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*Karl Lachmann a cura di Alessia Serluca - Università di Trento) traduzione di
Giorgia Voi*

MULTIPERSPECTIVE FICTIONS OF MEMORY AND THE IMPLICATED NARRA- TOR

GABRIELE D'AMATO – *Università dell'Aquila - Ghent University*

Prendendo le mosse dall'intersezione di memory studies e teoria della narrazione, l'articolo esamina il multiprospettivismo come strategia narrativa particolarmente adatta ad affrontare le complessità della memoria collettiva nella narrativa contemporanea. Sebbene il multiprospettivismo sia spesso considerato come una strategia formale in grado di contrastare forme narrative dominanti, il contributo cerca di mostrare come le narrazioni multiprospettive debbano andare oltre facili dicotomie per offrire una comprensione multidirezionale della memoria collettiva. Prendendo ispirazione da concetti quali post-memoria e soggetto implicato, propongo quindi la nozione di pseudo-multiprospettivismo per esplorare le potenzialità e i rischi della moltiplicazione delle prospettive e dei ricordi dei personaggi finzionali.

ADrawing on research at the intersection of memory studies and narrative theory, this article explores multiperspectivity as a storytelling mode particularly well-suited to engaging with representations of collective memory in contemporary fiction. While often celebrated as a narrative strategy that fosters perspective-awareness and enables counter-narrativity, I argue that multiperspective storytelling must move beyond simplistic dichotomies to effectively convey a multidirectional understanding of collective memory. Building on concepts such as postmemory and the implicated subject, I then introduce the notion of pseudo-multiperspectivity to examine both the potential and risks inherent in the proliferation of characters' perspectives and memories.

I INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, postclassical narratology has devoted increasing attention to a contextualist and cultural extension of narrative theory, by putting the so-called narratological toolbox in the service of textual analysis.¹ In Ansgar Nünning's terms, a cultural or historical narratology is «a kind of integrated interdisciplinary approach that puts the analytical tools provided by both narratology and other narrativist approaches to the service of the study of culture».² Among the new fields of cross-disciplinary research explored by postclassical narratology, the interweaving of narrative and memory has been widely examined by scholars following the proposal of a narratology of cultural memory. In his analysis of retrospective narratives, Wolfgang Müller-Funk emphasizes the strict bond between the creation of (cultural) memory and the process of narrativization, by arguing that «cultural memory always starts from the moment of narrating and re-narrating».³ Similarly, in one of the most influential contributions to the study of narrative and cultural memory, Astrid Erll notes that «acts of memory and narrative are in

¹ For a recent survey, see MARCO CARACCILO, *Narrative Form and Negotiation in Cultural Narratology*, in «Status Quaestionis», XXVI (2024), DOI <https://doi.org/10.13133/2239-1983/18807>, pp. 357-374.

² ANSGAR NÜNNING, *Narrativist Approaches and Narratological Concepts for the Study of Culture*, in BIRGIT NEUMANN and ANSGAR NÜNNING (eds.), *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter 2012, pp. 145-183, p. 160.

³ WOLFGANG MÜLLER-FUNK, *On a Narratology of Cultural and Collective Memory*, in «Journal of Narrative Theory», XXXIII, no. 2 (2003), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2011.0068>, pp. 207-227, p. 208.

many ways closely linked, and it is in fictional representations of remembering that the manifold possibilities of narrative discourse best come to the fore». ⁴ In her understanding, a narratology of cultural memory is «actually not so much a *theory as a method*», whose main focus is «on using existent narratological categories as a toolbox for looking at texts and their relation to cultural memory» ⁵ (original emphasis). Drawing on these insights, this article will explore the use of multiperspectivity as a mode of storytelling particularly well-suited to engaging with complex representations of collective memory, by focusing on a peculiar kind of multiperspective narration – that I will call «pseudo-multiperspectivity» – inviting us to reconsider the most common assumptions around the multiplication of characters' points of view.

In an influential account of the literary representation of memory, Birgit Neumann emphasizes the potential represented by multiperspective narration to provide insights «into the memories of several narrative instances or figures», ⁶ and thus revealing the «functioning and problems of collective memory-creation», as well as designing a perspective structure ⁷ of co-existing collective memories. Similarly, in one of the first conceptual outlines of the term «cultural narratology», Gabriele Helms describes it as «the place where dialogism and narrative theory meet», ⁸ thus foregrounding the pivotal, almost symbolic role played by concepts such as multiperspectivity and polyphony in cultural approaches to postclassical narratology. It is no coincidence that multiperspectivity has been traditionally associated with ideas of polyvalence, perceptual relativism, or cognitive flexibility, as a mode of storytelling particularly apt to reveal «the constructedness of any reality and the perspective-dependency of all perception». ⁹ However, as noted by C. Namwali Serpell, ethical and cultural criticism has sometimes superficially regarded multiperspectivity *per se* as a counter-hegemonic way of addressing complex issues in a democratic vein, by including viewpoints of victims, minorities, or excluded groups:

Ethical criticism tends to be enamored with the democracy, impartiality, tolerance, or all-encompassing beneficence that multiple

⁴ ASTRID ERLI, *Narratology and Cultural Memory Studies*, in SANDRA HEINEN and ROY SOMMER (eds.), *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter 2009, pp. 212-227, p. 213.

⁵ Ivi, p. 221.

⁶ BIRGIT NEUMANN, *The Literary Representation of Memory*, in ASTRID ERLI and ANSGAR NÜNNING (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies*, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter 2008, pp. 333-344, p. 338.

⁷ On the concept of «perspective structure» see ANSGAR NÜNNING, *On the Perspective Structure of Narrative Texts: Steps Toward a Constructivist Narratology*, in WILLIE VAN PEER and SEYMOUR CHATMAN (eds.), *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, Albany, State University of New York Press 2001, pp. 207-224.

