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Stretching the Boundaries of Narrativity on Stage: A Narratological Analysis of

Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* and *Hot 'N' Throbbing*

While the novel still remains the most thoroughly investigated field of narratological study, recent research has indicated that the longstanding dichotomy between narrative and drama is an artificial one. Arguments to discard this dichotomy are not exactly new: in 1988 Brian Richardson – one of the major advocates for the recognition of drama as a narrative genre – refuted the notion that “drama is exclusively a mimetic genre, while fiction combines *mimesis* and *diegesis*” and concluded his article by claiming that “drama, like the novel, is and always has been a mixture of mimetic and diegetic representation, and that any theory of narration that ignores stage narration may be considered needlessly limited, if not seriously impoverished” (193, 212; Richardson’s italics). And indeed, even though it has long been neglected by narratologists, theories about the relation between narrativity and drama extend back to Antiquity.

Since Richardson’s article we have witnessed a slow but steady rise in the inclusion of drama in narratological research, as narratologists such as Richardson (2001, 2006), Monika Fludernik (1996; 2001; 2008), Manfred Jahn (2001), Ansgar Nünning (2001) and Roy Sommer (2005; see also Nünning and Sommer 2002; 2008; Hühn and Sommer 2011) have

provided a theoretical framework to support this thesis. By revisiting structuralist concepts such as “agency,” “focalization,” “narrative voice,” and different types of narrators, and by applying these concepts to drama, they have paved the way to more, practical research that analyses narrative experiments set up by contemporary dramatists.

In a forthcoming article on Samuel Beckett’s radio play *Cascando*, Tom Vandeveldt rightly reminds us that – now that a theoretical framework has been established – there is still a great need for narratological research based on a thorough textual analysis of drama texts. In most cases, the aforementioned critics have employed the reversed strategy. They have outlined theoretical concepts (e.g. Richardson’s “generative narrator” which will be elaborated on below) that can be used to investigate narrativity in drama, and provided many examples in order to validate them. While this approach suited these critics’ needs perfectly at the time, the field now requires a more exhaustive methodology focussing on thorough narratological analysis rather than on listing titles of important diegetic plays. If we wish to keep the narratological study of drama relevant we must not only identify those plays which make use of narrativity, we must also – and more importantly – investigate the ways in which dramatists explore and eventually transgress the “conventional” limits of narrativity in their plays. For while the theory enveloping diegetic possibilities and experiments in drama might still be fairly recent, their practice is not. Many postmodern playwrights have kept their repertoire interesting by experimenting with mediation, narrative voice, narrative time, etc. in their plays, which often leads to the creation of what Jan Alber terms “impossible storyworlds:” “stories [which] transgress real-world frames and urge us to stretch our sense-making strategies to the limit” (80).

Paula Vogel is one of those playwrights. As a lesbian feminist playwright who often uses feminism and sexuality in her plays, most articles on and interviews with Vogel have focussed on gender-related issues. While this is undoubtedly an important aspect of her work

(see Mansbridge; Savran), the significance of experiments with narrativity in her plays has often been overlooked. Two exceptions I have found are Graley Herren's "Narrating, Witnessing, and Healing Trauma in Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*" and Brian Richardson's "Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama". Herren's article is a case study which discusses how the protagonist in *How I Learned to Drive* employs narration as a coping mechanism to help her confront a traumatic event in the past. Richardson's article on the other hand is a more general treatment of the use of narratological concepts in Postmodern drama. In "Voice and Narration" Richardson called Vogel's work *Hot 'N' Throbbing* "one of the most recent, innovative and powerful [examples of the use] of narration and subjectivity" in drama (689), after which he continued to describe some of the key narratological aspects of that play. However, since it is but a small part in a larger treatment of narratology in drama in general, his discussion of the play remains but a brief enumeration of those aspects. In this article, I intend to provide a more thorough analysis of two of Vogel's most experimental plays: *The Baltimore Waltz* and *Hot 'N' Throbbing*. Like Herren, I will start from the premise that there is indeed a place for narrativity on stage rather than try to reinforce that theory. Unlike Herren, I will use that premise to investigate how Vogel's narrative experiments stretch or even overturn the conventional limits of poststructural narratology. Obviously, before any discussion of Paula Vogel's use of narrativity on stage can be attempted, we must first provide a definition of the already contested term "narrativity." Therefore, I will dedicate my first chapter to the definition of the term, by turning to an article by Nünning and Sommer. By subdividing narrativity into "mimetic" and "diegetic" narrativity they have provided a broad enough definition of the concept to support transgeneric narratological analysis. Moreover, this first theoretical chapter will also serve to elaborate on some of the key narratological aspects that will be used in my discussion below. Chapters 2 and 3, then, will each contain a thorough narratological analysis of one of

Vogel's plays. There, I will specify how Vogel first adds both mimetic and diegetic narrative dimensions to her plays, to then exploit or even completely overturn them.

