more or less explicitly suspending at least two "realities" [the real world and the pre-text], is a determining feature of rewritings" (2017, 8, original emphasis).

We have seen in chapters 1 and 2 how multiperspective narratives require readers' coordination of multiple character perspectives. Yet, while intratextual multiperspective narratives limit the coordination process to the diegetic level, what is distinctive about transtextual multiperspectivity is that it requires a double level of coordination, involving both the individual character perspectives and the broader ideological value of the text. For Spengler, rewritings and highly intensive intertextual forms "deliberately promote inter- or transtextual perspectival shifts in addition to those between inner-textual segments," a process that prompts recipients to establish the connectivity "between different textual worlds and their discursive and ideological presuppositions" (2017, 6). In other words, recipients are brought to coordinate a wide array of perspectives both on the diegetic and the extradiegetic level, thus inevitably linking an intertextual friction between character perspectives to the broader ideological assumptions of the two works.

The concept of "negation" can help us capture the peculiar reading practice elicited by transtextual multiperspectivity. Spengler refers to Iser's understanding of negation and negativity as complex "synthesizing activities" which directly involve or challenge the reader's beliefs and ideological values (2017, 6–7). According to Iser, the aesthetic quality of readers' acts of imagining is created through negation, because negation not only produces blanks and gaps but also challenges readers to imagine what is negated (1978, 213). In Winfried Fluck's terms, "to make the negation meaningful we have to mentally construct not only the object or situation itself which appears in negation but also that which it negates" (2000, 184). Iser further develops his theoretical proposal by introducing the concept of "negativity," which goes beyond the semantic level of negation to describe the "unformulated double" of the formulated text (1978, 225). As suggested

by Spengler, rewritings *actualize* this doubling structure of formulated and unformulated by prompting a "trans-textual oscillation" for which the reader is brought to bear the hypotext in mind and coordinate the two texts all the time (2017, 7). In other words, while negativity is a characteristic of literature in general (Fluck 190), rewritings—and I would add, multiperspective narratives—build on it as one of their defining features. These forms rely on the tension between the formulated text and its unformulated double, which in the case of rewritings or multiperspective narratives becomes a concrete precursor.

In politically charged examples of minor-character elaboration, Iser's subversive negation serves a critical purpose as an act of resistance—of "writing back"—that invites readers to question dominant patriarchal or imperialist ideologies embedded in the hypotext. These retellings aim to unsettle the ideological structures of the canonical work by offering a new perspective, frequently from a previously marginalized, silenced, or stereotyped character. Through negation, the original text's assumptions are called into question, and the reader is invited to critically engage with the norms, values, and power structures that the hypotext reinforces and legitimizes. However, following Iser's idea of negativity, this process of subversion and resistance is far from a straightforward re-inscription. Negation does not simply erase or replace the old meaning: instead, the "old negated meaning returns to the conscious mind when a new one is superimposed onto it; this new meaning is unformulated, and for precisely this reason needs the old" (1978, 217). With this passage, Iser seems to capture the core of the potential ambivalence of rewritings and minor-character retellings that this chapter explores: the return of the negated, that is, the collateral effect of referring to the canonical work while aiming to revise it.

This distinction between negation and negativity converges with Marco Caracciolo's reformulation of "negation" (2021a, 80). As noted by Caracciolo, narrative theory has so far addressed negation in the form of "denarration," defined by Brian Richardson as "a kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of her narrative that had earlier been presented as given" (2001, 168). Similarly, another narratological concept, that of "the disnarrated," is inherently linked to negation. For Gerald Prince, who first coined the term, the disnarrated "covers all the events that *do not* happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text" (1988, 2, original emphasis). Prince's concept has been especially productive for the analysis of rewritings and the process of writing back. According to Laura Karttunen, for example, "[i]n reacting to previous texts […] and imagining alternative

histories (what could have been), postcolonial literature involves the disnarrated almost by definition" (2008, 425). Similarly, Karin Kukkonen underlines how the concept of the disnarrated "is of great importance for feminist and postcolonial narratology, because it brings to the fore the social and cultural context from which readers are supposed to approach the narrative" (2020, 119). Both denarration and the disnarrated are productive narrative strategies building on the potential of negation to unsettle questionable ethical and ideological values. However, they do not fully capture the ambivalent nature of negation expressed by Iser's return of the old negated. Conversely, the kind of narrative negation described by Caracciolo "does not revoke previous narrative information but conveys the hiatus between two temporal frames within the storyworld's chronology" (2021a, 80). Caracciolo is here interested in the relationship between postworld and preworld in post-apocalyptic narratives and draws his distinction by turning Doležel's "dyadic worlds" (1998, 128–129) from spatial to temporal domains. Similarly, I propose to understand retellings as projecting a dyadic storyworld between the hypotext and the rewriting. Paraphrasing Caracciolo (2021a, 80), multiperspectivity arises from the way readers are asked to simultaneously entertain and imaginatively blend two storyworlds, along with the character perspectives through which these worlds are experienced.

Caracciolo provides two main examples to illustrate his idea. The first is the Kanizsa triangle, a figure whose experiential effect is the simultaneous and paradoxical awareness of the triangle and its absence. The second is a statement that clarifies negation as a linguistic phenomenon. For Daniel Gilbert, "[t]o comprehend a denial (*armadillos are not herbivorous*), a listener must first comprehend the core assertion (*armadillos are herbivorous*) and then reject it" (1991, 113, original emphasis). Similarly, to capture the subversive value of the retelling, recipients must first (re)consider the canonical text; or, in minor-character elaboration, to fully engage with the new perspective, we must coordinate it against the backdrop of the narrator or focalizer of the precursor, thus triggering multiperspectivity as a readerly effect. In Caracciolo's terms, "when we process a negative statement, we entertain its affirmative counterpart before fully parsing its negative meaning" (2021a, 81). When predisposed recipients are aware of the intertextual reference, transtextual multiperspectivity and literary rewritings work in the same way. This means that these

narratives build the new perspective as a negation (or at least a conflictual comparison) of the precursor, a strategy that refers to the canonical work while aiming to disrupt its assumptions.[7]

As we have seen, this is not the only element of retellings' potential ambivalence identified by Rosen. In his critique of the double-dipping logic of the genre, he also emphasizes writers' attempt to reclaim both symbolic and economic capital, interpreting the reference to the canon as leverage "to gain strategic advantages in a highly competitive literary marketplace" (2016, 30). In other words, authors—those who really speak while claiming to "give voice" to minor characters—would be brought to adopt the genre not only to get published but to be directly associated with the "great names," thus acquiring both literary prestige and economic capital through the exploitation of their ideological commitment. Similarly, the perspective reversal these texts rely on would conform, for Rosen, to "sentimental conventions": authors would "manipulate narrative point of view in the service of the production of sympathy, concern, and identification with a previously minor character" (25). This aligns with what Glenda Carpio has recently described, in the genre of immigrant literature, as the "limits of empathy" (2023, 6). In her monograph, Carpio discusses writers who "do not seek to 'give voice' to marginal migrant subjects or to elicit our empathy for their suffering" (93), thus converging with Rosen's critique of the politics of "giving voice to the silenced" as the core subversive value of minor-character elaboration. While I mostly focus on the first element—the double logic of negation—my two examples also address, more or less directly, these additional issues. Through the medium-specific blurring of the status of the author, for example, *Elsinore* unsettles Rosen's view of authors vicariously giving voices to minor characters in order to acquire personal symbolic capital. Similarly, *The Ballad of Black Tom* problematizes the undisputed production of sympathy towards a minor character by, in turn, adopting an intratextual multiperspectivity that does not limit the narrative to the suffering of the previously silenced figure. In the next two sections, I will focus on the formal and ludic strategies specifically adopted by the two works to critically engage with the double logic of negation, thus reaffirming their subversive value vis-à-vis structural racism and patriarchal ideologies.

[7] Julie Sanders effectively captures the link between the peculiar reading practice elicited by postcolonial and feminist retellings and their potential collateral effect. On the one hand, "[i]f readers are to be alert to the comparative and contrastive relationships that Eliot regarded as crucial to the aesthetic process" (2016, 97), the hypotext must be well-known and maintained as a constant backdrop in the reading experience. On the other hand, adaptation and rewriting operate "within the parameters of an established canon, serving indeed at time to reinforce that canon by ensuring a continued interest in the original or source text" (97–98).

"With All My Conflicted Feelings"

The Ballad of Black Tom opens with a dedication which serves the double purpose of pointing to the precursor and introducing the concept of ambivalence at the core of the novella: "*For H. P. Lovecraft, with all my conflicted feelings*." In literary rewritings and works which foreground intertextuality more generally, paratextual devices play a pivotal role in establishing the connection between the canonical text and the retelling. In some cases, the reference is made explicit by the title itself: *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) clearly hints to *Gone with the Wind*, while *Mr. Dalloway* (1999), *Ahab's Wife* (1999), or *The Penelopiad* (2005) unmistakably refer to their precursors. In other cases, recipients become aware of the intertextual reference through the book's cover, authors' notes, or other paratextual materials. Victor LaValle, perhaps more originally, provides a dedication for the author of the hypotext, without explicitly stating the canonical work itself. Yet it is not difficult for a reader, once known Lovecraft's name, to identify the precursor in the short story "The Horror at Red Hook," considered by many critics as one the author's most racist fictional works (Steadman 2024, 111). For S. T. Joshi, the short story can be described as "nothing but a shriek of rage and loathing at the 'foreigners' who have taken New York away from the white people to whom it presumably belongs" (1996, 366). Usually regarded as a transitional tale between Lovecraft's early works and the Cthulhu mythos, "The Horror at Red Hook" was written in 1925 and first published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1927.

The story opens with detective Thomas Malone recounting a disturbing case in New York's Red Hook neighborhood, a waterfront slum in Brooklyn. While investigating on the case of Robert Suydam, a reclusive, wealthy, and shabby occultist associated with strange rituals and local disappearances, Malone encounters a hidden world of dark magic, human trafficking, and worship of malevolent forces. Suydam soon reveals to be the leader of a cult of black magic practitioners operating clandestinely, kidnapping children in the area for arcane rituals meant to summon demonic entities. Over time, Suydam seems to be rejuvenated by the occult practices, and thus marries a young society woman: however, he is ultimately murdered under mysterious circumstances, with a party of the cultists claiming his body. In the aftermath of the murder, Malone reaches the basement of Suydam's building and witnesses supernatural events, human sacrifices, and the reanimation of the cult leader's body. The urban decay described by the short story—in Red Hook, and New York more generally—is explicitly linked to a racist portrayal of

immigrants and black people—the members of Suydam's cult—depicted as practitioners of dark rituals, associated with crime, degradation, and corruption.

The Ballad of Black Tom presents itself as a retelling of the story from the point of view of a previously unnamed black member of the cult, Charles Thomas Tester. Crucially, the novella is divided in two parts, "Tommy Tester" and "Malone," focalized through the titular characters, that is, the proper "minor character" and the detective of Lovecraft's story. In an interview on the novella, LaValle points to Lovecraft's description of the immigrant neighborhoods of New York as one of the main aims of his retelling: "His depictions of the immigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn were so baffling to me because I simply couldn't recognize the kinds of places he feared as exactly the kind of places I'm so happy I grew up in, and where I still live now. So my depictions of Harlem had to work as a kind of corrective. If Lovecraft seemed to be suffering blurred vision about these neighborhoods then I wanted my story to be like the contact lenses" (Weinstock 2016, 241). What is particularly interesting in LaValle's words is how he considers the storyworld to be the same of Lovecraft's precursor, only filtered through different perspectives. He would thus trigger the transtextual multiperspective effect in the reading practice by juxtaposing, or "correcting," Lovecraft's "blurred vision" with his new "contact lenses." Moreover, the metaphor of the vision, as we will see, plays a pivotal role in the variation that the novella brings to the plot of "Red Hook."

LaValle's novella takes its departure from Lovecraft's short story but reshapes it significantly. The first part follows Tommy Tester, an "entertainer" who carries a guitar case across Harlem despite lacking musical talent: the entertainment he provides is in fact a hustle to make money, an activity that brings him into contact with a mysterious woman in Queens, Ma Att. This woman hires him to obtain an occult book which contains the Supreme Alphabet, a system that would teach Black people how to acquire knowledge through Arabic numbers and Latin alphabets. Crucially, Tommy keeps the last page of the book, thus making it useless for Ma Att's purposes. However, when he meets the occultist Robert Suydam—who hires him for playing at his party—Tommy is confronted with dark forces and the supernatural power of the Alphabet. Meanwhile, Tommy's harmless father, Otis, is brutally killed by a racist police officer, Howard, hired by Ma Att in an attempt to retrieve the lost page of the book. The murder of his father convinces Tommy to join Suydam's dark plans, that is, to awaken the "Sleeping King" in order to wipe away "all the petty human evils, such as the ones visited upon your people" (LaValle 57). Realizing that cosmic

indifference could only be a relief from human malice, he thus becomes the titular "Black Tom," Suydam's "second-in-command" and acolyte (101).

The second part is then focalized through Detective Malone, the other white police officer hired by Ma Att, who was present during Howard's murder of Tommy's father. While Howard is depicted as the "more virulent—and easily dismissed—kind of racist," Malone represents the "passive racist" (Wynne, qtd. in Jenkins 2024, 44), deeply implicated with the anti-black violence and oppression that dominate New York. It is through Malone's perspective, then, that we experience Tommy's descent into dark magic. Tommy's choice is portrayed as an ambivalent act of resistance, shaped by a morally fraught temptation: to gain control and seek revenge against the world of anti-Black oppression. The novella's climax, as in Lovecraft's work, occurs in a Red Hook building's basement, where Malone witnesses Black Tom writing out the Supreme Alphabet and performing a black mass ritual. Taking distance from Lovecraft's narrative, Suydam is unexpectedly killed by Black Tom, while Malone—who refuses to "see" Black Tom's actions, as well as his own implications in the pervasive racist brutality—is symbolically mutilated: "Black Tom had cut off Malone's eyelids. 'Try to shut them now,' Black Tom said. 'You can't choose blindness when it suits you. Not anymore'" (2016, 133). Malone, now disfigured, is ultimately forced into an early retirement, while Black Tom vanishes leaving no trace.

LaValle's novella has been recently analyzed as an example of "new black Gothic" (Jenkins 2024, 35), "Black Weird" (Dunning 2020, 46), and "New Weird" fiction (Hudson 2022, 186). What is relevant here is that the work addresses its precursor not only as pertaining to the genre of "minor-character elaboration," but as a generic response to Lovecraft's weird fiction. It is customary to distinguish between the "old weird" of early twentieth-century and the "new weird" linked to authors such as Jeff VanderMeer or China Miéville. In Benjamin Robertson's words, "the new weird exhibits a general tendency to espouse a worldview more open to and receptive of the beyond [the otherness] than does the weird" (2018, 29). More specifically, the New Weird explicitly takes distance from its precursors' problematic racism and antihumanism. As noted by Gry Ulstein, "the *new* weird has adopted the cosmic horror of the old weird, but typically approaches it in different ways; often it is more about researching, articulating, and *embracing* the monster rather than escaping it" (2017, 75, original emphasis). While Ulstein goes on arguing for the ecological potential of the genre, I am interested here in how LaValle resorts to the New Weird's adoption of metafictionality to engage with the ambivalence of minor-character retelling.