⁸ GABRIELE HELMS, *Challenging Canada: Dialogism and Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels*, Montreal, Queen's University Press 2003, p. 10.

⁹ SILKE BRASELMANN, *The Fictional Dimension of the School Shooting Discourse: Approaching the Inexplicable*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter 2019, p. 261.

perspectives imply. Multiplicity is said to present a more complete picture: each view adds another facet to a concept, character, or event.¹⁰

Following Serpell's understanding, I will argue in the third section that pseudo-multiperspective narratives aim to challenge these prevailing assumptions around multiplicity (her term for multiperspectivity). Although democracy and impartiality may certainly be conveyed by several sophisticated examples of multiperspectivity, I suggest that a multiperspective approach to complex issues – such as the representation of a collective and transgenerational memory, as in my case study – may also become a formal and rhetorical strategy of narrative manipulation, in which hegemonic memory culture is ultimately reinforced, even as the narrative appears to challenge its foundations.

In the last few years, as the introduction to the edited collection *Memory Unbound* (2017) reminds us, memory «is not what it used to be»:¹¹ once conceptualized as a static concept, anchored to places and containers, memory is now regarded as something that «circulates, migrates, travels», a dynamic process whose mobility is summarized by Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen in four salient dimensions: transcultural, transgenerational, transmedial, and transdisciplinary. Similarly, Erll explores the «dynamic, multilinear and often fuzzy trajectories of cultural remembering and forgetting», stating that what appears to be a manageable section of reality becomes fuzzy «as soon as the perspective is widened».¹² Therefore, there seems to be a striking convergence between the dynamic approach to memory studies and the multiplication of perspectives, as we will see with Michael Rothberg's influential concept of «multidirectional memory». In this fluid scenario of mnemonic mobility, narratives need to adopt specific formal strategies to convey the multifaceted and traveling dimension of memory.

In a recent article, Claudia Mueller-Greene suggests to go beyond Erll's dynamic approach «to consider forms of individual and collective memory as phenomena that emerge from complex nonlinear systems».¹³ The emphasis on complexity foregrounds a recent strand of narratology that is informed by «complex systems theory» and investigates the relationship between complexity and narrative form.¹⁴ Formally challenging narratives allow to grasp the complex qualities of memory by foregrounding its «nonlinear,

¹⁰ C. NAMWALI SERPELL, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press 2014, p. 117.

¹¹ LUCY BOND, STEF CRAPS, and PIETER VERMEULEN, *Introduction: Memory on the Move*, in LUCY BOND, STEF CRAPS, and PIETER VERMEULEN (eds.), *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*, New York-Oxford, Berghahn 2017, pp. 1-26, p. 1.

¹² ASTRID ERLI, *Travelling Memory*, in «Parallax», XVII, no. 4 (2011), pp. 4-18, p. 11.

¹³ CLAUDIA MUELLER-GREENE, *The Concept of Liminality as a Theoretical Tool in Literary Memory Studies: Liminal Aspects of Memory in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, in «Journal of Literary Theory», XVI, no. 2 (2022), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1515/jlt-2022-2025>, pp. 264-288, p. 271.

¹⁴ On narrative complexity see RICHARD WALSH and SUSAN STEPNEY (eds.), *Narrating Complexity*, New York, Springer 2018; and MARINA GRISHAKOVA and MARIA POULAKI (eds.), *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press 2019.

chaotic, and emergent properties».¹⁵ In recent years, experimental narrative forms have been adopted to question the static understanding of memory and to go beyond the mere representation of locations and sites of remembrance. For example, Michael Basseler and Dorothee Birke have analyzed, under the concept of «mimesis of remembering», a set of textual strategies adopted by narrative fiction and nonfiction alike to achieve a «mnestic narration»,¹⁶ by pointing at two basic structural principles: the presence of a center of subjective perception, and the definition of two distinct time levels.

Recent examples of mnestic narration mostly include the blurring of fiction and nonfiction in first-person narratives, such as autofiction or fictional memoirs, usually employing a wide range of experimental narrative techniques, such as metalepsis, parallel storylines, or circumleptic narration.¹⁷ On the other hand, collective forms of storytelling such as we-narratives – a first-person plural narrative situation – present a peculiar mode of narration that foregrounds the collective dimension of memory. In we-narratives, as noted by Natalya Bekhta, the we-group narrators «possess, create, and express constitutive institutional knowledge through “collective performative speech acts”»: ¹⁸ thus, although not all members are equal in such knowledge, authors of we-narratives frequently adopt a collective perspective. In Zakes Mda’s novel *Ways of Dying* (1995), for example, the narrative authority of the we-voice «lies in the assumption that what “we” deem to be truth is the truth»¹⁹ (original emphasis) and thus, while the memory of an individual character reaches its limits, «the collective memory is infinitely vaster than his»: ²⁰ «We know all these things», says the we-voice, «but Toloki does not remember them».²¹

By understanding the «communal pool of knowledge»²² as the sum of each member’s information and memory, Bekhta seems to engage with Rothberg’s «non-zero-sum logic»²³ of multidirectional memory, a concept that I will explore in greater detail in the next section. We-narratives thus emerge as a particularly compelling storytelling form for exploring the formal engagement with collective memory. Similarly, while not inherently a complex formal technique, multiperspectivity is often linked to cognitive flexibility – a necessary practice for navigating the complexity and ambivalence that arise

¹⁵ C. MUELLER-GREENE, *The Concept of Liminality as a Theoretical Tool in Literary Memory Studies*, cit., p. 273.

¹⁶ MICHAEL BASSELER and DOROTHEE BIRKE, *Mimesis of Remembering*, in «Journal of Literary Theory», XVI, no. 2 (2022), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1515/jlt-2022-2023>, pp. 213-238.