1. Narrativity and Drama

As Nünning and Sommer correctly remarked in "Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity" the concepts of narrativity and narrative are "notoriously difficult to pin down" (333). Traditionally, the definitions of these terms are mostly text-oriented, meaning they attempt to pin the concept down to a small set of textual features, distinguishing it from nonnarrative (Prince *A Dictionary of Narratology*, 65). Such text-oriented definitions can focus on "story" (eventfulness, the presence of existents, etc.) or on "discourse" (modality, mediacy, etc.), while some narratologists define the term precisely in the combination of the two (see Abbott *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, esp. 14-17). In contrast to these text-oriented approaches, Fludernik has proposed a reception-oriented approach by regarding narrativity as "a function of narrative texts [which] centres on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature" (Fludernik *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, 26).

Because it stems from a cognitive rather than a purely textual perspective, the latter approach already allows for a more inclusive concept of narrativity. And indeed, in *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* Fludernik avidly supports the inclusion of drama in the discussion of narratology. However, from the point of view of a completely transgeneric narratology Fludernik's definition is still too limiting. In this article, I will follow Nünning and Sommer's advise to avoid "the dangers involved in reductive definitions of narrativity that privilege one of the possible dimensions of narratives at the expense of others (eventfulness, the presence of a narrator, or experientiality)" ("Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity", 339). In order to accommodate to a more comprehensive transgeneric understanding of the term, they proposed to make a distinction between mimetic and diegetic narrativity:

Mimetic narrativity could be defined as the representation of a temporal and/or causal sequence of events, with the degree of narrativity hinging upon the degree of eventfulness. Diegetic narrativity, on the other hand, refers to verbal, as opposed to visual or performative, transmission of narrative content, to the representation of a speech act of telling a story by an agent called a narrator.

(338)

The combined image of this new dichotomy offers a definition of narrativity that can be applied to prose, drama, poetry and other genres or media alike. As such it will serve as the perfect basis on which to build my narratological analyses of Paula Vogel's plays.

These analyses will also draw on some other narratological concepts which might require elucidation beforehand. The first concept to be discussed is that of the aforementioned "generative narrator," a term coined by Richardson to indicate a typical type of narration in drama ("Point of View in Drama"). A generative narrator is a narrator "whose diegetic discourse engenders the ensuing mimetic action" (197). In other words, it is a character that introduces a story which is then in turn enacted on stage. A good example of this type of narrator is the STAGE MANAGER in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, whose diegetic discourse alternates with the mimetic action performed by the town's inhabitants throughout the play.

Wilder's STAGE MANAGER can also be considered an example of a second important narratological concept that will be discussed in relation to Vogel's plays: "narrative metalepsis" – an "intrusion into the storyworld by the extradiegetic narrator or by the narratee (or into deeper embedded levels), or the reverse" (Pier 303). Throughout the play, the STAGE MANAGER interacts with the storyworld he has created by walking on, off and through the stage (for the organization of which – as his name reveals – he is responsible) as well as with the characters in his story.

In "Scene Shift, Metalepsis, and the Metaleptic Mode," Fludernik discerns four types of metalepsis, combining Genette's original typology of the term with Marie-Laure Ryan's

more recent distinction of rhetorical versus ontological metalepsis (388-9). The first type is called “authorial metalepsis,” which is reserved for passages that indicate the narrator’s control over the development of the fiction he narrates, and thus foreground the fictionality of the story. The second type is called “narratorial metalepsis” (or: “ontological metalepsis 1”), and occurs whenever a narrator or character moves to a hierarchically lower narrative level in the storyworld. This type will become an important aspect of the discussion of Vogel’s *The Baltimore Waltz* below. The third type, then, is called “lectorial metalepsis” (or: “ontological metalepsis 2”). This type turns type 2 around, by implicating the narratee on the story level or referring to a character’s passage from an embedded to an embedding narrative level. Finally, Fludernik’s fourth type of metalepsis is called “rhetorical metalepsis,” which occurs when the narrator explicitly pauses the plot to address the reader. As such, this type is quite similar to “authorial metalepsis,” but differs in the fact that it does not necessarily imply that the narrator can alter the plot in a substantial way.

