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1. Introduction

Realism has for a long time been the unquestioned literary technique, especially in the 19th century. In the second half of the 20th century the premises of realism were heavily discussed and discarded by postmodern authors. The vital differences between realism and postmodernism can be seen in the tendencies of the post-war American literature. Kennedy argues that post-war American authors can be divided into two groups according to their literary principles.

The former group of authors intended to show real life in literature and believed that it is possible to depict reality in a work of art. The latter movement wanted to highlight the artificiality of reality and the qualities of art that influence the perception of reality. (Kennedy 3) Kennedy defines the first movement as “The real-life writers: subjective journalism/objective fiction”. (3) These writers confused realism with reality since realism is a literary technique where the gap between reality and fiction is disguised. Therefore, the correspondence between the world of the reader and the fictional world is artificially created and a convention not a given. Therefore, “[t]he point is that realism is a fictional technique whereby a writer creates an illusion of reality with words.” (Kennedy 4f.)

The other movement includes writers such as John Barth, Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme. McCaffery states that “[t]his view that literature is a free, consciously false construction is directly relevant to the literary approaches of Coover, Barthelme and Gass”. (12)

Perhaps more than any other in the United States, these three writers [John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover] shifted the focus in American fiction, for a time, from content to process, and to the existential significance of the process of fiction for the creation of human identity: we are all, metafiction seems to say, our own fictions, created by ourselves of our perceptions and the language which we express them. (Kennedy 5)

In the quote above Thomas E. Kennedy draws attention to the main qualities of metafictional writing, namely the self-conscious exploration of the narrative strategies that constitute a fictional text and subsequently their relevance to the postmodern perception of reality and the real world. 'Postmodernism' and 'metafiction' are two terms that are frequently used in the discussion of contemporary fiction, especially when interpreting the works of the American fictionists Robert Coover and John Barth. The term 'postmodernism' defies a simple definition since it is used in a wide range of disciplines by different scholars who propagate dissimilar classifications. In my paper, I want to discuss the different classifications of the term 'postmodernism' in order to develop my approach towards postmodern writing.

Self-reflexivity is often defined as one of the key characteristics of postmodern literature. Therefore, 'postmodernism' and 'metafiction' are sometimes used interchangeably in literary theory. In this thesis the relationship between postmodern and metafictional literature will be discussed so as to highlight their experimental and anti-illusionist potential that challenge the reading and interpreting faculties of the audience.

Since Robert Coover and John Barth are both classified as postmodernist authors I want to examine the question in what ways Robert Coover and John Barth are postmodernist authors and whether there are similarities and differences in their approach towards postmodern literature. To further investigate the metafictional qualities of Coover's and Barth's writing, I want to investigate Robert Coover's short stories "The Magic Poker" and "The Elevator" from his short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants* and John Barth's short stories "Lost in the Funhouse" and "Life-Story" from his short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse*.¹

¹ In his comparison of the differences between modernist and postmodernist short stories, Connor explains that the postmodernist short story is "characterized not by insulation and concentration, but by eccentricity and interference. Where the modernist short story aims at a completion through subtraction, postmodernist writers use the short story in order to display connectedness without completion. This interest in the interference patterns set up across short narratives leads to the distinctively postmodern phenomenon of the book formed from suites or complex ensembles of separate fictions." (Connor 74)

2. Postmodernism

2.1. Definition²

In literary theory the terms postmodern, postmodernity and postmodernism are sometimes used synonymously. The literary critic Nicol, however, claims that a distinction between the terms is vital for the discussion of postmodern fiction.³ According to Nicol, both postmodernity and postmodernism refer to the particular period from the 1950s to the 1990s. The term postmodernity is used to talk about the development and the subsequent changes in politics, society, economy and the media. Postmodernity is described as the era of late capitalism and consumerism which is influenced by the dominance of technology and digital media. (Nicol 2) In contrast, the term postmodernism⁴ concerns the aesthetic production which was influenced by newly originated ideas in philosophy and theory. (Nicol 2) As a consequence, the adjective postmodern is used in both these contexts. The term postmodern is used to talk about this period in literary and cultural history as well as the literary production and its characteristic aesthetic styles and principles. (Nicol 2)

In the discussion concerning the definition of the term postmodernism it seems to be useful to define modernism first.⁵⁶ Modernism is the cultural and literary movement of the first half of the twentieth century that rejected the literature of realism and naturalism.⁷ (Barry 81) Modernist authors wanted to challenge the readers by questioning the traditional ways of perceiving reality and they also wanted to highlight the importance of language in the interpretation process of

² The complex history and the key characteristics of postmodernism are, too, examined in two other diploma thesis's: "Forms and Functions of Self-Reflexivity in Postmodern Film" by Konrath, and "Forms and Functions of Metatextuality in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*"

³ Cf. Hutcheon *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 23-29.

⁴ McHale states that the term postmodernism defies a simple definition and claims that "postmodernism exists discursively, in the discourses we produce *about* it and *using* it." (1)

⁵ David Antin states that "From the modernism you choose you get the postmodernism you deserve." (qtd. in Woods 1)

⁶ Cf. Barry, 81-85

⁷ Realism is a literary movement that developed in France in the 1830. By the end of the century, however, realism was a literary trend in most European countries. (Dictionary of literary terms 728-733). Naturalism is "sometimes used loosely as a synonym for realism" and "developed out of realism." The French author Emile Zola was one of the first popular representatives of the naturalist movement. (Dictionary of literary terms 537f.)

the world. (Barry 82) The literary critic Lois Gordon argues that developments in other sciences had a great impact on modern authors. In physics the relativity of space, time, matter, and energy was proved and in social sciences identity was no longer defined as a “fixed or measurable entity observable to senses.” (Gordon 3) Gordon points to the frequent use of concepts like “randomness” and “relativity” in the description of reality. (2)

Modern authors responded to these changes and developed a new style of writing which should depict reality more accurately. This led to the preference of literary techniques that were useful for describing the inner thoughts and feelings of a literary character such as the stream-of-consciousness.⁸ Besides, genre distinctions were blurred and fragmented forms became prominent as well as the use of images and symbols. Realistic concepts like the authorial omniscient narrator, the employment of fixed points of view and a linear representation of time and place were discarded. (Barry 82) In general, modernist literature tended to be self-reflexive and above all it dealt with questions regarding its own “nature, status, and role.” (Barry 82) Modernist writers regarded form, style, and technique as vital for the literary work as the content. This is why modernist literature is seen as innovative and experimental. (Barry 82)

There are various characteristics of postmodern literature that are in opposition to modernist literature. One key difference between modernism and postmodernism is the attitude of writers towards the shifts in culture and philosophy. Most disturbing in philosophy were the abandonment of concepts of a dominant centre and the rejection of a border between art and reality. Whereas modernist writers considered these changes as a negative development to which they reacted rather with sincerity and despair, postmodernist writers enjoy the playfulness and the liberating freedom of irony and meaninglessness. (Nicol 2) Therefore, the literary critic Alan Wilde explains the difference between modernism and postmodernism in this way:

To speak metaphorically first, paradise, once lost, is now abandoned: [...]. The modernist nostalgia over origins is replaced by a dismissal of

⁸ *Stream of consciousness* “refers to that technique which seeks to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind.” (Dictionary of literary terms 866f.)

them; the frustration of being unable to resolve a dilemma gives way to an acceptance of the impossibility of making any sense whatever of the world as a whole. (Waugh, *Postmodernism* 16)

There are crucial differences between modernism and postmodernism concerning the status of art and the attitude towards truth claims. Modernist writers strived to create an original piece of art which was a rational and authentic account of the changing reality and the means by which humans conceived the world.⁹ In postmodernism, however, the originality of art is rejected. This tendency gave rise to parody¹⁰, pastiche¹¹ and bricolage¹², and literary texts where styles and genres are intermingled. (Nicol 2) Besides, another difference between modernism and postmodernism concerns their attitude towards the existence of universal truths. Modernist authors believed that depth and meaning can be found in any object or event and therefore struggled to explore significant truths of the individual's experience of life and reality. In contrast to modernism, the existence of one universal truth which accounts for all aspects of life is abandoned. Postmodernism declares that different truths which might be mutually exclusive exist and therefore does not seek to provide conclusions or a single underlying meaning. As a consequence, various interpretations of a unique event become possible. (Nicol 2) This has also consequences for the readers of postmodern fiction. Since there is no single meaning in the text that can be perceived without difficulties, they are forced to create meaning actively. This negotiation of meaning parallels the human construction of reality which is always individual and subjective. (Baumgartner 5)

Apart from the differences stated above the relationship between modernism and postmodernism is a rather complex one. Nicol claims that postmodernism

⁹ Cf. Nicol, 2

¹⁰ Parody is the "imitative use of the words, style, attitude, tone and ideas of an author in such a way as to make them ridiculous." However, authors who employ parody have to be careful to be at the same time creative themselves in order to achieve "a subtle balance between close resemblance to the 'original' and a deliberate distortion of its principal characteristics." (Dictionary of literary terms 640-642)

¹¹ Pastiche is defined as "a patchwork of words, sentences or complete passages from various authors or one author." If applied intentionally, pastiche can be a form of parody. (Dictionary of literary terms 644)

¹² Bricolage generally refers to "a construction made of whatever materials are at hand; something created from a variety of available things." In literature, the term bricolage is used for a piece created from diverse resources." (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bricolage>)

employs an “inherent doubleness” which gives way to the “logic of ‘both...and...’ rather than ‘either...or...’” which is useful for the description of how postmodernism is connected to realism and modernism. (31) Therefore, Nicol argues that “[R]ather than regarding postmodernism as an absolute break with modernism or realism we can argue that it *both* breaks with modernist conventions *and* continues with them.” (32)

The term postmodernism was first extensively used in the context of literary studies in the 1950s. (Waugh, *Postmodernism* 1) The term was used to describe a certain kind of fiction that was characterised by “a frequent use of random techniques, mixed and merged styles, and increasingly provisional methods.” (Woods 50) This kind of fiction functioned as an investigative tool to analyse its underlying “structural and formal bases”. (Woods 52) Furthermore, in postmodern literature the idea that language is able to describe the reality outside the text is refused. This led to the claim that “reality only existed in the language that described it, with meaning inseparably linked to writing and reading practices.” (Woods 52)

The history of the term postmodernism in the 1960s, 70s and 80s is highly complex since the beginning of the use of the term is dependent on the particular art form and the area of research. Actually, the term postmodernism emerged in the late 1950 in the arts, in the late 1960s in architecture, in the early 1980s in cultural theory, and finally in the late 1980s in social sciences.¹³ (Woods 12) This spreading of the term postmodernism can be viewed as a process that was triggered by a general break in philosophical thought with the premises of modernism and modernity. (Waugh, *Postmodernism* 3) For a long time the belief that the world is something natural that we only perceive was prevalent. In postmodernism, however, the constructed nature of reality and the world is highlighted. Hutcheon defines this de-naturalizing quality of postmodernism in the following way:

Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as

¹³ Cf. Connor, 1-10.

'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees. (1f.)

Due to the complex history of the term postmodernism by the 1980s the term was used in three different senses¹⁴; first, as a term to describe the current cultural epoch, second as an aesthetic practice, and third as a paradigm shift in philosophical thinking. Regarding the new stance of philosophy the premises of Enlightenment were questioned and the concept of universal reason was criticised. (Waugh, *Postmodernism* 3)

As a conclusion, it can be said that these different definitions of the term postmodernism are not mutually exclusive and demand for a multidimensional position. (Konrath 34) To do justice to the ambiguity of the term, it seems essential to investigate these three different senses mentioned above in more detail. Therefore, in a first step I will focus on the definition of postmodernism as a cultural epoch in the following. To do so, I will mainly refer to the influential critics Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard.

2.2. Postmodernism as a cultural epoch

2.2.1. Fredric Jameson

One of the most influential critics who considers postmodernism in cultural terms is Fredric Jameson. Jameson, as explained by Waugh, defines postmodernism as a cultural epoch¹⁵ which emerged in the 1960s and which is the cultural dominant of the present. (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 41)

¹⁴ Cf. Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 5.

¹⁵ Waugh explains the characteristics of the term cultural epoch in the following way: "Postmodernism' now expresses the sense of a new cultural epoch in which distinctions between critical and functional knowledge break down as capitalism, in its latest consumerist phase, invades everything including the aesthetic, the post-colonial world and the unconscious (what Lionel Trilling had seen as that bit of biology radically opposed to culture), leaving no remaining oppositional space." (*Practising Postmodernism*, 5)

Jameson claims that postmodernism is similar to the culture of the third stage of capitalism, that is late capitalism or multinational capitalism. Hence, postmodernism and capitalism are closely linked and postmodernism can be seen as the “apologetic or justificatory cultural discourse of the third stage of capitalism.” (Woods 35) Jameson declares that capitalism is the economic base of postmodernism because the rise of postmodernism is linked to the growth of capitalism as an economic system. (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 41f.) To enable the individual to make sense of the capitalist world-view, Jameson suggests “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping”:

‘Cognitive mapping’ is a reorientation of our experience of time and space in an era where the opportunity to place ourselves into a definable time-space location (*viz.* a *place* with a unique, individual identity) has become systematically challenged by the culture of global capitalism, [...]. (Woods 37)

For Jameson, postmodern characteristics are not unique to the current cultural epoch but can already be found in modernism, especially in Saussure’s concept of language. This concept promotes the arbitrariness of signs. Waugh highlights the following features of Saussure’s concept in her discussion, namely “the concern with the autonomy of language, the ‘play of the signifier’ which undermines the referent, and the idea of depth as meaningful.” (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 41f.)

In his discussion of the influence of capitalism on society and culture, Jameson provides a list with attributes that can be considered in postmodern terms. These attributes relate to postmodernism as a paradigm shift in philosophy as well as to postmodernism as an aesthetic practice: “the death of the subject; the culture of the simulacrum; the proliferation of trompe l’oeil art; copies without originals; textuality; loss of historicity (as a sense of teleological linear time); pastiche.” (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 43)

Another core argument of Jameson is that postmodernism is highly ahistorical. Jameson views postmodernism as the contemporary period which has lost its connection to history. This led, according to Jameson, to the postmodern statement that there is no position outside ideology, culture or textuality from

which it is feasible to criticise postmodernist theory. (Baker 53) Therefore, it is no longer possible to arrive at a simple point of view for or against postmodernism. (Waugh, *Postmodernism* 114)

Like Baudrillard, Jameson argues that any distinction between the real and culture is lost in postmodernism. The rejection of the belief that one can arrive at a deeper meaning is inherent in postmodernist thinking and it leads to the culture of the simulacrum. (Baker 52f.) In this culture of the simulacrum, the autonomy of art has collapsed. Thereby art has lost its autonomy as Waugh explains in the following statement:

Like Eagleton, he [Jameson] emphasises the collapse of the autonomy of art: culture becomes 'coterminous with social life in general; now all levels become acculturated, and in the society of the spectacle, the image, or the simulacrum, everything has at length become cultural, from the superstructures down into the mechanisms of the infrastructure itself. (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 42)

2.2.2. Jean Baudrillard

Another important cultural theorist is Jean Baudrillard. As Jameson, Baudrillard acknowledges the loss of history in postmodern thinking and the influence of multinational capitalism. Besides, both highlight the impossibility of describing and interpreting reality neutrally and objectively since language and ideology are inseparably linked:

Postmodernism, on the other hand understands ideology as the support for our very perception of reality. There is no outside of ideology, according to this view, at least no outside that can be articulated in language. Because we are so reliant on language to structure our perceptions, any representation of reality is always already ideological, always already constructed by simulacra. (Felluga, Baudrillard)

In contrast to Jameson, Baudrillard is most concerned with media reproduction and the culture of hyperreality. Felluga summarises Baudrillard's argument in the following way: "Our culture, according to Baudrillard, has been inundated by trashy, kitsch, mass-market products, which contribute to our society of

simulation and consumerism.” (Felluga, Baudrillard) According to Nicol, Baudrillard further argues that hyperreality has intruded every aspect of everyday life. (Nicol 4) Therefore, representation is no longer a trustworthy means of reflecting the world because it structures the perception of reality. Especially the media, like movies or television, try to depict reality or choose historical topics as their content and thereby reproduce them. This is why fiction, television or cinema are perceived as more real than reality itself. (Barry 87) Moreover, in this media culture, also the private lives of individuals are strongly influenced by media images and advertisement. The individual's needs are manipulated by television and commercials so that “we therefore no longer acquire goods because of real needs but because of desires that are increasingly defined by commercials and commercialised images, [...]” (Felluga, Baudrillard)

Consequently, the three factors “simulation, implosion, and hyperreality” are essential for Baudrillard's definition of postmodernity. (Woods 26) Simulation can be defined as the “process by which the technologies which dominate the contemporary world attempt to make aspects of the real, natural world around us into tangible, distinct entities.” This leads to the effect, that “[s]imulation does not just eliminate the real, it creates it.” (Nicol 6) Simulation is responsible for the fact that “the image or the model becomes more real than the real”, so that it is no longer possible to differentiate between the model and the reality. (Woods 26)

As a result, in the age of media saturation, the “real world” disappears. This “real world” can be defined as the “concrete material foundation to which human systems of signification point.” (Sheehan 30) In the modern virtual reality last instances of the pre-industrial world are lost. (Nicol 4) Whereas in former times, commodities or currency were used in exchange, what are left now are only ambiguous signs that are interchangeable. Baudrillard termed this interchangeability as the code. The code relies on the law of value which is used to assign meaning and value to every sign in relation to other signs. (Nicol 5) The law of value is inextricably connected to consumer society where money and consumer goods are vital for self-identification. This leads to the fact, that

the use-value of the purchased item is not relevant: "A culture of consumption has so much taken over our ways of thinking that all reality is filtered through the logic of exchange value and advertising." (Felluga, Baudrillard)

Furthermore, the law of value leads to the establishment of those binary oppositions which are essential for Western thinking, philosophy and culture, for example "life over death, good over evil, cause over effect." (Nicol 5) These oppositions create an apparently stable system of "essences, identity, difference and meaning." (Nicol 5) Consequently, reality is produced through this code: "we experience the world through the sign-system of values set down in its underlying metaphysic." (Nicol 5) As the real world does no longer exist, all that is left are the representations themselves, which are "mere "simulations" of concrete reality" without having any referentiality to reality. (Sheehan 30) Baudrillard shows how reality is transformed into hyperreality: "Initially referring to a material reality beyond itself, the sign then distorts, disguises, and finally replaces that reality." (Sheehan 30)

This transformation from reality to hyperreality as described above developed in different stages throughout history. Baudrillard argues that there are three orders of simulacrum. (Felluga, Baudrillard)¹⁶ The first order of simulacrum is set in the pre-modern period where the image is a "counterfeit of the real." This means that "the image is recognized as just an illusion, a place marker for the real." This changed in the industrial age which is the second order of the simulacrum. In this period, "the distinctions between the image and the representation begin to break down because of mass production and the proliferation of copies. Such production misrepresents and masks an underlying reality by imitating it so well, thus threatening to replace it (e.g. in photography or ideology)." (Felluga, Baudrillard) In the postmodern age, the third order of simulacrum can be seen: "we are confronted with a *precession* of simulacra; that is, the representation *precedes* and *determines* the real." (Felluga, Baudrillard) Since any relationship between objects and their representation has finally vanished, the current period is defined by simulacra. (Woods 27)

¹⁶ See also Woods, 26 and Barry, 87f.

