Reading for Departure:
Narrative Theory and Phenomenological Interviews on Hallucinations

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Within psychology, phenomenology and philosophy of mind, the term "mindreading" (used to describe a variety of cognitive processes we deploy to make sense of other people's minds via outer behaviours) has little to do with the proper act of reading. In spite of recent works in psychology or cognitive narratology suggesting that literature might be training our mindreading skills, in fact, real people are anything like books. They are embodied and largely concealed subjectivities, and their minds are not transparently readable in the same way most fictional minds are. Mindreading in the sciences rather stands for a broader, primarily non-linguistic and multimodal activity of interpretation. As such, scientific literature on social cognition restrained borrowing from narrative theory and cognitive literary studies concepts or frameworks about the activity of reading narrative artefacts, fictional minds and literary storyworlds.

Written reports of phenomenological interviews such as the ones that constitute the research object of this volume, on the other hand, are proper, albeit peculiar, texts about real minds. Actually, we can say that mindreading and the proper reading of reported minds are almost complementary processes. The reason for which we need phenomenological interviews (i.e., reading minds), in fact, is partly to compensate for the outer inaccessibility (i.e., mindreading) of some phenomenological states or experiences. This compensatory need becomes even more acute with hallucinatory experiences such as hearing voices or feeling shadowy or diaphanous presences, because here the intersubjective anchor of a shared outer reality between the feeling subject and the mindreading interpreter gets rickety, misty or lost.

When probed by cognitive scientists alone, however, these written reports are mostly searched for qualitative patterns to fit a model or coded for data analysis, rather than treated as (more or less narrative) texts to be read. In bridging narrative theory with scientific questions related to the understanding of hallucinatory experiences, this essay will consider instead a set of problems in the readerly dimension of phenomenological interviews. What kind of interpretive dispositions do we bring to these qualitative reports? How can narrative theory help us illuminating our relationship with these phenomenological enervated fibres of storytelling, often surfacing out of confused or inconsistent pre-verbal and pre-narrative experiences? What kind of active yet tensive correlation lies between our background world as

readers and the reported world of the hallucinating interviewee? What is the readerly role played by the interviewing frame in shielding us from, or ushering us into, the hallucinated storyworld of the interviewed experiencer? By adapting key concepts from classic and post-classic narrative theory, this chapter will therefore attempt to pave the way for an interdisciplinary approach to phenomenological interviews on hallucinations. Together with arguing that the narratological toolbox might help understanding the interpretive dynamics underlying the reading of hallucinatory reports (reading minds), it will suggest that a readerly conceptualisation of phenomenological interviews might have something to offer back to our direct encounter with sufferers in our intersubjective, embodied and paperless social world (mindreading).

When considering the textual structure of the transcripts of phenomenological interviews, a preliminary problem is posed by the function of the interviewing frame. If we think of these transcripts as narrative hierarchical architectures, the interviewing threshold would be the first narrative level we encounter, with the interviewer and the interviewee facing each other on the doorstep of the interviewee's story and storyworld about to disclose or emerge. The classic narratological concepts of "frame narrative" and "narrative embedding" might capture some important aspects of this narrative outline, and its ontological and functional relationship with the voice-hearer's reported world. In narratology, a narrative frame is usually a shorter narrative interlude or ancillary scaffolding (level 1) which serves to introduce the main reported events of a story (the embedded narrative on level 2). Narrative frames are part of the stereotypical conventions of artefactual storytelling, and they have been modulated according to different historical periods, genres or media (e.g., Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Woody Allen's *Melinda and Melinda*, David Lynch's *Inland Empire*). Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, is a standard example of how a narrative frame is usually constituted by characters talking to each others (here on a boat on the Thames), followed by one of them beginning to talk about a more or less distant past (the embedded, primary narrative of Marlowe's journey in the colonial Congo), then circularly closing back to the initial framing situation at the end of the novel.

Phenomenological interviews have their own framing conventions, and each of the interviews in the longitudinal study behind this volume begins with small variations of the same formulaic routine of ethical guidelines for the interviewee ("For this interview I'm going to be asking some questions…"; "Quite a few questions are going to be about hearing voices…"; "People sometimes worry about this topic, do you have any concerns, is it OK to ask some questions about it?"). However, even when the interviewing frame gradually starts to fall into the background after this

attuning inception, with the first experiential windows opening into the subject's hallucinatory states and storyworld, it never becomes entirely marginalised or forgotten (as it does, for instance, in Conrad's novel). This is quite unlike artefactual frame narratives. As Monika Fludernik summarises, in fact, "usually in the setting of a frame narrative the framing primary story is quite marginal in relation to the embedded story, which takes up most of the text. Hence, indeed, the term *frame* narration, since the framing situation of storytelling merely serves to bracket the `real' story and mirrors the reader's gradual access to the story proper" (1996: 257). By contrast, the interviewing frame stands in a constant, resilient and recursive tension with the hallucinated storyworld of the interviewee.

