



CHAPTER 6

Events

Abstract This chapter scrutinizes the essential notion of represented events as a transmedial cornerstone of narration. Events should be understood as sudden or slow changes of conditions. Because events can be both concrete and abstract and generally very diverse, they can be represented by a broad range of media types far beyond the borders of verbal media. The distinction between actions and occurrences further helps to discern among different kinds of narratives: actions are events that result from acts of volition and occurrences are events that do not result from acts of volition. Finally, it is emphasized that some represented events are normally perceived to be more salient than others, which leads to hierarchization.

Keywords Transmedial narration • Existent • State • Event • Action • Occurrence

While the concepts of actual and virtual narrators and narratees are essential for understanding how narration is realized, narrating minds are not, as such, part of the narrative core—the investigation of which will start here. In this and the two subsequent chapters, I will examine the various constituents of this scaffolding core, the story, according to the definition of it as *represented events that are temporally interrelated in a meaningful way*. This chapter focuses on represented events.

The concept of event is potentially very complex. It has been investigated in great detail by David Herman (2002: 27–51), but for my purposes a comprehension that includes only the most essential features of the concept is needed. A general guiding principle to be observed is that it is not always possible to delimit the exact extension of events. Sometimes it may not be absolutely clear whether some represented happenings are best understood as one or several closely linked events (cf. Nanay 2009). Whereas this may be a philosophical difficulty, it does not constitute a problem for understanding how narration works.

STATES AND EVENTS

Nevertheless, the concept of event must be inspected and delineated sufficiently to operate transmedially. Chatman (1978) suggested that narratives include *existents* and *events*. Existents appear in represented space and events appear in represented time. Although this is a neat dichotomy that, at least partly, works well for its purpose of investigating narration in film and literature, it is too narrow for a more radical transmedial narratology. Confining existents to three-dimensional space means, in effect, that only materially existing objects and phenomena are captured. This largely excludes communication that is not primarily about what goes on in a physical place inhabited by concrete entities but is rather about more abstract notions. Although abstract thinking is also deeply colored by our experiences of existing in a three-dimensional, physical world, resulting in image schemas that bridge the mental and the material, there is a difference between thoughts and ideas that have a spatial character and physical objects and processes that are three-dimensional as such. Therefore, a truly transmedial narratology cannot delimit its scope to the representation of concrete existents but must include a comprehension of virtual spheres that contain representation of partly, mainly, or only abstract existents. This also means that the existents versus events dichotomy no longer builds on the clear-cut space-versus-time division.

Substantially modifying Chatman's dichotomy, I instead propose another initial distinction, namely between representing *what exists (existents)* and *how that evolves in time*. Existing entities may be material as well as mental and may be perceived as anything from concretely spatial to abstractly spatial or not spatial at all. Examples of existents would then include a cat represented by a still image, a balloon represented by moving images, the emotion of happiness represented by speech, the notion of

high speed represented by a piece of writing, a toddler represented by gestures, and the idea of conflict represented by a meal. Represented existents like these are media characteristics that may be more or less transmedial: whereas the most abstract existents, such as conflicts, are likely to be most transmedial, the most concrete existents, such as balloons, are likely to be somewhat less transmedial. Media types based on developed systems of symbols, such as visual verbal language, have large representative scopes. As demonstrated in the previous sentences of this very text, several forms of both abstract and concrete existents can readily be represented by written words.

Media types based on visual or auditory iconicity may also represent a broad scope of existents. Not least, visual iconicity is a versatile representative tool: cats, balloons, and toddlers can be represented through straightforward similarity between representamen and object (meaning that, because of the resemblance, one directly conjures up inner images of cats, balloons, or toddlers). Adding an index makes it possible to also effortlessly represent existents such as happiness, speed, and conflict: visual icons of faces, airplanes, or cats can be formed in such ways that one does not only perceive a resemblance to these objects but also interpret them as really connected to more abstract existents. Represented faces that look happy also represent happiness, airplanes represented as flying also represent speed, and cats represented as fighting also represent conflict. Auditory icons, on the other hand, freely represent auditory objects that visual icons may represent only more indirectly: the mewing of a cat, for instance, can directly be represented by a sound resembling mewing, but only indirectly by a visual image of a cat with a certain facial expression. Thus, the transmediality of existents is not a question of either-or but rather of degrees between efficient and highly intersubjectively perceived transmediality and cumbersome and less intersubjectively perceived transmediality.

