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Gianna Zocco

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The Art of Watching. The literary Motif of the Window and its Potential for Metafiction in contemporary Literature

Gianna Zocco

1 For a long time, authors have been using the literary motif of the window for discussing metafictional questions. As we can see in one of the most famous examples of this development, E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Des Vetters Eckfenster* (1822), windows enable us to see without participating. They allow us to take the position of distant, secure observers gaining information about the world even if we are not able or willing to become a part of this world. Yet, the *aesthetic* position of observers does not turn us into passive, stimulated objects, but requires an active, creative way of watching. We can only make sense of the chaotic world outside if we bring it into order, if we interpret what we see, if we consciously or unconsciously know that the abilities of structuring our perceptions and constructing our own view of ‘reality’ are indispensable parts of what the wheelchaired cousin in Hoffmann’s story calls “die Prinzipien der Kunst zu schauen.”

2 In *Des Vetters Eckfenster*, the wheelchaired cousin knows this ‘art of watching’. To the world outside his window, a marketplace and its mostly female attendants, he relates in a self-reliant, superior way, using his observations of people’s clothing, behavior, and appearance as physiognomic ‘windows to the soul’, as ways to gain knowledge of people’s inner feelings, motivations, and thoughts. This practice and its obvious parallel to authorial storytelling has led Florian Welle to describe the metafictional potential of the window as a means of constructing male, self-reliant authorship through the gaze at the woman. As Welle claims, even contemporary texts such as Richard Ford’s story *Privacy* (2002) turn to the *topos* of the male gaze from or through a window for repeating and continuing this at least 200 year old model of self-reliant, superior authorship.

3 Though this statement may be true for the examples given by Welle, the metafictional potential of the window is not limited to its parallel to self-reliant, powerful authorship. Literature of the late 20th and 21st century provides us with a huge amount of examples...
which establish particularly weak, unreliable narrators, but still turn to the motif of the window for discussing metafictional questions. Think of Heimito von Doderer’s *Die erleuchteten Fenster* (1950), Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* (1957), Alberto Moravia’s *L’uomo che guarda* (1985), Paul Auster’s *Ghosts* (1986), Peter Handke’s *Die Wiederholung* (1986), Siri Hustvedt’s *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996) or Antje Rávic Strubel’s *Fremd Gehen. Ein Nachtstück* (2002). Most of these texts are influenced by movements such as subjectivism, the *Nouveau Roman*, postmodernism, deconstructivism, or feminism, and emphasize the incoherence and unreliability of human perceptions and constructions of reality. Thus, the rejection that self-reliant authorship receives in these texts is founded in a different conception of the window-scenario: The observer at the window doubts the ability of learning Hoffmann’s ‘art of watching’.

4 In what way, then, can we describe the metafictional potential of windows in these contemporary examples? Do literary window-scenarios of the 20th and 21st century still relate to their predecessors or do they articulate completely new, innovative aspects of the window? In the first part of this article, I will discuss these questions in a general way and propose two parameters, namely objectivity/subjectivity and *mimesis/poiesis*, for classifying the various options that authors have when depicting a window-scenario of metafictional relevance. Then, I will give an exemplary analysis of two novels, Peter Handke’s *Die Wiederholung* and Siri Hustvedt’s *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*. Though both depict the development of adolescent future artists and may thus be considered contemporary versions of the *Bildungsroman*, they propose considerably different views on literature. With regard to the parameters developed in the first part, it will become clear in what way these views are articulated in Handke’s and Hustvedt’s window-scenarios.