2.3. The Philosophical Basis of Postmodernism

2.3.1. The paradigm shift in philosophical thinking – the linguistic turn in philosophy¹⁷

Closely linked to postmodernism and sometimes used as a synonym is poststructuralism since poststructuralist theory is highly interconnected with postmodernism.¹⁸ Both postmodernism and poststructuralism question the aptitude of language to serve as an objective way to refer to a reality outside language. According to poststructuralist theory, it is, thus, not possible to gain access to an extra-linguistic reality. (Barry 61)

Poststructuralist theory modified key concepts of structuralism.¹⁹ One of the founders of structuralism²⁰ was the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who defined language as a system which consists primarily of signs. Therefore, there is no relationship between language and the outside world. The sign consists of the 'signifier' and the 'signified' which are only arbitrarily connected to each other. The signifier is the word and the signified is the concept or definition which is evoked in the mind. This connection is not constituted by logic but by social conventions because these agreed meanings are essential for language to serve as a means of social communication. (Nicol 6f.) In Nicol's words, "[T]he real implication of Saussure's theory is that language doesn't *need* the world to function; it works independently of it." (6)

In poststructuralism, the relationship between language and the representation of the world in an accurate and immediate way was further rejected. This deep disbelief in representation is called the linguistic turn in philosophy. (Sheehan

¹⁷ Cf. Connor, 69.

¹⁸ Cf. Barry, 61-79.

¹⁹ Poststructuralism developed in the 1960s. Poststructuralist theory claims that "meaning is inherently unstable, whereas a structuralist would hold that an explanation/understanding is conceivable and possible, provided that the conventions and codes of any literary text or cultural message are analysed." (Dictionary of literary terms 690-693)

²⁰ Structuralism is a "movement of thought in the human sciences" and is concerned with "'language' in a most general sense: [...] It is concerned with signs and thus with signification. Structuralist theory considers all conventions of codes of communication; [...] In theory, at any rate, it is to do with any or all of the means by which human beings convey information to each other [...]" (Dictionary of literary terms 868-871)

23) This linguistic determinism claims that there is no access to a world beyond the linguistic system. Hence, this intense distrust in any kind of representation led to a highly textualised worldview, that is “the belief that reality only exists in a textualised version and as Derrida states “il n’y a rien hors du texte” ([1967] 1976, 158). – there is nothing outside the text.” (Konrath 30) The perception of reality as text leads to the diffusion of formerly separate concepts such as life and fiction and truth and reality. Consequently, truth and fiction become indistinguishable. (Konrath 30)

Not only the capability of language to provide access to the real world was heavily discussed, there has also been a vital paradigm shift in philosophical thinking. The reason for the shift in paradigm was the fact that philosophy was denied the possibility to produce any kind of knowledge. (Sheehan 21) The dilemma of being in the postmodern condition is the belief that it is discourse which produces knowledge. So, it is no longer possible to seek transcendence from a position that lies outside culture. Waugh puts it this way: “There is no Kantian ‘view from nowhere’, no conceptual space not already implicated in that which it seeks to contest.” (Waugh 5) The philosophical tradition which was therefore most questioned in postmodern thinking was the tradition of Descartes and Hegel.²¹ In contrast, postmodernism suggests “a resistance to totality (in particular, the philosophical systems comprising the western tradition), to teleology²² (the notion that those systems might be going somewhere in particular) and to closure of any kind – narrative, conceptual, metaphysical.” (Sheehan 21)

This new stance towards philosophy has incomprehensible consequences for the humanist definition of the human subject which is now viewed as deprived. (Sheehan 21) The human subject is constructed through language and Barry states that “the individual is really a product of social and linguistic forces – that is, not an essence at all, merely a ‘tissue of textualities’.” (65) Additionally, the

²¹ Descartes developed the method of “radical scepticism” and advocated the “foundationalist claim that a correct beginning could finally be made”. Hegel’s “synthetic approach first of all organized the entire tradition into a purposive and dialectic whole, and then assumed that it had reached its apogee, with no further work to be done.” (Sheehan 21)

²² “Teleology” is a philosophical term and refers to the “doctrine that final causes exist.” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/teleology>)

works of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and Michel Foucault influenced this new conception of man:

In the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, man was reduced to an empty space, a mere vantage point where the codes and conventions of language and culture happened to coincide. Lacanian psychoanalysis saw the subject as subsequent to language, and always dependent on it for its existence. (Sheehan 25)

This is the total opposite to the philosophical western tradition of Enlightenment²³ where the individual is seen as a “stable entity called a self which has access to inner states and outer world.” (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 67) In Enlightenment thinking “man has been the measure of all things and the maker of all meanings – and the autonomous, transcendental subject the “site” where meaning is incarnated.” (Sheehan 25) The premises of Enlightenment were heavily challenged because they were seen as part of a metanarrative which shaped Western history and philosophy. A metanarrative as in the tradition of Enlightenment claims to provide a valid account of knowledge and truth. In postmodernism, it is argued that these metanarratives should be abolished because they hinder the true engagement with history and philosophy. (Waugh, *Postmodernism* 5)

Initially, this incredulity towards metanarratives was first pronounced by the critic Jean-François Lyotard. Therefore I will discuss his philosophical approach towards postmodernism in the following chapter.

2.3.2. Jean-François Lyotard: Incredulity towards metanarratives

As Waugh points out, Jean-François Lyotard is one of the most influential postmodern theorists. The publication of his book *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979 was the beginning of the spreading process of the term across discipline boundaries. (Waugh 3)

²³ Waugh states that “Enlightenment is the state of believing that human beings are collectively engaged in a progressive movement towards moral and intellectual self-realisation through the application to their situation of a *universal rational faculty*.” (*Practising Postmodernism* 67)

As mentioned in the chapter above, postmodern theories are foremost a critique of Enlightenment whose premises have shaped the western philosophy.²⁴ (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 66) Vital for postmodern thinking in philosophy is the loss of belief in overarching systems of meaning, the refusal to accept any “total explanations” of reality and the rejection of ideological concepts of knowledge such as “science, or religion, or political programmes like Communism, [...]” (Woods 20) Therefore, postmodernist theory can be defined as a refusal of humanity’s grand narratives or metanarratives that were used to structure the discourse about modern religion, politics, and science. (Konrath 30) In Lyotard’s words, postmodernism is characterized by an “incredulity towards metanarratives.” (1984, xxiv)²⁵

To follow Lyotard’s argument it is essential to define the term metanarrative first. Nicol’s definition of the term metanarrative is the most feasible one:

A metanarrative is like a literary narrative in that it is essentially a means of ordering discrete elements in a particular form and thus presenting a rhetorical case about the way things work or are connected, which legitimates political positions and courses of action. (Nicol 11)

Metanarratives, therefore, create a “false sense of ‘totality’ and ‘universality’” in order to “suppress and control the individual.” (Nicol 11) According to Lyotard, there are two metanarratives which were essential for western philosophy, namely “the Enlightenment story of progress and political emancipation, and the Hegelian narrative of the manifestation of scientific reason.” (Sheehan 28f.) These metanarratives are highly ideological and can be defined as total theories because they try to find an explanation for all aspects of human life no matter how disparate they actually are. (Waugh, 6) Lyotard declares that especially the metanarrative of Enlightenment was used to simplify the reality and to produce an explanation of the world as “something coherent and socially useful.”

²⁴ Cf. Eaglestone, 182-185. Eaglestone gives the following definition of the term “western thought”: “By ‘western thought’, I mean roughly something like a *tradition* – which is not just philosophy, but is also made up of art, literature, politics, the culture of everyday life, everything that relies on to thinking make it so – which is part of a recognizable and ‘fundamental conceptual system,’ most powerfully but not exclusively stated in language, located geographically, chronologically and intellectually in what is called (calls itself?) the western world.” (Eaglestone 183f.)

²⁵ McHale discusses Lyotard’s term “incredulity towards metanarratives” and declares that it is one of various “competing constructions of postmodernism.” (26)

(Sheehan 28f.) In contrast to this modernist argumentation, Lyotard claims that in postmodernist thinking it is no longer seen as possible and as useful to produce an overarching narrative:

Postmodern subjects simply don't believe in metanarratives any more and appreciate that alternative narratives could be fashioned from the same groups of events. Postmodernity, Lyotard argues, prefers 'little narratives' (*petits récits*), those which do not attempt to present an overarching 'Truth' but offer a qualified, limited 'truth', one relative to a particular situation. (Nicol 12)

Lyotard's focus on truth and knowledge lies in the legitimization process that any kind of knowledge requires to become accepted. Therefore, Lyotard concludes that "knowledge can only be partial, fragmented and incomplete." (Woods 21) Besides, Lyotard is "suspicious to all claims to proof or truth" as he connects any sort of legitimization to the question of power. (Woods 21) Postmodern theory withdraws from these legitimating processes: "The death of the grand narrative thus heralds the birth of the local narrative, with its emphasis on diversity and heterogeneity." (Sheehan 28f.) The absence of metanarratives leads to the plurality of history which can be seen as "islands of discourse" and not as a homogenous whole. (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 5f.)

2.4. Postmodernism and Literature

2.4.1. The Aesthetic Basis of Postmodernism

In the preface to his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, the literary critic Bran Nicol gives a definition of postmodern texts and their most important aesthetic characteristics. In postmodern literature, the fictionality and artificiality of the text is examined in a self-reflexive way. Besides, these texts examine and criticise realistic concepts implicitly as well as explicitly. Furthermore, these texts force the readers to reconsider their ways of interpreting literature. (Nicol xvi)

According to McCaffery, the overall aim of postmodern writers is “By exploring how the writer produces an aesthetic fiction, the metafictionist hopes to suggest the analogous process through which all our meaning systems are generated.” (7) Besides, McCaffery points out that a central idea to postmodern writers is the “idea that fictional systems such as the novel are, in fact, *fictional* – they are symbolic systems of signs and relationships which are freely constructed and have no necessary connection with the world.” (23)

2.4.2. Anti-mimetic aesthetics

Both modernism and postmodernism evaluate nineteenth-century realism in a negative way. (Nicol 18) The anti-mimetic aesthetics of postmodern literature is opposed to the premises of realistic literature. McCaffery explores the connection between the rise of the realistic novel and the premises of Enlightenment in the 18th century and argues that the trust in science to explain the foundation of the world led to the great realistic novels of the 19th century. (10) However, even in the 19th century this faith was questioned because the subjectivity of man’s knowledge of the world was foregrounded. McCaffery then claims that this development reached its peak in the 20th century, where “the problem of analyzing the relationship between man and his metaphors, between objective and subjective views of the world, has been one of the main topics of controversy.” (11) This had a huge impact on artists in literature and the visual arts who were “profoundly influenced by the discoveries of the fictional bases of other systems.” (McCaffery 12)

In realistic writing, aesthetic illusion creates the false impression that the fictional world corresponds to the real world in appearance, behaviour of characters and the likeliness of particular events to happen. Realist novelists intend to create a text that can be described as presenting a “slice of life”.²⁶ (Nicol 18) The foundation of realism is the Aristotelian term *mimesis*. Here, art has the power to represent aspects of reality. It is obvious that realism is also a system of belief and an ideology. Here, literature has the duty to represent

²⁶ *Slice of life* “suggests that a work presents life ‘in the raw’, factual, visceral and unadulterated by art.” Cf. Dictionary of literary terms, 836.

aspects of the real world so that the reader is able to learn something from the described events. (Nicol 18) This mimetic approach to fiction is highly dogmatic because the realistic text has to be produced by an author who provides the reader with concepts such as characters or plots that are causally linked and can be divided into beginnings, middles and ends. In the same degree as a human being has to make sense of the real world, the author is obliged to create this sense in the literary work. (McCaffery 13)

Postmodernist literature questions the ability of conventional literary devices to depict reality accurately and to reflect on the modern world. On the contrary, it is argued that a stable reality does not exist. (Gordon 1) In postmodernist literature, the concept of teleology is heavily questioned. The coherence of a narrative world can only be achieved by a simplification of reality because the events described are put in a logically determined order to produce a plot. (Siegle 203) Besides, postmodern writers do not only reject teleological concepts but also problematize the inaccuracy of language to refer to a reality outside the linguistic system. "The act of writing becomes an existential act or reacting to and "reading" the event, people, and "meaning" of the universe." (Gordon 2) Furthermore, postmodern writers investigate the conventional concepts of traditional literature in order to show how mimetic representation is actually created. Besides, they also abandon the claim of representing universal truths, no matter if they are aesthetic, historical or philosophical. Postmodern authors rather want to examine the people's attitude towards reality and the means by which meaning is given to non-connected events. (Alfonso 125) Moreover, postmodern fiction refuses to fulfil the reader's expectation to find a straightforward and univocal interpretation. (Siegle 203)

2.4.3. Breaking of aesthetic illusion

The phenomenon of aesthetic illusion is central for mimetic fiction. It is essential for the emotional involvement of the reader in the story. Mimetic texts are created and organized according to various pro-illusionist principles²⁷ that

²⁷ Cf. Eva Müller-Zetzelmann. "Deconstructing the Self? – Late Twentieth-Century British Poetry and the Fiction of Authenticity." *European Journal of English Studies* 6.1 (2002): 69-84.

imitate a-priori categories which shape the human perception and are not consciously perceived. The principle of detailed world-creation is used in order to create a visual impression of the literary world so that it is perceived as an imitation of reality and not as a constructed universe. The principle of content-centred interest ensures the reader's interest in the story level by creating a story line full of suspense so that the fictionality of the text is forgotten. The principle of lisibility makes sure that the text can be perceived in the same way as reality. Therefore, in mimetic literary texts ontologically different levels are clearly divided and the laws of logic and common sense are employed. The principle of *celare artem* is vital for the creation of aesthetic illusion by hiding the artificiality and the madeness and inventedness of the literary text. (Wolf *Illusion (Aesthetic)*, 151-153)

In postmodern texts, these principles are violated deliberately in order to highlight the strategies which create the illusion of realism. Thereby, the ontological difference between fiction and reality is emphasized. Through the violation of the content-centred interest principle the story level is often devaluated whereas the discourse level is foregrounded. Besides, explicit and implicit metareferences to the status of the text violate the *celare artem*-principle and prevent the reader from getting immersed into the story. The reader cannot identify with the story or the characters because the fictionality and artificiality of the text are made over-prominent. Additionally, the reader is challenged by the abandonment of the principle of lisibility. He or she can no longer rely on the continuity of time and space and the principles of causality and teleology. (Baumgartner 13)

2.4.4. Characteristics of postmodern literature on the story level

Postmodern fiction questions concepts like teleology or causality. This can be achieved through the employment of various techniques which flaunt the expectations of readers. These techniques concern the story level as well as the discourse level. On the story level the ability of the reader to construct a chronology of events is questioned by either an over-complicated story or an

aleatory arrangement.²⁸ In postmodern writing, plot linearity is frequently abandoned so that it is impossible for the reader to establish the chronology of events or time and space patterns. Besides, also the narrative progress of the reader is disturbed by tedious and uneventful stories which completely lack any sort of action. A further technique which is typical for postmodern writing is a Moebius-strip-like narration of events so that the story line is constituted through repetition, infinite regress, circularity and narrative short-circuits. Postmodern texts often lack a definite closure and provide the reader with various endings. (Konrath 40) In anti-illusionist novels, the discourse level is foregrounded whereas the story level retreats into the background. Thereby, conventional plot elements like characters and action are neglected what results in uninteresting story lines. (Baumgartner 20)

2.4.5. Characteristics of postmodern literature on the discourse level

2.4.5.1. Frames and frames-breaking

Werner Wolf analyses the use of the concept of frames²⁹ in literary theory and defines the term frame as “a general term which refers to discursive exchanges as in the production and reception of literature and other media [...]” (*Frames* 2) According to Wolf the most crucial function of a frame is

to guide and even to enable interpretation – be it with reference to everyday experience and communication or to medial performances, artefacts etc. It is this interpretive function that justifies the description of frames as **meta**-phenomena. (*Frames* 3)

In order to analyse the use of frames in a literary text Wolf draws a “terminological distinction between ‘frame’ as an abstract cognitive metaconcept and ‘framing’ as activity and in particular a concrete coding of frames [...]” (*Frames* 7)

²⁸ Cf. Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion* 176.

²⁹ Cf. Waugh, *Metafiction* 28-34.