There is a wealth of represented existents. Investigating them all would amount to investigating the totality of communication, and investigating all their various transmedial potentials would be equal to investigating the entirety of transmediation.

How do existents evolve over time? Answering this question requires another distinction, namely between *states* and *events*. States are relatively stable conditions flanked by events, while events are sudden or slow changes of conditions. Thus, states tend toward lack of evolvment, whereas events comprise evolvment. Although there is clearly no definite

way of saying when a slight modification of a state turns into a slow event, the distinction is operable and highlights important facets of what goes on both in the actual world and in virtual spheres.

Representing various kinds of existents is fundamental for all forms of communication and both states and events obviously presuppose existents; if there is no representation of anything that exists, there is clearly nothing that can evolve over time. One could say that representing states is the default position of communication. In a minimal act of communication, such as an actual communicator writing the word ‘cat’, the actual communicatee, if she understands English, will most probably form an interpretant based on the notion of an unchanging existent: a kind of animal with certain properties that does not evolve in time in any particular way. It is simply there; an existent in a certain state. Thus, representing events is optional in communication: ‘the cat disappeared’ involves an existent being connected to first a state and then an event: first the cat was simply there and then something happened—a sudden change of conditions leading to it no longer being there. Introducing such an event is the first step toward narration.

Just like existents, states and events can be material as well as mental; they may be directly perceived by the external senses as well as internally experienced. Whereas events such as balloons bursting or toddlers starting to cry are primarily perceived, events such as happiness being transformed to irritation or a conflict being resolved are often experienced.

Yet another distinction is needed to clarify the concept of event. As human beings, equipped with consciousness and advanced cognitive and emotive resources, most of us believe that there is a substantial difference between things that happen by themselves, because of physical forces freely operating in the universe, and things that happen because of cerebral processes. Again, we are faced with one of those difficult dichotomies that must certainly be thoroughly questioned and scrutinized but are nevertheless difficult to do away with. While it is easy to put theoretical pressure on the general material–mental dichotomy, and more specifically on the opposition between physical forces and cerebral processes—because cerebral processes actually adhere to physical forces—human interactions would be very difficult to handle if we did not recognize the vital difference between someone hitting someone else in the head and someone being hit in the head by a dead branch falling from a tree.

Consequently, in the context of human communication and transmedial narration it is useful to distinguish between two main forms of events:

actions and *occurrences*. Actions are events resulting from acts of volition, while occurrences are events not resulting from acts of volition (for a detailed discussion of the concept of action, see for instance Meister 2003). While this is not the forum to try to define the definite border between volition and non-volition, I leave the possibility open for understanding, for instance, certain acts performed by mentally severely ill living creatures as occurrences rather than actions. As other distinctions in this treatise, the distinction between actions and occurrences is not intended to cut reality into two pieces but rather to highlight important but debatable differences in order to get closer to a more complex understanding of the phenomena in question.

Examples of actions, either in our lived world or represented in various forms of communication, include a resting cat that decides to try to catch a mouse, a father who finds an empty balloon and blows it up, a lonely pensioner who buys a dog and becomes happy, a burglar who steals a car and drives away at high speed, a toddler jumping into a puddle, and a monkey who mocks another monkey and gets into conflict with it. Within literature and film narratology, represented concrete existents with conscious agency are often called *characters* (human beings, animals, or anthropomorphized objects).

Examples of occurrences, within or without communication, include a cat that falls ill because of eating an infected mouse, a balloon that gets lost because of strong wind, a happy pensioner who becomes sad because of the death of a friend, a speeding car that stops because there is no gas left, a toddler who gets soaked because of a sudden rain, and two monkeys who happen to find a delicious fruit simultaneously and start to quarrel. Like existents, events in the form of simple actions or occurrences are media characteristics that may be more or less transmedial. The most abstract events, such as conflicts that arise, are likely to be more transmedial, and the most concrete events, such as balloons blowing away, are likely to be less transmedial.