Interestingly enough, Caracciolo and Ulstein refer to *The Ballad of Black Tom* as one of the New Weird works which address Lovecraft's weird writing "using metafiction to disrupt straightforward immersion and unsettle the conventions of this literary mode (and, with them, the Old Weird's questionable politics)" (2022, 4). In particular, I will now focus on two strategies adopted by the novella to reach this goal and effectively unsettle the racist assumptions of Lovecraft's short story: the metafictional blurring of ontological boundaries, and the multiscalar dimension of indifference. Moreover, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, these two strategies are likely to foreground slowness (with the former) and uncertainty (with the latter), two experiential effects central to multiperspective narratives.

As discussed in chapter 1, multiperspective narratives can elicit a slow reading practice through their foregrounding of segmentivity and coordination of different character perspectives. The peculiar structure of repetition-cum-variation characteristic of both intratextual multiperspectivity and minor-character retellings can further be considered as a potential mode of slowness. In particular, the cognitive reading practice described in the previous section—Spengler's "trans-textual oscillation"—forces readers to entertain the hypotext before fully parsing its "negative" meaning. When LaValle speaks of his depiction as "a kind of corrective" to Lovecraft's work, he is hinting at the knowledge of the precursor: to correct something, as in the double logic of negation, we have to simultaneously engage with both the correction and the corrected. Naturally, as a short text of 150 pages, *The Ballad of Black Tom* can be read quickly. But, as argued by Caracciolo, this is only the "objective time it takes to traverse the book" (2022b, 133). However, I would propose not to completely discard objective time in this case. As opposed to the great majority of minor-character retellings, the predecessor chosen here by LaValle is far from a culturally prominent one. Although Lovecraft has become a canonical figure in weird fiction, "The Horror at Red Hook" is not one of his best-known works: it does not belong to the Cthulhu mythos proper, and is far less popular than *The Odyssey*, *Hamlet*, or *Pride and Prejudice*. While target logics cannot be discarded here—LaValle is an author of SF and new weird fiction—I suggest that the brevity of Lovecraft's short story plays a significant role in the choice of the precursor.

LaValle is clearly aware of the importance of readers' knowledge of the hypotext: his interview is full of references to both the concept of perspective ("blurred vision," "contact lenses") and of negation and re-vision ("kind of corrective"); more crucially maybe, the novella hints at the precursor in very specific ways which cannot be grasped without a fresh knowledge of Lovecraft's

text. What the brevity of the hypotext and his own novella allows LaValle to do is to subtly ask readers to directly compare the two works: paradoxically, I argue, the objective length of the works becomes the trigger of a slow mode of reading, at least indirectly. The brevity of Lovecraft's work could thus prompt readers to engage with a hypotext they are less likely to know, especially compared to widely popular canonical works. Naturally, it would be delusional to claim that *all* readers will buy a copy of "The Horror at Red Hook" before delving into *The Ballad of Black Tom*. Yet slowness is always an "interplay of audience members' predisposition and textual strategies" (Caracciolo 2022b, 6), precisely like the effect of transtextual multiperspectivity (and adaptations and rewritings in general): if readers are not aware of the intertextual connection, the work will not work for them. Conversely, for the willing and predisposed reader, the direct juxtaposition of Lovecraft's precursor and LaValle's retelling can give rise to an experience of slowness, through the actualization of the trans-textual oscillation and coordination of character perspectives. In this way, readers can move beyond the conventions of minor-character retelling (the giving voice to the silenced, the sympathetic connection towards the minor character), focusing on its deeper meanings, the formal and stylistic features of the rewriting, and the construction of the different focalizing characters.

The main device adopted by LaValle to prompt readers to pay close attention is the *displacement of textual segments* from Lovecraft's work into the novella, that is, the direct quotation of passages from the hypotext in the rewriting. This strategy primarily works as a metafictional blurring of ontological boundaries,[8] because it regards the incursion of the narrator's words (from "Red Hook") as words uttered by a character in the retelling. My link between metafiction and readers' attention could at first seem contradictory, as metafictional writing has often been regarded as inhibiting immersion. However, Merja Polvinen has recently argued that, rather than preventing immersion, metafiction complicates and enriches it through the recognition of fictionality (2016). In this way, the self-reflexive blurring of ontological boundaries can elicit a slow experience by asking readers to pay closer attention to the relationship between narrative and everyday reality.

A striking use of this device can be found in Suydam's dialogue with Tommy during the first manifestation of supernatural phenomena in the cultist's mansion. Lovecraft's infamous description of the immigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn is reformulated and re-functionalized here through the words of Suydam. In the original text, Red Hook was depicted as "*a maze of*

[8] My use of metafiction here refers to the implied reference, throughout the novella, to the rewriting operation.

hybrid squalor […] the population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another, and fragments of Scandinavian and American belts lying not far distant. It is a babel of *sound and filth* […] From this tangle of material and *spiritual putrescence* the blasphemies of a hundred dialects assail the sky […] *Policemen despair of order or reform*, *and seek rather to erect barriers protecting the outside world from the contagion*" (Lovecraft 2004, 128–129, emphasis added). All the words italicized in the previous passage return in Suydam's discourse: "'Your people are forced to live in mazes of hybrid squalor. It's all sound and filth and spiritual putrescence'" (LaValle 47). The metafictionality of the passage is further exposed in the following paragraph: "If anything could pull Tommy Tester's attention from the door it would be this […] [Suydam] looked up and to the right, like a man trying to remember a speech: 'Policemen despair of order or reform and seek rather to erect barriers protecting the outside world from the contagion,' he continued" (47). Two elements are of extreme interest here: first, Tommy Tester's *paying attention* mirrors the predisposed readers' recognition of the intertextual reference, hinting at a slower mode of reading; second, Suydam's *remembering* similarly points to the reading process of trans-textual oscillation. Even more strikingly, I suggest that the appropriation of the passage by Suydam serves as a self-reflexive commentary on the potential ambivalence of retellings. What Suydam is doing here is to reshape the meaning of Lovecraft's text in order to manipulate Tommy, exploiting its racist themes to serve his own agenda. Through this metafictional device, LaValle directly engages with the double-dipping logic of reclaiming both cultural and economic capital.

The second metafictional passage I want to discuss here directly involves multiperspectivity, and more specifically its double-layered structure in the novella. As we have seen, *The Ballad of Black Tom* presents both an intratextual (between Tommy and Malone) and a transtextual multiperspectivity. This multiplication of the defining feature of minor-character retelling complicates the straightforward identification between readers and silenced figure, which would run the risk to foster, in Carpio's view, a facile empathy for the suffering. Conversely, the novella destabilizes readers' alignment with Tommy by shifting focalization and presenting his descent into cosmic horror through Malone's perspective. By doing so, LaValle exposes the biases within Lovecraft's text without fully aligning with either of his new character perspectives, thus resisting to present a definitive truth. The formal juxtaposition between Malone and Tommy's points of view is mirrored on a diegetic level through a supernatural passage shaped by self-reflexivity. In

the middle of Suydam's conjuring, Tommy tries to escape the mansion by opening the library doors: he suddenly finds himself confronting Malone with a revolver pointed towards him. Yet Malone's surroundings seems weirdly different from his: "[w]hile Tommy stood in the library of Robert Suydam's home, Malone stood in what looked to be the lobby of an apartment building […] It was as if the two locations—mansion and tenement lobby—had been stitched together by a haphazard tailor, Tommy Tester and Detective Malone facing each other because of a bad splice in reality's fabric. And actually both men looked mystified" (LaValle 52). While the supernatural elements of the genre work here as an internal explanation of this strikingly metafictional passage, they do not undermine the value of the self-reflexive commentary: through the metaphor of the "stitching," LaValle seeks to juxtapose Lovecraft's short story and his novella, Malone and Tommy Tester's perspectives, without erasing their difference. Conversely, the ultimate openness remains a crucial element of the novella: here LaValle, stepping in the shoes of the "haphazard tailor," juxtaposes two texts and two perspectives, but does not seal the gap between them. It is just a weird glimpse into the loosened fabric of reality.

Lastly, this fundamental gap brings us to the last strategy I will mention here: the formal and thematic foregrounding of openness. For Graham Harman, Lovecraft's works allude to a world of monsters through gaps in descriptive practices, "the gap he produces between an ungraspable thing and the vaguely relevant descriptions that the narrator is able to attempt" (2012, 24). Similarly, LaValle foregrounds a series of textual and thematic gaps which directly speak to the gap-filling process of minor-character retelling. As we have seen, the genre is usually characterized by the authorial agenda of filling in the gaps left by canonical works, mostly with the act of giving voice to the silenced.[9] Rather than providing narrative closure and offering a clarifying perspective on the events of the short story, LaValle further undermines a linear narrative progression, leaving a major gap between the two parts of its novella. As noted by Kathleen Hudson, for example, "[d]ividing the story using two subjective viewpoints echoes Lovecraft's use of incomplete narratives" (2022, 193). Following the conventions of weird fiction, Tommy's transformation into Black Tom is ungraspable, and the shift in focalization emphasizes the indescribability of his descent into dark magic. The adoption of Malone's perspective, therefore, testifies the

[9] This aligns with one of the most influential 'resistant' reading strategies, Edward Said's "contrapuntal reading" (1993), defined as a simultaneous reading of point and counterpoint, which, as noted by Erin James, is "heavily invested in narrative gaps, in that it locates meaning in the unnarrated and considers the effects that the unnarrated stands to have on readers" (2022, 53).

impossibility of entering the monster's mind: while the New Weird, as noted by Ulstein, *embraces* the monster, *The Ballad of Black Tom* still needs Malone's filter to represent it. The centrality of openness is further thematized throughout the novella with symbolic images, such as Malone's final disfigurement, which forces him to keep his eyes wide open, and the openness of the book whose missing last page sets the narrative in motion. However, I will briefly focus on another type of gap—the one created between the different scalar levels typical of weird fiction.

Black Weird, as a politically charged variant of the New Weird, is premised on decentering the white subject and locating the Other and the monstrous in white racism itself (Turnbull et al. 2022). While the New Weird would not need to emphasize "cosmic horror as a necessary factor" (Ulstein 82), LaValle both broadens and narrows the scope of Lovecraft's novella, creating a gappy discontinuity which symbolically scales down the horror from cosmic indifference to human malice and white racism. He broadens it by explicitly relating Black Tom to Cthulhu, which was absent in the hypotext, and emphasizing the scale variance between human and more-than-human temporalities: "'I don't know how long it'll take. Our time and their time isn't counted the same. Maybe a month? Maybe a hundred years? All this will pass. Humanity will be washed away'" (LaValle 148). At the same time, crucially, the horror is located in the actions of Howard *and* the implication of Malone, that is, not only in "malice" but also in the scalar leap between cosmic and human indifference. While the text explicitly highlights the neat dichotomy between human malice and cosmic indifference ("What was indifference compared to malice?" [66]), it is Malone's human "indifference to the moral or existential implications of this situation" to result even more terrifying (Hudson 195). As a result, indifference is not merely located into the ungraspable and unknowable cosmic horror, but it reveals itself as a defining feature of systemic racism.

The key to this operation is the same process of juxtaposing yet leaving a gap that we saw with the metafictional passages. While brought together in the multiscalar horror of the novella, human and cosmic indifference remain distinct realms with different laws and temporalities: however, their juxtaposition throws into sharp relief the entanglement of human and cosmic horror. In this way, the novella works as the ecological strand of New Weird fiction which experiments with "the old weird conventions in order to facilitate communication of ecological awareness and human entanglement in nonhuman realities" (Ulstein 2019, 57). In other words, the multiscalar dimension of the novella's horror shows how cosmic indifference is, above all, mirrored and rooted in human indifference: juxtaposing these dimensions in a New Weird vein allows to recognize human

implications without sealing the gap. This movement of *juxtaposition without closure* reasserts the value of minor-character retelling: juxtaposing a hypotext and a retelling, the Old Weird and the New Weird, cosmic indifference and human malice, does not imply a teleological narrative closure, the replacement of a *wrong* version with the *new sympathetic* one. Rather, it offers the potential to coordinate and negotiate values and beliefs, to parse new storyworlds and perspectives against the backdrop of a predecessor, to read against the grain of the questionable politics of the canonical work. But also, to read against the grain of LaValle's own words: minor-character retelling is at its most effective when it presents itself as a *critical* lens, not a *corrective* one.

To Be or Not to Be or to Be or Not to Be…

If *The Ballad of Black Tom* reaffirms the subversive value of minor-character retellings through its double-layered multiperspectivity and multiscalar horror, *Elsinore* keeps the novella's self-reflexive commentary by embedding it in its primary game mechanic: the time loop. My core argument here is that *Elsinore* adopts the temporal loop to self-reflexively address the main risk of minor-character retellings, that is, the loop-like process of referring to the canon as they seek to subvert it through alternative perspectives. In other words, the cyclical repetition in *Elsinore* mirrors the iterative formula of feminist and postcolonial rewritings. At the same time, the game reaffirms the value of the operation by refusing to provide a single ideal outcome or resolution for its narrative. In this way, I aim to demonstrate how *Elsinore* foregrounds the subversive potential of minor-character retelling's "endlessly iterable formula: retell X classic from Y minor character's point of view" (Rosen 33). Moreover, the medium-specific affordances of video games allow players, and Ophelia, to be actively engaged with the rewriting process: each temporal cycle in *Elsinore* provides a new version of events, thus multiplying potential retellings and scenarios, and offering a wide array of—to stay with LaValle's metaphor—critical lenses rather than a single corrective one. But is Ophelia's agency merely a transmedial reiteration of the politics of "giving voice to the silenced"? In this section, I will discuss three main aspects of the game's engagement with the genre minor-character retelling: time loop, ambivalent (female) agency, and lack of ideal outcome.

Developed and published by Golden Glitch Studios, *Elsinore* is a point-and-click adventure game released on PC in 2019. Set in the titular Elsinore Castle, the game is a retelling of *Hamlet*

following Ophelia as the player-controlled character. Recent years have seen a rise of so-called "Shakespeare games," video game adaptations of Shakespeare's most popular works. Gina Bloom has identified three typologies of such games: "theater-making" games, where medium-specific affordances are adopted to experience the staging of the drama; "scholar-making" games, which revolve around trivia to improve the players' knowledge of the plays; and "drama-making" games, narrative-focused video games in which players take on the role of Shakesperean characters and directly interact with the play (2015, 115). *Elsinore* clearly falls into the last category: in the game, players are called upon to actively shape the narrative progression of this version of *Hamlet* through their choices. Such choices are multiplied and problematized through the core game mechanic—the time loop—which constantly confronts players with a process of writing and rewriting their previous attempts. After a spooky vision of the deaths of everyone in the castle, including herself to the bottom of a river, Ophelia is indeed assassinated by an unknown spy, her body left in a pond to look like a suicide by drowning. However, she wakes back up in her bed and has the chance to relive the last four days of her life to prevent the narrative's tragic outcome. While seemingly returning to the same point, every death will teach both Ophelia and the player something about the storyworld and characters' motivations.