The most basic frame³⁰ that can be applied to a literary text is “the frame ‘fictionality’” in opposition to reality that Wolf defines as “in media representing or constructing possible worlds, fictionality is a frequently applicable frame that implies a specific, ‘non-serious’ or playful communication and also creates a kind of uncertainty or vagueness that would be untypical of pragmatic communication.” (Wolf, *Frames* 14)

Wolf, then, goes further by defining framing borders “in written literature” as “cover illustrations and opening paratexts [...], but also initial intermedial (ekphrastic) references, e.g. to pictures [...] and terminal elements [...]” (*Frames* 24f.) Wolf classifies the interpretative and controlling functions of framing borders as a help for the reader to

select frames of interpretation or reference relevant for the work under consideration. [...] By pointing to frames as tools or guides of interpretation, framings – and this applies also and in particular to the special form of framing borders – likewise fulfil an essentially interpretive, but also a controlling function. Most importantly, framings mark an artefact as such and distinguish it from its surroundings by indicating the special rules (frames) that apply in its reception. (*Frames* 26)

2.4.5.2. Metalepsis

Metalepsis is a literary phenomenon that “produces a ‘short-circuit’ of levels” because it deals with transgressions from a superior hierarchical level of the narration to a lower one as the literary critic John Pier states. (Pier, 303) In a conventional narrative the level of narration and the level of the narrated events are strictly kept apart. In a narrative where metalepsis is employed, however, the distinction between these two levels is blurred and this leads to the transgression of formerly distinct narrative levels. (Pier 303)

According to Pier, metalepsis has the following qualities: “metalepsis fold narrative levels back onto the present situation of the narrating act, uprooting the boundary between the world of the telling and that of the told or even, in

³⁰ Cf. Nicol 35-37.

extreme cases, effacing the line of demarcation between fiction and reality.”
(Pier 303)

2.4.5.3. Intertextuality

Intertextuality³¹ is most characteristic of postmodern art. Intertextuality is not unique to the postmodern period since it is found in all literary epochs. However, in postmodernism intertextuality is used in an excessive way and has foremost a deconstructive function. According to Waugh, postmodern intertextuality has a “comprehensive nature” because it acknowledges that any autonomy of literary texts is impossible. The distinction between literature and theory is no longer valid so that both are connected through a “web of textual overlap”. (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 50) This form of intertextuality plays with the expectations of readers concerning genres and styles and thereby forces the readers to rethink their presupposition. (Konrath 36)

Baumgartner points out that the metafictional elements that are used in postmodern writing, namely ontological frame-breaking, playing with the discourse level, parody, and intertextuality are used to liberate the reader who has to actively construct the story.³² (Baumgartner 6)

2.4.5.4. Metatextuality

Nicol argues that metafiction is “the most distinctive formal practice employed by postmodern writers.” (30f.) Therefore, “metafiction is the main technical device used in postmodern fiction.” (35) Metatextuality is frequently found on the discourse level of postmodern texts. Because this device is central to the

³¹ The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966. It is used to “denote the interdependence of literary texts, the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before it.” Kristeva further argued that “a literary text is not an isolated phenomenon but is made up of a mosaic of quotations, and that any text is the ‘absorption and transformation of another’,” (Dictionary of literary terms, 424.)

³² Cf. Connor, 77.

interpretation of the short stories of Coover and Barth I will discuss the concept of metareference³³ in an individual chapter.

3. Metareference and Metafiction

3.1. Definition of Metareference

The literary critic Werner Wolf has extensively published on the phenomenon of metareflexivity in self-reflexive texts. Wolf states that

„Metaisierung‘ bedeutet im Kontext der Literatur und anderen Medien das Einziehen einer Metaebene in ein Werk, eine Gattung oder ein Medium, von der aus metareferentiell auf Elemente oder Aspekte eben dieses Werkes, dieser Gattung oder dieses Mediums als solches rekurriert wird. (Wolf, *Metaisierung* 31)

Additionally, in these texts there are no primary references to anything outside the universe of the text. These narratives consist of various ontological levels, the level of narration and a meta-level. On this meta-level reflections about art, artificiality and fictionality can be found. Since these reflections deal with the textuality and the mediality of literature they can be defined as metareflexive. (Wolf, *Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz* 70)

3.2. Forms of Metareference

3.2.1. Fictio-metareference vs. Fictum-metareference

Concerning the content of metareference one has to distinguish between *fictio*- and *fictum*-metareference. Metareferential reflections on the fictionality of literary texts deal with the artificiality and the mediality of literature and discuss

³³ In this field of literary study terminological confusion is prevalent. Numerous critical terms are used synonymously and often interchangeably. Konrath gives the following list of frequent terms used to describe the phenomenon of metareference: “metaisation, metafiction, self-reflexivity, self-reflexion, self-reference, self-referentiality, meta-reflexivity, meta-reference, autoreflexivity and literary recursivity [...]” (49)

implicitly or explicitly its norms and conventions. *Fictio*-metareference refers to the ontological status of a literary text that highlights the opposition between natural and made and emphasises the fact that the text is composed by the author. Therefore, the text is the result of a creative act. Besides, *fictio*-metareference foregrounds the difference between life and art. (Wolf, *Metaisierung* 35)

Fictum-metareference, on the other hand, refers to the referential status of literature and points to the opposition invented vs. real. Metareferential comments that discuss the *fictum*-status of the literary text draw attention to its inventedness and emphasise the dichotomy between truth and fiction. (Wolf, *Metaisierung* 35)

3.2.2. Explicit vs. Implicit Metareference

Concerning the mediation of metareference one has to differentiate between explicit and implicit metareference. Concrete moments of speech or concrete metafictional comments of the narrator which can be quoted are defined as instances of explicit metareferences. In these statements the fictional character of the text is thematised. This is the case, for example, when the narrator states explicitly that the story is his own invention. Explicit metareferences are rendered in the mode of telling. (Wolf, *Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz* 71f.)

Implicit metareference is rendered in the mode of showing and can be defined as putting the metafictional comments into practice. Implicit metareferences illustrate the fictionality and artificiality of the text. Various elements of the narration are used to initiate metafictional reflections about the production of a mimetic text. Implicit metareference draws attention to the mediality of the text through marked rule-breaking, this means through the devaluation of the story level or an over-prominent discourse level. One example of implicit metareference is the use of typographical devices. (Wolf, *Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz* 71f.)

3.2.3. Story vs. Discourse Metareference

Metareference can be analysed according to its location that is either on the story or on the discourse level. In literary texts that strive to create aesthetic illusion the rendering of a thrilling and appealing story line is essential. Metafictional reflections that are situated on the story level, however, devalue the story level by the deconstruction of traditional stories. This can either be achieved through an uneventful story that lacks action or aleatory arrangements that hinder the simple interpretation of the text. Literary techniques such as metalepsis or *mise en abyme*³⁴ blur the ontological levels of the text and make it impossible for the reader to become immersed into the story. As a consequence, the fictionality and artificiality of the story becomes apparent to the reader. (Konrath 56)

In anti-illusionist texts the discourse level is made over-prominent through the use of metareference. The discourse level is the level where the narrator is situated and encompasses all formal options. Thereby, the discourse level is no longer only used to narrate the story. Besides, the discourse level as such becomes visible on its own because its mediation strategies are foregrounded. (Konrath 56)

3.3. Definition of Metafiction

Werner Wolf defines metafiction as the most important subcategory of metareflexivity:

Metafiktion sind metaästhetische Aussagen und alle autoreferentiellen Elemente eines Erzähltextes, die – unabhängig von ihrer impliziten oder expliziten Erscheinung – folgender Bedingung genügen: Sie müssen den Rezipienten in spürbarer Weise Phänomene zu Bewußtsein bringen, die sich nicht auf den Inhalt von Erzählungen als scheinbare Wirklichkeit beziehen, sondern auf das eigene, fremde oder allgemeine Erzählen als (Sprach-)Kunst und namentlich auf dessen Fiktionalität (im Sinne sowohl der Gemachtheit des Erzähltextes wie der 'Unwirklichkeit' oder Erfundenheit der in ihm vermittelten Welt). (Wolf, *Life-Story* 37)

³⁴ *Mise-en-abyme* is the term for a "literary recursion" and the "literary effect of infinite regression." (Dictionary of literary terms, 513)

Metafiction is the term for self-reflexive commentaries and elements in a fictional text that are not concerned with the content of the story but that lay bare the textuality and fictionality of literary texts. (Wolf: „Metafiktion“, 262; qtd. in Wolf: *Formen literarischer Selbstreferenz*, 71)³⁵ Linda Hutcheon puts it this way, “[m]etafiction’ [...] is fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity.” (Hutcheon, qtd. in Müller-Zettelmann, 18) Therefore, “[m]etafiction is still fiction, despite the shift in focus of narration from the product it presents to the process it is.” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 39)

One of the core point of this new approach to literature is the shift in the focus from “content to process” to highlight that the construction of human identity is paralleled by the process of writing fiction. Kennedy puts it this way, “we are all, metafiction seems to say, our own fictions, created by ourselves of our perceptions and the language with which we express them.” (5)

The content of metafictional writing is foremost concerned with the question how fiction is produced. This is to say that the process of creating the story is a frequent topic of metafiction. It is the exploration of the process of writing fiction that leads to the foregrounding of literary devices and their artificiality: “How is meaning created? Metafiction asks. How are stories put together, and why do people feel the need to put stories together in the first place?” (Evenson 15)

Subsequently, metafictional writing explores the processes that underlie the construction of reality and “the way individuals and social groups put together a sense of the world.” (Evenson 15) McCaffery defines this need of individuals to give meaning to their experiences and to make sense of the world as the “fiction-making process”: “By implication, every significant human act carries with it a context of meaning which is directly a function of language and of the rules of transformation established *by the system itself* and not by any exterior, imposed meaning.” (6) Postmodern writers share the assumption that the perception of the individual is determined by “language and by subjective (i.e., *fictional*) forms developed to organize our relationship to the world in a coherent

³⁵ Cf. Heckard 210.

fashion.” (McCaffery, 6) Consequently, the intention of these authors is to demonstrate the fictionality of human ordering systems. (McCaffery, 8f.) It is suggested that the creation of fiction and the construction of reality follow similar lines:

What it [metafiction] does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover - through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly ‘written’. (Waugh 18)

McCaffery focuses in his definition of metafictional literature on the distinction between reality and fiction: “Fiction cannot hope to mirror reality or tell the truth because “reality” and “truth” are themselves fictional abstractions whose validity has become increasingly suspect as this century has proceeded.” (5) McCaffery concludes that “[s]uch works therefore become metafiction – fictions which examine fictional systems, how they are created, and the way in which reality is transformed by and filtered through narrative assumptions and conventions.” (5) The intention behind this investigation is to explain the composition of the world as it is experienced by human’s in contemporary society. The result of this exploration is that the world can be described as a “construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems.” (Waugh 9)

3.4. The aim of metafiction

Patricia Waugh declares that the purpose of metafiction is twofold. Metafictional writing intends to lay bare the traditional literary devices especially of the realistic novel and to investigate the relationship between fiction and reality. This is to say, that metafiction “explores the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.” (Waugh 2) In metafictional writing, the importance of the reading process for the actualisation of the text is stressed. It is highlighted that the reader creates the fictional universe through the written words of the author. (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 27) As Hutcheons states, “the making of fictive worlds and the constructive, creative functioning of

language itself are now self-consciously shared by author and reader.” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 30) In addition to the investigation of the narrative structures of fiction and the closeness of fiction to the creation of reality, metafiction also focuses on the new role of the reader. (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 6)

Through the process of “defamiliarization”, the reader becomes aware of the literary devices that are used to create mimetic fiction. Because of this new awareness of the fictionality and the artificiality of the text, the reader needs new reading strategies to approach the text. (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 24) The reader can no longer only perceive the story passively but has to actively make sense of the fictional world. Thereby, the reader should become aware of the fact that he uses similar processes to make sense of reality. (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 29) To achieve this goal, “[i]n metafiction the reader or the act of reading itself often has become thematized parts of the narrative situation, *acknowledged* as having a co-production function.” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 37)

4. Robert Coover

4.1. Robert Coover’s short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants*

The title *Pricksongs and Descants* gives an insight into the construction of the metafictional short stories in this collection. Robert Coover explained the implications of the title in an interview:

‘Pricksong’ derives from the physical manner in which the song was printed – the notes were literally pricked out; ‘descant’ refers to the form of music in which there is a *cantus firmus*, a basic line, and variations that other voices play against it. [...] In this connection, I thought of the descants as feminine decoration around the pricking of the basic line. Thus: the masculine thrust of narrative and the lyrical play around it. (Evenson 52)

The short stories in *Pricksongs and Descants* can be divided into three groups. (Evenson 3) The first group consists of stories which rework familiar fairy tales³⁶; the short story “The Gingerbread House”, for instance, is a reworking of the popular fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel”.³⁷ The short stories of the second group can be defined as revisions of familiar biblical stories.³⁸ Here, they are told from a surprising point of view which adds a new dimension to the source text. In “The Brother”, Coover narrates the story of Noah and the arc from the perspective of Noah’s nameless brother. This brother helps him to build the arc but then drowns since he and his family are not allowed to enter the arc. In the short story “J” another familiar biblical story is reworked by Coover, namely the myth of Joseph and Virgin Mary. Coover employs the perspective of Joseph who cannot understand why God is interfering with his life. According to Lois Gordon these short stories “often concentrate on archetypal roles or situations, or on generally familiar myths or Bible and folktales – those moral lessons generations have accepted as ‘exemplary’.” (Gordon 87) In Coover’s short stories, however, it becomes obvious that these myths nowadays only produce “unworkable archetypes” (Gordon 88) that are no longer relevant for contemporary readers. The third group of short stories consists of self-reflexive metafictional short stories that investigate their own fictionality and artificiality. McCaffery defines these short stories as “cubist” pieces and explains Coover’s attitude towards reality in the following way: “Coover shares with the cubists the relativistic view that the role of the artist is not to render reality unambiguously but to create realities whose ambiguities suggest something of our own relationship to the world.” (72f.)

In this thesis the focus lies on the third group of short stories. In a first step, the overall themes of the metafictional stories are analysed, namely the breaking up of myths and the investigation of basic conventions of realistic literature. This

³⁶ Bacchilega analyses the use of the fairy tale convention in Coover's work and states that “[h]is use of the *Märchen* at a meta-fictional level necessarily implies that the folktale is a narrative system (both semiotic and semantic) which expresses a particular world-view and produces certain expectations in the reader. This wholistic approach to the *Märchen* allows him to consider it one of the basic ‘fictions’ which to Coover design our unconsciously inherited culture and our social being.” (172-173)

³⁷ Cf. Cope 12f.

³⁸ Cf. Heckard 219 and Cope 21-25.

analysis seems necessary to examine in a next step the short stories “The Magic Poker” and “The Elevator” in more detail.

4.2. *The general themes of the metafictional short stories*

4.2.1. The breaking up of myths

In order to investigate the complexity of Coover’s short stories the following quote of the literary critic Kennedy is interesting. Kennedy gives the following definition of Coover’s thematic issues in his writing: [t]hese are the themes and subjects of Coover’s short fiction: he deals with life, life viewed through the lens of art, as well as the process of that viewing and the process of his own fictional handling of it all. (Kennedy 9)

In his works, Coover investigates the relationship between reality and fiction and the significance of fictions for our understanding of the world. Furthermore, he highlights in his writings how dependent societies but also individuals are on these processes. Evenson focuses his interpretation on Coover’s different approaches towards the relationship between mythmaking and metafiction. Evenson points out that “the breaking down of old myths” (13) is the most prevalent theme in Coover’s novels and short story collection. Furthermore, Evenson claims that Coover’s interest in the constructivist power of fiction led to his occupation with metafiction. Consequently, Coover wanted to highlight “the way in which communities both come together and hold together through a series of shared stories and myths.” (Evenson 10)

Gordon’s main focus in her analysis of Coover’s writing is to show the relevance of his metafictional writing for an interpretation of the concept of real life and reality. Gordon highlights the importance of his unique style in his interpretation of human neediness and the yearning for significance in concrete and metaphysical terms. Kennedy, on the other hand, focuses his examination of Coover’s short story collections on their innovative potential and the metafictional qualities which according to Kennedy lie in the demonstration of the limitations of realistic literary concepts. Heckard’s focus in her analysis of

Coover's writing lies on the potential of independence from literary conventions that arises from the rejection of archetypes, stereotypes, and myths. Therefore, Heckard examines the use of myth in *Pricksongs and Descants* and concludes that the short stories show that myths and fairytales are no longer valid to make a sensible interpretation of reality because the reader's response to them has changed dramatically. Heckard concludes that the value of Coover's metafictional writing lies in his attempt to deconstruct myths and traditions that until now have been acknowledged without questioning.

In his analysis of the most prevalent themes of Coover's writing McCaffery coined the term "Fiction-Making Process". (7) McCaffery refers to the linguistic term in philosophy. He points out that human cognition and the capability of language to represent reality are limited. Due to this fact, it is impossible for individuals to fully understand the world and to interpret reality objectively. This is why humans need to create fictions in order to interpret and to give meaning to their experiences. (McCaffery 8) As a result, the creation of fictional accounts of one's experience is essential for the construction of significance and meaning. McCaffery claims that a central concern of Coover's work is the "focus on the mediating effect which language and literature have on man's relationship to the world." (13) This is the reason why the way we construct our fictions has an immediate influence on how we interpret certain events. Coover is very concerned with the way these fictions are created because they have a manipulative power, especially when they are accepted uncritically. According to Coover, it is the task of the author to demystify the old myths and "to break up the tired myths, the conventional ways of putting stories together, so as to revitalize literature, making it relevant to the complexities and difficulties of modern life." (Evenson 4) Moreover, the author has to bring about a new way of thinking even if this effort is met with hostility:

Unfortunately, our desire for permanency and order often tempts us to ignore the fictional nature of our systems; and as the works of Coover, Gass, and Barthelme often dramatically demonstrate, without this understanding, we tend to become trapped within our fictional systems, victims of our own decayed or obsessive creations. (McCaffery 8f.)