These four types of metalepsis can be incorporated into two larger varieties: a rhetorical variety (types 1 and 4) where the different hierarchical narrative levels are merely exposed, and an ontological variety (types 2 and 3) where those narrative levels are actually transgressed. Narrative metalepses of the latter variety can be regarded as “non-natural” types of narration, the third and final narratological concept to be explained in this chapter.

As I already mentioned, Fludernik proposed to approach narratology (and therefore “narrative” and “narrativity” as well) from a cognitive perspective in her book *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*. Apologizing in advance for the “naïve and evaluative” interpretations the term “natural” in her title might produce, Fludernik explains that it is to be applied “exclusively to the *cognitive frames* by means of which texts are interpreted” (12; Fludernik’s italics). In this sense, the term intends to denote “‘naturally occurring’ or ‘constitutive of prototypical human experience’” (ibid.). As such, she aims to examine how “[r]eaders actively

construct meanings and impose frames on their interpretations of texts [...] in terms of available [real-life] schemata” (ibid.). She then goes on to contrast these “natural” schemata with “non-natural”² (rather than the more provocative “unnatural”³) schemata, which signify “[f]ictional experiments that manifestly exceed the boundaries of naturally occurring story(telling) situations” (ibid.).

By transgressing hierarchical narrative levels, ontological metalepses are doing just that. In real life it is impossible for a narrator to step down into the fictional storyworld he has created, or for a character to climb up to a higher level and to begin communicating with his narrator. Of course, this does not mean that non-natural types of narration are inconceivable in the strict sense. Indeed, they are still “schemata,” implying they can be imagined, staged and interpreted. Rather, non-natural types of narration are possible in fiction, but impossible in reality.⁴

Finally, I would like to close this introductory chapter by adding a small disclaimer of my own. As the title of the chapter suggests, my analysis will be based on drama texts, and not on the actual performance of the plays. In my analyses, I might sometimes refer to the play’s implied performance or audience, but these will always be constructs, based on a reading of the text (the drama text itself as well as stage directions and author’s notes), not on observations of an actual play. While I can surely appreciate the medium specific value of theatrical performances, I have chosen to focus solely on the plays’ drama texts because this approach has two advantages. Firstly, the essentialist nature of the drama text allowed me to discuss the author’s work without being distracted by the input of actors or directors. Secondly, since the author’s notes and stage directions are often written as explanatory remarks that serve to guide actors and directors in their performance of the text, they might also explain the author’s use of certain structures more explicitly. These two reasons make it

easier to accomplish a thorough narratological analysis of a (fixed) drama text than one of a (fleeting) theatrical performance.

2. *The Baltimore Waltz*

That the author's notes and stage directions might facilitate the critic's understanding of a drama text is also the case for *The Baltimore Waltz*, a play Vogel wrote in 1989 in the memory of her brother Carl who had died of AIDS the year before. In the "playwright's note," she defines the play as "a journey with Carl to a Europe that exists only in the imagination" (4). In the play, we witness CARL's⁵ final moments, and his sister ANNA's desperate attempt to flee the reality of her brother's imminent death by resorting to a fantasy world in which she fulfils one of his last wishes: to visit Europe with his sister. The Europe painted by ANNA's imagination is a surreal landscape based on clichés rather than on experience. Vogel's production notes prove as much. They reveal that Vogel would encourage the director of her play "to score the production with [...] every cliché of the European experience as imagined by Hollywood" (6). Also, the play's stage directions tell us that it is filled with a series of improbable characters (all played by the same actor), among whom a Parisian GARÇON who talks "[w]ith a thick Peter Sellers French" accent (20; Vogel's italics).

All these factors indicate that the play is not set in the real world, but rather inside ANNA's mind and that the action on stage can be read as a mimetic projection of her fantasy – a good example of Nünning and Sommer's mimetic narrativity. ANNA is the play's mediator: her consciousness mediates the events and existents (*story*) in an audio-visual sign system (*narrative*) (Alber and Fludernik, paragraph 4). As such, the play is mediated "through consciousness," rather than "through a (narrator's) *discourse*" (paragraph 28). This means that in Stanzel's terms (who coined the concept "mediation"), the play's mediation is presented in the "reflector mode" rather than in the "teller mode:" instead of being explicitly told by a

narrator character, the play's story is offered from the reflector character's perspective (in this case ANNA), as if by itself.