The Window as “Mise en reflet”

5 Werner Wolf’s term of the *mise en reflet/série* is quite useful to describe how the motif of the window relates to metafictional questions. To understand why Wolf proposes this term, a short digression into literary theories of self-referentiality is necessary. Wolf suggests the term *mise en reflet/série* when criticizing Michael Scheffel’s distinction between two elementary forms of self-referentiality, which Scheffel links to the double-meaning of the German verb “reflektieren” (the English “to reflect” shares this double-meaning) as 1. to throw back, to send back an image of, to mirror; 2. to contemplate, to consider:


It proves difficult to apply Scheffel’s theory to the motif of the window. The parallel between looking through a window and writing/reading a literary text is a formal one which consists in the similarities between both actions. Since the term *Betrachtung* is limited to the level of content and requires the narrator or a character to talk or think about literature (or something close to it), the motif of the window does not belong to this...
category. Yet, it also turns out to be wrong to consider it a Spiegelung since this would require a mise en abyme or another kind of mirroring between two different levels of narration.7 Noticing this problem, Wolf proposes to expand the concept of Spiegelung by replacing the criterion of repetition, which Scheffel considers necessary for the Spiegelung, through the broader criterion of similarity. Wolf points out that a wide range of literary elements have a self-referential potential because of their formal similarity to the literary text, though they may not be considered repetitions of some part of the story and though they do not lead to a switch from one level of narration to another. In analogy to the term mise en abyme, which necessarily requires a mirroring between frame story and framed story, Wolf suggests to call these elements mise en reflet/série, and distinguishes between self-referential elements, whose similarity to the literary text causes a single mirroring ( = mise en reflet) and those causing multiple mirrorings ( = mise en série).8

7 Applying the term mise en reflet/série to the motif of the window allows us to depict the relation between the window and metaphysical questions in terms of formal similarity. The window, some of its properties such as the frame and the need for perspective, the experience of looking through a window, and the experience of being seen behind a window may be considered similar to writing or reading a literary text. Yet, we have to understand what this similarity precisely consists of. In order to do so, I would like to propose two parameters, which can both be applied to the act of writing as well as to the act of reading. Each of these parameters relates to a different aspect of the window and thus to a different kind of possible similarity.

8 The first parameter can be derived from the function of windows in our everyday life. In the words of French psychoanalyst Gérard Wajcman: “Disons alors que pour mettre le sujet et le monde en rapport, il faut une fenêtre.”9 Considering the window as a ‘bridge’ mediating between the perceiving subject and the outside world, points to two different and possibly diametrical experiences: On the one hand, windows grant access to reality and provide an objective, proof-based view of the outside world, which renders the information we get by looking out of the window more reliable than the information we get by closing our curtains and fantasizing about what is going on outside. On the other hand, this access to reality is very limited. Windows offer only one perspective on the outside world, they provide a view which is restricted to a small part of the world, and they usually allow us only to see, but not to hear, smell or taste. Hence, it is not so clear that the information we acquire through a window is more objective and reliable than our imaginations about the world outside. When we imagine what might be going on, at least we (usually) know that we are just imagining. When we look out of a window, we might get the impression of an objective access to the world, whereas the view we get is actually still influenced by our subjective imaginations, interpretations and projections, which we use to fill out the gaps in visibility.

9 Thus, the first parameter may be called “objectivity/subjectivity.” Metafictional window-scenarios in literature can articulate the level of objectivity or subjectivity characterizing an author’s poetics. The window-scenario in Honoré de Balzac’s La Maison du chat-qui-pelote (1830), for example, provides a view of different social environments and enlarges the protagonists knowledge of other people’s realities,10 whereas the windows in Marcel Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu (1913-27) express the radical subjectivity of the protagonist’s perceptions.11 A more contemporary example is Paul Auster’s Ghosts (1986), where the window emphasizes the interrelatedness of objectivity and subjectivity. The protagonist, a hard-boiled detective believing in direct access to reality through the
observation of facts, discovers that his perceptions of a person behind a window do not enlarge his knowledge about this other person, but about himself:

For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself. Life has slowed down so drastically for him that Blue is now able to see things that have previously escaped his attention. [...] The beating of his heart, the sound of his breath, the blinking of his eyes.\(^{12}\)

The second parameter is related to this dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity addressed by the first parameter, but it is more connected to the window as a medium. As we have already seen in Hoffmann’s *Des Vetters Eckfenster*, the window structures our observations of the world outside. It induces spatial relations such as near/far or above/below, it frames our view, it turns the world outside into something close to an image. In this sense, the window is a medium as much as texts, pictures or photographs are media. Similar to these artistic media, which not only imitate reality as it is, but rather create new, imaginative realities, the window generates a particular image of the world outside and transforms reality into an artificial space that does not exist independently from the window.\(^{13}\)