Consequently, there are essential differences between myths and fictions. Myths that are no longer efficacious become fictions that have the ability to question the myths successfully. (Evenson 14) The literary critic Jackson Cope puts it this way: "Myths are agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent." (9) As a conclusion, it can be said that it is Coover's aim that his readers "understand the dynamics not only of the story but also of the fictions people create in the world at large." (Evenson 10)

4.2.2. Dismantling basic conventions of realistic literature

The literary critic Robert B. Siegle explores the differences between mimetic and anti-illusionist writing to work out the key qualities of metafictional writing. Siegle's main focus lies on the denial of the unbridgeable gap between a literary text that pretends to mirror reality and reality itself. Due to the complex nature of reality, reality has to be simplified in a literary text since the depiction of a coherent and logical narrative world without simplification is impossible. According to Siegle, Coover's anti-mimetic metafictional literature incorporates this postmodern view on reality as fragmented and this is Siegle's main argument in his analysis of Coover's short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants*. To further deepen this claim, Siegle takes a close look at the short story "The Magic Poker" since in this short story that central traditional concepts such as the authority of the narrator over his creation are heavily challenged and therefore more similar to the contemporary view on reality.

Another critic who builds his analysis of Robert Coover's writings on a close analysis of "The Magic Poker" is Ricardo Miguel Alfonso. He wants to show the postmodern qualities of the short stories especially the refusal of believing in any aesthetic, historical or philosophical "truth-claims" (125). Alfonso's main focus in his analysis of *Pricksongs and Descants* is to point out the high self-reflexive potential of Coover's short stories that enhance the reader's awareness of the limitations of traditional realistic and mimetic literature. In his view, there is a critical relationship between the metafictional short stories and the contemporary cultural situation when the stories were written. Alfonso

concludes his essay with a rejection of those critics who see the stories only as “formal disposition of the thematized material.” (135)

As pointed out by the critics above, in his metafictional short stories it is Coover’s aim to question literary conventions, mimetic methods of presentation and organizing principles of realistic literature.³⁹ It can be argued that Coover wants to discuss “fundamental categories by throwing them into question” in order to highlight “the very limits of literary interpretation.” (Alfonso 123) The most prominent literary conventions that Coover critically investigates are the role of the author and the narrator, the linearity and fictional coherence of the story line, and the boundary between reality and literature. (Alfonso 123) To do so, the stories are spatially fragmented into numerous segments that are neither temporally nor logically ordered and therefore “rearrange the order of the narrative.” (Evenson 17) The fragments feature the same characters and are often set in the same setting but several mutually exclusive story lines evolve so that the story finally consists of various plots. (Evenson 17)

These metafictional and postmodern qualities of the short stories have immediate effects on the interpretation since the interpreter of metafiction needs a new approach towards literature. The reader, as well as the interpreter, has to inhabit the part of the implied reader to enact the potential meanings that are inherent in the text. Consequently, the value of metafictional writing is the importance of approaching these texts in an open-minded fashion in order to be able to explore the ambiguity that is inherent in the metafictional short stories. (Pearse 73-84)

Thus, Coover’s metafictional short stories challenge those readers who are used to the conventions of realistic literature and who expect a linear narrative and fictional coherence. In his stories, Coover forces the reader to develop new reading strategies towards these texts since all variations are ontologically situated on the same level. Hence, it is impossible to say that one particular story line is the true version of the story. (McCaffery 73) McCaffery describes Coover’s approach to these metafictional short stories as the creation of a so-

³⁹ For a negative evaluation of “The Magic Poker” see Schmitz 210-219.

called “garden-path-story”: “In presenting all the forks of the road, Coover abandons one of realistic fiction’s strongest conventions – that the author should choose one specific narrative “path” and then follow it to a conclusion.” (McCaffery 74) Besides, McCaffery states that “his [Coover’s] short fictions usually deal much more directly with *literary* fictions, the sources of their appeal, the problems which face those who want to create them, and the way in which they affect our relationship to reality.” (McCaffery 60) Similarly, the literary critic Kennedy also claims that Coover in his short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants* “take[s] the worn out illusions of the realist and destroy[s] them before the reader’s eyes only to create an even stronger illusion.” (Kennedy 7)

4.3. “The Magic Poker”

Coover’s short story “The Magic Poker” consists of 54 fragmented segments that are spatially divided by three bubbles. These segments are told from different viewpoints and feature five main characters. These characters are the girl in gold pants and her sister Karen who visit the island, the caretaker’s son who was left behind when the island was deserted, a tall man who also seems to live on the island and the creative narrator who in the beginning can be described as a real person and has a story line of its own. In this postmodern story Coover uses various metafictional devices to shatter the reader’s expectations and to force him to find a new approach towards literary texts: “The reader’s expectation of closure, consistency or progress in the plot are invariably disrupted – strictly, there seems to be no plot at all.” (Alfonso, 126) As a result, it is “impossible for the reader to find any stable structure of meaning or narrative coherence”. (Alfonso 127)

The story in “The Magic Poker” has a two-fold interest. There are two distinct ontological levels that divide the narrator and the fictional protagonists. On the highly complex story level, the reader is confronted with four different plot lines. One of the plot lines describes how the girl in the gold pants finds a magic poker and then the reader gets four contradictory versions of this event. The story is not narrated by a conventional narrator who hides behind his story in order to

uphold the *celare-artem* principle but by a narrator who reflects on his role as the creator and mediator of the story. (McCaffery 80) Therefore, a close analysis of the role of the narrator seems to be vital for the interpretation of the story. Overall, it is interesting to see how Coover discusses “the limits of the relationship between literary representation and the author’s control over this representation.” (Alfonso 128)

4.3.1. The role of the narrator

The short story starts with an explicit statement about the process of writing and the status of the narrator in fictional texts. Therefore, it is obvious from the very first line that this short story is not structured like a conventional one with beginning, middle and end and a covertly mediated plot line. There is no chance for the reader to get immersed into the story because already in the first segment of the short story the narrator confesses that it is him who invents and narrates the story. That is to say that the narrator immediately draws the reader’s attention to both the artificiality and the fictionality of the story. Consequently, the *celare artem* principle is violated right from the beginning since the narrator unmasks his narrative techniques. This has a most disturbing effect on those readers who are used to realistic literary story telling and expect a conventional narrative. As this is a quotable phrase, it is an explicit metareference that thematises both the *fictio*- and the *fictum*-status of the story. However, the last sentence is somewhat hard to typologize since it is not clear if this “anything” actually involves events that are not favoured by the narrator:

I wander the island, inventing it. I make a sun for it, and trees – pines and birch and dogwood and firs – and cause the water to lap the pebbles of its abandoned shores. This, and more: I deposit shadows and dampness, spin, webs, and scatter ruins. Yes: ruins. A mansion and guest cabins and boat houses and docks. Terraces, too, and bath houses and even an observation tower. All gutted and window-busted and autographed and shat upon. I impose a hot midday silence, a profound and heavy stillness. But anything can happen. (20)

In the statement above, the narrator introduces himself as a narrator who is in perfect command of his story line and the characters. In segment 21, however,

the narrator questions his control over his characters, something that is against the traditional realistic conception of the authorial narrator. In this fragment, the two sisters explore the deserted mansion and the guest cabins. Upon hearing the two girls coming, the caretaker's son hides in the shadows of the room. In segment 20 the girl in the gold pants enters this very room and notices the bad condition of the room. What is problematic in this particular situation is that she does not mention the caretaker's son. As a result, the significant question arises whether the characters have a life of their own:

But where is the caretaker's son? I don't know. He was here, shrinking into the shadows, when Karen's sister entered. Yet, though she catalogues the room's disrepair, there is no mention of the caretaker's son. This is awkward. Didn't I invent him myself, along with the girls and the man in the turtleneck shirt? Didn't I round his back and stunt his legs and cause the hair to hang between his buttocks? I don't know. The girls, yes, and the tall man in the shirt – to be sure, he's one of the first of my inventions. But the caretaker's son? To tell the truth, I sometimes wonder if it was not he who invented me... (27)

In this segment, Coover discusses another essential question of literary fiction which is the autonomy of literary characters. (Siegle 206) Additionally, the narrator is troubled with the question of who invents what and whom, so that the ontological levels between narrator and the characters become blurred. This instance of metalepsis further questions the realistic convention of the narrator as a trustworthy mediator of the story. Additionally, the status of the narrator as narrator-creator changes rapidly and he turns into a "textual strategy." (Siegle 206)

In the course of the story it seems as if the reader is a witness to the difficult writing process of the narrator.⁴⁰ In the middle of the short story, in segment 29, the narrator laments about his loss of control over the actions of the characters and of the story in general. The caretaker's son wants to deposit a love letter for Karen whom he seems to know from a former encounter. At least, there are various hints in the story suggesting that they had actually met before although no explanation is given as to how this might be possible. Suddenly the narrator exclaims:

⁴⁰ Cf. Evenson, 56f.

A love letter! Wait a minute, this is getting out of hand! What happened to that poker, I was doing much better with the poker, I had something going there, archetypal and even maybe beautiful, a blend of eros and wisdom, sex and sensibility, music and myth. But what am I going to do with shit in a rusty teakettle? No, no, there's nothing to be gained by burdening our fabrications with impieties. Enough that the skin of the world is littered with our contentious artifice, lepered with the stigmata of human aggression and despair, without suffering our songs to be flatted by savagery. Back to the poker. (30)

The narrator claims that a narrative story line like a love story hinders the understanding of the deeper mythical meanings of this short story. Besides, Coover highlights the usedupness of narrative devices such as love letters that through overuse became literary clichés that are mostly used in popular literature. (Siegle 204) The depiction of love stories is one of the myths that Coover wants to break up because these descriptions have no relevance to modern life. Conventional love stories are artificial accounts where especially the female reader is immersed into the story because in an act of wishful thinking she wants to experience the love story herself. Nevertheless, the reader is aware that it is unlikely that these events happen in real-life. In these stories the topic of love is not discussed in such a way that the reader can relate it to his or her everyday life.

Moreover, as Siegle explains, in this segment Coover puts into question the role of the narrator in mimetic fiction which is to create the illusion that the literary texts are a slice of life:

A narrator gets "something going" by artful arrangement of these elements of the narrative code, a reminder that as long as he doesn't posit them too simplistically (as in light literature) or jumble them in incompatible configurations, readers will believe that artifice equals reality, that the thought systems mirror the referent. (204)

Another important topic that is raised in the segments that feature the narrator is the difficult relationship between reality and fiction. The narrator reflects on the reality of his invented island since "the invented world follows paradigms by which we unconsciously preconceive reality that it seems more real than reality." (Siegle 206) Here, the confusion between reality and fiction results from

the tendency of readers who compare the setting of literary text to places that really exist. In the same segment, the narrator states explicitly that it is only a convention of realistic fiction that the story is unmediated without a narrator who is visible. The narrator points out that he no longer plays an active part in the mediation of the story but that he is going to “disappear”, that is to say that he is going to hide the mediation process of the narrated events. Nevertheless, the narrator compares himself to “Zeno’s turtle”. In the following statement the belief that traditional realistic texts are unmediated pictures of real life is highlighted:

I am disappearing. You have no doubt noticed. Yes, and by some no doubt calculable formula of event and pagination. But before we drift apart to a distance beyond the reach of confessions (though I warn you: like Zeno’s turtle, I am with you always), listen: it’s just as I feared, my invented island is really taking its place in world geography. Why, this island sounds very much like the old Dahlberg place on Jackfish Island up on Rainy Lake, people say, and I wonder: can it be happening? Someone tells me: I understand somebody bought the place recently and plans to fix it up, maybe put a resort there or something. On *my* island? Extraordinary! – and yet it seems possible. I look on a map: yes, there’s Rainy Lake, there’s Jackfish Island. Who invented this map? Well, I must have, surely. And the Dahlbergs, too, of course, and the people who told me about them. Yes, and perhaps tomorrow I will invent Chicago and Jesus Christ and the history of the moon. Just as I have invented you, dear reader, while lying here in the afternoon sun, bedded deeply in the bluegreen grass like an old iron poker... (40)

Siegle points out that the boundary between fiction and reality is questioned here as “[t]he text at this point makes irrepressible the unbridgeable gap any linguistic act makes between itself and reality, [...]” (207) Furthermore, Siegle points to the narrator’s statement that he is the creator of the reader. According to Siegle, this “claim to invention is made primarily to remind the reader that he is not the same as the model reader who understands perfectly what the author is attempting.” (208) As a conclusion, Siegle states that this passage “interchanges the roles of narrator, character, and reader until none of these three principal zones of consciousness in fiction is fully distinct from another.” (208)

As a conclusion, it can be said that the narrator cannot be defined as the mediator who is prevalent in conventional literature. This narrator is “just

another formal component, as liable to variations and hesitations as are the plot or the characters.” (Alfonso 126)

4.3.2. The disruption of the narrative line

4.3.2.1. Discontinuous fragments and mutually exclusive story lines

The short story “The Magic Poker” “is composed of various fragments of fairy tales, legends, myths, and speculative histories.” (McCaffery 80) On the whole, the segments can be divided into four different strands of narration, namely the realistic subplot, the story of the caretaker’s son, the story of the “prince of the parapet” and the story of the magic poker. (Siegle 210) According to Siegle’s distinction mentioned above, I want to analyze the different story lines.

The short story consists of mutually exclusive story lines that cannot be connected to a coherent whole. It seems as if the plot of this story consisted of different accounts of what happens when two sisters visit a deserted island. Since all these variations are situated on the same ontological level a distinction between reality and fantasies, wishes and dreams seems to be obsolete. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the story deals with various possible worlds. Therefore, it can be claimed that the possible worlds theory is applicable here and gives further insights in the highly complex story line.

Es existiert daher – wie die Vertreter der *possible worlds*-Theorie meinen – in jedem Erzähltext neben der vom Autor zum jeweiligen Zeitpunkt der Geschichte **als real ausgegebenen Textwelt** (der sogenannten **textual actual world**) eine Vielzahl von **Wirklichkeitsmodellen einzelner Figuren** (die sogenannten **characters’ domains** [...]). Diese subjektiven Wirklichkeitsmodelle sind in sich wieder aus verschiedenen **Teilwelten (private worlds)** zusammengesetzt, weil das Handeln einer Figur stets von verschiedenen Motivationssystemen geleitet wird, und zwar von ihrer **Wunschwelt (wish-world**, das sind ihre Triebe, Bedürfnisse und Wünsche), ihrer **Pflichtenwelt (obligation world**, das sind ihr moralisch-ethisches Wertesystem und verinnerlichte Pflichten und Konventionen) und von ihrer **Wissenswelt (knowledge-world**, das sind ihr Informationsstand, ihre Kenntnisse und Fähigkeiten) [...]. (Busse 35)

In this short story, however, these possible worlds are no longer only possible story lines or dreams of the protagonists but they materialise and consequently all versions of the same event are equally part of the story. In fact, some descriptions of the visit of the two sisters on the island could be analysed as the realisation of their possible worlds. By this I mean that the “realistic subplot” examines the obligation world of the girl in gold pants whereas the subplot of “the magic poker” deals with her wish-world of a fairytale-like love story.

4.3.2.2. The realistic subplot

As Siegle claims there are four different main strands that build up the short story. Siegle defines those 20 segments that describe the island and the visit of the girls as “realistic subplot”. (210) In these segments the story of two sisters is told who explore the island. The core action of this realistic subplot is the examination of the inner thoughts and feelings of the girl in gold pants who has to overcome the failure of her third marriage. Besides, the relationship between the two sisters is described and it is obvious that their relationship is troubled by their mutual misunderstandings. The realistic subplot can be defined in the following way: “[t]his part of the story, then, is recognizable realistic mimetic psychological fiction, a little vignette in the troubled lives of sisters unable to be close.” (Siegle 210)

It is especially the inner state of the girl in gold pants that is investigated in this subplot. Throughout this subplot the reader gets insights into her obligation world that are her moral and ethical thoughts on the nature of human beings. Besides, it is also obvious that the inner state of the girl in gold pants is mirrored in the ruined condition of the island. Finally, in segment 40, the girl explicitly compares the island with her own life:

“It’s a sad place.” Karen joined her sister on the terrace, the balcony, and they gaze out at the lake, two girls alone on a desolate island. “Sad and yet alright for me, I suppose. Oh, I don’t regret any of it, Karen. No, I was wrong, wrong as always, but I don’t regret it. It’d be silly to be all pinched and morbid about it, wouldn’t it, Karen?” The girl, of course, is talking about the failure of her third marriage. (36)

In the short story the relevance of the realistic subplot is expressed explicitly. Segment 49 seems to be a summary of the realistic subplot although it starts like a fairy tale with the phrase “once upon a time”. The two styles of a realistic description and a fairy tale are mixed even if they contradict each other strongly. The emphasis in this segment lies on the inner thoughts and feelings of the girls. The finding of the poker has nothing magical about it and it is only a souvenir of this day:

Once upon a time, two sisters visited a desolate island. They walked its paths with their proclivities and scruples, dreaming their dreams and sorrowing their sorrows. They scared a snake and probably a bird or two, broke a few windows (there were few left to break), and gazed meditatively out upon the lake from the terrace of the main house. They wrote their names above the stone fireplace in the hexagonal loggia and shat in the soundbox of an old green piano. One of them did anyway; the other one couldn't get her pants down. On the island, they found a beautiful iron poker, and when they went home, they took it with them. (41f.)

4.3.2.3. The story of the caretaker's son

In this short story there are eight segments which include the caretaker's son. The reader gets informed in segment 4 that he was left behind on the island when it was deserted. As Siegle points out, the realistic subplot and the segments that feature the caretaker's son are “incompatible by conventional standards.” (213) The core action of this subplot is the attempt of the caretaker's son to fulfil his wish-world, namely to have sexual intercourse with Karen. He is not civilised, naked and only grunts so that he is a contrast to the tall man, the other male protagonist on the island. (Siegle 213) In these segments there are hints that the caretaker's son and Karen know each other from a former occasion. Especially in segment 18 this relationship is formulated:

He knows that one. He's been there before. He crouches inside the door, his hairy body tense. She enters, staring straight at him. He grunts. She smiles, backing away. “Karen!” His small eyes dart to the doorway, and he shrinks back into the shadows. (26)

However, he is not successful since both of the girls are able to chase him away. In the end, the question remains whether he functions as a symbol of sexuality or whether he is the materialisation of the girls' physical needs and desires.