According to Richardson, who proposed a definition for narrators on stage, the mere fact that ANNA's consciousness frames the play's actions is enough to call her the play's narrator as well: "In referring to narrators on stage [...] I am designating the speaker or consciousness that frames, relates, or engenders the actions of the characters of a play" ("Point of View in Drama," 194). Later in the article, Richardson explains that his study of point of view in drama is an attempt to fill a narratological gap that has been allowed to exist for too long already: "Perhaps the most flagrant omission in point-of-view theory is the absence of any discussion of the dramatization of an individual consciousness in the theater. Just as it is regularly averred that all drama is non-narrative, it is also presumed that dramatic representation is invariably objective, unmediated, devoid of subjectivity, and, in Bakhtin's terms, entirely monological" (204).

The Baltimore Waltz demonstrates that subjectivity and mediation *can* be presented on stage. ANNA's world is entirely subjective: hers are the expectations of Europe that constitute the fictional world, and hers are the emotions that colour the events that occur in it. ANNA's imagination even allows for her brother's fatal illness to be projected onto her: in her world CARL is completely healthy while ANNA is dying of "ATD – Acquired Toilet Disease" (11). This is where Vogel's influences from dramatic expressionism and surrealism become apparent. Similar to, for instance, O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, it is mainly the protagonist's subconscious that rules the fictional world of the stage. Only in the play's last scene does ANNA return to reality. There we can witness her standing next to CARL's hospital bed, trying to come to terms with the fact that her brother has just died:

ANNA (*Takes the brochures*): Ah, yes. The brochures for Europe. I've never been abroad. We're going to go when he gets – (*Stops herself*)

(*With control*) I must learn to use the past tense. We would have gone had he gotten better.

(57; Vogel's italics)

As such, the play can be interpreted as an embedded narrative. ANNA's reality in the Baltimore hospital lounge forms the play's frame narrative in which her imagined trip to Europe is embedded. The only difference between this play and the prototypical embedded narrative in prose is that the transition between both hierarchical levels of fiction is marked by audiovisual markers rather than linguistic ones. As ANNA returns to reality, "[t]here is the sound of a loud alarm clock," which symbolically wakes her from her fantasy world (56; Vogel's italics). The play's lighting is also an important indicator: Vogel's production notes explain how in ANNA's scenes "[t]he lighting should be highly stylized, lush, dark and imaginative, in contrast to the hospital white silence of the last scene" (6).⁶ This embedded structure of the play serves a metafictional end, comparable to what Monika Fludernik remarked about Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* in her essay "Narrative and Drama":

The play [*Travesties*] has a primary level of the frame narrative in which Carr tells Bennett about his experiences in Zurich, which are then represented as insets. [...] As Nünning/Sommer have already noted, such strategies, current in epic theatre and in postmodernist plays, frequently serve metadramatic and metafictional ends, highlighting the fact that what we get to hear of the story is dependent on the narrator figure who keeps distorting the plot, if not inventing it.

(370-1)

The difference between the use of embedded narratives in *Travesties* and *The Baltimore Waltz* is that in the latter the audience is only explicitly made aware of the play's embedded structure in its last scene. As such, Vogel needed to employ other dramatic strategies throughout the play to indicate that the performed events are not realistic. I would argue that this function is realised by her use of diegetic narrativity (more specifically, a set of intradiegetic narrators) within ANNA's imagined (mimetic) narrative.

Throughout the play, in the scenes that are governed by ANNA's imagination, the function of narrator is passed back and forth between the play's many different characters.

These narrative passages usually appear at the beginning of a scene. As such they mark the transition from one scene to the next, and introduce the scene's topic and setting. While most of the play is set in an imaginary Europe, Vogel's notes indicate that the entire play in fact "takes place in a hospital lounge in Baltimore, Maryland" (6). That location is also what defines the play's set and even some of the characters' costumes. The hospital bed, ANNA's "full slip/negligeé," CARL's "flannel pyjama's," and the "latex gloves" which are worn by THE THIRD MAN "throughout the entire play" are all signs that in reality the characters never leave the Baltimore hospital (ibid.). Nevertheless, the performers need to create the illusion that ANNA and CARL are in fact travelling through Europe. While the aforementioned lighting effects and the cliché soundtrack undoubtedly are a great help in the creation of that illusion, it is in fact chiefly the characters' dialogue that determines the play's setting. Throughout the play, the transition between the scenes – and between different imagined settings – is usually introduced by THE THIRD MAN reciting lessons in foreign languages, not unlike the Assimil language courses parodied in Eugène Ionesco's absurdist theatre. A good example of such an introduction is the beginning of the scene where CARL and ANNA supposedly arrive at the airport to begin their journey:

THE THIRD MAN: Lesson Five: Basic Dialogue. At the airport. We are going to Paris. What time does our flight leave? Nous allons à Paris. A quelle heure depart notre vol?