¹⁷ For the concept of circumleptic narration see CAROLIN GEBAUER, *Making Time: World Construction in the Present-Tense Novel*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter 2021, p. 127.

¹⁸ NATALYA BEKHTA, *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction*, Columbus, The Ohio State University Press 2020, p. 137.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 142.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 143.

²¹ ZAKES MDA, *Ways of Dying*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1995, p. 30.

²² N. BEKHTA, *We-Narratives*, cit., p. 8.

²³ MICHAEL ROTHBERG, *Multidirectional Memory*, Stanford, Stanford University Press 2009, p. 243.

from lack of closure or the juxtaposition of equally plausible events.²⁴ Therefore, by relying on formally challenging techniques, narratives can problematize the relationship between individual and cultural or collective memory, thus going beyond an understanding of cultural memory as a «discrete, lost, and static object to be reconstituted and restored through remembrance».²⁵

In the next section, I will discuss multiperspectivity in fictions of collective memory and the ethics of multiplicity in the juxtaposition of perpetrators' and victims' perspectives, by relying on Rothberg's «multidirectional memory» and Serpell's concepts of «full-tiplicity» and «null-tiplicity». In the third section, I will then introduce the concept of pseudo-multiperspective narrative to show the risks associated with multiperspectivity and the narrative manipulation of collective memory, taking Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) as my main example. Through this pseudo-multiperspective narration – an example of formal complexity in literary fiction – novels can challenge dichotomies usually associated with cultural memory and the ethics of its fictional representation, from the binary divide between victim and perpetrator to the dualism of master- and counter-narratives.

2 MULTIPERSPECTIVITY AND MULTIDIRECTIONALITY

Multiperspective narratives²⁶ strongly rely on mnestic narration, as they frequently report memories of a particular event from different characters' points of view. In novels, they usually present first-person narrators or focalizing characters who offer subjective representations of events, or portray different versions of the same characters with individual stylistic and linguistic peculiarities, as in the canonical example of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). In movies and other audiovisual media, narratorial flashbacks or other techniques for representing character interiority are juxtaposed to create a kaleidoscopic effect of multiple memories, with aesthetically evocative examples such as Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), where each version of events is visually dominated by a particular color. Thus, multiperspectivity usually entails conflicting reports and unreliable narrators: in a contradictory example of multiperspectivity, at least one of the narrators or focalizing characters is necessarily supposed to be unreliable. In the so-called «Rashomon effect» – popularized by Akira Kurosawa's movie *Rashōmon* (1950) – that is, a narratorial, contradictory, open structure, we find «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

²⁴ See, for example, VERA NÜNNING, *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds: The Cognitive Value of Fiction*, Heidelberg, Winter Verlag 2014, p. 275.

²⁵ RICHARD CROWNSHAW, *Cultural Memory Studies in the Epoch of the Anthropocene*, in *Memory Unbound*, cit., pp. 242-257, p. 245.

²⁶ For a broader understanding of the concept of multiperspective narratives see the seminal work of VERA and ANSGAR NÜNNING (eds.), *Multiperspektivisches Erzählen: Zur Theorie und Geschichte der Perspektivenstruktur im englischen Roman des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, Trier, WVT 2000; and the entry on multiperspectivity in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*: MARCUS HARTNER, *Multiperspectivity*, in PETER HÜHN et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Hamburg, Hamburg University Press, accessed May 7, 2025, url <https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/37.html>.

on the question».²⁷ In this case, recipients are forced to acknowledge complexity and lack of closure, evaluating different memories and opting for a specific reading strategy to deal with the gaps in the narrative.²⁸ However, in narratives following the Rashomon-style, incompatible memories usually regard a specific, highly tellable event, from rapes and robberies to breakups and murders. Thus, they usually deal with a punctual although traumatic memory, and they may even be set in a single day, as Brian DePalma's *Snake Eyes* (1998) or Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003). Other types of multiperspective narratives, on the other hand, span across decades and continents, by intertwining characters' lives and different phenomena to convey the complexity of a globalized reality that can only be expressed through nonlinear plotting and juggling storylines. In this case, the entanglement of multiple perspectives may connect different generations or cultures, thus offering a fictional representation of transgenerational and transcultural memory through the eyes and voices of different narrators.

Following Aleida and Jan Assmann's distinction between individual, communicative, and cultural memory, Basseler and Birke see «mnestic narration» as mostly concerned with the level of individual memory. Here, I focus on the relationship between multiperspectivity and *collective* memory: it is thus crucial to discuss multiperspective fictions of memory not as a sum of individual memories but as an *ongoing negotiation of different perspectives*. As we have seen in the introduction, in Neumann's view multiperspectivity can be regarded as a productive mode of storytelling for providing access to fictional consciousnesses and thus presenting a more complex and ethically charged insight on the collective memory-creation. By expanding the remembered world through multiperspectivity, fictions of memory would thus be able to «design a panorama of coexisting collective memories», making «shared interpretations of the past, but also incompatible memories of the shared collective past» visible.²⁹ Focusing on the opposite side of multiperspectivity, Yvonne Liebermann proposes to link connective multiperspectivity and collective memory. While introducing the mode of latency in «non-evental multiperspectivity»³⁰ – that is, a multiperspective narrative without a single central event – she suggests that multiperspective novels can convey, following Rothberg, a multidirectional understanding of memory. Although the concept of non-evental multiperspectivity mostly overlaps with other existing forms, such as «multilinear» or «network narratives» (in David

²⁷ ROBERT ANDERSON, *What Is the Rashomon Effect?*, in BLAIR DAVIS, ROBERT ANDERSON, and JAN WALLS (eds.), *Rashomon Effects: Kurosawa, Rashomon and Their Legacies*, London and New York, Routledge 2016, pp. 66-85, p. 71.