4.3.2.4. The story of the “prince of the parapet”

The story line of the tall man is mutually exclusive to the other strands because it is stated continuously in the other segments that the island is deserted. However, these segments are situated on the same ontological level so that this subplot is as probable as the other ones. Siegle claims that this plot “provides an affirmative thematic notion that one way or another affects one’s sense of the other strands even though they are ruled incompatible in the court of causality.” (214) This is the case because the other characters are part of these segments although these encounters are impossible according to the realistic subplot. Right in the beginning the tall man hears the boat approaching and delights in the idea that he is going to have company. This strengthens the impression of his actual existence. In segment 9 the tall man is introduced as a counterpart to the caretaker’s son: “Poised there now, gazing thoughtfully out on that view, is a tall slender man, dressed in slacks, white turtleneck shirt, and navy-blue jacket, smoking a pipe, leaning against the stone parapet.” (23) Siegle states that “this character is constructed of stereotypical dress and speech, and is a good illustration of what we have seen about the ease of invention-by-convention.” (Siegle 214)

The contrast between the tall man and the caretaker’s son is particularly obvious in the segments 24 and 35. Whereas the caretaker’s son is only able to grunt and to think of his physical needs, in these two segments the tall man reflects on the condition of the desolated island and the human nature of people:

He has been deeply moved by the desolation of this island. And yet, it is only the desolation of artefact, is it not, the ruin of man’s civilized arrogance, nature reclaiming her own. Even the willful mutilations: a kind of instinctive response to the futile artifices of imposed order, after all. But such reasoning does not appease him. Leaning against his raised knee,

staring out upon the vast wilderness, hoping indeed he has heard a boat come here, he puffs vigorously on his pipe and affirms reason, man, order. Are we merely blind brutes loosed in a system of mindless energy, impotent, misdirected, and insolent? "No," he says aloud, "we are not." (28)

These sophisticated thoughts link him to the girl in gold pants who employs similar thoughts and eventually shares them with him:

"It's a sad place," she says, "and all too much like my own life." He nods. "You mean, the losing struggle against inscrutable forces, young dreams brought to ruin?" "Yes, something like that," she says. "And getting kicked in and gutted and shat upon." (35)

In the course of these segments Karen as well as her sister meets the tall man. In segments 39 and 41 it is Karen who is with the tall man. However, their encounters are very different. These contrasting actions show various character traits of the tall man which may seem exclusionary. In the encounters between the tall man and the girl in gold pants the discussion of philosophical questions is foregrounded. In contrast to this, Karen is mainly playing with an iron poker which makes their encounters full of sexual allusions.

4.3.2.5. The magic poker

In this subplot the possibilities of the ongoing story line are further multiplied. There are four different story lines of what happens when the girl in gold pants finds the magic poker.⁴¹ These four possibilities play with the reader's expectation of what to expect in a short story whose title clearly alludes to the fairytale convention. It is interesting to note that the two instances of the transformation of the poker into a handsome young man correlates with the wish-world of the girl in gold pants whereas the other two possibilities seem to be linked to her knowledge-world.

In segment 13 the story of the magic poker begins like a fairy tale. The girl in gold pants is lost on her way to the guest cabin and she asks herself which way to go:

⁴¹ Cf. Kennedy 19.

To the left it is dark, to the right sunny: she chooses the sunny side and there, not far from the path, comes upon a wrought-iron poker, long and slender with an intricately worked handle. She bends low, her golden haunches gleaming over the grass: how beautiful it is! On a strange impulse, she kisses it – POOF! Before her stands a tall slender man, handsome, dressed in dark slacks, white turtleneck shirt, and jacket, smoking a pipe. He smiles down at her. “Thank you,” he says, and takes her hand. (24)

Here, it is obvious that he is described in the same way as the tall man in the other subplot which leads to a further confusion between the different subplots. However, the next segment offers a realistic description of the finding of the magic poker. Here, the poker loses its magical qualities and becomes a normal object again:

Karen in some distance in front, almost out of sight, when the other girl discovers, bedded in the grass, a wrought-iron poker. Orange with rust, it is long and slender with an elaborate handle. [...] “Oh!” she says softly. “How strange! How beautiful!” Squeamishly, she touches it, grips it, picks it up, turns it over. Not so rusty on the underside – but bugs! *Millions* of them! She drops the thing, shudders, stands, wipes her hand several times on her pants, shudders again. (25)

It seems obvious, that this subplot plays with the conventions of romantic stories as it becomes evident in segment 16. The conventions are critically applied to the very story in question. The girl in gold pants states explicitly that she is a silly romantic fool to believe that this poker has magic qualities. Therefore, the next sentence ridicules the convention of the fairy tale that every object that is found has to have magic qualities that transform the objects into handsome knights and princes:

She crouches, haunches flexing golden above the bluegreen grass, and kisses the strange poker, kisses its handle and its long rusted shaft. Nothing. Only a harsh unpleasant taste. I am a fool, she thinks, a silly romantic fool. Yet why else has she been diverted to this small meadow? She kisses the tip – POOF! “Thank you,” he says, smiling down at her. He bows to kiss her cheek and take her hand. (25)

The last version of the finding of the poker again discusses the applicability of fairy tale conventions to the realistic experience of finding an abandoned object. This segment states that there is something wrong when nothing happens after the kiss. This suggests that in a short story that is called "The Magic Poker" there should be something extraordinary about this object:

She kisses the rusted iron poker, kisses its ornate handle, its long rusted shaft, kisses the tip. Nothing happens. Only a rotten taste in her mouth. Something is wrong. "Karen!" (26)

4.3.3. The story within the story

After the narrator declares that he will no longer feature in the short story, the reader is introduced to a grandmother who tells her two grandchildren the story of 'The Magic Poker' on a stormy day. So the reader gets yet another version of the story of "The Magic Poker" and the story of the magic poker becomes a story within itself.⁴² There are four different beginnings of this story within the story since most of the characters that are part of "The Magic Poker" reappear in this story within the story. The fourth version tells the story of a beautiful young princess in tight gold pants that cannot be removed. The King promises the knight that is able to remove the tight pants the hand of his daughter. The Caretaker's son, described as squat, naked and hirsute, steals the Magic Poker and he removes the pants of the Princess. The moment the Princess kisses the poker "a handsome Knight in shining armor of white and navy blue stood before her, smoking a pipe." (43) Then, the handsome knight kills the caretaker's son but the king is not amused because the knight made his daughter a widow. This behaviour is contradictive to the conventions of the fairytale genre where it is never questioned that the handsome knight should be the husband of the beautiful princess. Here, this assumption is reversed and the cruelty of the knight is highlighted.

⁴² A "story within a story" is "an enclosed narrative; a story which occurs as part of, or as a digression in, a longer story." (Dictionary of literary terms 865)

The ending of this story within the story raises the question of what might happen when the princess kisses the poker again. Will the handsome knight turn into the poker again? In the next segment, it is suggested that the handsome knight/man does indeed turn back into a poker again and remains a “handsome souvenir of a beautiful day.” (45)

4.3.4. Setting instability

Concerning the setting, it is clear from the narrator’s statement in segment 1 that the story takes place on a deserted island invented by the narrator. In a conventional narrative the setting of the story remains constant. Throughout this short story, the island is not only a background foil for the central action but its qualities are openly discussed. The island and its history are discussed in several segments. These accounts, however, cannot be linked to a homogenous whole but rather seem to highlight the importance of the setting to the kind of story that is told.

The first description of the history of the island is given in segment 7. It seems as if this account links the island to the history of a historical novel that narrates the fate of a family as the word “patriarch” suggests. An authorial narrator tells in a realistic manner that:

Once, earlier in this age, a family with great wealth purchased this entire island, here up on the border, and built on it all these houses, these cabins and the mansion up there on the promontory, and the boat house, docks, bath houses, observation tower. They tamed the island some, seeded lawn grass, contrived their own sewage system with indoor appurtenances, generated electricity for the rooms inside and for the Japanese lanterns and postlamps without, and they came here from time to time in the summers. They used to maintain a caretaker on the island year round, housed him in the cabin by the boat house, but then the patriarch of the family died, and the rest had other things to do. They stopped coming to the island and forgot about caretaking. (22)

It can be argued that here the island is indeed the background foil for the “realistic subplot”, that deals with the exploration of the island by the two sisters. It could be claimed that the island functions as a mythical setting. (Haupt 83) Haupt describes the mythical setting in the following way:

Darin haben die beschriebenen Raumverhältnisse archetypischen Charakter, d.h. sie beziehen sich auf im kollektiven Unbewussten des Menschen verankerte Urbilder, die für bestimmte menschliche Grunderfahrung stehen. [...] Auf der räumlichen Ebene können solche archetypischen Bilder z.B. ein schwieriger Weg, eine gefährliche Straße oder ein Labyrinth sein. (Haupt 83)

In this context, the island functions as a mythical setting for the girl in the gold pants. She fights her way through the wild landscape of the island and thereby reflects on her former life and undergoes an "Individuationsprozess". (Haupt, 83)

The island is also the setting of the legend of the magic poker. The beginning of this segment is realistic since it tells the reader that it is actually an "island on Rainy Lake up on the Canadian border" that was bought by a "family of wealthy Minnesotans." (40) It is also suggested that the name of the island is "Jackfish Island". This realistic description, though, is juxtaposed by the next lines:

Did they name it Jackfish Island, or did it bear that name when they bought it? The legend does not say, nor should it. What it does say, however, is that when the family abandoned the island, they left behind an iron poker, which, years later, on a visit to the island, a beautiful young girl, not quite a princess perhaps, yet altogether equal to the occasion, kissed. And when she did so, something quite extraordinary happened... (40f.)

This segment suggests that the legend of the magic poker is like a fairy tale where a beautiful young girl finds her prince by kissing the poker. The segment is deliberately left open so that the reader can imagine for himself what might happen then.

In the next segment (48), we get yet another description of the island where the legend of the magic poker takes place. This segment is connected to the other ones since the fate of the caretaker is mentioned. This island seems to be the place where the legend of the magic poker is a horror story as words like "strange woodland creatures" suggest.

Once upon a time there was an island visited by ruin and inhabited by strange woodland creatures. Some thought it once had a caretaker who had either died or found another job elsewhere. Others said, no, there was never a caretaker, that was only a childish legend. Others believed there was indeed a caretaker and he lived there yet and was in fact responsible for the island's tragic condition. All this is neither here nor there. What is certainly beyond dispute is that no one who visited the island, whether searching for its legendary Magic Poker or avenging the loss of a loved one, ever came back. Only their names were left, inscribed hastily on walls and ceilings and carved on trees. (41)

This analysis suggests that in this short story the analysis of the setting is brought round in circles. The narrator points out that in either case, regardless of the genre, the setting is an invention of the author.

4.3.5. The ending

The ending of "The Magic Poker" is highly unconventional. There is neither an explanation of the fate of the main protagonists, the solving of the main conflict, a heightened state of realization, a point or punch line nor a parallel of beginning and end on the story level. (Krings 172) In fact, the ending raises several new questions:

The boat is almost out of sight, so distant in fact, it's no longer possible to see its occupants or even know how many there are – all just a blurred speck on the bright sheen laid on the lake by the lowering sun. The lake is calm. Here, a few shadows lengthen, a frog dies, a strange creature lies slain, a tanager sings. (45)

It is not possible to decipher what strange creature it is which lies slain after the girls left the island. In a former fragment, the narrator points to the state of the path to the main house: "Here, beside the path, trees have collapsed and rotted, seedlings and underbrush have sprung up, and lichens have crept softly over all surfaces, alive and dead. Strange creatures abide here." (31) In this fragment is again a reference to strange creatures but there is no further explication of what these creatures actually are. On the whole, there are many questions that the

reader has after finishing the story.⁴³ The most prevalent ones seem to concern the plot of the story and the question what the poker really is:

Coover is not interested in allowing the reader to puzzle out what *really* happened. Rather it is the aggregate of what might have happened, the exhaustion of possibilities, that is important: the story is left deliberately open-ended. (Evenson 58)

For this reason, the intransparency of the ending mirrors the complexity of the whole short story and further complicates the interpretation of the short story. Since the different narrative strands of the short story cannot be linked to a coherent text, it defies an easy explanation and it is impossible to use mimetic concepts in the analysis of this short story. Due to this fact, readers who are used to conventional narratives encounter severe difficulties in their reading process. Consequently, this complexity might lead to the rejection of postmodern writing. It seems necessary to accept the deliberate openness of the text in order to be able to fully appreciate postmodern metafictional narratives:

The fictionalized worlds do not finally materialize for the reader to recognize, and reconstruct, them in mimetic-hermeneutic terms. So it is that the reader is ultimately left with the experience of having read a text that is a complex net of events and characters, often mutually exclusive, which does not lead him/her anywhere but to mere contemplation. (Alfonso 131)

4.4. "The Elevator"

McCaffery defines "The Elevator" as "probably the simplest of the cubist pieces." (74) As in the short story *The Magic Poker*, the arrangement and the content of the short story are highly complex and do not give way to a simple interpretation. In this short story, Coover touches philosophical questions as the instability of one's character, the boundary between reality and fiction, the

⁴³ Cf. Kennedy 23.

difficulty in interpreting reality, and the uselessness of metanarratives.⁴⁴ Similar to *The Magic Poker*, here, it is again not the reader's task to decide which story line to follow or to distinguish between reality and dreams. As McCaffery states, "Readers who try to recreate the 'real events' of any of the cubist stories will be frustrated and will have misunderstood their nature." (McCaffery 75) The metafictional quality of this short story lies in Coover's attempt to rework existing fictional structures and mythical elements in order to rearrange them and to create a new perspective on the process of storytelling:

Man mag solche Art von Literatur als "metafiction" und ihre konkrete Ausprägungen als "metastories" bezeichnen, die je nach Blickwinkel mehr ihren eigenen ontologischen Status reflektieren oder das Erzählsujet und den Erzählvorgang zum Gegenstand des Erzählens machen oder im Absorbieren vorliegender fiktionaler Formen neue Substrate für den Fiktionalisierungsprozeß gewinnen. Offenkundig wird gleichwohl jenseits aller Bekennungsfragen und Spezifikationen bei solchen Versuchen ein Verdacht, den auch Coovers "The Elevator" immer wieder suggeriert und der von John Barth einmal auf die knappe Formel gebraucht wurde: "*Thus Art is as natural an artifice as Nature; the truth of fiction is that Fact is fantasy; the made-up story is a model of the world.*" (John Barth, *Chimera* (New York, 1972), 246.) (qtd. in Pütz 287)

4.4.1. Disruption of the narrative line

The short story focuses on Martin, the main protagonist, who takes the elevator every morning to the fourteenth floor because he works there. The short story consists of fifteen segments and each describes different elevator trips. All in all, these fifteen segments correspond to the fourteen floors and the basement. Therefore, it can be assumed that there is an analogy between the fifteen segments and the fifteen floors. In the way the elevator doors open to reveal another floor, each segment reveals another possible variation of reality. This short story can be defined as an aleatory arrangement⁴⁵ because these fifteen segments are not ordered logically or temporally.

⁴⁴ Cf. Kennedy 48.

⁴⁵ "Aleatory' writing [...] refers to writing (as well as the composition of music, sculpture and painting) achieved by some random means, by leaving things to chance or accident." However, "[t]hose who practice aleatoric techniques are somewhat more deliberate. They do not leave things to chance; they create the opportunities of chance." (Dictionary of literary terms 18)

The title of a literary text often provides the reader with an idea of the content of the narrative. In this case, the title "The Elevator" suggests that the short story which follows deals with an elevator or with a main protagonist who rides the elevator. Since riding an elevator is a very linear action in itself, first associations with the title might suggest a repetitive action. In this story, however, the reader has to cope with a plot which is totally contrastive to the idea that riding an elevator is a recurring action.⁴⁶

In contrast to *The Magic Poker*, this short story starts in a conventional way. This makes the reader suggest that he or she is reading a realistic story with a single story line. By introducing the main protagonist and the setting in the first segment, the narrator makes the reader believe that there is a linear action. Nevertheless, allusions can be found that undermine this assumption. The phrase "he wonders if today it might not turn out differently" suggests that there might indeed be an event which alters Martin's working day:

Every morning without exception and without so much as reflecting upon it, Martin takes the self-service elevator to the fourteenth floor, where he works. When he first arrives, however, he finds the lobby empty, the old building still possessed of its feinting shadows and silences, desolate though mutely expectant, and he wonders if today it might not turn out differently. (125)

This narrative line, however, is immediately questioned in the next segment where it is stated that "They were seven in the elevator: six men and the young girl who operated it." (126) Hence, it can be argued that there are two opposing opening segments in this story. These segments seem to be the beginnings of different stories since they contradict each other strongly. The phrase "Every morning without exception" (125) makes those segments where the elevator is operated by a girl impossible and questions their legitimacy. The reader is further irritated because two other segments that follow later in the short story start almost identically like the first segment. Here, it is again highlighted that Martin as usual and without giving it a second thought takes a self-service elevator to go to the fourteenth floor:

⁴⁶ Cf. Kennedy 48.

5

'Martin, as always and without so much as reflecting upon it, takes the self-service elevator to the fourteenth floor, where he works.' (129)

10

"Martin, without so much as reflecting on it, automatically takes the self-service elevator to the fourteenth floor, where he works." (133)

An additional subversion of narrative progression and fictional coherence can be found on the level of tense usage. (Pütz 281f.) Throughout the story, the narrator switches between present and past tense. These changes in tense usage occur between the individual segments. The present tense is used in the segments where Martin takes the self-service elevator. Additionally, present tense is also used in the segments where he is alone with the operator girl. Present tense is also used in segment fourteen where Martin is defined as a character of a fable. In contrast, the past tense is used in the episodes with Carruther and in segment 7 where Martin visits the non-existing fifteenth floor. This inconsistency in tense usage leads to the question if the segments that are narrated in the past tense have already happened. Since the segments where Martin takes the self-service elevator and his experiences with the operator girl are narrated in the present tense it is feasible to ask whether there is a distinction between reality and imagination.