(The Third Man becomes an Airport Security Guard)

(15; Vogel's italics)

This is a clear case of generative narration: in this case THE THIRD MAN's speech shapes the fictional world on stage. His mere mention of the word airport transforms the set into an airport customs area, and THE THIRD MAN himself into an AIRPORT SECURITY GUARD. For the remainder of the scene, the characters continue to act as if they were in an airport, and ANNA and CARL were trying to get through customs. This kind of generative narration

is usually performed by THE THIRD MAN, but not exclusively so. In some scenes CARL is reciting the language courses (e.g. scene XVI), and sometimes THE THIRD MAN performs the lines simultaneously with CARL or ANNA (e.g. scenes VIII and XIX) which further develops the Assimil-effect. At other times, the scenes are not introduced by means of Assimil recitations, but by more straightforward forms of narration. Scene XI, for instance is introduced by the aforementioned GARÇON character, who becomes an omniscient intra- and homodiegetic narrator:

GARÇON (*With a thick Peter Sellers French*): It was a simple bistro affair by French standards. He had le veau Prince Orloff, she le boeuf à la mode – a simple dish of haricots verts, and a médoc to accompany it all. He barely touched his meal. She mopped the sauces with the bread. As their meal progressed, Anna thought of the lunches she packed back home.

(20; Vogel's italics)

This narrator is intradiegetic because he himself is being narrated by a hierarchically higher instance: he is still but a figment of ANNA's imagination. He is homodiegetic because he is a witness to the events he narrates (he works at the bistro), and even converses with ANNA and CARL a little further in the scene. But the GARÇON's omniscience is suspect: how can a witness to the events know ANNA's innermost thoughts? This is an example of a non-natural type of narration. In fact, we are dealing with a case of Fludernik's second type of metalepsis: "narratorial metalepsis." At the beginning of the scene, the GARÇON is a generative narrator whose narration shapes the fictional bistro scene on the stage. Afterwards, he steps down into the hierarchically lower level of fiction he just created, and becomes part of his own narration. As I have argued in the previous chapter, such cases of metalepsis extend the boundaries of narration and can therefore be regarded as true forms of narrative experimentation that can rival those in prose fiction.

These are the most important narrative experiments that occur in *The Baltimore Waltz*. There are more: CARL and ANNA both play similar parts as generative introductory

narrators, and CARL even attempts a dramatized form of second person narration, which, according to Fludernik in her article “New Wine in Old Bottles?” is a very “foregrounded type of nonnatural narration, [which] has recently become quite prominent” in prose fiction (626). But these experiments all seem to follow more or less the same pattern: at the beginning of a scene a generative narrator diegetically recreates the stage around him. The other two characters then start a dialogue in accordance with the newly created setting. Sometimes, as was the case with the GARÇON, the narrator then metaleptically steps down into his fictional world and interacts with the other characters. Such structural similarities render a detailed discussion of each of these instances redundant. Suffice it to say that within ANNA’s fictional world, the function of intradiegetic narrator varies from scene to scene; creating narrative confusion that produces a *Verfremdungseffekt*, causing the audience to become critical observers who question the realistic value of the drama that unfolds before their eyes, which of course contributes to the play’s postmodern atmosphere.

In this interpretation of *The Baltimore Waltz*, we can subdivide Vogel’s experiments with drama into two narratological categories: those of focalization (“who sees/whose point of ;” in this case ANNA’s dramatized psyche) and voice (“who speaks;” in this case a series of embedded narrators). These two structuralist concepts have, however, already inspired much lively debate among narratologists. One of the key questions in this debate is whether or not a narrative can exist without a narrator. While most narratologists will attribute the narration of a seemingly undiegetic narrative to a covert extradiegetic narrator, some might attribute it to the implied author (or even, provocatively, to the author; see Walsh), and yet others may allow for the existence of so called “nonnarrated stories” (Chatman). Fludernik, on the other hand, takes an altogether different approach when she confronts the subject from a cognitive point of view and makes the case that while the existence of a covert narrator may be of practical use for readers (who while reading tend “to attribute stylistic

features to a hypothetical narrator persona and/or a character”), this by no means “necessitate[s] the stipulation of a narrator persona on the theoretical level at all” (“New Wine in Old Bottles?,” 622-3). She then goes on to argue that – at least in prose fiction – “the distinction of ‘who sees’ and ‘who speaks’ can be argued to be entirely spurious:”

The distinction between voice and focalization in the traditional type of narratives does not really make good theoretical sense. Both narratological categories are established on the basis of roughly the same textual features, and they are so established by way of an interpretative move that, in the case of voice, projects a communicative schema on the narrative, and – in the case of focalization – uses a visual metaphor for determining the source of fictional knowledge. Both interpretative strategies are based on illusionistic presuppositions, and both attempt to extrapolate a consistent real-world schema from the textual surface structure.