For interviews on hallucinatory experiences, this tension is to some important extent readerly perceived as ontological. Through the answers of the interviewee in the conversational frame, we access a world that is rife with impossible or unnatural events (more on this soon), a world that departs in many fundamental aspects from our own. The role of the interviewer in this respect is manifold. While working within the frame as the prompter for guided introspection, constantly trying to unlatch new experiential windows by moving the interviewee's retrospective attention to different phenomenological nuances of the her storyworld (the embedded world), he is also the implicit bearer of a non-hallucinatory perceptual worldview to which we recursively align as readers (in the framing world). Far from being forgotten or marginalized, the interviewing frame is a world we are continuously brought back to by the interviewer (even by neutral phatic signals such as a "Yeah"), after briefer or longer immersions into an embedded world often logically and ontologically remote from ours. It is with a hybrid sense of comfort and disruption that our readerly mind keeps its feet anchored in what we consider to be the real parameters of perception and cognition. To understand the relationship between the world of the frame (the interviewer's and reader's) and the hallucinated world of the interviewee therefore means to understand our inclination to share or to resist experiences that depart from our own in some radical way.

Once again, narrative theory might help problematizing what kind of disposition we bring when moving to the world of the frame to the perceptually and informationally more noisy world of the interviewee. In literary narratives, the textual presentation of a storyworld is always incomplete, yet our mind makes a lot of conscious or unconscious inferences about what the texts is not explicitly saying. For example, even if a text is not telling us that the law of gravity is present or that human beings are made of flesh and breathing air, unless told otherwise we assume this is to be the case. This readerly principle, which spares a lot of cognitive efforts both to writers and readers, is what Marie Laure-Ryan has called the "principle of minimal

departure", an inferential disposition which "enjoins readers to construct fictional worlds as the closest possible to their model of reality, amending this model only when it is overruled by the text" (2012: 376). When facing the embedded storyworld disclosed by voice-hearers, we similarly bring a model of our own world to guide our inferences. From the very onset of many of the interviews, however, we face the need to depart from this model to accommodate events and perceptions that in our own world would be logically and ontologically impossible. Even the simpler reports of voices heard in the absence of any embodied speakers requires an update of our model of reality towards an experiential recentering in the new affordances offered by the interviewee's storyworld, for instance when Dan tells us that "sometimes it sounds like it's somebody maybe within the same room as me, or sat next to me, but when I look around it's like they are not there, but I swear like I can hear it". After reading these lines, we are now accommodating the possibility that in the voice-hearer's world voices that feel physically present can nonetheless be disembodied.

One of the key factor that makes of phenomenological interviews challenging reading experiences is that this kind of updating of a reality model keeps happening all the time, in a constant renewal of possibilities and perceptual events which for many does not fit the standard experience of the real world. In addition, in spite of some internal consistencies within a single interview and storyworld (.e.g, with voice-hearers having some sort of recurring mode of hallucinating: either visual, auditory, tactile, with religious or personified voices or visions), there is a high degree of variations across all of them. In some of these embedded worlds we have talking animals (e.g, a mole in Olivia's, which "I've had that since I was a little kid and I used to call her Mummy Mole, and she's got a really soft, calming voice"), in others religious presences and visions (e.g., the archangel Michael in Leah's storyworld); some of them have guiding disembodied voices, other tormenting, many both. Each readerly plunge in all of these embedded worlds, however, requires a significant departure from what is for many people a standard model of reality. How does our mind cope with these impossible storyworlds? If we turn to narratology, we can conceptualize and critically evaluate further these readerly dynamic adjustments.

If the embedded hallucinatory storyworlds of the interviewees were artefactual creations, in fact, they would be the objects of a recent branch of narratology called "unnatural narratology", which deals with "physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events. That is to say, the represented scenarios or events have to be impossible according to the known laws governing the physical world, accepted principles of logic (such as the principle of non-contradiction), or standard human limitations of knowledge or ability" (Alber et al. 2013: 102). A central contribution of unnatural

narratology is to have reflected on the strategies whereby we 'naturalize' such impossible storyworlds in order to make sense of, or reduce, their strangeness. The concept of "naturalization" originally comes from narrative theorist Jonathan Culler (1975), who coined it to describe how readers tend to tame unfamiliar or impossible elements in a storyworld because "the strange […] must be recuperated or naturalized, brought within our ken, if we do not want to remain gaping before monumental inscriptions" (134). Phenomenological interviews of hallucinations abound in such unusual or unnatural experiences that depart from our model of reality, therefore radically calling for naturalisation.