In the interpretation of *The Elevator*, the question arises how these two distinct story lines can be interpreted. It could be suggested that the permutations of Martin's experience of riding an elevator can be either events from different days or a series of purely imagined events. Moreover, it could be possible to classify these two opposing story lines as reality in contrast to dreams and fantasies.⁴⁷ This argumentation is foremost used in the interpretation of realistic literature where parts that do not belong to the main story line can be regarded as dreams and fantasies. Nevertheless, as Pütz argues, in *The Elevator* such an interpretation is only persuasive at a first glance. (Pütz 281ff) Following this argumentation, all segments that feature the operator girl can be defined as Martin's fantasies that are ontologically on a different level. However, with regard to the content, there are various points that question this ontological

⁴⁷ Cf. Evenson, 85.

separation of these narrative story lines. In the course of the short story, Martin and the operator girl have sexual intercourse that might qualify the segments that feature the operator girl as Martin's wishful fantasies. In contrast to this, it is in these segments that Martin is humiliated by his colleagues, especially by Carruther who starts the verbal attacks. Yet another point that questions the distinction reality vs. fantasy is the fact that the other characters refer to the operator girl as well which creates the illusion of her actual existence. In consequence, I agree with Pütz who points out that both narrative lines are situated on the same fictional level and happen simultaneously:

Dem Leser enthüllt sich so ein in sich geschlossenes System von Fiktionen, literarischen Echos und Eigenschöpfungen, die keinen Maßstäben von Wirklichkeit und keiner Logik äußeren Geschehens mehr verpflichtet sind. (Pütz 282)

In addition to this analysis of the short story, the literary critic McCaffery finds two other ways of analyzing this story, namely musical analogy and the concept of number. (McCaffery 75) Thereby, McCaffery points out that this short story puts the concept of the title of the short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants* into practice:

The musical analogy has already been suggested: one way to view the different sections in "The Elevator" is as variations or counterpoints (the "pricksong" or "descant" idea) to the familiar plot line (an ordinary ride in an elevator). (McCaffery 75)

Additionally, McCaffery highlights the importance of the number seven that appears at various points in the story. As McCaffery points out, "it has been seven years since Martin began working in this building; there are usually seven people in the elevator; what is probably the most important scene takes place in the seventh section." (75)

Despite all differences between the two mutually exclusive story lines, they share a common theme. It can be argued that Coover investigates the powers of myths in this short story because mythical elements are interwoven into Martin's adventures while riding an elevator. At first, this might seem highly

contradictory to the repetitive and uneventful event of riding an elevator. Pütz describes Coover's use of myths in the following way:

Solches Spiel mit Archetypen und Mythen der Vergangenheit ist nun bei Coover keinesfalls Selbstzweck. Seine Bemühungen stehen vielmehr in dem doppelten Funktionszusammenhang, daß er sich zum einen zu den Ursprüngen des Fiktionalisierungsprozesses zurückarbeiten will und zum anderen auf seiner Suche nach potentiellen Ordnungseinheiten für das Universum gegenwärtiger Erfahrung geneigt ist, bereits existierende Ordnungsschemata als Hintergrundfolie zu benutzen. Beides, Rückgriff und Ordnungsintention, verbindet sich zu einer Einheit in Coovers Ahnung, daß die Ursprünge des Fiktiven vielleicht die Ursprünge jeglicher Wahrnehmung von Ordnung sein könnten. Und beides verbindet sich auch nahezu problemlos mit Coovers Hang zur Kreation formaler Entsprechungen und scheinbar unabhängiger ästhetischer Strukturen. Denn wenn Archetypen und Mythen unter anderem formale Ordnung bedeuten, dann ist auch formale Ordnung möglicher Zugang zu Archetypen und Mythen. Das eine wird wechselseitig zur Bedingung und zum Zweck des anderen. (284)

The key topic of *The Elevator* that is interwoven with Martin's experiences on the elevator is the theme of immediate death. (Pütz 284) This theme is dealt with on three levels and it is part of both story lines. This fact again seems to be an indication that the different events of the opposite narrative strands indeed happen simultaneously. Initially, the topic is introduced in segment four through foreshadowing. Here, Martin will encounter death in the self-service elevator on his own:

Perhaps Martin will meet Death on the elevator. Yes, going out for lunch one afternoon. Or to the drugstore for cigarettes. He will press the button in the hall on the fourteenth floor, the doors will open, a dark smile will beckon. The shaft is deep. It is dark and silent. Martin will recognize Death by His silence. He will not protest. (128)

The sudden death while riding the elevator is a prominent theme in segments 6, 9 and 12 that feature the operator girl too. In contrast to the statement above where Martin passively accepts death, here he reacts forcefully against his destiny. When the elevator with Martin and the girl crashes, Martin does not give into his fate but decides to actively make a counteract by having sex with the girl. So the themes of death and sex are contrasted. Consequently, it can be seen as a form of protest against death:

The elevator shrinks insanely as it drops. Their naked bellies slap together, hands grasp, her vaginal mouth closes spongelike on his rigid organ. Their lips lock, tongues knock. The bodies: how will they find them? Inwardly, he laughs. He thrusts up off the plummeting floor. Her eyes are brown and, with tears, love him. (134)

The third instance where death features prominently can be found in the last segment. In this case, Martin escapes death because he decides against his habit to not use the self-service elevator.

Similar to *The Magic Poker*, the analysis of the structure and the content of the short story seem to suggest that Coover takes a ground situation and then shows the various narrative possibilities that might evolve out of it. In this short story, the ground situation consists of a limited range of narrative elements such as the main character Martin and the main action, the riding of an elevator. Coover, then, illustrates the seemingly endless options of the narrative by highlighting the various transformations of the given elements. As a conclusion, I want to refer to the literary critic McCaffery who compared Coover to a mathematician:

Like a mathematician toying with the different possible permutations of a set of given elements, Coover constructs "The Elevator" (and his other cubist pieces) so that each section can be seen as a permutation or transformation of the set of original elements (the main characters, the plot possibilities, the symbols employed, and so on). (75)

4.4.2. Character instability: Who is Martin?

As Bachorz claims, a prevalent problem in the analysis of characters is the comprehension of characters (Figurenverständnis). Generally, there are two different and opposing approaches towards it:

Während ein **mimetischer Ansatz** Literatur als Nachahmung der realen Welt auffasst und nach außertextuellen Grundsätzen beurteilt, besteht der **strukturalistische Ansatz** auf der Annahme, dass Bedeutung auf

dem System selbst beruht, dass der Text als Zeichensystem seine eigene Bedeutung konstituiert. (53)

In the following analysis it will become obvious that Coover is against any mimetic conception of characters. Since the story of "The Elevator" is highly complex and consists of fifteen divergent segments, Martin's character shows different traits and qualities and it varies according to the story which is told in the respective segments.⁴⁸

As stated above, the main protagonist Martin experiences various journeys while he rides the elevator. His character is not fixed but changes according to the different events. On the one hand, Martin is described as timid and shy and he is the victim of violent jokes. In contrast to this, he flirts with the elevator girl when they are alone in the elevator. In the segments where the crash of the elevator is described, Martin is a brave hero who wants to save the life of the girl.

Apart from these realistic encounters, Martin has mythical experiences throughout the story, too. In these segments, Martin takes an active role and is no longer the passive user of the elevator. In the first segment, Martin decides to overcome his fear of going downwards and presses the "B" button to visit the basement for the first time. This ride is depicted as descending into hell and Martin is explicitly paralleled with Dante. (Pütz 283)

One to fourteen, plus "B" for basement. Impulsively, he presses the "B" – seven years and get to visit the basement! He snorts at his timidity. After a silent moment, the doors rumble shut. All night alert waiting for this moment! The elevator sinks slowly into the earth. The stale gloomy odors of the old building aroused in him an unreasonable sense of dread and loss, Martin imagines suddenly he is descending into hell. *Tra la perduta gente*, yes! [...] The old carrier halts with a quiver. The automatic doors yawn open. Nothing, only a basement. It is empty and nearly dark. It is silent and meaningless. (125f.)

In contrast to this, Martin also ascends upwards into heavenly spheres. In segment 7, he is the explorer of the non-existing fifteenth floor. Martin works

⁴⁸ Cf. Kennedy 49.

late and it is already after midnight when he finishes his work. Without reason, he feels very nervous until the elevator finally comes. Although he presses the button for the first floor the elevator starts to rise:

The elevator stopped, the doors opened, Martin stepped out. Later, he wondered why he had done so. The doors slid shut behind him, he heard the elevator descend, its amused rumble fading distantly. Although here it was utterly dark, shapes seemed to form. Though he could see nothing distinctly, he was fully aware that he was not alone. His hand fumbled on the wall for the elevator button. Cold wind gnawed his ankles, the back of his neck. Fool! wretched fool! he wept, there *is* no fifteenth floor! Pressed himself against the wall, couldn't find the button, couldn't even find the elevator door, and even the very wall was only (132)

Martin also acts as a guide who leads other passengers safely through their ride on the elevator. Pütz argues that Martin here takes the role of Vergil (Pütz 283): "Two men leave. Two more intermediate stops, and Martin is alone. He has seen them safely through." (130) The most rigid and disturbing change of Martin's character is his transformation from the everyman who rides the elevator and fears God into a God-like person who actively moves the elevator:

Here on this elevator, my elevator, created by me, moved by me, doomed by me, I, Martin, proclaim my omnipotence! In the end, doom touches all! MY doom! I impose it! TREMBLE! (134)

However, in the fifteenth segment Martin claims the significance of human life: "*I, Martin, proclaim against all dooms the indestructible seed.*" (137) It is interesting that Martin's decision to act against his unquestioned habits occurs particularly in this section. For the first time, Martin does not take the elevator and in so doing escapes the crash of the elevator.

Another layer to Martin's character is added in segment fourteen. At this point, a new anonymous voice informs the reader that Martin is a kind of God and has a "doodang about five feet long." (135) Martin is described as a character of a fable (Pütz 284) who nowadays has to live in the same manner as all normal people. This is the reason why he also has to ride the elevator every day like everyone else: "but now like I'm sayin them pastoral days is dead and gone and

hes goin up and down in elevators like the rest of us and so here he is boardin the damn cage" (136)

This analysis suggests that Coover violates one of the key principles of realistic literature, namely the fixedness of character identity. This character instability makes it impossible for the reader to empathize with Martin because his actions cannot be fully explained. Therefore, it can be argued that it was not Coover's intention to invent a round character but to come up with a protagonist who has as many multiple layers as people in real life.

Fiktion und notwendigerweise personal fixiertes und vermitteltes Wirklichkeitserleben rücken sich näher, ja werden zur wechselseitigen Bedingung voneinander. Martins Fall wird damit, weit über seine Kuriosität und individuelle Bedeutung hinaus, zu einem Modellfall zeitgenössischer Existenz, die die bewußte Fiktionalisierung von Erfahrung und eine totale Imagisierung des Wirklichen mit Vorstellungen eschatologischer Heilserwartung verbindet. (Pütz 286)

4.4.3. Setting instability

In "The Elevator", there are two different settings which has an irritating effect on the reader. Simply the fact that there are both a self-service elevator and an elevator operated by a girl makes fictional coherence impossible. It can be argued that Coover plays with the expectation of the readers that are associated with the title "The Elevator". One may argue that an elevator is not an appropriate setting for a story because it suggests repetitiveness and uneventfulness. The reader might ask the question of what can happen in an elevator that is worth narrating.

In this short story, however, the self-service elevator as well as the elevator operated by a girl is not mere ways of transport from one floor to the other but function as a metaphor for the world. On this elevator Martin descends into hell and ascends to the non-existing 15th floor. The elevator is depicted as a microcosm in itself and serves as a replica of the universe. The motion of the

elevator mirror's the body's motion in the universe. (Pütz 284f.) In segment 5 Martin investigates the categories of "space, time cause, motion, magnitude, class" and links them to the elevator:

This small room, so commonplace and so compressed, he observes with a certain melancholic satisfaction, this elevator contains them all: space, time, cause, motion, magnitude, class. [...] They stand, apparently motionless, yet moving. Motion: perhaps that's all there is to it after all. Motion and the medium. Energy and weighted particles. Force and matter. The image grips him purely. Ascent and the passive reorganization of atoms. [...] But the totality of the universe is suffused: each man contains all of it, loss is inconceivable. Yet, if that is so – and a tremor shudders coolly through Martin's body – then the totality is as nothing. [...] Although caged as ever in his inexorable melancholy, Martin nonetheless smiles as he steps out of the self-service elevator on the fourteenth floor. "I am pleased to participate," he announces in full voice. But, as the elevator doors close behind him and he hears the voided descent, he wonders: Wherein now is the elevator's totality? (129f.)

4.4.4. The ending: inscrutable!

Although the short story is highly aleatory, it seems that Coover provides the reader with a clue to how to approach this text:

He hesitates, poised on the stair. Inscrutable is the word he finally settles upon. He pronounces it aloud, smiles faintly, sadly, somewhat wearily, then continues his tedious climb, pausing from time to time to stare back down the stairs behind him. (137)

In this concluding quote, the intransparency of the action is emphasised. It can be argued that this final event parallels the reader's perception of the story. In the same way as Martin tries to make sense of this event, the reader has to interpret the complicated and irritating story. "Inscrutable" is therefore the final comment to the attempts of finding underlying structures of meaning, order and transparency.

Pütz declares that there is a crucial link between the ending, the content and the interpretation process of the reader. According to Pütz, Coover highlights

the intransparency of reality and the difficulty of giving meaning to certain events:

Coover faßt in diesem Wort noch einmal die Undurchschaubarkeit und Offenheit des Geschehens zusammen. Dies aber heißt, anders gewendet, daß er uns zwar – wie viele amerikanische Gegenwartserzähler – zu bedenken gibt, daß vielleicht bisher für Realität gehalten wurde, was doch nur fiktionale Auslegung von Realität war, und daß solche Mythologisierung des Alltäglichen zwar zu den unabdingbaren Aufgaben des Menschen gehören mag, nichtsdestoweniger aber immer wieder zum Scheitern verurteilt sei. (286)

5. John Barth and Postmodernism: The Exhaustion and Replenishment of Literature

In his analysis of Barth's oeuvre, Harris argues that Barth's writing can be explained as "passionate virtuosity: algebra and fire" where "algebra", the form and technique, is successfully combined with "fire", the "unique and original expression." (Harris 6) Schulz, too, claims that John Barth's approach towards literature can be defined as an aesthetic one. As Schulz highlights, Barth investigates the tradition of Western literature, especially the principles of realism:

The relationship of Barth's fiction to the Western literary tradition is more important for understanding his development than any single philosophy or ideology. Storytelling is his forte, not "philosophical speculations," and, as he has been at pains to clarify, his various brushes with this or that abstract impulse in his fiction – [...] have always been secondary to his "reflections about literature, about things like the phenomenon of literary realism." His fiction is the outgrowth of this "impulse to go back to the beginning of things, to see to what contemporary uses they might be put." [...] The literary preoccupation of his lifetime has been the metafictional concerns of self-reflexivity and intertextuality. (M. Schulz xii)

In his discussion of metafictional and postmodern literature, Barth primarily focuses on the narrative techniques of realistic literature in order to emphasize that they cannot be used to write a valuable contemporary literary text. John

Barth gives an insight into his postmodern aesthetics in his two essays "The Literature of Exhaustion"⁴⁹ and "The Literature of Replenishment".⁵⁰

In 1967 Barth's highly influential essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" was published in *Atlantic Monthly*. For Barth a key problem of contemporary writing is the fact that literature, especially realistic literature, has a long tradition and that the postmodern author is aware that most topics have been discussed extensively before. Therefore, it is almost impossible to write an original story by employing the premises and techniques of realism. (Woods 52)

In his later essay "The Literature of Replenishment", Barth summarises the main arguments of his former essay. Furthermore, he elaborates on the transformation of exhausted literary techniques and themes into the starting point of a new and prolific literature:

The simple burden of my essay ["The Literature of Exhaustion"] was that the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness, at least in the minds of significant numbers of artists in particular times and places: in other words, that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work. (Barth, *Replenishment* 205)

Besides, Barth discusses in "The Literature of Exhaustion" the difficult task of the contemporary author who has to develop innovative "aesthetic ideas" and techniques which are different from those of realistic literature. In Barth's view, there are three different kinds of authors, namely "a technically old-fashioned artist, a technically up-to-date non-artist, and a technically up-to-date artist." (Barth, *Exhaustion* 66)

In the first category I'd locate all those novelists who for better or worse write not as if the twentieth century didn't exist, but as if the great writers of the last sixty years or so hadn't existed. [...] In the third category belong the few people whose artistic thinking as *au courant* as any French New Novelist's, but who manage nonetheless to speak eloquently

⁴⁹ Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion". *The Atlantic* 220.2 (August 1967): 29-34.

⁵⁰ Barth, John. "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction." *The Atlantic* 233.1 (January 1980): 65-71.

and memorably to our human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done. (Barth, *Exhaustion* 66f.)