Each loop will begin with Ophelia waking up in her bedroom and starting the conversation with Hamlet. She thus attempts to use the knowledge acquired by the loop to alter everyone's fate in Elsinore Castle. In order to do so, players must interact with the other characters in the castle—a task that quickly proves to be more challenging than it appears, as characters will assume that Ophelia is mad if she directly addresses them with knowledge of their fates. Thus, the game strongly relies on attempts, exploration, experimentation, that is, the trial and error ("live-die-repeat") structure of loop narratives.[10] Moreover, conversation is strictly connected to *actual* knowledge: to interact with these characters, Ophelia must have information to share about an event she has learned through "Hearsay," that is, via conversation, eavesdropping, or other modes of environmental storytelling. As summarized by Julia Wold, "Ophelia cannot bring up topics that she is not directly aware of, that is, she cannot make specific choices without the right knowledge" (2024, 221). The game thus appears as a striking example of the blending of Ryan's "exploratory" and "ontological interactivity" (2006, 108) encountered in chapter 2. In *Elsinore*, players are forced

[10] See Schniedermann (2023) and Schniedermann, Willemsen, and Yeager (2025) for recent discussions of the time loop in contemporary narratives, and Caracciolo (2023b) for the link between video games and time loop narratives.

to consistently rely on the former to acquire crucial information required to carry on the narrative progression. At the same time, as in most choice-based games, the new knowledge serves to directly shape the game world and the plot development. The peculiarity of the game's ontological interactivity is that here the mechanic works against the backdrop of a canonical text. In *Elsinore*, players' choices are not always straightforward, as it is not possible to easily trace back the consequence of a decision, which may have long-term consequences in more than a single reiteration of the loop. Players are thus faced with an "aggregation of choices" (see chapter 2), but at the same time they must negotiate their decision with their pre-existing knowledge of *Hamlet*. To quote again from Wold, "knowledge of the original text can complicate the player's in-game motivation and choices" (222). We can see in this process a medium-specific reiteration of trans-textual oscillation that shapes the reading practice of rewritings and minor-character retelling. Yet here it is not a mere coordination of storyworlds and perspectives but a direct interaction with the narrative itself: the more players recognize the hypotext the more their choices will be thoughtful and ethically charged.

There is another aspect of the loop that is worth examining here. As discussed earlier in this chapter, adaptations and multiperspectivity share a common ground in their unique structure of repetition-cum-variation. In *Elsinore*, this structure is further mirrored by the time loop mechanic, which itself embeds the concept of repetition with (the possibility of) difference. While some time loops, such as the endless loops of many "impossible puzzle films" (Kiss and Willemsen 2017) like *Triangle* (2009) and *Predestination* (2014), present a fixed cycle of endless repetition, the loop of *Elsinore* is precisely built around the potential for rewriting. This variation-based loop serves as a metafictional commentary on minor-character retelling, but at the same time—as in multiperspective narratives—the repetition-cum-variation can elicit an experience of slowness, encouraging players to engage with subtle narrative shifts over multiple iterative cycles.

Naturally, the loop does not inherently imply a slow game practice but requires coordination with specific strategies to achieve this effect. In *Elsinore*, this is primarily possible through the distinctive decision-making process the game requires. While most choice-based video games foreground environmental storytelling[11] and ethical issues, the oscillation *Elsinore* fosters between in-game choices and intertextual knowledge of the play invites players to weigh the implications

[11] As seen in chapter 1, Caracciolo discusses "radical environmental storytelling" as the narrative method adopted by video games to provide a slow game experience (2022b, 161).

of their choices with a broader perspective. In *Elsinore*, players can certainly engage with the goal of discovering all the possible outcomes, yet it soon becomes clear that a teleological narrative is not the main purpose of the game, nor the game poses real ludic challenges. Conversely, players' main engagement consists in the repetition with the piquancy of variation, in lingering over dialogue choices, exploring game spaces, investigating the small differences between different iterations of the loop, and especially all the possible variations from the play. As noted by Ladan Niayesh and Louise Roszak, "[p]ause and think, rewind and start again make this play, somewhat like Shakespeare's original, not an action play, but a reflexive one" (2023, 3). Once again, to fully parse the retelling, players need to be aware of the hypotext: such awareness, as noted by Wold, complicates and decelerates their in-game motivation and choices. Moreover, it significantly positions *Elsinore* as a "literary game" (Ensslin 2014), in which narrativity is strongly foregrounded not only on a textual but also on a transtextual level. This double-layered process of repetition-cum-variation—the *intratextual* loop and the *transtextual* retelling—is the most remarkable feature of environmental storytelling in *Elsinore*. The deceleration is, therefore, a result of a unique approach to environmental storytelling which strongly relies on both intra- and transtextual repetition-cum-variation. In other words, to advance the narrative, players must collect plenty of information and parse each piece with *the knowledge of both the loop and the play*.

The second aspect of the game's engagement with the potential ambivalence of minor-character retelling is the complex process of giving 'voice' to Ophelia. In the game, we engage with the retelling of *Hamlet* through her perspective, and, more specifically, by controlling her as a player character. As noted by Wold, the revisionist goal of *Elsinore* would seem to "empower a figure so disempowered by the source text" (215), precisely in the vein of minor-character retelling. However, as she goes on arguing, the game complicates this assumption through the narrative features of time loops and the figure of a mysterious actor. Most of the scholarly research on *Elsinore* has so far focused on interactivity and Ophelia's agency: stepping into Ophelia's shoes and having the chance to see key events from her perspective, interact with the storyworld, even shape the future outcome of the narrative would appear, at first glance, an effective way of empowering a female character. According to Mckenzie Bergan, for example, "*Elsinore* demonstrates what it means to give agency to a character who never had it before" (2023, 403–404). Similarly, Niayesh and Roszak discuss the strategies of "redefining female agency in *Elsinore*'s patriarchal world" (5). However, the straightforward operation of giving voice to the

silenced is here obstructed, as Wold reminds us, by the "oppressive system" of the time loop (223), a time loop which reveals to be ruled and governed by someone.

Apart from Ophelia, the only character who seems to remember the past loops is the solo performer Peter Quince, who replaces the troupe of players performing at Elsinore Castle in Shakespeare's play. His metatextual awareness is ultimately explained through his implication: it was Quince to create and maintain the loop in order to address his power in directing the characters' lives. If *The Ballad of Black Tom* subtly hinted at the authorial figure as the tailor who stitched together the predecessor and the retelling, Tommy and Malone's perspectives, *Elsinore* is more explicit in unmasking the author (or director) as the villain. Through the figure of Quince, *Elsinore* addresses one of the retellings' elements of ambivalence mentioned by Rosen: the "vicarious storytelling" (Gebauer and Sommer 2023) of authors exploiting the politics of giving voice to the silenced, ostensibly to empower them while ultimately reinforcing their own authority and cultural status. Quince, the "puppet master," brilliantly raises questions about authorship and agency, hinting at the ambivalence of negation, namely that retellings, while offering new perspectives, may also replicate existing power structures. By exposing Quince's manipulation, I suggest, *Elsinore* forces players to confront all these elements of ambivalence of minor-character retellings. Rather than simply stepping into Ophelia's shoes, the game prompts a deeper reflection on who controls the narrative and for what purpose.

This potential ambivalence is also mirrored by the presence of multiple endings, and, more specifically, by the lack of an ideal outcome. The game does not provide an unequivocally good ending—the so-called "Golden Ending" in choice-based video games—and each path forces players to make ethically charged choices. At the end of the game, once found Quince's cursed book, Ophelia can choose among eleven possible endings, all of which require a sacrifice. As underlined by Wold, "it is meaningful that the mechanism that curses Ophelia is a book, a text with contents that decides her fate, contents Ophelia has no control over, and which existed long before she ever did" (226). However, when liberated from the text's curse, she does not find an ideal conclusion but is faced with ethically complex choices. In other words, it is not sufficient to 'free' a minor character from the constraints of the hypotext: each retelling is charged with potentially ambivalent choices, from reaffirming the canon to excluding *other* minor characters. Most of the eleven possible endings require a sacrifice in exchange for a gain: thus, we have "Sacrifice Prestige for Family," "Sacrifice Innocence for Power," "Sacrifice Choice for Revenge," "Sacrifice Family

for Legacy," and so on. One of the endings, "Exeunt All" tilts more than the others towards narrative closure, as nearly everyone is ultimately killed, thus closely resembling the canonical ending. Significantly, refusing to choose any of the endings unlocks a "secret ending" which results to be even less desirable than the others: Ophelia keeps the book for herself and is eternally trapped in the time loop with Quince. In any case, however, something is lost during the retelling.

As a result, I suggest that the multiplication of 'imperfect' outcomes reveals the inherent partiality of each minor-character retelling, and at the same time reassesses their values as a possible critical reevaluation *among others* of a canonical text. It is precisely in this self-reflexive partiality that lies the subversive value of minor-character retellings. What self-reflexive devices allow the genre to do is to expose, rather than hiding, its elements of ambivalence and to challenge them by foregrounding recipients' ethical engagement. This engagement, as I have attempted to demonstrate here, is primarily shaped through the experiential effects of slowness and uncertainty, which are triggered by the convergence of the distinctive structure of minor-character retelling (repetition-cum-variation, transtextual multiperspectivity) and the specific strategies displayed by my two case studies. In this way, the endless iterability of the 'minor-character formula' reacquires the original subversive value whose disappearance in contemporary works was lamented by Rosen, thus reinforcing the ongoing relevance of retellings as a dynamic conversation with, rather than a unique replacement for, the canonical narratives they reimagine. *Elsinore* stands as an exploration of the genre's capacity to critique, reinterpret, and even thoughtfully reinstate canonical texts, exemplifying the cultural potential, and risks, of transtextual multiperspectivity.

The chapter has focused on two examples of minor-character elaboration—a novella and a video game—in which metafictional devices serve to expose the elements of ambivalence of the genre at the same time as they reassess its cultural and subversive potential. LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* retells one of Lovecraft's short stories from a black character perspective without providing—despite his own author's claims—a corrective lens. Rather, the novella unsettles the predecessor's racism and xenophobia through the entanglement of its self-reflexive commentary with the experiential effects of slowness and uncertainty. Here, the former is articulated through the displacement of textual segments and the double-layered multiperspectivity; the latter can be found in the foregrounding of gaps and openness throughout the text, and, more specifically, in the scalar leap between human and cosmic indifference.

Similarly, *Elsinore*—a transmedial retelling of *Hamlet* from Ophelia's perspective—provides a metafictional commentary on the value of retelling by adopting the time loop as its core gameplay mechanic: the time loop thus directly mirrors the structure of negation at the heart of the genre, namely the process of referring to the canon while challenging it. Slowness is here elicited through a peculiar approach to environmental storytelling in which the structure of repetition-cum-variation that characterizes both adaptation and time loop requires players to articulate a wide array of perspectives, thus hindering a teleological rush toward the resolution of the game and drawing attention to the myriads of variants the game provides. Uncertainty comes instead with multiple endings, which do not provide an ideal outcome for Ophelia but ask players for a sacrifice, thus mirroring the partiality of minor-character retelling and the impossibility of a resolutive rewriting. Therefore, while self-reflexivity aims to lay bare the retelling's potential ambivalence, the ethical engagement provided by the experiences of slowness and uncertainty effectively restores its subversive potential. The former encourages a reflective mode of engagement with both retelling and precursor, which foregrounds the formal and stylistic qualities of the variation; the latter undermines the corrective purpose of the retelling by keeping gaps open and resisting any definitive closure.

The encounter between multiperspectivity and retelling—in the genre of minor-character elaboration—is thus shown to be a productive one for predisposed recipients who are willing to engage with a transtextual mode of reading, that is, the cognitive oscillation between hypotext and retelling which triggers the coordination of character perspectives as well as the imaginative blend of the two storyworlds. Crucially, it is precisely this reading practice that mirrors what Rosen considers the main ambivalence of the genre, the logics of negation which risks reaffirming the cultural centrality of the canonical work. Before turning to these elements of ambivalence, I have outlined four typologies of transtextual multiperspectivity, conceptualized as the form of multiperspectivity which extends beyond the scope of the single text. The four typologies are distinguished according to four parameters: allographic, autographic, transfictional, or transmedial. The different examples of transtextual multiperspectivity have allowed me to refer to the disparate functions this formal strategy can cover, ranging from a mere homage to a beloved predecessor in fan fiction, or the mainstream exploitation of IP licenses in Hollywoodian franchises, to the subversive potential of postcolonial and feminist rewritings. In this way,

transtextual multiperspectivity remarkably exemplifies Sternberg's Proteus Principle and Meretoja's insights on the ethical potential *and* risks of storytelling.

The formal and ludic strategies I have described in this chapter allow both *The Ballad of Black Tom* and *Elsinore* to display the cultural potential of minor-character retelling—and transtextual multiperspectivity more in general. The potential ambivalence of the genre, as I have discussed here, can be addressed and ultimately overcome by integrating self-reflexivity with specific strategies to elicit the experiential effects of slowness and uncertainty, from the displacement of textual segments in LaValle's novella to the time loop in *Elsinore*, from the multiscalar indifference of the former to the lack of ideal outcome of the latter. In this way, the double-dipping logic critiqued by Rosen does not undermine the subversive value of minor-character retelling, thus leaving open fruitful possibilities for revisiting and unsettling the questionable politics of canonical works.

5 Three Ecological Modes of Multiperspectivity

The previous chapter examined how multiperspectivity reclaims its political and subversive potential in contemporary culture through minor-character retellings in different media. This chapter retains the same "corpus-based approach" (Sommer 2012) to explore the ecological value of multiperspective narratives. However, my aim is not only to explore how multiperspectivity can help us better grapple with the challenges raised by the Anthropocene, but also to reflect on how those challenges might reshape our understanding of multiperspective storytelling itself. Following the econarratological project of an "Anthropocene narrative theory" originally developed by Erin James, I am interested here in the "diplopic questioning of not only how narrative theory might help us understand the Anthropocene but also what we stand to learn of narrative by reading it through (and in) our current epoch" (James 2022, 19). In other words, I ask: how can multiperspectivity help us navigate the complexity of our climate change era, and how might an Anthropocene narrative theory, in turn, prompt a rethinking of conventional examples of multiperspective storytelling? To answer these questions, my final chapter thus revisits some of the key features of this formal strategy explored throughout the thesis. My main argument here is that canonical examples of multiperspectivity—often grounded in Western epistemologies of teleology, closure, and Anthropocentrism—are ill-equipped to account for the nonlinear, distributed, and more-than-human complexities of the Anthropocene.[1] To address these limitations, the chapter proposes three alternative modes of multiperspective storytelling that reconfigure the form's ecological potential: nonrepetitive, ambiguous, and ontological multiperspectivity.

Contemporary narrative scholarship has begun to recognize the potential of multiperspectivity in addressing environmental concerns (see Caracciolo 2023a, 15; Nünning and Nünning 2020, 37). Yet there is a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the textual strategies and experiential effects afforded by multiperspectivity to effectively engage with the Anthropocene. Similar to its inherent predisposition for ethical insightfulness, as explored in chapters 2 and 3, the value of

[1] As the challenges posed by climate change stretch the limits of narrative forms—including multiperspectivity—my understanding of the terms "conventional" and "canonical" in this chapter is broader than in the previous ones: it encompasses not only the goal-oriented trajectory toward narrative resolution problematized throughout the thesis, but also other key limitations of multiperspectivity vis-à-vis the climate crisis, namely the foregrounding of a single event and the dichotomy between perceiving subjects and perceived objects.

multiperspectivity is often taken for granted, with insufficient attention given to the potential ambivalence embedded in this formal strategy of narrative. Drawing on econarratological approaches, I aim to explore the relationship between multiperspective narratives and the Anthropocene by examining both their potential and their limitations, and by questioning how such limitations can be reimagined within the context of planetary crisis. My main example throughout the chapter will be Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Acceptance* (2014), the third volume in his "Southern Reach" series (2014–2024)—a genre-blending work of climate fiction (cli-fi)[2] and New Weird fiction[3] particularly well-suited to display my three alternative modes of multiperspectivity. Revolving around the mysterious, ecologically unstable coastal region known as "Area X," VanderMeer's series traces a succession of failed expeditions dispatched to investigate the area's inexplicable phenomena that disrupt both the landscape and its human presence. The secretive government agency known as the "Southern Reach" attempts to contain and manage the flow of information about the anomaly, officially attributing the region's increasing "weirdness"—ultimately linked to an extraterrestrial intelligence—to environmental catastrophe. As the series progresses, the narrative moves from first-person field reports (*Annihilation*) to bureaucratic intrigue (*Authority*) and fragmented accounts that juggle multiple character perspectives and timelines (*Acceptance* and *Absolution*). Central to *Acceptance* are the converging story lines of multiple characters from the previous volumes: the Lighthouse Keeper (his real name is Saul Evans) who first encounters the anomalies of the coastal region; the former Director of the agency and psychologist of the twelfth expedition (the one reported in the first volume), who is also revealed as Gloria, the Lighthouse Keeper's nine-year-old friend; Control, the protagonist of *Authority* and new director of the Southern Reach; and Ghost Bird, a copy of the biologist (the narrator of *Annihilation*) generated by Area X, who wanders the region before encountering her original self.