(634-5)

Still, I would like to suggest that despite the absence of textual features that point to an extradiegetic narrator, the concept of covert narration *can* make theoretical sense. As I have tried to demonstrate, this concept can become a powerful instrument in the narratological analysis of drama. Often, as is the case in *The Baltimore Waltz*, attributing the mimetic development of a play’s story to a single narrator persona can help the reader grasp the logic behind an otherwise seemingly arbitrary succession of scenes.

Of course, depending on how one chooses to define “narrativity,” categorizing ANNA as the play’s (covert) *narrator* rather than its reflector character might still be contested. Not everyone will agree with Richardson’s definition of narrators on stage, quoted above. As I have argued in the previous chapter, however, transgeneric narratology requires the use of a broader definition of the term “narrativity” (such as Nünning and Sommer’s dichotomy). Because, in this case, the play’s mimetic narration can be ascribed to a reflector character, I agree with Richardson and also regard ANNA’s “dramatized psyche” as its narrator (“Point of View in Drama,” 194).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, Vogel's experiments with narrativity in drama are not restricted to mimetic narrativity alone. In my analysis of *The Baltimore Waltz*, I have already discussed the play's diegetic narrativity when I analysed Vogel's use of a confusing set of alternating intradiegetic narrators. The following analysis of *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, however, will show how she takes her experiments with diegetic narrativity to a whole new level.

3. *Hot 'N' Throbbing*

Hot 'N' Throbbing tells the story of a WOMAN (Charlene) who writes scripts for an adult production company that targets a female audience, and lives with her two children (a BOY and a GIRL) in a small townhouse. One evening, when both her children are out, the WOMAN's drunk abusive ex-husband (MAN) comes barging in, and disturbs the WOMAN in the middle of a writing session. After being shot in the behind by the WOMAN, the MAN stays in and the two try to communicate. At the end of the play, however, the MAN suddenly becomes violent again, and strangles the WOMAN to death. What makes this play narratologically interesting is that it also stages two narrative voices: a female one named VOICE-OVER (or: V.O.), and a male one named THE VOICE. Vogel's notes for her characters inform us that VOICE-OVER "narrates the script that The Woman is writing, [she is the WOMAN's] inner voice. [...] Her voice is sensual and husky" (232). THE VOICE, on the other hand, mainly spouts sexist lines, often quoting established works of fiction (such as *Lolita*, *Ulysses* or *Lady Chatterly's Lover*) and early sexology. His voice changes accents continuously, and "is always theatrical, rich, baritone and commanding" (ibid.).

In "Popular Bodies, Canonical Voices: Paula Vogel's *Hot 'N' Throbbing* as Performative Burlesque," Joanna Mansbridge makes the case that VOICE-OVER can be interpreted as the WOMAN's "own narrative voice," and THE VOICE as a form of sexist distortion which "continually disrupts [the WOMAN's] ability to listen to" herself (469). As

the following passage from *Hot 'N' Throbbing* will demonstrate, THE VOICE's interjections are always more violent than VOICE-OVER's:

WOMAN: Page twenty-six... I need some words that pack a punch...

BOY: So what about throbbing?

WOMAN: I've got throbbing all over the page. There are only so many ways to say throbbing...

V.O.: – “Pulsating– ”

THE VOICE: – “Beating– ”

V.O.: – “Heaving–”

THE VOICE: – “Battering–”

V.O.: – “Pulsing–”

(243-4)

Indeed, a careful examination of the interaction between VOICE-OVER and THE VOICE suggests that THE VOICE's disturbing language breaks VOICE-OVER's concentration, causing her to almost repeat herself by offering the WOMAN the synonym “pulsing” after having just offered “pulsating” – a reading which would support Mansbridge's claims. Because sexism is still so ubiquitous in contemporary Western society, not even the WOMAN – a liberated feminist who shows she is comfortable with her own sexuality by writing female-oriented erotica – can escape VOICE-OVER's influence. Together, the WOMAN's own inner voice (VOICE-OVER) and the remnants of society's indoctrinating patriarchal discourse (THE VOICE) form the source of the her narration:

WOMAN: Well, they're the characters speaking, or the script itself. I mean, I know it's me, but I have to get into it. At first it spooked me a little. But now I know when I hear them, it's a good sign. And I am in control.