For instance, we read Olivia talking about the occurrence of unnaturally disembodied voices making the room impossibly shaking while casting physical sourceless shadows on other people ("it looks like the room's shaking or people can be shadowed out when I start hallucinating") or Leah's reporting of voice-hearing experiences being accompanied by the vision of a huge wing, hugging her on London quayside ("…massive like black…[…] like eagle wing or something like that, it was absolutely huge. And it kinda came round the side of us like that, and kinda…as if it kinda hugged us."). Within the available naturalising strategies proposed by unnatural narratology, such hallucinatory events might be familiarised by what Jan Alber calls "subjectification" (for a similar concept see Ryans' idea of "mentalism"; 2012: 377) or "reading as internal states", whereby we attribute these impossible elements to an altered state of mind. As Alber phrases it, through subjectification "some impossible elements can simply be explained as parts of internal states (of characters or narrators) such as dreams, fantasies, visions, or hallucinations. This reading strategy is the only one that actually *naturalizes* the unnatural insofar as it reveals the ostensibly impossible to be something entirely natural, namely nothing but an element of somebody's interiority" (2016: 51). In other words, naturalization of hallucinatory states works against the feeling of departure, so that instead of having to postulate a different world where unnatural events are actually possible, we can treat hallucinatory experiences as happening in the world as we know it, where it is indeed possible that someone is *just* hallucinating.

Even literary storyworlds, however, sometimes resist this interpretive strategy (e.g. see Beckett's or Agota Kristof's trilogies) because of an unresolved ontological ambiguity between a single world (with unified perceptual and physical laws that only some characters might be misperceiving as altered) and what Ryan has called the "many-worlds" (2012: 377) readerly disposition (i.e., accepting multiple possible realit*ies* as overlapping or being compossible). When it comes to phenomenological interviews on non-fictional hallucinatory storyworlds, though, to say that these are entirely natural because they are nothing but someone's interior

altered states is a far less innocent manoeuvre, no matter how much it facilitates our illusion of understanding. If we want to understand the experiential qualities of hallucinatory states (or become better aware of the difficulty in fully understand them), in fact, there might be good reasons to reject a unified view of a single world between the interviewer (or reader) and the interviewees in favor of a pluralistic approach where the feeling of departure into unexplored new worlds should not abandon us that easily.

Similarly to naturalization of impossible storyworlds, in fact, the subjectification of the interviewees' experiences (i.e., impossible worlds are still impossible, but what is possible is that she is hallucinating a devious reality) is intended mainly to reduce the unnatural to the natural, transforming a possible clash of worlds into a categorizing harmony (i.e., in the only possible world I consent to believe there can be people hallucinating). In the clinical domain, naturalization by subjectification is the instrument of diagnostic, and diagnostic manuals are the sediment of diachronic naturalizing processes. While these might be valuable, even necessary heuristic tools for medical treatment, and while the very definition of hallucination seems to require a single-world approach to retain its meaning (i.e., someone is perceptually deviating from the *shared* reality of someone's else), the scope of phenomenological interviews is rather to access what is like *for* a subject to live in her world (the only world she knows or come to know). Diagnostic naturalization is therefore opposed to openness to phenomenological departure. The former needs to preserve a single world to be operationally effective, but the latter equally needs to resist categorization to allow a maximum of experiential displacement into another persons' reality, out of the reassuring threshold of the interviewing frame. Regardless of our need to accommodate alien experiences in the only world we end up living, feeling, perceiving and thinking, this reduces the experiential import of phenomenological windows into other worlds (worlds *felt* as others) and the significant efforts made by the interviewees to keep them open.

Traces of the tension between (and of the will to bridge) two different worlds are painstakingly evident in the voice-hearers' hypertrophic use of analogical or metaphorical connectors such as "it's like", "as if", "sort of" or "kinda". In narratological terms, these clauses can be considered as introducing what Dorrit Cohn has called "psycho-analogies" (1978: 41-44): analogical images that either a narrator or a character uses to approximate mental experiences that elude linguistic or narrative reports. Psycho-analogies are common currency in literature and even everyday conversations whenever there is need to share mental experiences with someone else without a direct linguistic equivalent to express them. Otherwise said, psycho-analogies are among the linguistic devices used to open a bridge between different experiential realities. The ubiquitous presence of psycho-

analogical formulas in phenomenological interviews on hallucinations, on the one hand, signals the opacity felt by the interviewees when it comes to share those experiences, as if the analogical mode were the only, oblique scalpel they find to penetrate retrospectively into the leaden surface of non-linguistic, highly sensorial and unnatural events. In this respect, psycho-analogies are tentative bridges between people sharing inaccessible experiences (meeting *in* a shared world, but possibly talking *of* impossible distant worlds). On the other hand, however, we can never be entirely sure whether the analogical correlative is entirely metaphorical, or rather some actual experiential event that happened into the interviewee's impossible (for us) world.