The novel lays the groundwork for revisiting three key limitations of multiperspective narratives in the Anthropocene: (1) the foregrounding of a *single event*; (2) the epistemic dualism between *contradictory* and *complementary* forms of multiperspectivity; (3) the Western dichotomy

[2] For a survey of the recent rise of the "cli-fi" genre, see Goodbody and Johns-Putra (2019a). In the word of the editors, the term designates "a distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change, exploring the phenomenon not just in terms of setting, but with regard to psychological and social issues, combining fictional plots with meteorological facts, speculation on the future and reflection on the human-nature relationship" (2019b, 2).
[3] For a discussion of New Weird fiction, see my reading of *The Ballad of Black Tom* in chapter 4.

between perceiving *subject* and perceived *object*. Understanding the value of multiperspectivity vis-à-vis environmental challenges requires an in-depth exploration of its traditional conceptualization, which, I argue, strongly relies on Western ontologies (mind vs body, subject vs object, animate agent vs static matter) and positivist ways of knowing. However, as noted by Heather Houser, it is crucial to underscore "the *necessity of* as well as *the limits to* positivism for environmental understanding today" (Houser 2020, 5, original emphasis). Similarly, I am not claiming that other forms of multiperspectivity cannot hold *any* promise in making sense of climate crisis and related phenomena. Even without achieving the disruptive effect of VanderMeer's work, many narratives effectively employ a multiperspective structure to juxtapose human and nonhuman narrators or focalizers, or to interweave Western and indigenous points of view, thus providing effective ways of entertaining and coordinating conflicting values and framings.

The ethical and cultural significance of incorporating multiple perspectives in both the fictional and nonfictional discourse on climate crisis has been widely recognized in the environmental humanities. French philosopher Bruno Latour's call for a "Parliament of Things" relies precisely on the creation of a political sphere in which nonhuman agents have their own representatives, where human and nonhuman actors are brought into a multiperspective dialogue, not in isolation, but through a system of relational accountability (Latour 1993, 142–145). Moving toward narratives more specifically, Ursula K. Heise discusses the complex narrative of Zacharias Kunuk and Ian Mauro's documentary *Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change* (2010), featuring interviews with members of four Inuit communities. Heise underscores the emergence of two narratives regarding polar bears: some interviewees claim that they are not endangered but more numerous than ever before; for others there are signs of trouble and polar bears are definitely at risk, mostly because of the "intervention of 'southerners' in general and wildlife biologists in particular, rather than changes in the bears' habitat" (Heise 2024, 3). Heise provides here a striking example of the relevance of acknowledging multiple perspectives on climate-related phenomena, by integrating Western perspectives with Inuit knowledge: "[o]ne may or may not agree with the interviewees' assessment that polar bears are not at risk or that the only risk they face is scientific monitoring. But it is clear that conservation, in this context, cannot succeed without awareness of the region's colonial history and respect for *knowledge systems outside the natural sciences*" (4, my emphasis). Similarly, references to the well-known concept of "Rashomon effect" (see chapter 1) can be found in addressing environmental issues: consider, for example, sociologist Allan

Mazur's *A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect at Love Canal* (1998), which tackles one of the century's most impactful environmental disasters by highlighting how the various accounts of the crisis, offered by different participants, remain as conflicting and irreconcilable as the contradictory, unreliable reports in Akira Kurosawa's canonical example of multiperspectivity.[4]

While there is a considerable consensus in environmental scholarship that multiperspectivity is a productive concept in our attempt to address present-day challenges, there is a distinct lack of work engaging with the specificities of this concept in a narratological vein. In the next section I will discuss the field of econarratology and the cultural relevance of form within contemporary narrative theory. Taking inspiration from Marco Caracciolo's conceptualization of multilinearity, I will then define the multiperspective object of interest as the alignment of the "diegetic knot" and the "focus." This understanding allows me to partially depart from the strict multiperspectivity that implies my first ecological limitation of the concept, that is, the foregrounding of a single event. While canonical "event-centered" multiperspective narratives revolve around a single event, my main example, as noted by many critics, undermines the static nature of its object of knowledge—the mysterious Area X—by transforming it into a materialization of Timothy Morton's "hyperobject," that is, objects that "exist on almost unthinkable timescales [and] confound our limited, fixated, self-oriented framework" (2012, 19). Drawing on C. Namwali Serpell's account of the risks of multiperspectivity (2014, 115–118), I will also discuss the convergence between the emphasis, in multiperspective narrative, on the single event and the illusion of a single truth: the belief that incorporating more perspectives will yield a clearer and more accurate understanding can create the illusion of complete comprehension, thus oversimplifying the complex and systemic nature of ecological crises, which inherently defy singular explanations or solutions.

Serpell's work will also inform my second point of ambivalence, namely the epistemic dichotomy between contradictory and complementary multiperspectivity. In both Kunuk and Mauro's documentary and Mazur's essay, multiperspectivity is advocated in relation to *knowledge*, from 'Inuit's *knowledge*' to the 'hazardous *inquiry*.' I will thus address the peculiar way of knowing

[4] Other examples include legal scholarship on climate crisis, such as Edward P. Richards's "The Hurricane Katrina Litigation" (2017); and Hojjat Salimi Turkamani's "The Loss and Damage Fund: A Solution to Interpretive Conflicts of Responsibility for Climate Change?" (2024). In most of these cases, however, the Rashomon effect and the phenomenon of multiperspectivity are adopted merely as cultural references; this nonetheless testifies the relevance of the concept in legal, sociological, and environmental discourses (see also Davis, Anderson, and Walls 2016).

raised by multiperspective narratives by identifying the problematic of multiperspective knowledge in the ecological discourse in Serpell's oscillation between the two concepts of *full*- and *null*-tiplicity (2014, 117). On the one hand, including a wider spectrum of voices gives the illusion to fully capture the complexity of today's ecological crisis, which, however, cannot be reduced to a positivist inquiry (complementary multiperspectivity); on the other hand, this pluralization runs the risk of producing an incommensurable distance between perspectives bringing to indifference or inaction (contradictory multiperspectivity). Through the analysis of VanderMeer's *Acceptance* and James's notion of "despatialization," I propose an in-between category, *ambiguous multiperspectivity*, which prompts readers to entertain multiple conflicting reports that are not mutually exclusive.

Finally, VanderMeer's blurring of ontological boundaries between animate agents and inert matter prompts readers to revisit the canonical structure of multiperspective narratives as a series of narratorial accounts around a static object of knowledge. Drawing on the so-called "ontological turn" advocated, among others, by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004), I suggest that *Acceptance,* in troubling the boundaries between epistemology and ontology, challenges the traditional understanding of multiperspective narratives as a typical modernist technique which only emphasizes *epistemological* relativity and uncertainty. In this way, the dualistic distinction between perceiving subject(s) and inanimate object vanishes, creating *ontological* instability and an "imaginary reshuffling of Western ontology" (Caracciolo 2021b, 370). While taking his point of departure, as we will see, by traditional generic and narrative elements attuned to Western ways of knowing, VanderMeer ultimately acknowledges the impossibility of capturing the irreconcilable ecology of Area X through a collection of subjective accounts, in an attempt to foster *acceptance* of epistemological, ontological, and ecological instability in his characters and readers.

Econarratology, and Types of Formal Engagement with the Collective

In the introduction to a volume on the value of literature, seminal theorists of multiperspective narrative, Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning, briefly hint at multiperspectivity as a narrative device particularly well-suited for engaging with environmental challenges: "[t]hrough narrative techniques like multiperspectivity or fragmentation, novels can capture part of the complexity of the entangled relationships between (non)human lives and diverse environments" (2020, 37). However, like many other traditional narrative categories, multiperspectivity's features face new challenges in the context of the current ecological crisis. My claim resonates with what Heather Houser pinpoints in a chapter on climate fiction in *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Fiction* (2021): "[t]he most often repeated refrain within the scholarship is that planetary disturbance stretches the novel's capacities, in terms of scope, time, setting, subjectivity […] name your narrative feature" (2021, 197). While addressed by literary studies and environmental humanities more generally, as Houser goes on discussing, this challenge is precisely one of the key premises of the field of "econarratology," a theory of narrative attuned to human-nonhuman entanglements that foregrounds the mutual interplay between stories and environment. The term was originally coined by James in *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives* (2015), drawing on other contextualist approaches to postclassical narrative theory—such as Susan Lanser's "feminist narratology" (1986) or Gerald Prince's "postcolonial narratology" (2005)—and preexisting calls for attention to narrative forms and structures in ecocritical literature (Heise 2008, 21–22; Nixon 2011).[1] This econarratological project seeks to develop an "Anthropocene narrative theory," to which her *Narrative in the Anthropocene* (2022) is more specifically dedicated. In this book-length study of the ideological significance of narrative categories, James explores the way in which some of the "basic elements of narrative" (Herman 2009)—storyworld, narrativity, time, space, and narration—need to be revisited against the backdrop of the ecological crisis, as a key step in understanding the relationship between narrative and the Anthropocene (2022, 14–18). The econarratology advocated by James has

[1] See also the anthology *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology* (2020), coedited by James and Eric Morel.

therefore played a pivotal role in emphasizing the prime importance of *form* in narrative's engagement with environmental issues.

By integrating insights from postclassical narrative theory and New Formalist accounts of literature, Caracciolo has similarly foregrounded the relevance of narrative form—and of "complex narratives"[2] more specifically—in addressing the ecological crisis. In recent years, he has developed his theoretical frameworks across several books that foreground the formal dimension of narrative's engagement with climate change (*Narrating the Mesh*), or specific experiential effects elicited by narrative forms (*Slow Narrative*). The crucial insight that moves his research is that "*narrative form matters*—that is, the formal strategies employed by storytellers enter a dialogue with historical and cultural contexts, carrying ideological implications" (Caracciolo 2024c, 357, original emphasis). He thus traces a parallel between contemporary work in postclassical narrative theory, such as Ansgar Nünning's "contextualist" and "cultural narratologies" (Nünning 2009), or James's own econarratology, and Caroline Levine's work in *Forms*, where she claims that "paying attention to subtle and complex formal patterns allows us to rethink the historical workings of political power and the relations between politics and aesthetics" (Levine 2015, xiii). In other words, both New Formalism and cultural narratology emphasize the relationship between narrative form and ideological meaning—which, however, is a highly nonlinear one, as repeatedly discussed throughout this thesis under the heading of Sternberg's "Proteus Principle" (1982).

Among the ecocritically productive narrative structures repeatedly explored by Caracciolo, a central role is played by "multilinear" and "network" narratives. Here, I am particularly interested in the way these narrative forms converge with and differ from multiperspective narratives, as this will help me identify and analyze the specific features of multiperspectivity in an econarratological vein. Broadly speaking, multiperspective narratives share similarities with structures that formally engage with the collective, whose ecological significance has been recently emphasized, among others, by Shannon Lambert in her discussion of collective agency in microbiological and mycological fiction (2025, chapter 3). Analyzing Frank Schätzing's *The Swarm* (2004) and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), Lambert refers to "analogy" and "polyvocality" as

[2] On the broad topic of narrative complexity see at least the collected volumes *Narrating Complexity* (2018), coedited by Richard Walsh and Susan Stepney, and *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution* (2019), coedited by Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki.

devices that enable us to convey the experience of nonhuman collectivity on the level of form (108). Similarly, concepts such as "braided narratives" (Bancroft 2018), "network narratives" (Poulaki 2014; Caracciolo 2021a), or "multi-protagonist novels" (Googasian 2022), converge with multiperspective narratives in trying to capture nonlinear forms of storytelling that uncouple the organization of narrative from a single protagonist or a single point of view, that feature multiple narrators or focalizers, and that foreground a highly segmented, episodic structure.

Similar formal engagements with collectivity are thus well-positioned to afford insight into the complexity of the Anthropocene by disrupting the linear progression of the plot and conveying nonhierarchical ways of thinking human-nonhuman relationships.[3] Although there is a high degree of overlap among these typologies, multiperspectivity is a different narrative phenomenon: "multilinearity" and "network" can be defined as features of the plot and are therefore narrative *forms* more specifically, whereas multiperspectivity—a feature encompassing both narrative discourse and content—is an interplay of textual strategies and readerly effects (see the introduction). Moreover, while the network and the multilinear have been regarded as narrative forms particularly well-adapted to address global processes (Barnard 2009; Beecroft 2016; Ganguly 2016), multiperspectivity has traditionally focused on a *single* event or phenomenon. In the next section, following Caracciolo's insightful taxonomy, I will zoom in on the concept of multilinearity to situate multiperspectivity within this proliferation of formal engagements with the collective. At the same time, conceptualizing multiperspective narratives through the alignment of "diegetic knot" and "focus" will help challenge my first element of ambivalence for an econarratological approach, namely the foregrounding of a single event.

[3] On the limitations of the linearity of narrative time and causality see Caracciolo: "the entanglement of the mesh is directly opposed to linear and hierarchical ways of understanding humanity's position vis-à-vis the nonhuman, where linearity is culturally bound up with notions of human mastery and exploitation (in linear models of economic growth or scientific progress, for instance)" (2021a, 20).

Nonrepetitive Multiperspectivity, and the Problematic of the Single Event

One of the most "repeated refrains" in the ecocritical scholarship, to borrow again Houser's expression, is the problematic of representing climate change as a single phenomenon. Amitav Ghosh's well-known dismissal of realist and "serious" literature as unable to represent the unpredictable realities of global warming pinpoints the impossibility to capture events "too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein" (2016, 32–33). Other scholars have discussed the inherently entangled nature of the ecological crisis (Morton 2012; Tsing 2017),[1] by calling for forms able to capture the intimate connections between humans and nonhumans and the fluid nature of narrative (Herman 2018; Caracciolo 2021a).[2] A similar emphasis on entanglement seeks to envisage Anthropogenic phenomena as inherently plural, complex, and unstable. Conversely, a significant body of fictional works still ends up reducing the ecological crisis to a single phenomenon, thus proving ill-suited to address its multilayered and enmeshed nature. According to Marco Malvestio, for example, "eco-dystopia"—a genre that merges the catastrophic narration of the post-apocalyptic novel and the predictive speculations of dystopia—tends to promote "a catastrophic understanding of the Anthropocene as a single event" (2022, 32), by portraying an individual disaster (usually a storm or a flood) that contradicts the long temporality of Anthropogenic events and the slow violence "dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2011, 2). Discussing movies like Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021), Malvestio points to the dichotomous temporality of the genre, between a time *before* and a time *after* the catastrophe, as a key ambiguity of eco-dystopias: "[t]his understanding of the Anthropocene as something that, destructive though it might be, can be isolated in time contradicts the long temporality of Anthropocenic events" (2022, 32). In other words, the genre thus fails to achieve what Herman,

[1] The body of work emphasizing the entanglement between human and nonhuman realities is obviously wider that these two instances: see also Haraway (2007), Willett (2014), and Gruen (2015).