Thus, the second parameter may be called “*mimesis/poiesis.*” Metafictional window-scenarios can express the author’s position on an axis between traditional *mimesis* and autonomous *poiesis.*\(^{15}\) They can be used to discuss if art should merely imitate reality, or if it should be allowed to construct new, artificial realities, which may withdraw from Aristotle’s claim “that a poet’s object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably.”\(^{14}\) Though most literary window-scenarios articulate the interrelatedness of *mimesis* and *poiesis*, they may attach different importance to each factor. Think, for example, of the contrast between Heimito von Doderer’s *Die erleuchteten Fenster* (1950) and Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* (1957). While both turn to the window-scenario for depicting the construction of imaginary realities, Doderer still adheres to the idea of telling the story of a character’s psychological development, the so-called *Menschwerdung des Amtsrates Julius Zihal.*\(^{15}\) The *jalousie* which constricts the view through windows in Robbe-Grillet, however, expresses the protagonist’s inability of relating to the outside world and mirrors his claim that literature should no longer imitate reality, but limit itself to confronting readers with the artificial character of the written word.\(^{16}\)

“Wie kann eine Landschaft überhaupt etwas wie ‘Freiheit’ bedeuten ?” (Handke)

Now let us turn to Peter Handke’s novel *Die Wiederholung* (1986). In this *Bildungsroman*, Handke tells the story of nineteen-year-old Filip Kobal, who goes on a journey from his home village in Carinthia to Slovenia (then a part of Yugoslavia), the country where his family originally came from and where his brother went missing in World War II. Handke, once considered “Schriftsteller des Gehens”,\(^{17}\) draws a parallel between Filip’s spatial movement and his inner development. Eventually, the destination of Filip’s journey is no specific place, but his decision to become an author: “Ich sah mich an einem Ziel. Nicht den Bruder zu finden hatte ich doch im Sinn gehabt, sondern von ihm zu erzählen.”\(^{18}\)

Windows affect Filip’s development. On his journey, he encounters various blind windows which imitate the structure of real openings in a wall, but actually refer to no
other world beyond. Yet, it is precisely the blankness of these “open signifier[s]” which marks their importance for Filip, who considers them his “Forschungsgegenstände[n], Reisebegleiter[n], Wegweiser[n].” Whereas normal windows provide us with an image of another world apart from us, a blind window looks back. It reflects Filip’s gaze, encouraging him to find this other world in the real world of Yugoslavia: “Kraft der in ihm gebündelten Unbestimmbarkeit strahlte es meinen Blick zurück, und in mir hörte alles Sprachengewirr und Durcheinanderreden auf: Mein ganzes Wesen verstummte und las.”

Together with other empty forms – especially the empty cow paths, which provide the title for the second part of the book (the first is called “The Blind Window”) – the blind windows change Filip’s perception of Yugoslavia in a way that relates to the first parameter of the metafictional window-scenario. They allow him to perceive the country as an empty space open for individual interpretations. This space does not have a claim on Filip, but enables him to follow his own claims: “Woher kam, schon mit dem ersten Sich-Umblicken damals, diese Freiheit? Wie kann eine Landschaft überhaupt etwas wie ‘Freiheit’ bedeuten?”

For Filip, this freedom consists in the possibility of transforming the real landscape of Yugoslavia into an individual space. A valley, for example, is no longer characterized by its materiality or its spatial form, but instead becomes a semiotic element, “eine […] sich aneinanderfügende Letternreihe, als Zusammenhang, Schrift.” Filip’s task is thus the task of a reader, an “Entzifferer”, who produces individual readings of this “text” by relating the semiotic elements of the Yugoslavian landscape to his own memories and experiences:


With regard to the first parameter, the kind of poetics that Filip learns on his journey to Yugoslavia is characterized by its extreme subjectivity and its refusal of relating to social reality. As to the second parameter, Handke’s use of blind windows resembles the motif of the jalousie in Robbe-Grillet and points to Handke’s denial of traditional mimesis. Filip, who has many parallels with young Handke, is not really interested in gaining information about life in Yugoslavia, and he does not intend to tell a story which, in some way or the other, imitates objective reality. The motif of the blind window, and in particular Filip’s preference for the blind window even when there is a real window close to it, expresses what he really expects from becoming an author: the possibility of exploring subjectivity, of articulating individual experiences and perceptions. The objective world outside is only relevant inasmuch as it may help Filip in achieving his aims. It may serve as object of projection, it may furnish Filip with inspiring images, it may allow him to find adequate means of expression. Hence, the metafictional scenario in Die Wiederholung combines its claim for subjectivity with a need for poiesis: For Handke, repetition/Wiederholung does not mean the imitation of something that exists independently from an individual, but the transformation of the real space of Yugoslavia in an imaginative space mirroring the individual and repeating his or her experiences:

“I don’t know why I feel more alive when I write”  
(Hustvedt)

Like Handke, Siri Hustvedt’s second novel, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996), makes use of a metafictional window-scenario in the context of a young artist’s growth to maturity. Yet, Hustvedt’s ‘window-poetics’ differs distinctly from Handke’s. Though obviously schooled in poststructuralist theory, Hustvedt maintains a partly mimetic view of literature arguing that art is not just a subjective means of expression, but also a way to get close “to the heart of things.” This poetics is depicted through her protagonist’s attempts of becoming an actress, and it its broadened by her encounters with three other fictional artists.

*The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* tells the “initiation story” of nineteen-year-old Lily Dahl, a young waitress living in Webster, Minnesota, who acts as Hermia in a local theater production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and dreams of becoming a professional actress living in a big city. These dreams become more concrete when Lily develops a kind of voyeuristic passion for Edward Shapiro, a painter from New York living in a hotel opposite to Lily’s apartment. After secretly watching him through the window for several weeks, Lily decides to attract his attention by performing a striptease at her window.

Rather than a pornographic scenario, this striptease resembles an artistic performance. Lily’s use of the curtains and the light transforms her room into a stage, where she acts as if she were somebody else. She starts her striptease by putting on a pair of shoes she stole from a mysterious woman, and she performs “borrowed gestures” indebted to Marilyn Monroe. Yet, she feels that this play with other roles and identities does not remove her from who she really is, but brings her closer to her true self. After Edward Shapiro responds to her performance by turning on the duet from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, Lily imagines “that the real adventure of her life was beginning now, that after this anything could happen, anything at all.”

Lily’s experience at the window points to a conception of art in which the dichotomies defining both parameters of the metafictional window-scenario complement each other, i.e. in which objectivity/subjectivity and mimesis/poiesis are mutually dependent. Lily’s joy at playing Hermia and her fascination with Marilyn Monroe also articulate this conception. A passage on her first encounter with a Marilyn Monroe film makes this clear: “Marilyn had made Lily think about acting in a new way, and she started wondering if it wasn’t a way of being very close to the heart of things, that maybe acting actually brought you closer to the world rather than farther away from it.” To experience this proximity to the world, it is necessary to relate to one’s subjectivity and to perform an act of poiesis: The striptease at the window requires Lily to create a new role for herself. Yet, the pleasure of her role-play depends on a mimetic process, on the ability of getting closer to the intersubjective reality through artistic role-play. As Hustvedt puts it in an essay: “I don’t know why I feel more alive when I write, but I do.
Maybe I imagine that if I scratch hard enough into the paper, I will last. Maybe the world isn’t enough, or maybe the distinction between the world and fiction is not so clear.”