As becomes obvious from Barth's line of argument in the quote above, only the "technically up-to-date artist" is capable to rejuvenate Western literary traditions. It is the aim of those authors to write literature in such a way that it is neither thematically nor stylistically a simple reproduction of former literary works. Barth claims that it is this necessity to investigate the relevance of traditional literary devices and techniques which lead to highly self-reflexive fictional texts. Therefore, the core message of this essay is that "parody 'replenishes' through a self-conscious recognition that implication in a prior discourse does not entail exhaustion and inert imitation." (Waugh, *Postmodernism* 2) Moreover, for Barth "the exhaustion of artistic possibilities may be overcome by the self-conscious confrontation and parodic use of narrative ultimacy." (Harris 2)

Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies, and it may well be that the time as a major art form is up [...] and one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it. [...] And I'll add that if you were the author of this paper, you'd have written something like *The Sot-Weed Factor* or *Giles Goat-Boy*: novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of an Author. (Barth, *Exhaustion* 72)

John Barth states that his aim in his essay "The Literature of Replenishment" was to "define to my satisfaction the term *postmodernism*". (Barth, *Replenishment* 193) Therefore, Barth investigates the relationship between postmodernism and modernism:

If the modernists, carrying the torch of romanticism, taught us that linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naïve illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle-class moral conventions are not the whole story, then from the perspective of these closing decades of our century we may appreciate that the contraries of those things are not the whole story either. Disjunction, simultaneity, irrationalism, anti-illusionism, self-reflexiveness, medium-as-message, political olympianism, and a moral pluralism approaching moral entropy – these are not the whole story either. A worthy program for postmodernist fiction, I believe, is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as pre-modernist and modernist modes of writing. (Barth, *Replenishment* 203)

As Barth argues above, postmodernism is “both offshoot of and revolt against modernism”. (Ziegler 85) Modernism is seen as a historical movement whose premises and techniques seem no longer appropriate in contemporary writing but whose influence on postmodernist authors is generally admitted. Although the literary forms of realism and modernism might be exhausted, modernist texts can indeed serve as pre-texts which can be used in order to generate a new way of story-telling. (Ziegler, 85) Therefore, Barth’s claim that postmodern fiction is indeed a “literature of replenishment” is valid. (Barth, *Replenishment* 206)

5.1. The short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse*: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice

John Barth’s short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* includes not only short stories which are for the printed medium. He also incorporates short stories which are meant to be performed on stage either by the author or played by an acoustic medium like a tape recorder. The themes of the short stories are manifold. Whereas some deal with “the life of an emerging writer”, others investigate “different aspects of narrative”. (D. Schulz 115)

Lost in the Funhouse is the autobiography of the artist from womb to tomb, both story of life and life of story. Much the book deals explicitly with fictional techniques and experiments in narration. [...] In these two books [*Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera*], technique and language are the content. Form – form itself – is the content. (Tharpe 10)

Like Coover, Barth discusses the relationship between fiction and reality in order to focus on the “question of truth”: “In Barth’s view, the point is no longer to try to find reality, because an attempt to discover truth is no more than making distinctions among illusions.” (Tharpe 7) Furthermore, Tharpe investigates Barth’s attitude towards language and its capacity to describe reality in an accurate and meaningful means. He concludes that Barth defines language in a metaphysical way so that storytelling has an essential place in the creation of our understanding of the world around us:

If it is impossible and hopeless to make language accurately describe reality, why not let what language creates be reality? The only reality described or referred to then is what comes through that method – the edifice that exists is whatever edifice the language constructs. Thus, it is possible for poetry to write history. And that idea is a metaphysics – perhaps also a truth. Storytelling, then, is an account of history, of origins and of universal principles. Storytelling creates a universe by a process analogous to the method by which God spoke the word that said – let it be! (Tharpe 12f.)

Although the writing of Coover and Barth share the same aim to “rejuvenate the story-telling conventions of the Western culture” (M. Schulz 1), Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* is entirely different in structure from Robert Coover’s *Pricksongs and Descants*. The short stories in Barth’s collection relate on each other and should be regarded as a whole:

This book differs ... from most volumes of short fiction ... It’s neither a collection nor a selection, but a series; though several of its items have appeared separately in periodicals, the series will be seen to have been meant to be received “all at once” and as here arranged. (P. ix)

The short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* consists of fourteen short stories with “Lost in the Funhouse” in the middle of the collection as the title story. Schulz investigates the structure of the collection and points out that it can be divided into two parts. The short stories in the first half of *Lost in the Funhouse* can be defined as “experimentally self-referential protagonist-narrator forms (“Night-Sea Journey,” “Autobiography,” and “Petition”) and conventionally realistic local-color narratives (“Ambrose His Mark,” “Water-Message,” and Lost in the Funhouse”).” (M. Schulz 6) According to M. Schulz, “Echo” is the first story of the second part of the collection. In “Echo”, “the place and role of the authorial voice” are discussed. The subsequent stories can again be divided into two different groups. While the short stories “Title”, “Life-Story”, and “Anonymiad” reflect on the “processes of their own authoring“, in the short stories “Two Meditations”, “Glossolalia”, and “Menelaid” the reader encounters “disembodied voices dramatically recounting myth-encoded truths about human nature.” (M. Schulz 6)

Moreover, the arrangement of the short stories can be described as a Moebius strip. A Moebius strip consists of a “twist along its surface which means that as

one proceeds around it one alternates between the 'outside' and the 'inside' edge." (Nicol 77) According to Nicol, this means that "at times we appear to be 'outside', namely in an imagined world created by Barth, only to find ourselves on the 'inside' of the fictional apparatus itself, watching the machine generating the fiction, as it were." (77) Barth introduces the Moebius strip in "Frame Tale" which serves as a preface to the whole short story collection. (Morell 92) Here, Barth gives explicit instructions how to create a Moebius strip so that in the end the strip reads like "Once upon a time there was a story that began Once upon a time there was a story that began Once upon a time ...".

Barth explained once in an interview the importance of the concept of the Moebius strip. In this interview, Barth states that the Moebius strip is not only valid for the analysis of the structure of his short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* but that it also lies at the core of the thematic development of the short stories:

Lost in the Funhouse is meant to be more than simply a collection, a miscellany, of short stories whose only common bond is that they came from the same authorial imagination and with maybe a few echoing motifs or even characters among them. It's meant to be a series in that there is an exfoliation and a development, one with a double motion. As the apparent narrator in most of the stories in the series goes through his biographical development, the time of the stories tend to move back from the present into the mythic past, and then at the end, of course, there's a circling back. A difference between the form of *Funhouse* – a cycle with a twist to it – and say, the form of Joyce's *Wake* (which circles back to its own first sentence) is the difference between a circle and a spiral, or a circle and a Moebius strip. The texts launched by the stranded minstrel at the end of the "Anonymiad" – which contains, in addition, his literal sperm – are meant to circle back to the spermatozoan story at the beginning of the book. You go around but you don't go around in a deadly circle. (Lampkin, *John Barth* 489; qtd. in D. Schulz 116)

Consequently, I would agree with Schulz who claims that Barth can be defined as a postmodern author who is "bent on preserving and combining past fictional practices with the distinctive narrative voices of the present." (M. Schulz 14)

5.2. The general themes of the metafictional short stories “Lost in the Funhouse” and “Life-Story”

“Lost in the Funhouse” as well as “Life-Story” discuss the issue of the conflict between life and art. Nicol argues that both short stories are texts that are self-referential and examine the underlying premises of realistic literature. Besides, both texts can be defined as autobiographical since they analyse Barth’s self-understanding as an author of postmodern literature:

So the term ‘self-conscious’ applies to Barth’s fictions not just in a metaphorical sense, as if the text themselves are aware of their own status as fiction, but more literally, too, as they are about Barth’s own self-exploration, in particular his own experience of being an author. Authorship, they suggest, is a continual journey of self-discovery and the division of self into other fictional selves. (78)

The main protagonists of both short stories try to give an account of their previous lives. Through this act of storytelling, they become their own autobiographers. Wicker argues that the focus of the autobiography lies on the necessity to create meaning. Additionally, this urge of the protagonists to tell their story results from their need to assure themselves of their existence.

It is worth noting finally, in this discussion of the explanatory powers of stories that narrative is not only a unique instrument for describing certain kind of truths about the external world, it is also, for similar reasons, uniquely important in explaining what happens inside oneself. Thus, the autobiographer is one who is trying to make sense of himself in relation to the world by recollecting his past in a narrative. For he knows that it is only in the retelling of his own story that he can put his life in order and shore up the fragments of his past against his ruin. (Wicker 46; qtd. in Todd)

According to Harris, the discussion of the individual’s yearning for significance and meaning is a central theme in his work

taken collectively, they [Barth’s books] achieve the affect of a constant grasping for meaning, on the one hand, balanced by the realization that all meaning is *projected* – invented, rather than discovered, and therefore relative and contingent – on the other. [...] In Barth’s fictions *the passionate desire to construct meaning* – not meaning itself – assumes

the status of a universal value. If anything is sacred, it is not a particular from of human "reality", but *that which forms* human "reality". (Harris 8)

As Harris, Schulz argues that there are two thematic areas that Barth constantly investigates in his writing, namely "the human sexual condition and the novelist's plight in our time, or felt life and fictive means." (M. Schulz xi) In *Lost in the Funhouse*, these two themes are interlinked especially in those short stories which feature Ambrose M as the main protagonist. In "Lost in the Funhouse", the core characteristics of anti-mimetic literature are discussed, namely the "traditional concepts of reality and the traditional distinction between fiction and reality". At the same time, the difficulties of the 13-year-old adolescent Ambrose are narrated. Here, the focus lies on the painful experiences of Ambrose who feels lost and confused in the funhouse. The reason for Ambrose's continuous difficulties with his surrounding, especially with the other sex, is his heightened self-awareness. He, thus, develops the certainty that he will become an author, a constructor of funhouses for others:

Ambrose as observant adolescent at the threshold of learning about life merges with Ambrose as author of his own story at the beginning stage of learning how to construct a narrative. In the latter role he usurps the voice of Barth and muses self-referentially about the technical problems of telling an endlessly recursive story of a young man growing up to become a writer telling the story of a young man growing up to become ... (M. Schulz 8)

Similarly to Schulz, Harris states that "[o]ne of John Barth's major concerns is the mysterious relationship between sex and other forms of human experience." (Harris 106) In this context, the metaphor of the funhouse is central to the interpretation of the relationship between sex and art. Hence, Todd claims that the "funhouse metaphorically represents both the confusion and self-consciousness of the adolescent who must deal internally and externally with a maturing body and the self-consciousness of the artist who must crate a maze of fictional devices in the struggle to portray reality." (Todd) Through his experiences in the funhouse Ambrose becomes aware that its main aim is "sexual byplay". (Harris 106) This revelation triggers his reflections on the compability of life and art and he reflects on his role as an author. The funhouse serves not only as a synonym for the literary text but also for "life and love."

(Lindsay 120) It becomes evident throughout the story that Ambrose envies his brother Peter who is self-confident and does not reflect on his actions constantly. Therefore, it is not possible for Ambrose to be really moved by his experiences of fear and pleasure because he is aware of the fact that this ordinary life is similarly a construct with love and sex at its core: "While Peter is never aware of the imminent threat of bliss, Ambrose always is, longs for it, fears it, but can never experience it. His imagination gives him the desire; his self-consciousness keeps it at bay." (Lindsay 120) Hence, it seems that Ambrose and his brother Peter are representatives of the author's struggle to combine the requirements of life with the production of art:

For Ambrose, however, art fails to gratify. He would much prefer to be among the lovers for whom the funhouse is fun, but the exuberant spontaneity necessary to young love (witness the antics of Peter and Magda) is checked in Ambrose by an almost paralyzing artistic self-consciousness. (Harris107)

Apart from the compability of life and art, the issue of authorship and the role of the author are examined. In his analysis of Barth's works, Tharpe argues that *Lost in the Funhouse* can be described as a study in "ontology and aesthetics which offer portraits of the artist as existentialist intellectual becoming philosophical analyst of world culture." (Tharpe 2) This statement is based on his analysis of the story level of "Lost in the Funhouse" and "Life-Story". As Tharpe states, both short stories are "dealing with the theme of a writer composing a work of art about an incipient hero who is anti-heroic because he reveals so much of his formative process – his own mistakes." (Tharpe 9) This is why the role of the author and his relationship towards the literary text are one of the core themes of these postmodernist short stories. The author is not seen as "an ideological construct wherein the name attached to the text refers to a person", but can be defined as "all possibility of textual origin." As a consequence, a literary text has not only one meaning that is acknowledged by the actual author but can be usefully interpreted in various ways. (Lindsay 169)

In her analysis of Barth's works, Ziegler defines *Lost in the Funhouse* as a "*Künstlerroman*, the artist's self-reflexive version of the *Bildungsroman*." (Ziegler 14) Consequently, the identity and the personal development of the artist are

investigated. In “Lost in the Funhouse” and “Life-Story” the “development of the artist is constantly questioned, and the author turned round from active creative ego to anonymity and back again.” (Ziegler 50f.) With the decision of becoming an artist the author-narrators distance themselves from ordinary life that is “gradually consumed by art.” (Ziegler 55) Thereby they reflect on their previously “unquestionable and unquestioning identity.” (Ziegler 55) This is especially true for Ambrose who decides to become an author and starts to narrate the story of his life to himself:

Wichtig ist, daß am Ende der *fiction* “Lost in the Funhouse” der Protagonist (und mit ihm der Autor) sich im Prozeß des Erzählens verlieren. Diese Hingabe an das Erzählen aber bedeutet für Ambrose sowohl den Verlust der Identität als auch den Verlust einer möglichen Liebe. (Ziegler, 161)

In his essay “The Art of Artifice”, Appel examines the metafictional qualities of Barth’s short stories by analysing the narrator. Appel argues that one key characteristics of “Life-Story” and “Lost in the Funhouse” is the existence of a narrator “whose intrusions involute the work.” (Appel 180) He states that the main feature of an involuted work is that it “turns upon itself, is self-referential and conscious of its status as an invention.” (Appel 180) This is especially true for the short stories under investigation. In both short stories, the narrators are authors who struggle with their narrative and self-reflexively comment on literary conventions in general and on the progress of the story in particular. Likewise, Worthington’s central interest is to investigate the topics of “selfhood and authorship” in the short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse*. (Worthington 114) Since these stories focus on the process of story writing the reader the task of the reader to interpret the story, to create meaning and to distinguish between the actual story and the narration becomes more and more complicated. Worthington, therefore, concludes that the reader now has to “participate in the construction of the work itself.” (Worthington 115) Although it seems that the authors encounter problems while devising their stories and lose control over their texts, they nevertheless feature prominently in them. Worthington claims that “the result is that most of the stories in the series depict narrators as authors so aware of themselves and so concerned with the effect of this awareness on their waning creative powers that they cannot avoid continually

inserting their presence into the stories they narrate.” (Worthington 115) With regard to the question of authorship, Worthington therefore states that “instead of challenging the primacy of authorship, Barth’s metafictional experiments serve to cement the author into a position of authority over the text.” (Worthington 114) While the necessity of the role of the reader is highlighted in metafiction, the story is nevertheless mediated by a narrator:

By claiming to be unable to control the story he is crafting, the author-narrator demonstrates his continued presence in and creative influence over the text. By asserting his failure he simultaneously asserts his (albeit waning) power, illustrating that the self-consciousness, the self-reflexivity of metafiction is simultaneously and necessarily a recognition of authorial presence. (Worthington 118)

5.3. “Lost in the Funhouse”

5.3.1. “*Lost in the Funhouse*” as a *Moebius Strip*

On the story level “Lost in the Funhouse” deals with the family excursion of the 13-year-old Ambrose to Ocean City on Independence Day. In Ocean City, they visit an amusement park whose main attraction is a funhouse. The reader might infer from the title that the story evolves around a main protagonist who gets lost in the funhouse and that the short story gives an account of how the protagonist is able to find his way out of the funhouse again. “Lost in the Funhouse”, however, has a twofold interest. First, the short story tells the story of Ambrose’s visit to the funhouse. Second, the focus lies on the struggling of the narrator to tell this story. Therefore, Worthington argues that the story “vacillates between telling that story and discussing the telling of that story.” (124) The simultaneous focus governs the short story even to the level of paragraphing. As Nicol states, these two levels of narration are blended “together in the same paragraphs without warning.” (77)

The central structuring device of “Lost in the Funhouse” is the Moebius strip. The Moebius strip is found on several levels such as the story level, the level of

the narrator and the textual level of the short story. Therefore, it can be argued that the metaphor of the Moebius strip is used to illustrate that the writer or narrator is trapped in endless repetitions which are operative in his universe.

The short story revolves around Ambrose's difficult search for his identity. Here, the postmodern definition of identity and the self is employed. Ambrose's identity is not a stable entity but seems to consist of various persons or social roles that he has to play in his daily life. Besides, all he discovers in the mirror room of the funhouse is that even a heightened self-awareness does not necessarily lead to a higher self-knowledge. Ambrose realises that it is not possible to reach a transcendental perspective from where to investigate reality from objectively. Furthermore, Ambrose becomes aware of the fact that it is unfeasible to see the core of things. All that is available to the individual are only the perceptions of these objects:

You think you're yourself, but there are other persons in you. Ambrose gets hard when Ambrose doesn't want to, *and obversely*. Ambrose watches them disagree; Ambrose watches him watch. In the funhouse mirror-room you can't see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see. (331)

Therefore, the mirror room plays a vital role in Ambrose's self-development. The mirror room can be defined as an "excruciatingly self-conscious symbol for the many distorted perspectives from which he [Ambrose] views his troubled psyche, a barely disguised reflection of the authorial narrator's own disintegrating self." (Joseph 40) Schulz, too, draws attention to the importance of the mirror room. Schulz argues that the mirror room in the funhouse is a symbol for the "human condition in solipsistic terms: man is alone, surrounded only by projections of his own mind." (D. Schulz 113)

While he is lost in the funhouse, Ambrose does not only encounter severe difficulties in defining his personality. Ambrose is inevitable trapped in his own art too. This becomes obvious when he tells his story over and over again and in so doing he is running in circles along the Moebius strip:

Ambrose wandered, languished, dozed. Now and then he fell into his habit of rehearsing to himself the unadventurous story of his life, narrated from the third-person point of view, from his earliest memory parenthesis of maple leaves stirring in the summer breadth of tidewater Maryland end of parenthesis to the present moment. Its principal events, on this telling, would appear to have been *A, B, C, and D.*" (338)

As stated above, Ambrose realises in the funhouse that sex is one of the main focuses of human individuals. The narrator reflects on the sexual relationships and their consequences and highlights the universality and timelessness of this theme in his use of the term "et cetera":

Mother and Father; grandmothers and grandfathers on both sides; great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers on four sides, et cetera. Count a generation as thirty years: in approximately the year when Lord Baltimore was granted charter to the province of Maryland by Charles I, five hundred twelve women – English, Welsh, Bavarian, Swiss – of every class and character, received into themselves the penises the intromittent organs of five hundred twelve men, ditto, in every circumstances and posture, to conceive the five hundred twelve ancestors of the two hundred fifty-six ancestors of the et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera of the author, of the narrator, of this story, *Lost in the Funhouse*. (328)

The Moebius strip is also evident on the textual level. There are various instances where the narrator repeats either single words or whole sentences to show the recurrence of the action. The narrator provides the reader with various possible endings. In one of these possible endings Ambrose tells the story of his life to himself. A girl listens to him secretly and falls in love with his voice. Hence, she decides to write down his narrative. However, when the narrator starts to explain what the girl has written down so far, all that he comes up with is an endless Moebius strip:

Quietly she kissed the rough plyboard, and a tear fell upon the page. Where she had written in shorthand *Where she had written in shorthand* Where she had written in shorthand *Where she* et cetera. (338)

This analysis of the Moebius strip illustrates the impossibility to overcome the Moebius strip. As a consequence, both Ambrose's quest for his own identity and his struggle to become an artist and to tell his story will continue as long as he lives.