[2] For a recent critique of the concept of entanglement see Giraud (2019). According to Giraud, an emphasis on entanglement is not always sufficient to address the complexities of the Anthropocene. Therefore, "rather than focus on an ethics based on relationality and entanglement, it is important to more fully flesh out an ethics of exclusion, which pays attention to the entities, practices, and ways of being that are *foreclosed* when other entangled realities are materialized" (2, original emphasis). While I do not entirely align with Giraud's emphasis shift from entanglement to exclusion, my argument partly converges with her (and Michelle Murphy's) discussion on the ambivalence of multiplicity (96–97).

Caracciolo, and other narratologists call "multiscalarity" or "multiscale narration," namely the integration of more-than-human scales through specific formal strategies.

Conceptualized in traditional terms, multiperspectivity appears similarly ill-equipped to address the multiple scalar levels of the Anthropocene. By foregrounding an event repeatedly narrated by or focalized through different characters, multiperspective narratives often isolate a singular phenomenon as the fulcrum of the plot, thus constraining the narrative's capacity to engage with the complex, interconnected systems characteristic of the Anthropocene. As we have seen, climate change resists reduction to a singular or localizable occurrence, as it operates across temporal and spatial dimensions that defy narrative containment. A flood, wildfire, or storm may serve as a focal center of multiple character perspectives—as in Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2005) or James Bradley's *Clade* (2015)—but such catastrophes are not always recognized as symptomatic of broader systemic shifts.[3] Therefore, while multiperspective narratives excel at juxtaposing disparate subjectivities, they risk reifying climate change as an event that is discrete and observable, rather than a diffuse, multiscalar process that transcends individual perspectives. An econarratological understanding of multiperspectivity thus requires a critical revisiting of its central "event,"[4] a concept that lies at the heart of its narrative structure. Put more clearly, multiperspective narratives must move *beyond* the canonical "event-centered" structure most frequently found in movies: a rape in *The Last Duel*, a political murder in *Snake Eyes*, a war evacuation in *Dunkirk*, and so on. To achieve this, I propose to revisit the definitional constraints of the "same event" through the lens of Caracciolo's dimensions of multilinearity.

Among the typologies of formal engagement with collectivity mentioned in the previous section, multilinearity is the form that more directly prompt readers to consider the complexities of global phenomena, emphasizing how disparate lives and experiences can intertwine across

[3] Yet not *all* eco-dystopias rely on the simplistic and isolated instance of the catastrophe. Heise, for example, distinguishes between the story templates of "climate disaster" stories and "climate dystopias" (which could both be included under Malvestio's heading), thus highlighting the latter's broader focus: "[c]limate dystopias also focus on the catastrophic consequences of global warming, but they do so while emphasizing a broader spectrum of changes […] Catastrophes unfold more gradually in climate dystopias than in climate disaster stories and typically involve a larger cast of characters so as to create a scenario of structural crisis well beyond one-time disaster" (2021, 25–26). Heise refers to *The Day After Tomorrow* as the canonical instance of the first story template, while Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) is better positioned to grasp the ripple effects of climate by juxtaposing four focalizing characters in a future Bangkok whose ecological collapse is never reduced to a single catastrophic event.

[4] For an insightful reconceptualization of classical narratological understandings of "event," see James (2022, 108–117). James introduces here the notion of "*effect-event*" as an event "that is only legible in its delayed, transformative effects," that is, an event that is illegible at the level of narration but necessary to narrative comprehension (110–111, original emphasis).

geographical, cultural, or temporal boundaries. Works adopting multilinearity often aim to capture the vast, networked dimension of the global world, as exemplified by works like David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004) or Alejandro González Iñárritu's movie *Babel* (2006). According to Rita Barnard, for example, multilinearity can be defined as a narrative form "constructed from apparently unrelated stories and characters, which eventually reveal a hidden connection" (2009, 208): the emphasis is here on the *hidden* connection, on the idea that the intermingling of threads almost works as a mind-tricking plot twist (Klecker 2013) that forces audiences to revisit each plotline against the backdrop of the final interconnectedness. Similarly, Caracciolo describes multilinearity as the eventual interlinking of seemingly stand-alone narrative threads: "[m]ultilinearity refers, broadly, to the coexistence of stories that remain, for at least part of a larger work, unrelated: they unfold independently and can potentially be understood in isolation" (2024c, 328). Conversely, in multiperspective narratives, the different narratorial accounts or focalized sections do not necessarily remain unrelated, nor can always be understood in isolation. Consider, for example, complementary forms of multiperspectivity, such as Pete Travis's political thriller movie *Vantage Point* (2008), where each character's perspective is closely tied to the reconstruction of the central event—the assassination attempt on the US president—and ultimately converges to reveal a truthful account of what happened. While nonlinearly distributed, the different segments cannot be understood in isolation and their interconnectivity is a crucial requirement for making sense of the plot.[5]

As we have seen, the concept of multilinearity partially overlaps, in turn, with the so-called "network narrative" (Bordwell 2008) or "networked novel" (Ganguly 2016). However, as clarified by Caracciolo, multilinearity stands as a broader concept that allows him to capture the specificities of different narrative strategies: "it is precisely through its pervasiveness that the network can easily become a catch-all form that conflates substantially different narrative strategies and modalities: not all multilinear narratives are organized according to the decentralized logic of the network […], or at least not to the same degree" (2024c, 326). Similarly, multiperspective narratives do *not* completely adhere to the *decentralized* logic of the network: on the contrary, it is

[5] Naturally, this is not a defining feature of *all* multiperspective narratives. In other "expanded" forms of multiperspectivity—such as the transtextual examples discussed in the previous chapter—additional characters' points of view can be juxtaposed to a preexisting stand-alone narrative. For example, the case study I discuss in this chapter, while a multiperspective narrative *per se*, is a transtextual expansion of a stand-alone novel, *Annihilation*, which can undoubtedly be understood as a single work.

precisely their *centralized* logic to pose challenges for an ecologically attuned reading, as they often convey multiple accounts of a central event around which the different story lines revolve. As opposed to the spatial form of the network, this kind of multiperspectivity can perhaps be captured more effectively through the image of a radial tree, as I will discuss in the last section.

Caracciolo effectively captures the different types of multilinear narratives by identifying three main dimensions: linkage, distribution, and focus. The first notion deals with the "local (micro-textual) strategies creating connectivity between a narrative's story lines" (328). To define its first dimension, Caracciolo relies on Arnaud Schmitt's distinction between "connectors" and "knots" (2014, 84): while the former indicate a thematic or symbolic resonance between distinct plotlines, the latter describe a place where characters converge on a diegetic level. Multiperspective narratives tilt towards the latter: while thematic connectors can also prompt readers to entertain different character perspectives on the same object of interest, I argue that—for the concept to be operatively productive—the multiplicity of points of view need to converge in actuality rather than merely thematically. Indeed, a mere thematic connector would turn almost *every* narrative into a multiperspective one: consider, for example, a random short story cycle where different stories present individual points of view on an overarching abstract concept that thematically links the whole collection.[6] Therefore, in terms of linkage, I position multiperspective narratives on the diegetic side of Caracciolo's spectrum of multilinearity.

The second dimension, distribution, describes in what way the different story lines are separated, whether in spatial terms, in temporal terms, or in both. Additionally, there is a special case of story lines that are ontologically parallel storyworlds as they recount possible versions of the same story in mutually exclusive ways. While the latter example might seem to align with multiperspective narratives by offering different versions of the same story, its ontological juxtaposition leans more clearly toward David Bordwell's concept of "forking-path" movies (2002), namely narratives that provide more than one story line as mutually exclusive realities, in the vein of Peter Howitt's *Sliding Doors* (1998). Once again, since multiperspective narratives

[6] Most of these forms, indeed, seem to blur the boundaries between short story cycle and novel. As argued by Corinne Bancroft in linguistic terms, for example, "[t]he strands of a braided narrative […] are more like units in polysynthetic languages where several variable morphemes constitute a single nuanced word that itself can function as a sentence" (2018, 269), whereas the short story cycle is a literary form where "each component work *must* stand alone (with a beginning, middle and end) yet be enriched in the context of the interrelated stories" (Nagel 2001, 15, emphasis added). Once again, by including both connectors and knots, the broader concept of multilinearity encompasses *both* the episodic structure of the short story cycle (as in Caracciolo's example of Jim Jarmusch's episodic movie *Night on Earth* [1991]) and the diegetic linkage of the novel.

require the diegetic linkage of a plot in which the different character perspectives can be effectively juxtaposed, I will not consider the ontological distribution as part of the spectrum of multiperspectivity.[7] With regard to the spatial/temporal divide, multiperspective narratives frequently foreground different recounts of the same *event* or *story*, thus asking for a quasi-simultaneity of story lines. While "object-oriented" multilinear narratives (Caracciolo, 2023a chapter 2) generally feature a broad spatiotemporal distribution—and are thus particularly well-adapted to address global and seemingly ungraspable phenomena such as the environmental crisis—the focus on the single event dramatically reduces the scope of multiperspective narratives. Yet the diegetic knot in multiperspective narratives is not necessarily represented by the same event in a strict sense: the case study I discuss in this chapter, for example, foregrounds a (highly peculiar) setting rather than an event in the canonical sense. In this way, the "Southern Reach" series can provide a series of narratorial accounts and focalizing chapters on the same object of interest—the mysterious zone on the coast of Florida—without necessarily repeating the same event of the *fabula* through different perspectives, thus spanning a broader temporal distribution than "event-centered" examples of multiperspectivity. To better address this point I will introduce Caracciolo's third dimension of multilinearity: the focus.

From its very name, the third feature of multilinear narratives highlights its relevance for our conceptualization of multiperspectivity: the term *focus* is frequently employed to identify the object of interest around which the accounts of several narrators or focalizers are juxtaposed. However, Caracciolo adopts it in a slightly different way: "[i]f linkage has to do with local connectivity, focus is the overarching justification for the multilinear form: the idea, theme, or metaphor that grounds and lends coherence to the overall structure" (329). Here my understanding of focus partially departs from Caracciolo's: he sees it as a "justification" for the story lines to be brought together, whereas I regard it as the overarching "interest" of the narrative: not a mere motivation (e.g., the same physical space as a static backdrop) but the main narrative reason that connects the different perspectives. While multilinearity allows Caracciolo to employ a deliberately vague phrase ("idea, theme, or metaphor"), the focus of multiperspectivity cannot be such an abstract one. As stated above, multilinearity is a feature of the *plot*: it does not require a

[7] See also the discussion of the concept of storyworld in the previous chapter: apocryphal examples of transtextual multiperspectivity are a notable exception to the requirement of a single storyworld as they rely on the specific reading practice of "trans-textual oscillation."

strict focus to be defined as a narrative form. Therefore, disparate story lines can be connected through "analogy" or "coincidence," abstract foci that significantly differ from a material anchor or a location (332). Conversely, multiperspectivity, as discussed by narratologists such as Marcus Hartner (2014) and Christoph Bode (2011, 199–200), runs the risk of becoming a catch-all concept that conflates different narrative modalities with no operative function.

So far, the primary unanswered question in the narratological study of multiperspectivity has concerned how to connect the "how" of the narrative mediation of perspectives with the "what" of the narrated content (see Nünning and Nünning 2000b, 13–20). For this reason, Ansgar and Vera Nünning have suggested to restrict the notion "to cases where points of view interact in salient and significant ways, and thus create multiperspectivity by, for instance, repeatedly portraying the same event from various different angles"[8] (Hartner 2014, loc. 2). Conversely, Bode remarks that it is "an unnecessarily narrow interpretation," that would "exclude precisely those cases that are the most exciting ones in literary and aesthetic terms: those in which the reader quite properly wonders in what sense the 'same' event is actually being described" (2011, 198–199). Here, I propose to combine Caracciolo's concepts of linkage and focus to effectively capture the distinctive nature of this central event. In my understanding, *multiperspective narratives require the alignment of the diegetic knot and the focus*. Put more clearly, the element of local connectivity must converge with the overarching focus of the narrative. Since multiperspectivity requires a diegetic linkage rather than a mere thematic connector, the focus will necessarily be more concrete than an idea, theme, or metaphor.

Let's first focus on canonical examples of multiperspectivity that foreground a central event in a strict sense. In Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* the fictional school shooting is both the diegetic linkage (characters *literally* cross paths repeatedly) and the overarching concern of the narrative; similarly, in Christos Tsiolkas's novel *The Slap* (2008), eight different focalizers reflect on the reverberations of a father's reprimand toward a friend's son: their narratives diegetically converge at the moment of the slap and their different accounts overarchingly return to this pivotal event. These examples

[8] It is important to underline that Nünning and Nünning understand the term "event" as referring to the totality of all phenomena on the level of the storyworld, thus including characters, themes, spaces, facts, and so on (see 2000b, 18–19). My concern here regards such a vague understanding of the term: in this way, almost *every* narrative featuring more than one focalizer could be considered as a multiperspective one, as this broad understanding of "event" would allow recipients to find *any* sort of connection between perspectives (a reader will always find a thematic resonance or a conceptual connection between narrators or focalizers). Once again, while a formal configuration of the plot such as multilinearity can exist without a strong connection between 'how' and 'what,' multiperspectivity requires a stricter understanding of *focus*.

of multiperspectivity are easy to spot as they follow the "structure of repetition" (see chapter 1): the same event of the *fabula* is reported more than once in the *syuzhet* through a different character perspective. We can call this typology "event-centered" multiperspectivity to distinguish it from examples that do not strictly adhere to the structure of repetition. Indeed, the alignment of linkage and focus allows me to avoid restricting multiperspectivity to the repetition structure—thus limiting it to the same *event* in a strict sense—while still preserving its operative value. By conceptualizing multiperspective narratives as the alignment of the diegetic knot and the focus, we can expand the understanding of "event" to include a location, a character, or an object. In this way, the broader scope of multiperspectivity makes it more adapted to address complex, systemic phenomena such as the climate crisis.

Consider the case of a *location* as the object of interest of a multiperspective structure: in the "Southern Reach" series all the narrators and focalizers are diegetically linked by their relationship with Area X, from the Lighthouse Keeper to the Director/Psychologist, through Control, Ghost Bird, the Biologist, and the new focalizing characters of *Absolution*. At the same time, Area X is the overarching focus of the series, the reason why temporally distributed narratives ultimately converge and form a coherent structure. It is crucial to note that for a location to qualify as an object of multiperspective storytelling, it is not enough for characters to simply cross paths there (diegetic linkage) or for their stories to revolve around the same physical space (focus). Charles Ramírez Berg's "Hub and Spoke Plot" (2006, 39–41) allows me to better clarify this point.