In the novel, the theoretical foundations of Lily’s experience are addressed through another fictional artist, Lily’s old neighbor Mabel Wasley. Mabel is the author of an “autobiography of some kind that included dreams and how they mixed into everyday life”, and she serves as Lily’s mentor, as theoretically schooled expert in fiction and semiotics. Mabel knows that the distinction between fact and fiction is less clear than it seems at first glance. She is acquainted with the constructive, semiotic character of reality, and she teaches Lily that she should adopt a non-essentialist view of identity: “Because the older I get, the more certain I am that you can’t know who’s who or what’s what. [...] You never get down to the bottom of it. Never.” Mabel’s knowledge provides an explanation for Lily’s experience. When it is normal to consider something ‘real’ despite the fictional elements it involves, then it becomes possible for fiction to be an adequate means of bringing us closer to reality.

The works of two other fictional artists, Lily’s old schoolmate Martin Petersen and her soon-to-be boyfriend, the painter Edward (Ed) Shapiro, shed light on another aspect of both metafictional parameters: the question if using the objective reality for the creation of fiction is as adequate as the use of fiction for getting closer to reality. This question makes the relation between art and world more problematic. Like Filip Kobal, both Martin and Ed dispose of reality for a subjective aim, the creation of art. While Ed makes use of people’s life stories for creating visual and narrative portraits of Webster’s inhabitants, Martin builds a life-sized doll that resembles Lily. Especially Martin’s ‘art’ is perceived as threatening and irritating. Lily feels humiliated by his claim of being the creator of “you in another form”, and she begins to wonder if Ed’s use of people’s private thoughts and secret fantasies “like a big sponge – in the name of art” is morally acceptable.

Ed’s final decision to take a certain responsibility for his models and to be considerate to their wishes and fears helps us to understand this part of Hustvedt’s poetics. Like Filip Kobal in Die Wiederholung, the fictional artists of The Enchantment of Lily Dahl use real spaces and people for the creation of fiction. Unlike Filip, the careless transformation of reality into a subjective space is rejected. While showing that fiction is constantly imitating, transforming and constructing reality for both subjective means and the wish of getting closer to ‘real life’, Hustvedt’s novel keeps reminding us that each of these transformations is necessarily missing something. No artist may justifiably claim to be the creator of “you in another form”, because the artist’s view on his or her object is never omniscient, but always limited and one-sided. Every artistic transformation neglects and overlooks several elements which might appear to be the most important elements if we change the window and look at the world from another perspective.

Conclusion

Hustvedt’s The Enchantment of Lily Dahl and Handke’s Die Wiederholung help us to broaden our view on the metafictional potential of the literary window-scenario. Both novels are important for reformulating Welle’s claim that the window-scenario usually establishes the old model of superior, self-reliant authorship. For Handke’s subjective poetics, this claim might still be partly true. Filip Kobal’s self-reliant way of transforming the real space into an individual space resembles the ‘art of watching’ practiced by Hoffmann’s...
wheelchaired cousin. However, Filip’s preference for blind windows articulates the subjective, poietic character of his task more directly than Hoffmann’s story does. Hustvedt, on the other hand, turns our attention to the limited perspective of the window. While maintaining that fiction may provide real, rather than blind, windows to reality, she emphasizes that the correct ‘art of watching’ requires us to know about the limits of each window.

More than a specific kind of poetics, the different metafictional window-scenarios share the kind of questions they discuss. As *mises en reflet*, they make use of the similarity between the art of watching and the art of writing and/or reading for discussing these questions. It was the aim of this article to show that the parameters of objectivity/subjectivity and *mimesis/poiesis* might be the adequate means of classifying these ‘window-poetics’ and of analyzing the relation between fact and fiction addressed by each of the different metafictional window-scenarios.

### Bibliography


NOTES

1. [My Cousin’s Corner Window]
6. Michael Scheffel, “Metaisierung in der literarischen Narration: Überlegungen zu ihren systematischen Voraussetzungen, ihren Ursprüngen und ihrem historischen Profil”, in Janine Hauthal et. al. (eds.), *Metaisierung in Literatur und anderen Medien. Theoretische Grundlagen, historische Perspektiven, Metagattungen, Funktionen*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2007, p. 162. [“It is one of the basic assumptions of my typology that we should distinguish two different forms of reflection in the sense of ‘mirroring oneself’ and ‘contemplating oneself’. Self-reflection in the sense of mirroring can be found when a part of the story can be considered the repetition of another part of the story or of the story as a whole. From this we should distinguish the cases in which the narrator or the characters of a story directly or indirectly contemplate on a part of a story or the story as a whole.”]
7. Cf. ibid., p. 162.