(260)

This creates a multifaceted narrative situation. On the one hand, VOICE-OVER and THE VOICE are two narrative voices. Their collaborative narrative act is, in a sense, responsible for the WOMAN's erotic script. But at the same time, these two voices appear to be created

by the WOMAN herself: when she says “I know it’s me,” this can be read to mean that she considers herself to be the origin of these two voices. This leads to a complex narrative hierarchy. In the above quote, the WOMAN explains that she is the one who is in control (which would place her on a hierarchically higher level), but on the same page in the drama text, she contradicts this statement when she says: “I don’t know. When I really get going, it’s like a trance – it’s not me writing at all. It’s as if I just listen to voices and I’m taking diction.” In conclusion, it can be argued that the WOMAN is narrating her script *via* THE VOICE and VOICE-OVER. But whether the WOMAN or the voices rank at the top of the narrative hierarchy remains ambiguous throughout the play. Instead, Vogel’s play seems to undermine the structuralist notion of hierarchical narration completely.

What complicates things even further is that the two voices are also physically present on the stage. VOICE-OVER is presented as “a sex worker: at times bored with her job; at times empathically overacting, trying to land a role in a legitimate film. [She] watches the stage action from her glass booth, where she dances” (233). THE VOICE is presented as the bouncer/owner/DJ of the erotic dancehall (The Foxy Lady) where VOICE-OVER works. In order to allow for interaction between the physical manifestations of the voices on the one hand, and the WOMAN on the other, Vogel transformed the stage into a dual space. One part of the stage represents the world of the “**stage lights**” (reality; presented as the WOMAN’s living room), the other part represents the world of the “**blue lights**” (fantasy; presented as The Foxy Lady) (234; Vogel’s emphasis). Vogel was able to produce this effect by use of lighting, and by placing the WOMAN’s living room in the middle of the dance hall: “In the midst of the dance-hall interior, there is a platformed construction of a living room, almost like an island floating in the deep **blue light**” (ibid.; Vogel’s emphasis). As such the stage world exists on two planes: the plane of the blue lights can be interpreted as a projection of the subconscious of the characters that live in the plane of the stage lights.

If we interpret VOICE-OVER and THE VOICE to embody the WOMAN's subconscious and source of inspiration, then the WOMAN can be regarded as a generative narrator. As such it is her subconscious that generates the action in the plane of the blue lights. But the two voices are generative narrators as well: more often than not their speech (i.e.: the dictated film script) is mimetically enacted on stage by the other characters. For instance, when VOICE-OVER dictates a voyeuristic quasi-oedipal scene where a "YOUNG BOY" is gazing at "an attractive older WOMAN," Vogel's stage directions say: "*(The Boy follows the instructions of Voice-Over)*" (244; Vogel's italics). At times, THE VOICE even acts as the director of the action that takes place in the plane of the stage lights, ordering the MAN and the WOMAN to alter their dialogue. Finally, at the end of the play, the narratological roles are entirely reversed, as THE VOICE tells VOICE-OVER "there has been a change in the script," and transforms the play's end into a misogynistic snuff-film. From that point onwards, the action on stage is generated by THE VOICE, and VOICE-OVER is obliged to reluctantly improvise her part in THE VOICE's dialogue. Meanwhile, in the plane of the stage lights, the MAN and the WOMAN mimetically enact the action dictated by the voices, crudely lip-syncing their dialogue. The WOMAN is powerless in her struggle against the MAN, who eventually kills her by strangulation. The play ends proleptically, as the audience witnesses an older version of the GIRL, sitting behind her mother's computer, typing a script of female erotica dictated by VOICE-OVER.