In Berg's taxonomy of "alternative plots" in contemporary cinema, the "Hub and Spoke Plot" describes a multilinear narrative in which several characters' story lines intersect at one time and place: his examples include Iñárritu's *Amores Perros* (2000) and *21 Grams* (2003), or Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994). Berg's typology resonates with multilinearity's emphasis on coincidence and analogy: "[m]ore than any other alternative plot, Hub and Spoke Plots emphasize chance, coincidence, and the freakish nature of fate" (40).[9] Following Caracciolo's categories,

[9] It is interesting to note how Berg, in 2006, captures the ideological and political significance of this formal structure before the emergence of New Formalism, and Rita Barnard's "Fictions of the Global" (2009): "[t]hematically, they demonstrate the frailty of agency by presenting a world where happenstance prevails and best-laid plans come to naught. At a formal level, they question whether causality and characters' choices, the bedrocks of Hollywood's classical narration and narration in general, are viable as narrative mainsprings particularly in contemporary dramas and romances. And because causality is foundational not just for movies but for life, particularly American life, the ideological implications of such challenges are seriously subversive […] The oppositional consequences of the Hub and Spoke Plot perfectly exemplify [the] contention that *a film's form is tied to its ideology*" (40–41, emphasis added). By describing this formal structure's disruptive effect in terms of causality, Berg is hinting at the undermining of the teleological thinking discussed by Caracciolo.

these movies provide a "diegetic knot" in the form of a location (or a "hub") where stories initially branch out or eventually intersect. Put more clearly, the location is here a mere physical space of diegetic intersection and *not* the object of interest of a multiperspective plot. Naturally, as Caracciolo himself acknowledges, "different interpreters may come to different conclusions about a multilinear narrative's focus" (2024c, 329). This is why the formal dimension of multiperspectivity can never be uncoupled from its readerly effect: only in the reading practice can the coincidence between diegetic linkage and focus be actualized. If we consider multiperspectivity as a scalar phenomenon, the event-centered typology can be described as a strict example of a multiperspective narrative, easily recognizable due to its reliance on the structure of repetition. Conversely, the broader conceptualization described in this section challenges the repetition of the same event, by portraying other narrative elements—such as a location, a character, or an object—as the focus of multiperspectivity: I will refer to this typology as *nonrepetitive multiperspectivity*, thus emphasizing its departure from Sternberg's repetition structure.

While Area X can be considered as a highly peculiar example of location—often interpreted as a fictional embodiment of Morton's hyperobject[10] (see Ulstein 2017, and Hegglund 2020)—more traditional examples of spatial setting can serve as productive focal points for multiperspective narratives. This is the case, for example, in Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017), a powerful example of how nonrepetitive multiperspectivity can capture the multiscalarity of the Anthropocene. The novel envisions a future New York dramatically transformed by a fifty-foot sea level rise, intertwining the visible effects of climate change with finance capitalism. Here, a large cast of characters coincides at the MetLife building and convergences around the same flooded city—not merely to foreground the flood as a singular catastrophic event, but to explore the lived realities shaped by this new urban environment. Robinson's Midtown Manhattan—turned into an "aquatropolis" (2017, 285)—is by no means a mere static backdrop where characters diegetically cross paths; rather, it functions as a dynamic space that shapes and is shaped by their perspectives. Drawing parallels between Robinson's work and the modernist innovations of John

[10] As noted by Jon Hegglund, "VanderMeer's fiction and Morton's theoretical work have been mutually sustaining. Morton has used VanderMeer's fiction as an imaginative evocation of hyperobjects, and VanderMeer in turn has retrospectively acknowledged the mutual resonance" (2020, 36).

Dos Passos and James Joyce,[11] Heise emphasizes "the break-up of plot into the perspectives of multiple characters who inhabit the same urban space, but perceive and remember it in divergent ways" (2021, 32). Building on this, I see the novel as well-positioned to engage with the ripple effects of its catastrophic event by expanding its different character perspectives well beyond the mere repetition of a single disruptive phenomenon. In doing so, *nonrepetitive* multiperspective narratives can mirror the multiscalar workings of complex systems that were entirely excluded by the traditional event-centered multiperspectivity.

Rather than assembling multiple perspectives to construct a singular, totalizing account of a catastrophe, the novel's nonrepetitive multiperspectivity resists the illusion of a singular truth. This is particularly relevant to Houser's critique of the "aerial perspective": "[r]ather than only traversing time or zooming from macro to meso to micro, readers occupy multiple positions through the texts' settings and technologies, through their *shifts in narrative point of view,* and through the actions characters perform" (2020, 230, emphasis added). *New York 2140* thus complicates the assumption that more character perspectives serve to capture an extraordinary event with greater clarity or comprehension. Instead, the novel emphasizes how different ways of knowing—shaped by positionality, expertise, and lived experience—can coexist without neatly resolving into a single, coherent understanding. In doing so, it raises crucial questions about the epistemological stakes of multiperspectivity: does the accumulation of perspectives reinforce a sense of complementarity, where different points of view contribute to a fuller picture? Or does it expose the contradictions and tensions between perspectives, destabilizing the very idea of a unified or objective account? These questions bring me to the second key ambivalence I seek to address in this chapter: the tension between complementary and contradictory multiperspectivity.

Ambiguous Multiperspectivity, and the Limitations of Scientific Knowledge

To further unpack the epistemological stakes of multiperspectivity, it is useful to turn to Serpell's notions of *full-* and *null*-tiplicity, which encapsulate one of its central ambiguities. Serpell's

[11] Significantly, Monika Fludernik identifies modernist novels as one of the main instances of multiperspective narratives (see the introduction).

framework effectively captures the tension between perspectives that collectively enrich understanding and those that ultimately negate one another, a dynamic that directly informs the distinction between complementary and contradictory multiperspectivity. In her terms, "[m]ultiplicity is said to present a more complete picture: each view adds another facet to a concept, character, or event" (2014, 117). However, each new interpretation would in turn run the risk to partly cancel out previous ones, thus transforming a *full*-tiplicity in a *null*-tiplicity: "[t]his negating effect raises one problem multiplicity poses for a democratic ethos: incommensurability, the idea that different values cannot be measured or calculated in relation" (117). This dualism partially mirrors the two opposing modes of interaction (between perspectives) in multiperspective storytelling, that I discussed as "complementary" and "contradictory" multiperspectivity (see chapter 1). In the former, particularly common in contemporary cinema (e.g. *Vantage Point* or Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* [2017] and *Oppenheimer* [2023]), each character perspective works as a piece of a puzzle, weaving together different threads or partial pieces of knowledge to ultimately offer narrative closure.[12] In the latter, when conflicting perspectives fail to provide narrative closure, as exemplified in the canonical case of *Rashomon*, there is a risk of dismissing any form of confrontation, as the pursuit of truth is deemed unattainable. This multiplicity of irreconcilable perspectives can mirror situations in real-world ecological and political crises, where competing interests—scientific, corporate, political, and so on—offer divergent narratives that fail to converge, as exemplified by Inuit communities' conflicting accounts on polar bears.

Following philosopher Emmanuel Alloa's proposed taxonomy in *The Share of Perspective* (2025), the first approach, *full*-tiplicity, relies on an "additive conception" of multiperspectivity and therefore on the algebraic assumption that the sum of different points of view can always produce a more complete picture. Framed within an ecological discourse, this "additive conception" would assume that by incorporating more voices—be they human, nonhuman, or scientific—narratives can better reflect the true scope of the climate crisis. In Alloa's "additive perspectivism," multiple partial perspectives "can be placed end to end to form a complete and viable picture,"[13] thus materializing—through its "progressive but constant approximation" to

[12] A notable exception, as argued in chapter 1, is Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*.

[13] Alloa links the additive conception to Leibniz's understanding of perspectivism in his *Monadology*: "a perspectivism of this kind catches a glimpse of the principle of sufficient reason that arranges these perspectives. In connection with his theory of preestablished harmony, history has held on to the image of Leibnizian God as a great organizer who makes all points of view converge. This image […] prompts a conception of perspective as an ultimate fusion of horizons" (167). In fictional narratives, a similar role of great organizer is played by an overarching narrator or an

truth—what Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic theory has influentially described as "fusion of horizons": "[w]e might not yet see the profound unity that links all points of view, but in the end, there is an ultimate point of view […] that will allow for seeing things as they are" (167). This optimistic allure of capturing "the epistemological truth" can obscure the fact that the ecological crisis is not only a complex, systemic phenomenon but it is also interwoven with uncertainties and contradictions that no accumulation of viewpoints can fully resolve. As seen in the previous section, reducing the Anthropocene to a single event or phenomenon is one of the most visible and frequently criticized limitations of narrative (Simon 2020). Moreover, as noted by Alloa, this additive perspectivism is "only ever a perspectivism of half-measures: the pluralism it features is only ever a transition stage on the path toward unanimity" (168). In this way, such a multiperspective approach ultimately undermines the value of each individual point of view by treating it as merely an inevitable step toward undisputed knowledge. Furthermore, this way of knowing emphasizes a clear *teleological* orientation, which stands in stark contrast to the principles of an Anthropocene narrative theory. As argued by Caracciolo, for example, "[b]ecause the climate is a highly nonlinear system, it does not sit well with narrative's built-in tendency toward the linear teleology of human intentions" (2022b, 8). An additive or complementary mode of multiperspectivity, therefore, poses at least two major limitations to an ecologically attuned narrative: (1) it tends to promote a linear understanding of the Anthropocene as a singular phenomenon; (2) it privileges a straightforward teleological structure of knowledge, where each perspective exists solely to serve an endpoint—the capture of the ultimate profound unity.

The counterpoint, *null*-tiplicity, arises when the proliferation of perspectives leads to a fragmentation that undermines any collective meaning. Reflecting on this incommensurability Alloa asks: "what can perspectivism mean in an age where the plurality of viewpoints is used as excuse for parochialism and the refusal of confrontation?" (xxv). In Alloa's terminology, the concept of *null*-tiplicity is mirrored by the "reclusive" dimension of perspectivism: "[i]f it was possible for perspectivism to appear as an agent of relativism and of singlemindedness, it was first of all because most continue to conceive of it in its *reclusive* dimension: each knowing subject, locked in by its respective blinders, only ever has a partial view of a thing" (166, original

authorial figure: consider, for example, Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel* (2021), which explicitly pays homage to *Rashomon* by juxtaposing three conflictual versions of a supposed rape but ultimately resolves its mystery through written inserts (see chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion).

emphasis). When each viewpoint is granted equal weight without a framework for synthesis, the discourse risks devolving into relativism: if all perspectives are valid and none take precedence, then there is no common ground to act upon. The ecological crisis, instead of being a shared concern, may become a cacophony of incommensurable narratives where each truth is isolated, fostering indifference and inaction. Alloa's concern highlights this pitfall: multiperspectivity can be co-opted as a tool for parochialism, a justification for avoiding engagement with opposing or challenging viewpoints. In the ecological discourse, this relativism can manifest as a refusal to acknowledge cause-effect relationships, or the ethical responsibilities attached to them. Environmental scholars like Eva Haifa Giraud and Michelle Murphy have thus warned against an overemphasis on concepts such as multiplicity and complexity in ecological and ethical criticism (Giraud 2019; Murphy 2006). In a book-length problematization of the value of entanglement, Giraud argues that "[i]rreducible complexity […] can prove paralyzing and disperse responsibilities in ways that undermine scope for political action" (2). Similarly, while recognizing the capacities opened by multiplicity, Murphy admits that "invoking multiplicity could shift the very grounds of causality to a constant uncertainty" (149).

While an additive conception ends up being too straightforward and teleological vis-à-vis environmental challenges, the reclusive one undoubtedly undermines the linearity of the former but at the same time disrupts *any* form of relationality. Morton's metaphor of the "mesh," effectively borrowed by Caracciolo, envisioned a "*form* alternative to linear and hierarchical ways of thinking about humans' relationship with nonhuman realities […] and processes" (Caracciolo 2021a, 11, original emphasis). Despite Giraud's critique, what the mesh suggests is interdependence, connection, entanglement, en*mesh*ment, offering a framework where human agents and nonhuman communities exist in a web of mutual and unexpected influence rather than as isolated or oppositional entities. The reclusive mode of multiperspectivity, however, falls short of realizing this vision. While it disrupts the linearity of the positivist and anthropocentric ways of knowing envisioned by the additive mode, it does not build anything in its place. Instead of fostering relationality, it ties the links of the mesh without creating any cohesive spatial form, leaving only a collection of secluded bubbles occasionally bumping into each other. This peculiar structure can perhaps be better described through Peter Sloterdijk's metaphor of the "foam" (2004): foam maintains a coherence that is in constant flux, built on ever-changing interconnections, lacking stability, and ultimately consisting of "a multiplicity of 'co-isolated' bubbles" (Vermeulen

2014, 78). Each perspective thus remains locked within its own boundaries, incapable of interacting with or influencing the others meaningfully, even extending the anthropocentric separateness between human and nonhuman entities to the human community itself.

To move beyond the binary of *full*- and *null*-tiplicity, multiperspectivity should be regarded not as an endpoint, but as an ongoing process of negotiation. Instead of seeking an epistemological truth through an additive or reclusive approach, multiperspective narratives can foster an active engagement with situatedness[14] and perspective-awareness. The challenge, here, is to harness this multiplicity to promote ethical engagement through the juxtaposition and coordination of different values and beliefs, rather than simply presenting a mosaic of views that may lead to inaction or to the illusion of a totalizing truth. In *Infowhelm* (2020), Houser argues that producing "entangled epistemologies" can help us go beyond the risk of reification and appropriation often associated to data information and other positivist ways of knowing (e.g., Haraway 2008, 158). The additive approach to multiperspectivity described here strongly chimes with positivist epistemology and the value of logic, observability, objectivity, and verifiability. Consider again the use of complementary multiperspectivity in cinema: it is no coincidence that it is precisely the audiovisual medium to more consistently rely on complementarity and closure—as in examples as different as *Jackie Brown*, *Vantage Point*, *The Handmaiden*, or *Dunkirk*. The illusion of totalizing comprehension of these movies is diegetically exemplified by the presence of security cameras and the media in *Snake Eyes*, which is eerily reminiscent of Bode's hypothetical example of multiperspectivity as the same event "recorded as though by differently positioned cameras in a stadium and then repeatedly replayed from these different points of view" (2011, 198–199).

However, as influentially argued by Donna Haraway, "the alternative to relativism is not totalization and single vision" but "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs and connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (1988, 584). Additive multiperspectivity resonates with the "epistemologies of mastery" repeatedly problematized by scholars in indigenous and feminist science studies through the value of alternative ways of knowing, such as bodily experience, social relations, and multigenerational knowledge (Houser 5). For Houser, however, there is no "outside of knowledge," as the parameters

[14] The reference here is to Donna Haraway's seminal theories of the situatedness of knowledge. For Haraway (1988), situatedness envisages two conditions: (1) knowing from "somewhere in particular" ("a view from a body") rather than from a universalizing position; (2) knowing the "sites of knowledge" with their origins and implications.

set by Eurowestern positivism should be challenged and expanded through the entanglement of distant epistemological approaches. As seen throughout this thesis, multiperspectivity is at its most productive when it fosters "ambiguity, uncertainty, unknowing," experiential effects which can be the "drivers of scientific knowledge production" (13). The middle ground between totalization and relativism, *full*-tiplicity and *null*-tiplicity, additive and reclusive multiperspectivity, is in the webs of connection, "in which all the parts are connected but also lead lives of their own" (Heise 2008, 64).

A striking example of blurriness of these dichotomies is provided by Area X in the "Southern Reach" series, particularly through the different perceptions of the characters who encounter it. As we have seen, Area X is a coastal region whose inexplicable anomalies force the US government to dispatch different research teams to investigate its nature. This investigative framework strongly echoes the structure of quest[15] or detective plots, in which characters are driven by the pursuit of hidden knowledge, piecing together fragmented clues in an attempt to uncover a central truth. The "fragmentary reports brought back" (VanderMeer 2014c, 55) by the different expeditions are indeed an embedded manifestation of the novel's multiperspectivity: a shady investigative agency, Southern Reach, seeks to explore and understand Area X through different expeditions' reports, in a sort of additive multiperspectivity with its accumulation of data and information about an object; similarly, readers experience Area X through the biologist's first-person journal, the director's second-person narration, the chapters focalized through Ghost Bird and Control, and so on. Conceptualized in this way, the novels would seem to align with the tropes of teleological multiperspective narratives, in which the multiplication of characters' reports and viewpoints merely serve to shed light on a mysterious object of knowledge: this is the detective work of the biologist, who "began to put together hints of purpose, suggestions of conspiracy" (174). It is then no coincidence that after the mesmerizing weirdness of *Annihilation* and the claustrophobic bureaucratic dullness of *Authority*, VanderMeer presents readers with the broader canvas of *Acceptance*, whose multiperspective structure creates the illusion of finally unraveling the unanswered mysteries of the previous installments, by suggesting a convergence of reports that might yield a more complete understanding of Area X. However, rather than offering resolution,

[15] On the teleological and ideologically fraught nature of the quest narrative see Caracciolo (2026). For Caracciolo, "the quest masterplot aligns with a quintessentially Western dichotomy between human agency and the passivity of matter," an element which resonates with my third point of ambivalence.