²⁸ On the peculiar experience of uncertainty elicited by open multiperspective narratives, see GABRIELE D'AMATO, *Incertezza multiprospettica. Strategie di lettura dell'effetto Rashomon*, in SIMONE CARATI, MARCO MALVESTIO, LUIGI MARFÈ, ALESSANDRO METLICA, and VALENTINA VIGNOTTO (eds.), *Poteri della lettura. Pratiche, immagini, supporti*, Padova, Padova University Press 2024, pp. 443-456.

²⁹ B. NEUMANN, *The Literary Representation of Memory*, cit., p. 339.

³⁰ YVONNE LIEBERMANN, *Memory and Latency in Contemporary Anglophone Literature*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter 2023.

Bordwell's terms),³¹ Liebermann's link between the multidirectionality of memory and multiperspectivity can help illuminate the potential of narrative forms for representing complex examples of collective memory.

Rothberg's reflections on the multidirectionality of the collective memory process are rooted in the idea that collective memory should not be regarded as «competitive memory – as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources» but as «multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative» (original emphasis).³² Similarly, in Liebermann's understanding, we should only focus on those examples of multiperspectivity that express its potential for connection rather than frictions. By sidestepping the conflictual dimension of multiperspectivity, however, Liebermann does not fully explore Rothberg's framework of multidirectional memory. For Rothberg, in fact, it is precisely the *conflict* of memories that enriches the previous static understanding of collective memory, by avoiding the «zero-sum game» for which the public presence of one collective memory would necessarily minimize that of another: «the conflict of memories produce more, not less, memory».³³ Linking multiperspectivity to multidirectionality thus serves to challenge skeptical understandings of collective memory as the one explicitly put forward by historian Peter Novick:

To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives [...]. Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.³⁴

In Novick's view, collective memory and multiperspectivity would thus be incompatible concepts: on the contrary, by understanding collective memory as fundamentally and structurally multidirectional, Rothberg validates narratologists' insights on the affordances of multiperspective storytelling for fictions of memory. What Rothberg's multidirectional memory mainly allows to do, however, is to encompass both Neumann's understanding of incompatible characters' memories as a site of conflictual discourse and Liebermann's emphasis on the connective dimension of multiperspectivity. Put bluntly, while Neumann foregrounds contradictory multiperspectivity as it «can keep alive conflict about what exactly the collective past stands for and how it should be remembered»,³⁵ Liebermann dismisses its conflictual dimension to discuss the vagueness and uncertainty of latency.

³¹ For the relationship between multilinearity and the global novel see M. CARACCILO, *The Global and the Multilinear: Novelistic Forms for Planetary Processes*, in «Studies in the Novel», LV, no. 3 (2023), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2023.a905805>, pp. 325-340. On network narratives the main reference is to DAVID BORDWELL, *Poetics of Cinema*, New York, Routledge 2008.

³² M. ROTHBERG, *Multidirectional Memory*, cit., p. 3.

³³ MICHAEL ROTHBERG, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford, Stanford University Press 2019, p. 122.

³⁴ PETER NOVICK, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company 1999, pp. 3-4.

³⁵ B. NEUMANN, *The Literary Representation of Memory*, cit., p. 341.

In a later contribution, Rothberg proposes a four-part distinction to map the discursive field of multidirectional memory, by locating it at the intersection between an axis of comparison and an axis of political affect. The former stretches from the pole of equation to the pole of differentiation, while the latter spans from solidarity to competition. Rothberg's schematic map thus strikingly mirrors a typology of multiperspective narratives, with the axis of comparison overlapping with the type of interaction between perspectives, stretching from fully complementary to fully contradictory.³⁶ In Neumann's approach to multiperspectivity and collective memory fiction, the contradictory dimension merely serves to present «incompatible opposites in the battle for interpretative sovereignty»,³⁷ thus replicating the zero-sum logic of the competitive memory criticized by Rothberg. Conversely, Lieberman presents loosely connected, complementary memories that do not really challenge the hegemonic memory culture or the accepted version of the truth, thus discarding Rothberg's conflict of memories as producing more memory. Her latent memories only cover one side of Rothberg's map, by ultimately providing, in her case study – Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) – «a sense of coherence, balance, and reconciliation within the novel». ³⁸ Therefore, I propose that multiperspective narration can be effectively linked with the multidirectionality of collective memory only if it goes beyond the dichotomy between its connective and contradictory dimensions. In this sense, multiperspectivity may be regarded as a scalar phenomenon, foregrounding the intersection of both equation and differentiation, as well as solidarity and competition. The ongoing negotiation of perspectives and memories that characterizes both multiperspectivity and multidirectional memory is thus the key for a productive understanding of a multiperspective fiction of collective memory.

One of the most celebrated characteristics of multiperspectivity in general, and in memory narratives more specifically, is its potential for destabilizing dominant or «master-» narrative discourses. In Neumann's view, «by giving voice to [...] previously silenced fictions of memory, they constitute an imaginative counter-memory, thereby challenging the hegemonic memory culture». ³⁹ Multiperspective narratives are thus ethically charged as counter-narratives, that is, in Hanna Meretoja's words, «critical reinterpretations of dominant narrative models»⁴⁰ that question the power structures underlying the so-called master-narratives. In her insightful examination of the ethics of storytelling, for example, Meretoja states that:

³⁶ See GABRIELE D'AMATO, *The Narrative Features of Multiperspective Movies in Contemporary Cinema*, under review, where I distinguish between complementary, contradictory, and «verbally contradictory and visually complementary» narration.

³⁷ B. NEUMANN, *The Literary Representation of Memory*, cit., p. 338.