As narration is about representing events, all of these observations are relevant for analyzing how narratives can be formed; they are simply indispensable for studying the peculiarities of narration. Narratives must necessarily and self-evidently include represented existents. Whereas representing states—stable conditions of existents—is common and often sufficient in communication, narratives also comprise representations of changes in the conditions of existents: events. Narratives can also be constituted by represented events that are perceived as actions caused by voli-

tion, as occurrences not caused by volition, or as a mixture of the two. A miniature narrative such as ‘Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese air force, which brought the United States into World War II’ is action-based. In contrast, the elementary narrative ‘the Earth was hit by a giant meteor, which led to the extinction of dinosaurs’ is occurrence-based. Confronted with a slightly more complex narrative such as ‘because most people ignored the warnings of scientists, the accumulated emissions led to global climate changes; the consequences were massive involuntary migration and escalating worldwide famine and ethnic conflicts’, one must conclude that it is based on a mixture of actions and occurrences. Naturally, occurrences can be represented so that they look like actions (‘the eruption of the volcano was a warning to the people on the island who lived in sin but decided to repent’) and actions may be brought forward as occurrences (‘after having suffered such humiliation for many years, he was forced to kill her’). Media types based on symbol systems or visual iconicity are probably normally superior at expressing this kind of narrative subtlety.

HIERARCHIES OF EVENTS

The more events a narrative contains, the more interrelations will appear among events. Increased narrative complexity is likely to lead to stratification because, often, not all events are perceived to be equally important. Therefore, it is probably unavoidable to construe hierarchies of events; most perceivers of media products resulting in narrative virtual spheres of some complexity will find that events have partly different weight and function.

This was realized already in the infancy of narratology. Writing about ‘motifs’, which can approximately be understood as the smallest of events, Boris Tomashevsky suggested that “The motifs which cannot be omitted are *bound motifs*; those which may be omitted without disturbing the whole causal-chronological course of events are *free motifs*” (Tomashevsky 2012 [1925]: 68). In a similar vein, he proposed that “Motifs which change the situation are *dynamic motifs*; those which do not are *static*” (Tomashevsky 2012 [1925]: 70). Although there are only subtle differences between dynamic and bound motifs (if motifs change the situation, they cannot be omitted without altering the course of events) and between static and free motifs (if motives do not change the situation,

they can be omitted without altering the course of events), the distinctions point to a substantial hierarchy of events in narratives. The difference between those represented events that are vital for the core of a narrative (what Tomashevsky called “the whole causal-chronological course of events”) and those that are not highlights the fact that although the story, the scaffolding core of a narrative, consists of represented events that are temporally interrelated in a meaningful way, the whole narrative may contain less vital represented events that are not perceived to be part of the story.

Several decades later, Roland Barthes launched a similar distinction between more or less vital events. He stated that there are events that have “*cardinal functions*” and events that are merely “*catalysers*”. For a function to be cardinal, he continued, “it is enough that the action to which it refers open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story. [...] Catalysers are only consecutive units, cardinal functions are both consecutive and consequential” (1977 [1966]: 93–94). Although Barthes was only writing about actions, the distinction may well be extended to also include occurrences.

Thus, represented events can to some extent, although hardly very exactly, be hierarchically ordered in concordance with Tomashevsky’s and Barthes’s ideas. Depending on the qualities of specific narratives, more or less clear-cut stratifications may be made in order to more clearly perceive meaningful relations among events. Although those two authors wrote mainly about literature, especially Tomashevsky’s distinctions are formulated on a very general level and are truly transmedial. This means that they are important tools for analyzing transmediation of narratives: being able to identify events that are more vital than others means being able to more accurately find similarities among central structures shared by narratives realized by dissimilar media types.

However, the issue becomes more intricate when considering that narratives may embed narratives, which means that represented events are embedded in represented events (investigated by Genette 1980 [1972] and many others). As such, an embedded narrative may be considered to be an event in the overarching narrative that is or is not vital. Furthermore, events that are vital in an embedded narrative may or may not be considered vital in the overarching narrative. It is probably safe to say that it is rare that represented events can be straightforwardly stratified.

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