Acceptance amplifies the ambiguous nature of the coastal area, demonstrating how multiple perspectives do not necessarily lead to closure but can instead deepen uncertainty, and acknowledging the "limitations of science and reason to make sense of an unstable and rapidly changing environment" (James 2022, 138).[16] Yet this is not a traditional example of *contradictory* multiperspectivity.

One of the most discussed mysteries of Area X is the ambiguity of the "tower/tunnel" distinction. Addressing the "ontological mystery of the storyworld," Jon Hegglund focuses on this "semantic inconsistency or mistake" (2020, 35): the narrator of *Annihilation*, the biologist, describes a hidden structure as a "tower," while all the other reports referred to it as a "tunnel." For James, this is a powerful illustration of what she calls "despatialization," that is, a new narratological category that underlines spatializing cues in narratives that "actively *inhibit* the generation of mental models of space by readers" (2022, 122, original emphasis). James describes despatialization as a "narratological cousin" of Karin Kukkonen's concept of "multistability," which she defines as "those moments in a narrative when readers are made aware of two mutually exclusive possibilities" (2017, 342). In Kukkonen's understanding, multistability is analogous to the well-known "duck-rabbit" illusion, in which viewers can either see a picture of a duck or a picture of a rabbit, but never both simultaneously. Similarly, contradictory multiperspectivity—particularly in narratives that ultimately provide closure—can be understood through a similar image. In *Rashomon*, for instance, Tajōmaru claims to have killed the samurai in an honorable duel, while the samurai, speaking through a medium, insists that he took his own life, and the woodcutter describes a clumsy, dishonorable fight. The audience is made acutely aware of the impossibility of reconciling these irreducible accounts, mirroring the binary perception inherent in Kukkonen's notion of multistability. Conversely, James underlines that "while despatialization shares multistability's interest in pluralism, its understanding of 'multi' differs in its emphasis on narrative spaces that are not mutually exclusive but potentially more than one space at once" (127). Building on this distinction, I propose to consider the novel's "tower/tunnel" ambivalence as an instance of *ambiguous multiperspectivity*. Whereas contradictory multiperspectivity mirrors

[16] For the relevance, and the limitations, of knowledge in VanderMeer's works see also Clapp (2021). Clapp reads the same distinction between types of spaces as a thematization of "knowledge asymmetries," that is, experiences of confrontation between bearers of a totalizing knowledge and characters who hold a merely perspectival understanding. Interestingly, for Clapp, this is a key feature of "spy fiction," the genre he sees more fitting with VanderMeer's works—and that clearly resonates with my emphasis on the aborted quest plot of the *Southern Reach* series.

Kukkonen's multistability in its reliance on non-simultaneity, ambiguous multiperspectivity paradoxically entertains mutually exclusive perceptions of the same focal object. In other words, rather than presenting conflicting accounts that cancel each other out, *ambiguous multiperspectivity allows for the coexistence of contradictory yet not mutually exclusive reports*.

I adopt the term "ambiguous" to account for the simultaneous yet unresolved tension between perspectives. This choice is particularly relevant to the tower/tunnel ambiguity, where the two spatial interpretations do not merely contradict one another but instead coexist in a way that resists definitive resolution. *Acceptance* offers other contradictory yet coexisting reports of Area X, such as the color of tendrils-made words on the wall—"[n]or are the words a vibrant green as reported but a searing blue" (56)—but the tower/tunnel remains the most striking illustration of its ambiguous multiperspectivity. Instead of forcing readers to choose one perspective over another, ambiguous multiperspectivity invites them to hold both in suspension, engaging with the productive instability that arises from their interplay. This mode of perception thus mirrors a crucial epistemological challenge: the unstable and Protean realities of the Anthropocene can only be grasped through a multiplicity of perspectives that remain in tension rather than converging into a singular truth or diverging into lack of relationality. By bridging the gap between additive and reclusive approaches, ambiguous multiperspectivity stands as a productive narratological category in the context of an Anthropocene narrative theory.

Ontological Multiperspectivity, and the Acceptance of Instability

VanderMeer's Area X is also a problematization of my last category of multiperspectivity's econarratological ambiguities, that is, its reliance on the widespread anthropocentric template of a human-like subject perceiving and shaping an inanimate object. Econarratological research describes the dualistic separation between human agency and inert materiality under the rubric of Monika Fludernik's "anthropomorphic bias" of narrative (1996, 13). According to Fludernik, even when narrative attempts to represent nonhuman entities, it risks anthropomorphizing them, framing them in terms of human relevance or utility. An Anthropocene narrative theory requires a fundamental reexamination of our relationship with nonhuman materialities and the natural world, challenging theoretical categories that have long been taken for granted. Therefore, a canonical

understanding of multiperspectivity as a multiplicity of human-like characters' points of view on an inert object of knowledge strikingly reveals its inherent ambivalence. Apart from relying on the illusion of totalizing knowledge described in the previous section, it also risks reinforcing anthropocentric hierarchies by positioning the nonhuman world as a passive entity to be interpreted and exploited by a multiplicity of human-like actors rather than an active agent in its own right.

While the image of the mesh suggests nonhierarchical interdependence and the complexity of entangled connection, the traditional structure of multiperspective narratives is better represented through the spatial figure of a radial tree. In this model, multiple character perspectives branch out from a central focal point, each offering a partial account on a core object of knowledge. This structure tends to privilege a fixed center—whether a singular event, a mysterious location to be uncovered, or an object of inquiry—thus reinforcing a hierarchical relationship between human-like perceivers and the inert focal point they collectively attempt to illuminate. This subject/object dichotomy inherently deployed by multiperspectivity overlaps with the human/nonhuman dualism strongly problematized by the "nonhuman turn" (Grusin 2015; Bennett 2010) and by scholars in material ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann 2012). Drawing on this environmental scholarship, structuralist models, and Andrew Goatly's ecolinguistics, Caracciolo's econarratological rethinking of the theory of character explores five "antidualistic" strategies through which stories can present nonhuman actants able to move beyond the hierarchical subject/object dichotomy. Among his strategies, the third and the fourth are particularly well-positioned to challenge multiperspectivity's dualisms: "evoking human-nonhuman reciprocity," and the "promotion of place to character" (2021a, 107–110). The former foregrounds reciprocity into the plot progression, with nonhuman entities or events becoming actants and directly shaping human-like figures (as in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* [2013]), whereas the latter pushes a location toward a non-anthropomorphized agentive position (as in VanderMeer's Area X). In its multiperspective canvas, *Acceptance* brings together Caracciolo's two strategies by providing a striking illustration of Viveiros de Castro's "ontological turn" and challenging the "epistemological bias" of multiperspectivity.

As discussed in the previous section, VanderMeer's series intentionally deploys generic and narrative templates aligning with Western ways of knowledge production—such as scientific inquiry, detective work, and bureaucratic data collection—eventually revealing their inadequacy in the face of Area X's irreducible alterity. In *Acceptance*, characters still try to gather fragments

of information, clues, and data in an attempt to make sense of the ever-shifting environment, hoping to ultimately assemble a coherent puzzle. In the Director-focalized chapters, for example, the convergence with detective tropes is overtly spelled out: "the question isn't *what* it is but the motive. Think of Area X as a murderer we're trying to catch […] Because the truth is, you told Whitby to act like a detective, in an attempt to 'think outside the Southern Reach'"; "[t]hinking that there is some part of the puzzle you can't see, that you *need* to see" (2014c, 43, 132, original emphasis). This friction on the teleological, all-too-human way of knowing is well-represented through the nonhuman focalization of Ghost Bird,[17] the biologist's *doppelgänger* generated by Area X: "[a]s if purpose could solve everything, could take the outlines of what was missing and by sheer will invoke it, make it appear, bring it back to life" (191).

Conversely, Control, the sluggish, bureaucratic protagonist of *Authority*, is still tied to his struggles to gain every sort of information about Area X. After reading the biologist's last will and testament, the two characters thus react in different ways: "[i]t had interested Ghost Bird to read it, to fill in the final gaps, and yet what gaps remained despite it. *The white light at the bottom of the tower. The manifestation of the lighthouse keeper within the Crawler*. There were things she distrusted without seeing them for herself. But to Control she knew it would just register as new evidence, new hope—information that might provide a solution, a sudden fix" (186, original emphasis). In an early stage of assimilation into Area X, Control is still tied too closely to the idea of gathering information, to the illusion of totalizing knowledge, whereas Ghost Bird is well aware that the "question made no sense" as the "hegemony of what was real had been altered, or broken, forever" (329). The growing distrust in scientific models of knowledge production thus appears to parallel the characters' progressive assimilation into Area X. Its elusive nature resists epistemological containment, or inert stability; it gazes back at its perceiving subjects, becoming both a more-than-human actant and an agent of human-nonhuman reciprocity, through a reversal of multiperspectivity's plural vision: "Area X was analyzing her from all sides. It made her feel like an outline created by the regard bearing down on her" (37). As noted by Gry Ulstein, this nonhuman agency involves a "vertiginous blurring of narrative perspectives" with Area X actively interrogating and analyzing the life forms it encounters "in order to assimilate the environment to its design" (2021, 70). What Area X is doing here is not only taking the role of the perceiver but

[17] On the problems of considering Ghost Bird's focalization as nonhuman see Kasia Kortekallio's reading of *Acceptance* (2023).

actively enacting the multiperspective structure envisioned by the investigative agency on the diegetic level and by *Acceptance* on the level of form. The progressive assimilation of the characters into Area X is thus achieved by analyzing them "from all sides."

By progressively acknowledging the limitations of science and disrupting the goal-oriented modes of knowledge employed by the Southern Reach, *Acceptance* seeks to go beyond the epistemological bias of multiperspectivity. By epistemological bias, I refer to the frequent emphasis on the epistemic aspect of perspective in the analysis of multiperspective storytelling. In his foreword to Alloa's book, Martin Jay highlights this prevailing assumption: "[i]n whichever formulation, however, the focus is on a subject knowing an object, either given or constituted, which suggests that the doubt raised by perspectivism is essentially epistemological" (2025, xx). However, as seen throughout this thesis, multiperspective narratives are by no means limited to the epistemic aspect of perspective: they can foreground ethical clashes, emotional conflicts, or different somatic perceptions (see the introduction). This epistemological bias is at the heart of Western perspectivism and has been repeatedly problematized by the so-called ontological turn advocated by Viveiros de Castro. Decades before the ontological turn, Claude Lévi-Strauss had already discussed the "reciprocity of perspectives"—the mirrored interplay between perceiving agents and the nonhuman world—as a characteristic of mythical thinking (see Alloa 47). This reciprocity is precisely what VanderMeer achieves by presenting his characters "through the eyes of Area X" (2014c, 329), thus unsettling the unidirectionality of perspective.

More recently, Viveiros de Castro has systematized Lévi-Strauss's position through the idea of a "cosmomorphic perspectivism" (1992). In his critique of the individualist perspectivism that dominates the Western thinking, Viveiros de Castro engages with Indigenous cosmologies in the Amazon to move beyond our Anthropocentric attitudes toward the nonhuman materiality. Reality is thus fractured into multiple *ontological* perspectives as the world is constructed by a subject—not necessarily human-like—in conjunction with cultural contexts and in relation to nonhuman entities. For Viveiros de Castro every being in the universe is endowed with the capacity to form a point of view: "[e]very existent is a center of intentionality apprehending other existents according to their respective characteristics and powers" (2014, 55). In other words, a subject is someone endowed with a point of view on the world. As aptly summarized by Alloa, "[s]tep by step, the human subject is being dispossessed of the privilege of perspectivism: it is not so much that we have a point of view because we are subjects; rather, one is a subject because one has a

point of view. In consequence, the universe is quite simply the entirety of perspectival divergences that compose it" (47). This conception foregrounds the reciprocity and reversibility of perspective: in Viveiros de Castro's example, jaguars do not perceive blood as humans do but rather as the equivalent of our manioc beer. In this way, the dualistic bifurcation between subjects and inanimate objects at the heart of Western conception of perspectivism (and multiperspectivity) vanishes.

The ontological turn thus challenges the unidirectional, goal-oriented bias of multiperspective narratives. Rather than limiting itself to the epistemological uncertainty initially foregrounded by its investigative template, VanderMeer's works unsettle the rigid boundary between epistemology and ontology: Area X is not "out there" to be discovered, understood, and exploited for human purposes, nor does it exist solely in correlation with human subjects. Instead, through its assimilative power, it prompts readers to renegotiate the boundaries of the human subject and of subjectivity itself. By vividly exemplifying what Stacy Alaimo calls "transcorporeality" (2010), namely the blurring of boundaries between the materiality of human body and the external world, *Acceptance* shifts from a merely epistemological to a more unsettling *ontological* multiperspectivity. In other words, the bidirectionality of the perceptual and material entanglement between human-like actants and Area X undermines the separation of human subjectivity and material world, a division that has long underpinned the epistemological aspect of multiperspectivity. As noted by Hegglund in his discussion of *Annihilation*, "ontologically, there is no categorical, material distinction between the weird, nonhuman entities and the supposedly human itself" (2020, 38). A canonical, epistemological multiperspectivity is thus unable to capture this mutual enmeshment and its fundamental reversibility of perspectives. Characters do not just perceive Area X differently; they are altered by it, becoming part of its ecology in ways that render their perspectives unstable, fluid, and at times, nonhuman.

Therefore, I consider *Acceptance* the crucial installment in VanderMeer's dismantling of the series' teleological tendency, a process already started by the first two novels but, perhaps paradoxically, achieved by the multiperspective structure of the third book. While hopeful readers might expect a clearer understanding of the weird mysteries of Area X through the accumulation of characters' reports, they are instead left in uncertainty—much like the biologist, who sifts through the previous expeditions' journals in search of insights that might make sense of Area X's irreconcilable strangeness. It is only through a rethinking of multiperspectivity's dominant from epistemological to ontological that we can eventually recognize the mutual entanglement between

human and nonhuman entities. Perhaps VanderMeer's most subtle hint at turning away from the relentless pursuit of truth lies in the linguistic destabilization of the word itself. As expected, the word appears several times throughout the book, and it is particularly frequent in the chapters featuring the Director or Ghost Bird, where it appears as something elusive: "[t]he *truth* always something vague and out of focus that had nothing to do with what you'd seen"; "[y]ou may never know the *truth*"; "[…] a swift justice against those who had obstructed his access to the *truth*"; "unable to tell him the *truth*" (2014c, 126, 138, 187, 198, emphasis added). However, what is particularly interesting here is the frequency with which VanderMeer employs formulaic expressions containing the word, such as "truth was," "in truth," and their different variants. What might seem like a mere stylistic feature is instead a deliberate emphasis on weaker linguistic variants of the word. Put more bluntly, by multiplying the occurrences of the word "truth" while stripping it of its dominant meaning, VanderMeer invites his readers to turn away from the epistemological and linear quest of his characters and instead embrace the ontological instability afforded by Area X. Throughout *Acceptance*, truth is therefore either an elusive concept or a formulaic expression devoid of its fundamental meaning.