³⁸ REGINA SCHÖBER, «It's about Being Connected»: *Reframing the Network in Colum McCann's Let the Great World Spin*, qtd. in Lieberman.

³⁹ B. NEUMANN, *The Literary Representation of Memory*, cit., p. 339.

⁴⁰ HANNA MERETOJA, *A Dialogics of Counter-Narratives*, in KLARISSA LUEG and MARIANNE WOLFF LUNDHOLT (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, London and New York, Routledge 2021, pp. 30-42, p. 34.

In ethical terms, monological narratives that invite immediate identification through naturalizing strategies tend to be more dangerous than ones that encourage awareness of multiple perspectives and of narrative construction. [...] 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.⁴¹

While Meretoja's broader reflection holds true, it seems to me that in today's era of pervasive climate and political crises, multiperspectivity has become a ubiquitous – and at times overused – concept in ethical and literary criticism. A commitment to multiperspectivity is often invoked in discussions of complex issues, such as migration or the climate crisis, aiming to address the demands for inclusivity and multiculturalism that shape contemporary society and narrative practices. While some multiperspective narratives are formally experimental and conceptually rich – capable of presenting divergent and even incompatible viewpoints in a thought-provoking manner – others employ the notion more superficially, using the banner of multiperspectivity to deflect criticism and project an image of inclusivity and political engagement. In an early discussion on the concept, Christoph Bode already pointed out that «multiperspectivity *per se* does not yet *automatically* imply radical interrogation of our concepts of reality, of truth, and the accessibility of the world to our knowledge: everything depends on the concrete way in which this multiperspectivity is played out, on how consistently it is developed» (original emphasis).⁴²

Similarly, as we have seen in the introduction, Serpell noted how ethical criticism tends to be enamored with multiperspectivity as a democratic and impartial mode of storytelling. On the other hand, multiperspective and memory narratives are both ethically charged for their inherent «tellability».⁴³ As noted by Meretoja once again, «both narrative and memory as processes of “making absent things present” are already ethically charged because they imply selecting something to be worth telling or remembering, instead of something else».⁴⁴ And as we have already seen with the Rashomon-style, multiperspective narratives can frequently present a higher degree of tellability, because their central event is supposed to be worth telling *more than once*, and complex enough to be understood differently from many angles. But this increase in diversity is precisely what Serpell problematizes in her ethics of multiplicity: each new interpretation, in her view, runs the risk to partly cancel out previous ones, transforming a «*full*-tiplicity» in a «*null*-tiplicity»: «this negating effect raises one problem multiplicity poses for a democratic ethos: incommensurability, the idea that different

⁴¹ HANNA MERETOJA, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2018, pp. 131-132.

⁴² CHRISTOPH BODE, *The Novel: An Introduction*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell 2011, p. 201.

⁴³ For the narratological concept of tellability, see RAPHAËL BARONI, *Tellability*, in PETER HÜHN et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, cit., accessed May 7, 2025, url <https://www.archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/30.html>.

⁴⁴ H. MERETOJA, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, cit., p. 120.

values cannot be measured or calculated in relation» (original emphasis).⁴⁵ An ethics of multiperspectivity in fictions of collective memory thus requires, once again, a multidirectional understanding of conflicting interpretations. It is no coincidence that Serpell defines null-tiplicity as a type of multiplicity where «the coexistence of conflictual views results in a zero-sum game»,⁴⁶ thus nullifying judgment altogether.

In this respect, multiperspective narratives that juxtapose contrasting versions of events and result in an indisputable definition of the past ultimately sidestep the potential of multiperspectivity as multidirectionality. This is what happens, for example, in multiperspective novels that rigidly juxtapose master- and counter-narratives through the narrations or focalizations of both perpetrators and victims, such as Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* (2000) or, at least in part, Martin Amis's *The Zone of Interest* (2014). I suggest that these novels consist of the interplay of two mnemonic modes of narration examined by Astrid Erll, that is, the «antagonistic» and the «reflexive» mode. In Erll's definition, the antagonistic mode is constituted by literary forms which «help to promote one version of the past and reject another», thus perpetuating a zero-sum game logic.⁴⁷ This is a common feature of feminist and postcolonial narratives, as well as «politically oriented littérature engagée»: once a certain character's memory is validated as true, the conflicting master-narrative is deconstructed as false. Therefore, as noted by Roy Sommer, «most approaches studying narratives in contest, like legal narratology or the *study of counter-narratives*, focus on the antagonistic nature of the narrative» (emphasis added).⁴⁸ Reflexive modes of memory narration, on the other hand, are constituted by narrative forms «which draw attention to processes and problems of remembering», including «the juxtaposition of different versions of the past (narrated and focalized)».⁴⁹

Following Erll, we can consider multiperspective narrative as inherently reflexive: by juxtaposing different characters' or groups' memories, these novels already critically reflect on the processes of memory-creation. Thus, multiperspective novels of victims and perpetrators blend the reflexive and the antagonistic modes of memory narration by self-reflexively juxtaposing master and counter-narratives. In *The Zone of Interest*, as noted by Erin McGlothlin, three narrators reporting divergent accounts of similar happenings occupy «two antipodal positions», namely «the antithetical identities of perpetrator and victim», with Thomsen seen as «transitioning to a limited extent from the former to the latter»,⁵⁰ while Doll and Szmul cover the opposite sides of the spectrum. It is through the figure of Doll that Amis partially

⁴⁵ C. N. SERPELL, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, cit., p. 117.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 130.

⁴⁷ ASTRID ERL, *Memory in Culture*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2011, p. 159.

⁴⁸ ROY SOMMER, *Migration and Narrative Dynamics*, in PAUL DAWSON and MARIA MÄKELÄ (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*, New York and London, Routledge 2023, pp. 498-511, p. 502.