Take for instance Leah's report of hallucinatory events feeling to her like a magnetizing tornado ("So me own voices and the things that I thought other people around us, their little bits and pieces, and that went into a cycle. Like a tornado, you know, when it picks stuff up like this?"). As readers, we cannot be sure what kind of elements are only metaphorically mapped onto the experience (e.g., the feeling of voices picking up the contents of their emissions from several external and internal sources), or whether the experience is phenomenologically more close to an actual tornado (e.g., with noise, strong wind, a felt threat of possible physical injuries, and so on). If we take the naturalizing option of subjectivising this report as a mental altered state, we might be more inclined to make fewer efforts to actually explore these phenomenological ambiguities as possible actual experiences of an unfamiliar world. We might just end up telling our readerly mind that this is a strange event of a hallucinating mind in an otherwise natural world. By contrast, if we resist this naturalizing temptation, we are forced to simulate what would be like to live in a world where suddenly disembodied voices are coming in the shape, strength and unpredictable behaviors of hurricanes, physically threatening us to get carried away.

Following Caracciolo's (2014: 115-132) model of reading fictional consciousnesses as a complementary mixture of attribution of states from the outside of a character's viewpoint (that he calls "consciousness-attribution") and the inner enacting of her experiences (that he calls "consciousness-enactment"), we can think of our readerly options with phenomenological interviews as an interpretive crossing. If we are content to simply *attribute* hallucinatory events of the interviewee to clinical malfunctioning (via subjectification), we will end up with a diagnostic distance that integrates the unnatural in our world. If we, instead, are open to *enacted immersions* into the interviewees' worlds of new possibilities and experiential qualities (via departure), we might get lost in the unfamiliar, yet closest to a reality where multiple worlds might be the norm, and as such in need to be explored or defended at the cost of getting lost in the unknown (a feeling that people with hallucinations are experientially forced to endure themselves).

Even if we are willing to undertake an enacting departure into hallucinatory worlds, however, the risk of naturalizing egocentric biases are not easy dispelled. As Monika Fludernik (2010) persuasively argues, we tend to process unnatural storyworlds by simply concoct a blending or alteration of our cognitive parameters of reality with the different, diminished or augmented versions proposed by the text. For instance, if we read Olivia's telling us that hearing voices for her "it feels like you're driving in your car, by yourself and then somehow two people have just got in the back", we might resort to, and then just blend, our experience of being alone in a car driving with that of being in a car with people talking in the back. This simulated blend might allow us to simulate an enactive experience of this hallucinatory event. However, it would still be far too close to our model of reality because we never experienced what it like to undergo this experience as an actual perception in a world where such things become possible, even likely events. Enacting by blending could be a staring point, but we need to be aware of a required radical departure that these phenomenologically distant worlds are calling us to perform.

As it is evident from the very unfortunate conceptual baggage of words such as 'disability', 'illness' or 'handicap', we tend to prepare our encounters with sufferers in terms of a diminished version of what we know. In his foundational article on the difficulty of accessing experiences other than ours, Thomas Nagel (1974) famously took the radically distant example of a bat to show how objective scientific knowledge of another being's cognitive apparatus (e.g., bat' sonars and ecolocation) won't suffice in giving us phenomenological subjective knowledge of what is like to be a bat. In his article, Nagel hints at how inter-species phenomenological bridges might be just as difficult as interpersonal ones, because whenever someone tries to enter another person's worldview is "restricted to the resources of [her] own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modification" (439).

Narrative theorists, however, are likely right in suggesting that subtracting or blending are the key strategies we deploy when readerly facing impossible storyworlds such as the ones hosting hallucinatory events. Reflecting on our naturalizing inclinations as readers of mind, though, might change our attitude also as mind readers in our social encounters (both with people who sufferers because of living in a different world, and with people in general as experiential bearers of individual worldviews). Phenomenological interviews are precious texts in this respect. They can become pedagogical tools teaching us *how to read for departure*: how to resist intuitive naturalization of unfamiliar experiences so as to be open to a

pluralistic view of the human ecosystem as a rich multitude of many worlds, each with its own idiosyncratic and original possibilities or impossibilities. We might also discover that, by radically departing from what we know, we might end up recognizing (experientially rather than diagnostically) elements of the unnatural in us. This is among the scopes of the ongoing quest in psychology for a phenomenological continuum between clinical and non-clinical experiences (see, e.g., Alderson-Day et al. 2017). This continuum, however, should not conceal ontological gaps; it should rather foster an acceptance of gaping before monumentally complex inscriptions that we should not translate, but actively experience as powerfully challenging our phenomenological alphabet.

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