In the last page, VanderMeer partially reveals the subtle clue disseminated throughout the novel. The book ends with a letter from Gloria, the Director, to Saul, the Lighthouse Keeper, in which the difficulty of acceptance is emphasized, and the desire for closure remains unfulfilled. The last line is Gloria's signature, followed by a sentence in brackets: "(who lived dangerous on the rocks and pestered you true)" (338). "True," followed by a bracket and without a period, is the final word of *Acceptance*. But what is the meaning of this iteration of truth? It is an old-fashioned adverb, a variation of "truly," which semantically emphasizes consistency and intensity more than truthfulness. In an archaic or literary iteration, the adverb "true" indicates a direct line, as in the examples provided by the Oxford Learners' Dictionary: "the arrow flew straight and true to the target," or "he shot true."[18] Here lies VanderMeer's final dismantling of truth: there is no closure, as the novel ends without a period; and Gloria's desired acceptance can only be achieved when the all-too-linear pursuit of truth is ultimately abandoned. By stripping the word of its conventional meaning and problematizing its semantic scope, VanderMeer exposes the fallacy of a teleological, unidirectional search for knowledge.

[18] https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/true_2.

This chapter took its point of departure from a seemingly simple question: is multiperspectivity a narrative strategy well-adapted to engage with the Anthropocene? My answer has focused on three ecological ambiguities raised by a canonical understanding of multiperspective narratives: (1) the problematic of conceptualizing climate change as a single phenomenon; (2) the epistemological shortcomings of both complementary and contradictory multiperspectivity; and (3) the rigid dichotomy between human subjects as active perceivers and the nonhuman world as a passive object of observation. Therefore, from the perspective of what James calls an Anthropocene narrative theory, canonical examples of multiperspectivity fall short: while certainly productive in terms of juxtaposition and coordination of different experiences, values, and beliefs, these models rest on fundamentally dualistic distinctions and on Western "epistemologies of mastery." An econarratological reading can help us rethink this canonical structure of multiperspective storytelling by shedding light on its limitations and providing new categories to navigate the complexities of the ecological crisis.

The three key ambiguities reveal how canonical multiperspectivity often functions within Western epistemological frameworks that prioritize totalizing knowledge and hierarchical mastery. As I have shown, the event-centered dimension of multiperspectivity risks reducing ecological crises to discrete, identifiable occurrences rather than recognizing their complex systemic nature and the ongoing processes that resist narrativization. Similarly, the assumption that multiple perspectives either cohere into a unified knowledge (*full*-tiplicity, or additive conception) or remain irreconcilably isolated (*null*-tiplicity, or reclusive conception) fails to account for the unstable, unpredictable, and ever-changing nature of the climate crisis. Finally, the epistemological bias of multiperspectivity strongly relies on the Western dualism between human-like subjects who perceive and inert nonhuman entities who are observed. To remedy these limitations, we need to examine alternative modes of multiperspective storytelling, that I called *nonrepetitive*, *ambiguous*, and *ontological* multiperspectivity.

The first mode—nonrepetitive multiperspectivity—represents an alternative to the foregrounding of a single event. As repeated by many scholars, the Anthropocene resists reduction to a single catastrophic event; thus, narratives relying on the repeated narration or focalization of an isolated phenomenon risk reinforcing a reductive, linear understanding of its ripple effects. Drawing on Caracciolo's taxonomy of multilinearity, I have proposed an understanding of multiperspectivity as the alignment of the diegetic linkage and the focus, thus moving beyond the

narrow definition of a single, repeated event to include locations, objects, and characters as its object of interest. In doing so, nonrepetitive multiperspectivity can integrate the multiscalar workings of Anthropogenic phenomena that event-centered forms were unable to capture, bounded as they were to the repetition of one and the same event. The alignment of linkage and focus has thus allowed me to avoid restricting multiperspectivity to the "structure of repetition" while still maintaining its operative value.

Taking inspiration from James's category of despatialization, ambiguous multiperspectivity bridges the gap between the illusion of a totalizing truth fostered by complementary multiperspectivity and the incommensurable lack of relationality produced by contradictory multiperspectivity. VanderMeer's "Southern Reach" series provides a powerful example of this mode: while their investigative framework aligns with teleological progression and goal-oriented multiperspectivity, the novels resist resolution and closure. At the same time, the contradictory reports of Area X's anomalies do not exist in isolation but paradoxically coexist. This perceptual tension mirrors the complexities of the Anthropocene, offering a mode of knowing in which contradictory realities can coexist simultaneously without mutual exclusion.

Area X also problematizes the anthropocentric and epistemological biases of multiperspectivity, which traditionally frames the nonhuman world as an inert object of knowledge. While structuralist models depict multiperspectivity as human-like perspectives converging on a fixed center in a hierarchical way, the nonhuman turn informs what I call ontological multiperspectivity, that is, a mode that seeks to overcome these shortcomings by providing a reciprocity of perspectives. *Acceptance* exemplifies this idea by blurring the boundaries between human agents and nonhuman entities and endowing its nonhuman actant with a point of view: rather than merely being observed, Area X actively perceives and transcorporeally assimilates characters. Through the eyes of Area X, the canonical conceptualization of multiperspectivity is thus challenged, as the word "truth" gradually loses its meaning, and both readers and characters are prompted to navigate the ontological instability of the Anthropocene.

By rethinking multiperspectivity beyond its epistemological and anthropocentric constraints, an econarratological approach thus encourages us to embrace the fluidity, unpredictability, and entanglement of the Anthropocene, disrupting the teleological pursuit of a totalizing truth and challenging Western dualistic assumptions. The categories of nonrepetitive, ambiguous, and ontological multiperspectivity help this formal strategy align with James's Anthropocene narrative

theory, thus proving crucial for capturing alternative ways of knowing, reciprocal modes of perception, and the multiscalar workings of climate change.

Coda: Multiperspectivity Beyond False Balance

In the last few years, questions around multiple perspectives have acquired new urgency across cultural and political scenarios. The so-called "post-truth" era discussed in the introduction has witnessed the flourishing of "alternative facts" and contested realities: climate change denial set against overwhelming scientific consensus; vaccine skepticism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; conspiracy-driven theories around wars and humanitarian crises, in which diverging ideological and geopolitical interests shape radically different versions of the same events. Calls to openness and inclusivity—urging us to acknowledge and embrace perspectives different from our own—have been strategically co-opted by denialists and conspiracy theorists, who exploit the rhetoric of multiperspectivity to erode trust in academic and scientific institutions. "That is how in recent years the defenders of creationism have made headway with their demand to add creationism to biology curricula, with the same status as Darwin's theory of evolution," writes philosopher Emmanuel Alloa (2025, 157) about today's perspectivist rhetoric. Their argument, of course, is that in order to choose everyone must be able to decide between a wide range of interpretations and alternatives. By dissolving crucial distinctions between knowledge grounded in systematic inquiry and theories based on ideology, belief, or speculation, this multiplication of perspectives proliferating in the post-truth era is profoundly different from the multiperspectivity I have examined in this thesis. This is not multiperspectivity as a form of ethical or aesthetic inquiry, but what we might call a "marketplace of perspectives," where the loudest or most sensational voice may eclipse the most substantiated. While alternative truths and revisionist theories thrive on their manipulative potential and emotional appeal against factual grounding, multiperspective narratives provide a unique site for challenging and negotiating our assumptions and beliefs without conflating the different perspectives in a cacophony of equally valid voices.

Media ecosystems have amplified this cacophony, producing both an unprecedented visibility of perspectives and a profound crisis of trust in expertise and scientific evidence. Looking at the COVID-19 debate, for example, José van Dijck and Donya Alinejad (2020) observe that nonexpert voices through social media platforms unmistakably impact the public's trust in scientific institutions. Perhaps more critically, even traditional media—mainstream newspapers, major television networks, and established news magazines—have at times contributed to this erosion of

epistemic authority through an uncritical juxtaposition of competing perspectives. Scholars have discussed this tendency to provide both sides of an issue when one side is actually more valid as "false balance" (Dearing 1995). In the name of neutrality and journalistic integrity, editorial practices frequently present opposing viewpoints as evidentially equivalent, making it difficult to distinguish between issues with high and low expert consensus. False balance has crucially manifested, for example, in climate change reporting, where equal platform is frequently given to climate skeptics even if the topic presents clear scientific consensus.[1] Recent empirical surveys have shown how false balance reporting and exposure to contrarian views reduce perceived expert consensus, regardless of the expertise of the contrarian source (Imundo and Rapp 2022), and even when participants know the actual data showing the level of scientific consensus (Han et al. 2025).

The implications of false balance extend well beyond climate change to encompass debates about vaccine safety (Thomas et al. 2016), COVID-19 pandemic (Zenone et al. 2022), or electoral outcomes (Miro and Anderson 2024). Across these domains, the journalistic impulse to appeal to "both sides of an issue"[2] often legitimizes positions that are factually misleading, thus generating, in Maxwell and Jules Boykoff's influential definition, "balance as bias," that is, a media bias caused by the supposed attempt to *avoid* bias (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). When reputable sources such as the BBC describe their mission as to show "due balance and due impartiality on any subject" (House of Commons of the United Kingdom 2023), we recognize false balance reporting as another key risk associated with an instrumental adoption of the rhetoric of multiperspectivity. Alongside the two opposing pitfalls of "*full*-tiplicity" and "*null*-tiplicity" (to use again C. Namwali Serpell's [2014, 117] terminology), the danger of false balance highlights the stakes of an in-depth engagement with multiperspective narratives vis-à-vis today's cultural and political debates. Therefore, the account of multiperspectivity I have developed here seeks to problematize both the uncritical naïveté that often surrounds the phenomenon and the false balance effect undermining expert consensus.

[1] Maxwell T. Boykoff's quantitative content analysis, for example, reveals how 70% of U.S. television news segments from 1996 through 2004 have provided 'balanced' coverage regarding anthropogenic climate change, thus perpetrating "an informational bias by significantly diverging from the consensus view in climate science that human contribute to climate change" (2008, 1).

[2] False balance reporting is colloquially known as "bothsidesism." A similar term, "bothsiderism," has been adopted to describe the specific "meta-argumentative" reasoning pattern on which the phenomenon builds on. For Scott F. Aikin and John P. Casey, the bothsiderist argument builds upon an existing controversy to push against regarding either side as superior: the conclusion would be to "either suspend judgment and action […], keep all voices in the conversation […], avoid partisanship […], or split the partisan difference" (2022, 9).

The ethical affordances of multiperspective narratives investigated in this thesis—from the foregrounding of uncertainty to the potential for perspective-taking—are not automatic responses to the juxtaposition of competing versions. Despite its inherent potential, multiperspectivity *per se* cannot turn us into more inclusive or democratic subjects. What formally sophisticated examples of multiperspectivity *can* do, however, is to provide a cognitive and ethical playground to train our negotiation of diverging versions of reality, challenging us to develop our interpretive skills and to cope with the moral and ideological stakes of our current post-truth era. This kind of training aims to disentangle multiperspectivity from its instrumental dimension, that is, the goal-oriented pursuit of totalizing knowledge that often comes with the most conventional understandings of the form. Negotiating multiple perspectives is not a mere cognitive task or a puzzle-solving game—piecing together fragmented accounts to obtain a more complete picture—but demands readers' predisposition and willingness to revise preexisting ideas and navigate the complex nature of reality, even embracing the absence of a clear-cut epistemological or ethical resolution.

Discussions on uncertainty have played a central role in my account of multiperspectivity, conceptualizing what I have called "multiperspective uncertainty" as both an experiential effect and a key ethical affordance of this formal strategy of narrative. By juxtaposing multiple, sometimes conflicting versions, multiperspectivity unsettles readers' expectations of a single, definitive truth, providing a privileged space for inquiry. Narrative's lack of closure can prompt us to embrace the inevitable uncertainty of living in an era marked by climate change, sociopolitical crises, and epistemic fragmentation. Yet the uncertainty staged by multiperspectivity is not limited to its epistemological dimension but carries significant ethical stakes. This ethical uncertainty invites recipients to negotiate between competing accounts without offering a guaranteed guide for moral judgment, cultivating both empathy and critical reflection. Of the narratives examined in this thesis, the video game *Tell Me Why* provides perhaps the most effective illustration of how a fundamentally epistemological uncertainty—the absence of an indisputable truth around a core event—can generate a profound ethical dilemma. The game centers on the unresolved question of Mary-Ann's intentions toward her children: did she mean to kill them, or are the children's accounts of self-defense accurate? Players are compelled to navigate between characters' competing versions and multiple endings, never receiving the reassurance of a definitive truth. In doing so, *Tell Me Why* infuses the epistemological uncertainty of the central event with urgent ethical stakes. What may initially seem like a narrative challenge—to find the correct version of

the events among multiple alternatives—ultimately emerges as a deeply moral undertaking as players are called to coordinate multiple characters' affective experiences and ethical values.

This attempt to go beyond problem-solving resonates closely with Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's understanding of negotiation, which has crucially informed this thesis (2017). In contrast to earlier narratological treatments of negotiation (see Bruner 1986), Herman and Vervaeck emphasize that the tensions and conflicts involved in negotiation "need not at all be resolved or even tempered in the course of the process" (2017, 619). Similarly, the kind of multiperspective negotiation I have investigated here is not a tool for conflict-resolution but a reading and interpretive practice rooted in our capacity to hold and coordinate multiple perspectives without conflating or dismissing them in biased or uncritical ways. As I have written elsewhere (2026), this understanding of multiperspective negotiation strikingly converges with Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory. For Rothberg, the dynamics of memory should not be reduced to "a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources" (2009, 3); rather, the interaction of conflicting or overlapping memories produces more, not less, memory (see 2019, 122). In a similar vein, Herman and Vervaeck's notion of negotiation is never conceived as a problem-solving tool or a zero-sum game, but as a generative process for producing and reproducing cultural conflicts.

Recognizing the value of uncertainty, however, does not mean that all perspectives are equally valid: by foregrounding the cultural embeddedness of narrative, Herman and Vervaeck's framework avoids the risk of treating multiple perspectives in equivalence, regardless of their factual grounding, ideological meaning, or cultural relevance. Only a multiperspective negotiation can thus welcome the ambiguities and gaps of uncertainty without falling into the trap of the false balance effect. Fiction, I have argued throughout this thesis, is uniquely positioned to foster this generative and critical multiperspectivity. I have examined a set of strategies through which story can bring the potential of multiperspectivity to the fore, starting from the evocation of experiential effects such as slowness and uncertainty in contemporary cinema (chapter 1) to the encounter between multiperspectivity's ethical affordances and the features of ethical gameplay in the interactive medium of video games (chapter 2). I have also looked at how multiperspectivity plays a crucial role in a peculiar example of "narratives in contest," to use James Phelan's expression (2008), that of minor-character retellings (chapter 4). Yet my analysis has not been limited to the potential but has also investigated the risks associated with the manipulation of

multiperspectivity's affordances through a story-critical lens (chapter 3). Similarly, I have detailed the shortcomings of canonical understandings of multiperspectivity vis-à-vis the climate crisis and proposed alternative modes to help us deal with the new challenges raised by the Anthropocene (chapter 5). This thesis is not and was not meant to be exhaustive: critically promising media such as comic books, tv shows, and emerging digital formats have been left out, and the range of cultural topics explored through multiperspectivity could have been far broader.[3] I sought instead to provide a sustained narratological analysis of multiperspectivity to shed light on the ethical and ideological potential—and risks—of the form in today's epistemically fragmented landscape. In a cultural moment where competing narratives shape politics, identity, and even reality itself, understanding how multiperspectivity works—and when it falls short—has never been more vital.

[3] I have examined elsewhere, for example, multiperspectivity's potential in addressing cultural memory (2025c; 2026) as well as its role in multimodal literature (2025a).

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