⁴⁹ A. ERL, *Memory in Culture*, cit., p. 159.

⁵⁰ ERIN MCGLOTHLIN, *Empathetic Identification and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction: A Proposed Taxonomy of Response*, in «Narrative», XXIV, no. 3 (2016), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2016.0016>, pp. 251-276, p. 267.

problematizes the binary divide between victim and perpetrator that usually characterizes this kind of multiperspective narrative. As we will see in the next section through the concept of pseudo-multiperspectivity, it is precisely this simple juxtaposition of victim and perpetrator to trigger Junot Díaz's criticism of Vargas Llosa's novel, where Rafael Trujillo's regime is represented through a multiperspective narrative that alternates Trujillo's own perspective with those of his victims.⁵¹ The «victim/perpetrator imaginary»⁵² undermines the multidirectionality of memory that multiperspective narratives can productively convey if they are not dominated by their antagonistic mode and their zero-sum game logic. In *Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz critically reflects on the potential and risks of multiperspectivity by complexifying both its formal logic and its characters' moral positioning.

3 PSEUDO-MULTIPERSPECTIVE NARRATIVES AND THE IMPLICATED SUBJECT

In this section, I introduce the concept of pseudo-multiperspective narrative to discuss a complex form of multiperspectivity that critically reflects on narrative manipulation and, in the case of *Oscar Wao*, on the constructedness of a dictatorial form of storytelling.⁵³ In pseudo-multiperspective narratives, the multiplication of focalizations or narratorial stances turns out to be a formal or rhetorical strategy developed by a «first-person omniscient narrator».⁵⁴ Since this kind of unreliable narrator is frequently provided with a «characterological motivation for the reflexive experimentation with conventions of omniscience»,⁵⁵ pseudo-multiperspective narratives display a reflexive mode of narration that exposes the dangers of narrative manipulation.

According to Bode, one of the most sophisticated functions of multiperspectivity is the hierarchization of narratives and perspectives:⁵⁶ this hierarchical relationship has been especially investigated by Werner Wolf, in what we might call «vertical multiperspectivity», as opposed to the more common *horizontal* alternation of viewpoints on a single, central event.⁵⁷ For

⁵¹ Díaz's disdain of *The Feast of the Goat* appears both in the text through the comments and footnotes of the narrator, Yunior, and in public declarations, as in EDWIDGE DANTICAT and JUNOT DÍAZ, *Junot Díaz*, in «Bomb», CI (2007), pp. 88-95.

⁵² M. ROTHBERG, *The Implicated Subject*, cit., p. 7.

⁵³ I have examined similar uses of pseudo-multiperspectivity in a different context in GABRIELE D'AMATO, *Collective Forms of Storytelling in Suburban Novels*, in «Between», XIV, no. 28 (2024), DOI <https://doi.org/10.13125/2039-6597/6238>, pp. 57-76.

⁵⁴ On the concept of first-person omniscience, see PAUL DAWSON, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction*, Columbus, The Ohio State University Press 2013, chapter 7.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 210.

⁵⁶ C. BODE, *The Novel*, cit., p. 200.

⁵⁷ WERNER WOLF, *Multiperspektivität: Das Konzept und seine Applikationsmöglichkeit auf Rahmungen in Erzählwerken*, in *Multiperspektivisches Erzählen*, cit., pp. 79-109. I have addressed the crucial role of frames and framing devices in multiperspective narratives in GABRIELE D'AMATO, *Framed Slowness and the Ecological Value of Multiperspectivity*, in «On_Culture», XVIII (2025), DOI <https://doi.org/10.22029/OC.2025.1478>.

Wolf, multiperspective narratives are not limited to accounts reported by multiple narrators or focalizers but may present other formal strategies for problematizing the relationship between points of view, including the use of framing devices and the multiplication of diegetic levels. In vertical multiperspectivity, a hierarchical preeminence is thus created whereby the lower diegetic levels are subordinated to the frame, which may be represented at the metafictional level by an editorial preface, a diary, or a novel written by a character who is part of the storyworld.

In Díaz's novel, Yuniór serves as a prime example of an «enhanced “I”»⁵⁸ narrator, that is, a homodiegetic narrator who blends features of both first- and third-person narration. Throughout the book, he strategically blends the eponymous protagonist's story with a supposedly oppositional historiography of the Dominican regime under Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship. As pointed out by Elena Machado Sáez, the accepted reading of the novel regards it as «a transgressive text that challenges the oppressive structures of the nation-state».⁵⁹ However, the novel seems to provide other discourses and perspectives, through the voices of Lola – the narrator's girlfriend and Oscar's sister – and Oscar himself, which ultimately «appear to be literally devoured by, and virtually indistinguishable from, Yuniór's narrative».⁶⁰ Although gathering testimony from multiple characters, the narrator of Díaz's novel «mediates their experiences through his own authorial voice», thus replicating the «discursive practices of the regime it denounces», that is, Trujillo's master-narrative.⁶¹ Many scholars have noticed that Yuniór's narrative struggles with the silenced stories of the victims of the Dominican Republic, by giving voice to Oscar, Lola, and other members of the Cabral-de León's family. Crucially, Yuniór himself is a victim of that same regime and an interesting example of a postmemorial narrator—one who has internalized dictatorial standards of masculinity and thus cannot escape them. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's influential notion of postmemory – a term meant to capture the transgenerational nature of trauma – Urania Milevski and Lena Wetenkamp describe «postmemorial narratives» as those texts that present a homodiegetic narrator as the «main narrative instance and agent of Postmemory»: however, the main narrator's narrative is «supplemented in a multi-perspectival manner by second-degree narrators, conversational reports, and letters or other documents that bear witness to the events of the past».⁶² Postmemo-

⁵⁸ FILIPPO PENNACCHIO, *Enhanced “I”: Omniscience and Third-Person Features in Contemporary First-Person Narrative Fiction*, in «Narrative», XXVIII, no. 1 (2020), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2020.0004>, pp. 21-42.