20. Handke, Die Wiederholung, op. cit., p. 97. [“my objects of research, my traveling companions, my signposts”, Handke, Repetition, op. cit., p. 69.]

21. Ibid., p. 136. [“Thanks to its extreme vagueness, it reflected my gaze; and the muddle of languages, the confusion of voices within me fell silent: my whole being fell silent, and read.” Ibid., p. 99.]

22. Ibid., p. 272. [“Where, with my very first look around, did that sense of freedom come from? How can a countryside mean ‘freedom’ or anything of the kind?” Ibid., p. 200.]

23. Ibid., p. 114. [“The previous night, I had taken in the details of the valley, but now I saw them as letters, as a series of signs, beginning with the grasspulling horse and combining to form a coherent script.” Ibid., p. 82.]

24. Ibid., p. 115. [“decipherer”. Ibid., p. 83.]

25. Ibid., p. 127. [“The buildings before my eyes pointed to strata of the architectural past [...]. While looking at one of these façades, I suddenly wished with all my might that my missing brother would push open the decrepit terrace door, with its opaque grooved glass, and show himself. I even thought in words: ‘Forefather, show thyself’, and saw the head of the old man beside me turn toward the bay window. And for a moment, as though my call were its own fulfillment, I caught sight of my brother.” Ibid., p. 92.]


28. Ibid., p. 333. [“Story, give the letters another shake, blow through the word sequences, order yourself into script, and give us, through your particular pattern, our common pattern. Story,
repeat, that is, renew, postpone, again and again, a decision that must not be. Blind windows and empty cow paths, be the incentive and hallmark of my story. Long live my storytelling!”  

Ibid., pp. 245-246.


32. Ibid., p. 40.

33. Ibid., p. 25.


37. Hustvedt, Lily Dahl, op. cit., p. 34.

38. Ibid., p. 236.

39. Ibid., p. 172.

40. Ibid., p. 236.

ABSTRACTS

Since Romanticism, authors frequently use the literary motif of the window for discussing metafictional questions. While texts like E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Des Vetters Eckfenster (1822) describe the male gaze at the woman in order to construct models of superior, self-reliant authorship, contemporary novels like Peter Handke’s Die Wiederholung (1986) and Siri Hustvedt’s The Enchantment of Lily Dahl (1996) are influenced by the deconstruction of traditional authorship in the context of subjectivism, post-structuralism and gender studies. Yet, these texts make broad use of windows for addressing metafictional questions. Considering the window a “mise en reflet”, whose metafictional potential derives from the similarities between ‘the art of watching’ and the art of writing and reading, my analysis proposes two parameters, namely objectivity/subjectivity and mimesis/poiesis, for classifying the various metafictional window-scenarios in contemporary literature.

Gianna Zocco is a doctoral student and a lecturer at the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Vienna. From 2005 to 2009, she studied Comparative Literature and Philosophy at the Universities of Bonn and Vienna. Her diploma thesis on the Epic of Gilgamesh in Hans Henny Jahnn’s trilogy *Fluß ohne Ufer* has been published by Peter Lang (*Sag an, mein Freund, die Ordnung der Unterwelt. Das Gilgamesch-Epos in Hans Henny Jahnn’s “Fluß ohne Ufer.”* Series: Wiener Beiträge zur Komparatistik und Romanistik, vol. 17. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2010). Since 2010, she is working on her doctoral thesis on the literary motif of the window as an opening into interior spaces in contemporary literature. For her dissertation, she received a DOC-scholarship from the Austrian Academy of Sciences and a Research Grant from the University of Vienna. In July 2013, she will present a part of her results at the international conference *Windows. Their Literary, Cultural, Artistic and Psychological Significance in the German-Speaking Territories from the Middle Ages to the Present* at the Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London.