Throughout the play, narrative functions remain deliberately ambiguous as its generative centre keeps shifting, resulting in a complicated non-natural type of narration. At first it would seem that the WOMAN is in control of her own actions, and that she is the extradiegetic narrator (albeit *via* the voices) of her script. However, towards the end of the play it becomes clear that the voices are the ones who are in control. When THE VOICE restrains VOICE-OVER and decides to change the script, the WOMAN loses all control, and

has no choice but to play her part to the bitter end. As such, *Hot 'N' Throbbing* can be read as a narrative experiment that attempts to stretch the boundaries of narration to the extremes. Here, the functions of narrator and narratee are constantly switched back and forth between the two coexistent planes of fantasy and reality. Instead of a clear-cut narrative hierarchy, the inhabitants of both planes appear to exist on the same level and are constantly influencing one another. Strictly speaking, this kind of interaction between characters on two different planes cannot even be counted as a true form of metalepsis, for that term always implies the existence of different hierarchical levels (see: Pier “Metalepsis”), while in *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, Vogel seems to have overturned all sense of narrative hierarchy.

As Richardson argues in “Unnatural Narration in Contemporary Drama”, such narrative experiments are quite common in postmodern drama and prose alike: “Like contemporary fiction, modern drama has for some time transcended the simple, humanist narrator figure and has gone on to create ‘unnatural’ [sic] narrators who exceed and subvert the limits of individual consciousness” (133). That is exactly what has happened in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* as well. No longer satisfied with traditional narration in drama, Vogel has created her own non-natural type of narration and pushed it to the limits.

4. Conclusion

In this article I have discussed Paula Vogel’s use of narration in her plays *The Baltimore Waltz* and *Hot 'N' Throbbing*. In *The Baltimore Waltz*, Vogel experimented mainly with mediation and mimetic narrativity: most of the play takes place in the mind of one of its protagonists, resulting in an entirely subjective and unrealistic narrative. Moreover, in the scenes that take place inside ANNA’s mind the function of narrator is passed along from character to character, which only adds to the play’s narrative chaos. In *Hot 'N' Throbbing* Vogel experimented mainly with diegetic narrativity by personifying the extradiegetic narrative voice of its protagonist on stage and by presenting that voice not just as one but as two

conflicting characters: one the protagonist's own narrative voice, the other the inescapable traces of a patriarchal social discourse. In the end the latter takes control over the play and ultimately kills the character which it surrounds and inhabits. In both plays, Vogel's experiments make room for her characters' subconscious on stage. In *The Baltimore Waltz*, the audience is transported on a journey inside the mind of one of the characters, and in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* the realistic plane of the stage lights is surrounded by the plane of the blue lights: a world of fantasies where Eros and Thanatos reign. In both plays this postmodern configuration allows for an interesting interaction between many different narrators and narrative voices on stage. My analysis of narrative in Paula Vogel's plays has been a demonstration that like prose fiction, drama texts too can withstand close narratological scrutiny, and should therefore not *de facto* be excluded from narratological discussions. For centuries playwrights have used narrator personae and embedded narratives in their plays. What is more, many postmodern playwrights (such as Paula Vogel) have attempted to reinvent narrativity in drama, stretching its boundaries by setting up narrative experiments on stage that can match similar experiments in prose fiction.

Notes

¹ The author wishes to thank Luc Herman and Lars Bernaerts for their comments on an early version of this essay. Thanks also to Monika Fludernik for hosting an inspirational seminar on narrativity in drama at K.U.Leuven.

² In some of Fludernik's works I have found this term spelled as "non-natural" (e.g. *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* 12), while in others it was spelled "non-natural" (e.g. "New Wine in Old Bottles?" 625). I have chosen to use the term's original spelling throughout this article.

³ In “Impossible Storyworlds – and What to Do with Them”, Jan Alber – who builds on Fludernik’s cognitive constructivist concept – *does* use the word “unnatural” to describe the “physically or logically impossible” (79). By applying the term to entire storyworlds instead of narration alone, Alber takes Fludernik’s concept one step further and uses his article to focus on how specific “unnatural [...] scenarios take [readers] to the limits of human cognition” (ibid.). Although an interesting topic for further research, a detailed analysis of how Vogel’s use of non-natural narration challenges her audience’s sense-making abilities lies beyond the scope of this article.

⁴ Perhaps a real life scenario might be imagined where a person suffers from a mental breakdown and “steps down into” an alternate fictional reality he has created in his mind. But even in this exceptional case the words between inverted commas are used metaphorically, by means of which a psychoanalyst might try to make sense of his patient’s mental illness.

⁵ Because this play is based on real life events (however loosely), it can become difficult at times to distinguish Carl Vogel from his fictional counterpart CARL. In order to avoid such confusion, I have decided to capitalize the names of fictional characters in Vogel’s plays throughout this article.

⁶ Of course, the transition between the two hierarchical levels is marked linguistically in the drama text, as they are presented in the author’s notes and stage directions.

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