⁵⁹ ELENA MACHADO-SÁEZ, *Market Aesthetics: The Purchase of the Past in Caribbean Diasporic Fiction*, Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press 2015, p. 159.

⁶⁰ DELPHINE MUNOS, *Speaking of Madness in the First Person/Speaking Madness in the Second Person? Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and “The Cheater's Guide to Love”*, in BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT, EVELYN O'CALLAGHAN, and DARIA TUNCA (eds.), *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature: On the Edge*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2018, pp. 81-102, p. 88.

⁶¹ LAUREN JEAN GANTZ, “Nothing Ever Ends”: *Archives of Written and Graphic Testimony in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in «Ariel», XLVI, no. 4 (2015), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2015.0031>, pp. 123-153, p. 123.

⁶² URANIA MILEVSKI and LENA WETENKAMP, *Introduction: Relations between Literary Theory and Memory Studies*, in «Journal of Literary Theory», XVI, no. 2 (2022), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1515/jlt-2022-2022>, pp. 197-212, p. 207.

rial narrative is thus strictly entangled with multiperspectivity, as the postmemorial narrator's voice needs to be counteracted by an ongoing negotiation between characters across generations. It is no coincidence that, in Rothberg's own terms, postmemory can be considered as a kind of multidirectional memory:

What Hirsch does not say – although her account does not exclude the possibility – is that postmemory may well constitute a particular version of memory's multidirectionality. Not only does the mediation and belatedness of postmemory recall the mediation and belatedness of all memory – its construction out of networks of spatially and temporally differentiated “moments” – but those characteristics of postmemory are precisely the points of entry for the multidirectional confluence of disparate historical imaginaries.⁶³

In the case of *Oscar Wao*, moreover, a specific aspect of postmemory is emphasized by Yunior's first-person omniscience. In Hirsch's definition, postmemory is «a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation».⁶⁴ Similarly, one of the key features of first-person omniscient narrators is their narrative acts of imaginative creation, even the «central paradigm for homodiegetic omniscience» in Paul Dawson's analysis.⁶⁵ Yunior's representation of other characters' consciousness is an act of border-crossing through an imaginative, authorial reconstruction of their voices – in the case of Lola, the only character who speaks in the first-person – and focalizations. My concept of pseudo-multiperspectivity draws indeed on Brian Richardson's «pseudo-focalization», where imagination plays a pivotal role. In pseudo-focalization, «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».⁶⁶ In pseudo-multiperspectivity, an impersonal omniscient narrator turns out to be a character of the storyworld who uses their imagination *to stage a fabricated multiperspective negotiation*. In the case of Yunior, his supposed counter-narrative – achieved by giving voice to those silenced by the regime – results in a perpetuation of the regime itself only partially masked through the multiperspective negotiation of memory. In Díaz's own words, in fact, «what's ironic is that Trujillo is this horror in this book, but the rea-

⁶³ M. ROTHBERG, *Multidirectional Memory*, cit., p. 271.

⁶⁴ MARIANNE HIRSH, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1997, p. 22.

⁶⁵ P. DAWSON, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator*, cit., p. 213. See also p. 204, where Dawson challenges unnatural narratologists' claim of «unnaturalizability» of first-person omniscience.

⁶⁶BRIAN RICHARDSON, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Columbus, The Ohio State University Press 2006, p. II.

ders don't even recognize that the person telling the story is Trujillo with a different mask».⁶⁷

As a postmemorial narrator and a perpetuator of a dictatorial form of storytelling, Yuniór does not occupy a clear-cut role. Drawing on Rothberg's idea of «implicated subject», I suggest that Yuniór 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».⁶⁸ Implicated subjects are less actively involved than perpetrators, but help nonetheless «propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present»,⁶⁹ as Yuniór's narrative manipulation clearly exemplifies. Like implicated subjects, Yuniór is a diasporic nationalist subject who help to «perpetuate nationalist projects that are based on the subordination of others» (original emphasis),⁷⁰ by silencing Oscar's queerness, replicating Trujillo's systemic *machismo*, and stealing his former girlfriend's voice. Moreover, the self-reflexive mode of pseudo-multiperspectivity and first-person omniscience exposes Yuniór'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»,⁷¹ as in a novel where the title character disappears behind his narrator's adherence to hyper-masculinity. Through Yuniór's character, Díaz portrays a narrator «complexly» implicated with «direct and indirect connection to histories of both victimization and perpetration»,⁷² thus questioning multiperspective novels which merely employ a rigid juxtaposition based on the victim/perpetrator imaginary and exposing both the potential and risks of multidirectional memory. As stated by Rothberg, in fact, «thinking in terms of implication also helps draw further attention to how practices of memory – even multidirectional practices – intersect with power dynamics, forms of complicity and distancing, and risks of forgetting».⁷³

Yuniór's complex implication can also be understood through his blending of what Aleida Assmann calls the passive and active forms of «cultural forgetting». The passive form of «cultural forgetting is related to non-intentional acts, such as losing, hiding, dispersing, neglecting, abandoning»,⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Quoted in HAKYOUNG AHN, *Masculine Failure: Rape Culture and Intergenerational Trauma in Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in KATE ROSE (ed.), *Displaced: Literature of Indigeneity, Migration, and Trauma*, New York and London, Routledge 2020, pp. 214-228, p. 216.

⁶⁸ M. ROTHBERG, *The Implicated Subject*, cit., p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 17.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 19.

⁷² Ivi, p. 203.

⁷³ Ivi, p. 26.

⁷⁴ ALEIDA ASSMANN, *Canon and Archive*, in *Cultural Memory Studies*, cit., pp. 97-107, p. 98.

while its active counterpart implies intentional acts such as persecution and censorship. In his reconstruction of Oscar's identity, as Machado Sáez and other theorists have noted, Yuniór deliberately omits elements of queerness or other aspects that would not be acceptable following Trujillo's hyper-masculine cultural regime, thus perpetuating a stereotypical image of the Dominican man. As his narrative becomes more and more self-reflexive, Yuniór seems to struggle with remembering and forgetting, but what he actually does is to *actively* and selectively omit Oscar's queerness to ensure his conformity to the requirements of the regime, while pretending to *passively* forget some key elements. Once again, this phenomenon is inherently related to the nature of a first-person omniscient narrator, who necessarily blends remembering and imagination. Therefore, while at times effectively questioning structural elements of the regime, Yuniór's implication ultimately contributes to the perpetuation of many of its canonical norms.

As noted by Matti Hyvärinen, counter-narrativity is «by no means an essential, abstract, and totalizing feature of any narrative»,⁷⁵ but it could be understood in terms of scalarity: in this sense, Yuniór's narrative explicitly counters a particular dominant discourse – through the recurring images of the *fukú* and the *zafa*, a curse and its «counterspell»⁷⁶ – while at the same time «drawing on some other cultural canonicities».⁷⁷ Relying on the understanding of his own novel as a *zafa*, Yuniór self-reflexively adopt multiple perspectives and voices to produce the illusion of a social pluralization that is nothing but a perpetuation of old values through narrative manipulation, following the spatial form of the hierarchical network typical of pseudo-multiperspectivity. While multiperspective narratives can be equated to Caroline Levine's New Formalist understanding of the network,⁷⁸ pseudo-multiperspectivity, I argue, blends the forms of the network and the hierarchy. In *Oscar Wao*, for example, the story is at first presented through entanglements and links moving in multiple directions, but as soon as the identity of Yuniór as an implicated narrator is revealed – implicated both with Trujillo's cultural regime and his characters' lives – the network-like spatiality of the novel gives way to the hierarchical structure of power. Through the spatial form of the hierarchical network, pseudo-multiperspectivity can thus replicate on a formal level the illusion of democratic counter-narratives that ethical criticism tends to directly associate with the depiction of multiple perspectives.

4 CONCLUSION

Contemporary Memory Studies understand memory as relational, dialogical, transcultural, transgenerational, that is, as a dynamic, entangled concept: multiperspectivity can thus be regarded as a significant tool and a productive mode of storytelling for representing what Rothberg has influentially

⁷⁵ MATTI HYVÄRINEN, *Toward a Theory of Counter-Narratives: Narrative Contestation, Cultural Canonicity, and Tellability*, in *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, cit., pp. 17-29, p. 27.

⁷⁶ JUNOT DÍAZ, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, New York, Riverhead Books 2007, p. 7.

⁷⁷ M. HYVÄRINEN, *Toward a Theory of Counter-Narratives*, cit., p. 27.

⁷⁸ CAROLINE LEVINE, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2015. See also Y. LIEBERMANN, *Memory and Latency in Contemporary Anglophone Literature*, cit., p. 136.

called the multidirectionality of memory. In this article, I have proposed an understanding of multiperspectivity as a formally challenging category that affords the opportunity to engage with complex entanglements of collective memory.

In the introduction, I have briefly discussed experimental narrative forms that can convey a complex understanding of collective memory, including we-narratives. In the second section, I have focused on multiperspectivity in fictions of collective memory by examining the juxtaposition of master- and counter-narratives and its ethical affordances. While ethical criticism frequently praises the potential of multiperspectivity *per se* for democratic and impartial counter-narrativity, I have suggested that only its multidirectional understanding can productively convey the ongoing negotiation of perspectives and memories. Multiperspective narratives thus need to go beyond the complementary/contradictory binary as well as the victim/perpetrator imaginary. To discuss the potential and risks of multiperspectivity, I have introduced, in the third section, the concept of pseudo-multiperspectivity, namely a complex narrative form that I have associated with the spatial form of the hierarchical network. The pseudo-multiperspective narrative of Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* foregrounds the potential of multiperspectivity through the adoption of an implicated first-person omniscient narrator, who allows to go beyond Rothberg's victim/perpetrator imaginary and exemplify how complex narrative forms can engage with complex forms of implication. At the same time, through its hierarchical structure, pseudo-multiperspectivity shows how the juxtaposition of different perspectives can be manipulated by an overarching narrative instance to convey the illusion of counter-narrativity.

As I have argued throughout this article, multiperspective narratives play a pivotal role at the intersection of narrative theory and contemporary memory studies, especially in the engagement with fictions of collective memory. However, it is crucial that ethical and literary criticism do not automatically associate multiperspectivity with democratic assumptions, thus running the risk to discard Meir Sternberg's oft-cited «Proteus Principle».⁷⁹ As in the case of the multidirectionality of memory, multiperspectivity appears as both an arena of possibility and an arena of danger.⁸⁰ In today's era of political and social crisis, the embrace of multiperspectivity – though necessary and often encouraged – must remain critically attuned to the risks of simplistic dichotomies and hierarchical networks of power.

⁷⁹ MEIR STERNBERG, *Proteus in Quotation-Land: Mimesis and Forms of Reported Discourse*, in «Poetics Today», III, no. 2 (1982), DOI <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772069>, pp. 107-156. «In different contexts [...] the same form may fulfill different functions and different forms the same function» (p. 148).

⁸⁰ M. ROTHBERG, *The Implicated Subject*, cit., p. 26.

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