5.3.2. *The role of the narrator*

As stated above, the story of Ambrose's experiences in the amusement park is not the only theme of the short story. In "Lost in the Funhouse", the reader encounters an extremely vocal narrator who expresses his feelings and opinions freely and loudly. From the beginning the narrator deliberately violates the *celare artem*-principle to highlight the fictionality and artificiality not only of the short story he is narrating but of literature in general. Throughout the story the narrator comments on the progress of his story but also on the difficulties of story telling in general. Therefore, it seems that "[t]he crisis of adolescence coincides with a crisis in the art of storytelling. This is true not only of the author's choice of subject matter but also of the technical aspects of fiction." (D. Schulz 111) Indeed, in the short story the narrator discusses the premises of realistic literature and the opposing approach towards fiction in postmodern writing. It seems that the story of Ambrose is a background foil necessary for the narrator to investigate anti-mimetic aesthetics:

Both fantasies – that of the lost boy telling himself stories in the dark, and that of the builder and operator of a new funhouse – project images of the artist. Both the somber and exuberant versions emphasize the birth of the artist from a condition of existential need. [...] By correlating adolescence with the crisis of fiction, the story dramatizes the situation of the contemporary artist as one of excitement *and* anguish. (D. Schulz 114)

Schulz argues that these interruptions of the narrative lead to a constant confusion of thematic elements and the narrative process:

Die für den Leser zumindest bei der ersten Lektüre verwirrende Erzähltechnik von "Lost in the Funhouse" resultiert aus dem Versuch des Autors, thematische Elemente und Erzähltechnik so miteinander zu vermitteln, daß das eine als Analogon des anderen erscheint, womit gleichzeitig die Unterscheidung von Thema und gestalterischen Mitteln hinfällig wird. (M. Schulz 291)

Consequently, a close analysis of the role of the narrator is necessary to explore the metafictional and postmodern qualities of "Lost in the Funhouse".

5.3.2.1. Metafictional comments on literature

The beginning of the short story “Lost in the Funhouse” is highly unconventional and prepares the reader for what to expect from the short story. Immediately after the main protagonist, Ambrose, is introduced the narrator shifts his focus to the narrative and explains the typographical devices like dashes and italics which he is using. (Morrell 87) In these comments, the impression is raised that the narrator cites from a style manual or a guide for story writing. Even in the first paragraph, the story line and the narrator’s comments stand together without any explanation of their relationship:

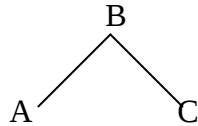
For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is a *place of fear and confusion*. He has come to the seashore with his family for the *holiday, the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America*. A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, *which in turn* is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases as well as the customary type for titles of complete works, not to mention. Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for “outside”, intrusive, or artificial voices, such as radio announcements, the texts of telegrams and newspaper articles, et cetera. They should be used *sparingly*. If passages originally in roman type are italicized by someone repeating them, it’s customary to acknowledge the fact. *Italics mine*. (323)

Throughout the story, explicit metareference is used extensively to highlight conventions of realistic literature in order to point at the impossibility to depict real life in fiction. These explicit metafictional comments are inserted to push the reader back from the story, and to keep him or her reminded of the fact that the story is indeed a fiction, an artefact created by an author. Moreover, key concepts of realistic literature are discarded since “[t]he storyteller is trying to present old material in a new way, and does so by emphasizing the conventions of fiction rather than concealing them.” (Morrell 87)

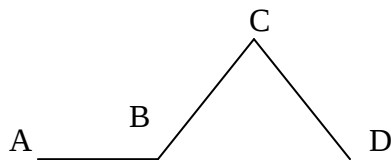
The narrator also explains conventional literary concepts like “Freitag’s Triangle” that is used in dramatic narrative. However, the narrator takes his critique one step further by stating that this concept does not close the gap between fiction and reality. Besides, the narrator further points out that

“Freitag’s Triangle” evolved because it was considered as a useful means to structure a dramatic narrative effectively:

The action of conventional dramatic narrative may be represented by a diagram called Freitag’s Triangle:



or more accurately by a variant of that diagram:



in which *AB* represents the exposition, *B* the introduction or conflict, *BC* the “rising action”, complication, or development of the conflict, *C* the climax, or turn of the action, *CD* the dénouement, or resolution of the conflict. While there is no reason to regard this pattern as an absolute necessity, like many other conventions it became conventional because great numbers of people over many years learned by trial and error that it was effective; one ought not to forsake it, therefore, unless one wishes to forsake as well the effect of drama or has clear cause to feel that deliberate violation of the “normal” pattern can better effect that effect. (337)

The narrator does not only investigate literary techniques which are used to create the illusion that reality can be depicted in literature. He also stresses that reality does not follow prearranged patterns but is interpreted and made into a chronological and logically motivated account by the individual. As a consequence, similar techniques are used in the interpretation of reality and the production of a literary text. In both contexts, these techniques are necessary to order the events and to structure the narrative. Consequently, realism itself is described as just a literary technique which uses typographical devices in order to enhance the aesthetic illusion:

En route to Ocean City he sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother Peter, age fifteen, and Magda G ----, age fourteen, a pretty girl and exquisite young lady, who lived not far from them on B---- Street in the town of D----, Maryland. Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means. (323)

Schulz argues that this statement implies Barth's literary aesthetics against mimetic literature. According to Schulz, Barth acknowledges the fictional character of reality which is enhanced by artificial means because an unmediated access to reality does not exist: "What we interpret as reality is largely an illusion, a fiction created by artificial devices." (D. Schulz 112) Therefore, it seems more sensible to Barth to highlight the artificiality of the literary text and to use conventional components of a narrative in a playful way to generate an innovative piece of art⁵¹:

On the one hand such staples of fiction as plot, character, narrative point of view, metaphors, etc., have been used up; they can no longer be applied naively in the manner of an outmoded realism. On the other hand, since reality is in itself an artefact, such staples may still be used playfully, ironically, with a full awareness of their "used-upness". Hence the innumerable references in "Lost in the Funhouse" to the traditional features of narrative art. The very fact that they are exhausted makes them available as new material for the author's playful imagination. At the same time, these references serve to underscore the fictitious nature of the story, its conscious artistry. (D. Schulz 112f.)

5.3.2.2. Metafictional comments on the story in progress

Explicit metareference is used in those instances where the author comments on the story which he is narrating. At one instant, the narrator explains the function of the beginning and how the beginning should be written. It is obvious that the narrator refers to traditional story telling since the reader is aware that especially the beginning of this short story is completely different. Actually, the

⁵¹ Cf. Schulz, 293.

beginning of “Lost in the Funhouse” intentionally fails to provide the very elements that the narrator describes as relevant:

The function of the *beginning* of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action, expose the background of the situation if necessary, plant motifs and foreshadowings where appropriate, and initiate the first complication or whatever of the “rising action.” (326)

Throughout the story, the discourse level is foregrounded because the narrator is converted into a major protagonist of the story. At one point, the narrator provides the reader with an account of how a traditional story with the title “Lost in the Funhouse” could be written. Eventually, he observes that this version is contrary to his short story and it seems that he would prefer the conventional way of telling this story:

Actually, if one imagines a story called “The Funhouse,” or “Lost in the Funhouse,” the details of the drive to Ocean City don’t seem especially relevant. The *beginning* should recount the events between Ambrose’s first sight of the funhouse early in the afternoon and his entering it with Magda and Peter in the evening. The *middle* would narrate all relevant events from the time he goes in to the time he loses his way; middles have the double and contradictory function of delaying the climax while at the same time preparing the reader for it and fetching him to it. Then the *ending* would tell what Ambrose does while he’s lost, how he finally finds his way out, and what everybody makes of the experience. So far there’s been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a *theme*. And a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder. We haven’t even reached Ocean City yet: we will never get out of the funhouse.” (326)

In the quote above, the narrator alludes to a second interpretation of the title “Lost in the Funhouse”. He claims that although his protagonists have not “reached Ocean City yet”, “we” are already in the funhouse. The question arises whom the narrator addresses here. It is plausible that the story of Ambrose’s experiences in the funhouse is mirrored in the difficulties of the narrator to give an account of Ambrose’s story: “The failure of the narrative to progress in a timely fashion will trap little Ambrose forever in the funhouse, making him similarly unable to progress. Just as Ambrose is lost in the funhouse, then, so are the narrator and reader lost in the funhouse of this narrative construction.” (Worthington 125) While Ambrose tries to find his way out of a real funhouse,

the narrator is not able to produce a straight narrative but is rather lost in the labyrinth he is creating. Therefore, the reader is challenged by a highly complex literary text that is difficult to interpret: "Das *funhouse*, in dem Ambrose sich verirrt, ist eins geworden mit dem *funhouse*, in dem sich der Autor befindet. Erzähltechnik und Gegenstand sind verschmolzen." (M. Schulz 292)

Furthermore, the narrator laments aloud about his failure to make narrative progress at various points in the short story: "At this rate our hero, at this rate the protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever." As a result, the author's difficult situation is confused with Ambrose's so that the narrator is indeed lost in the funhouse similar to Ambrose. This similarity is paralleled in a further point. Although Ambrose visits the funhouse with his brother and Magda, he is the only one who loses his way. The narrator links this fact to his own storytelling when he states that he is not able to narrate his story in a conventional way despite the commonness of traditional story telling:

We should be much further along than we are; not much of this preliminary rambling seems relevant. Yet everyone begins in the same place; how is it that most go along without difficulty but a few lose their way? (327)

Besides, both the narrative and Ambrose suffer from too much self-reflexivity. (Worthington 125) The narrative digresses from the realistic conventions of story-telling by focusing on the narrative techniques that it employs. Therefore, the narrative reveals its own processes and a realistic description of Ambrose's experiences in the funhouse retreats more and more in the background. Ambrose, too, is self-conscious. He tends to reflect on his thoughts and experiences and consequently feels detached from his experiencing self. This is the reason why he has problems to deal with his environment directly. Ambrose is not able to simply feel pleasure or fear but has to describe and analyse his experiences: "In the same way that his self-awareness prevents Ambrose from forgetting himself long enough to have an experience unalloyed by self-narration, the self-conscious preciousness of the narrative prohibits it from progressing with the story." (Worthington 127) Moreover, the connection between the development of the narrative and the fate of Ambrose is also shown in the plot development:

Just as the narrative has become preoccupied with its own workings, Ambrose has become lost in the inner workings of the funhouse; just as the narrative has gone off its track toward the proper conclusion, Ambrose has gone off the track toward the end of the funhouse. It is important to note that the moment Ambrose goes astray into the inner workings of the funhouse is the moment when he is at his most self-reflexive. (Worthington 126)

After walking along in the funhouse and finding no exit, Ambrose decides to become an author and to “construct funhouses for others.” (339) Here, the funhouse can be described as a synonym for the literary text: “But the funhouse is also the ivory tower of the artist, including the structure of his own works, the method of his narrative technique, and the relationship between the artist and his works, particularly insofar as the works resulted from the artist’s need.” (Tharpe 92)

In contrast to the author-narrator of “Lost in the Funhouse” Ambrose wants to devise funhouses that have only one way so that nobody can get lost. This means that he wants to be a “controlling author” (Lindsay 117) who creates unambiguous texts that have only one meaning:

He envisions a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ. Nobody had enough imagination. He could design such a place himself, wiring and all, and he’s only thirteen years old. He would be its operator: panel lights would show what was up in every cranny of its cunning of its multifarious vastness; a switch-flick would ease this fellow’s way, complicate that’s, to balance things out; if anyone seemed lost or frightened, all the operator had to do was. (338)

The short story, however, shows that the writing of a story in a realistic way that leads the reader through the text and provides him also with the interpretation of the described events is no longer possible in the 20th century. The last sentence in the quote above is left unfinished as if the process of getting lost cannot be prevented. Therefore, it can be argued that Ambrose, too, is “ill equipped [...] to control the funhouse.” (Lindsay 117) In the end, “[t]he funhouse in the story has become one with the story as a funhouse.” (D. Schulz 112)

Schulz D. argues that Ambrose was chosen as the main protagonist for a certain reason. (289) The narrator deliberately evokes the literary cliché of the sensitive adolescent only to highlight its ordinariness. In this short story, the narrator also refers to other media such as the cinema where patterns like a romantic love story are extremely popular. However, the narrator makes it clear that this episode in Ambrose's life is not like one of these romances:

In the movies he'd meet a beautiful young girl in the funhouse, they'd have hairs-breadth escapes from real dangers; he'd do and say the right things; she also; in the end they'd be lovers; their dialogue lines would match up; he'd be perfectly at ease; she'd not only like him well enough, she'd think he was *marvelous*; she'd lie awake thinking about *him*, instead of vice versa – the way *his* face looked in the different lights and how he stood and exactly what he'd said – and yet that would only be one small episode in his wonderful life, among many others. Not a *turning point* at all. (335)

Additionally, the narrator does not only refer to contemporary media such as the cinema but employs intertextuality by referring to other literary authors and their works especially to John Dos Passos and James Joyce: "The Irish author James Joyce, in his unusual novel entitled *Ulysses*, now available in this country, uses the adjectives *snot-green* and *scrotum-tightening* to describe the sea." (324)

5.3.3. Who is the author/narrator/Ambrose: *Metalepsis*

One difficulty that the reader of this short story encounters is the blurring of the boundary between the narrator and the main protagonist Ambrose. The narrative perspective constantly changes between an authorial and a personal narrative situation. In the course of the story, it becomes impossible for the reader to determine whose voice is speaking, the narrator's or the character's:

Doch sowenig Ambrose seinen Stimmbruch unter Kontrolle zu halten vermag, sowenig gelingt es dem Autor, eine durchgängig objektive Erzählperspektive aufrechtzuerhalten. Formal wird zwar die Er-Erzählung nirgends durchbrochen, die Perspektive fluktuiert jedoch ständig zwischen auktorialer und personaler Erzählsituation und führt schließlich, vor allem nach mehrmaliger Lektüre, zu einer Homogenisierung der beiden Erzählsituationen. (M. Schulz 292)

Therefore, it can be argued that the narrator here has an ambiguous position, somewhere between author and protagonist. Lindsay argues that there are two different narrators that can be distinguished, namely Ambrose and a “more knowledgeable narrator”. Lindsay describes this complex overlap in the following way:

We have here two narrators: Ambrose telling his story to himself in the third person [...], and an older, more knowledgeable narrator, who may be the older Ambrose remembering that day. The suggestion seems strong that the “real” narrator is the one telling himself the story from inside the funhouse. The scene of the story alternating between those that have led up to Ambrose’s getting lost, those that narrate his present moment of being lost, and those that imagine a way out. (116)

Lindsay further argues that Ambrose, the narrator, and the implied author of the story are one and the same person, namely Ambrose, who is still lost in the funhouse, telling his own story to himself over and over again:

[...], the title story [Lost in the Funhouse] presents us with a narrator who sometimes seems to be the omniscient narrator of realistic fiction, at times seems to be the adult “Ambrose” looking back on his past, at times even seems to be the present Ambrose embroiled in this predicament, at times seems to be the present Ambrose merely daydreaming – so that there is no reason for the reader to believe in any actual trip to Ocean City at all, let alone a problem of becoming lost. (Lindsay 115)

Worthington argues that this blurring of the ontological levels of narrator and main protagonist is initiated by the plot development of Ambrose’s story. As Worthington points out, Ambrose’s decision to become an author is one key theme of the narrative. Therefore, the character Ambrose turns into the author-narrator Ambrose: “In addition to its being a story about an author telling a story about the creation of an author, the story, through its telling, performatively transforms the main character Ambrose into an author ultimately able to narrate the story of its own creation as author.” (Worthington 130) This means that in the course of the story Ambrose becomes the narrator of his own story when he starts to narrate his previous life to himself. Ambrose creates his identity through his narrative act and “needs the narrative – he needs to narrate – in order to be a person, in order to have a self.” (Worthington 130) With the blurring of the distinction between author/narrator and protagonist, Barth raises

questions about the relationship between biography and fiction, reality and imagination.

So kann z.B. die Frage "How long is this going to take?" (77) sowohl vom auktorialen Erzähler in Bezug auf den Fortgang des hoffnungslos verwickelten Plot als auch von dem im Labyrinth des *funhouse* umherirrenden Ambrose gestellt sein. Nicht nur Ambrose als Person, sondern auch der Autor und Ambrose zusammen bilden eine Einheit und sind zugleich gespalten. (M. Schulz 292)

The employment of metalepsis, the constant shift between an omniscient narrator and a personal narrator who tells the story from Ambrose's perspective, is most disturbing on the level of paragraphing. In a number of passages, the narrator does not seem to have decided yet how to tell the story. The narrator leaves sentences unfinished or offers more than one version of a sentence to the reader. Consequently, the reader becomes more and more aware of the fictitiousness and constructedness of the story.

The individual paragraphs in "Lost in the Funhouse" lack a coherent structure and logical links between the individual sentences that jump from one topic to the next. In the following quote we begin inside the protagonists thoughts on his experience of sexual passion. However, suddenly this story line is interrupted by the narrator with a discussion of the condition of the digger machines in the penny arcades. The narrator does not give any explanation for his constant shift of focus nor does he relate if and how they are relevant for the continuance of Ambrose's story line.

Strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take upon the scene: This is what they call passion. I am experiencing it. Many of the digger machines were out of order in the penny arcades and could not be repaired or replaced for the duration. Moreover the prizes, made now in USA, were out of order in the formerly, pasteboard item for the most part, and some of the machines wouldn't work on white pennies. (330f.)

These paragraphs might be interpreted as streams of consciousness of the author where the reader is taken back to an earlier stage in the manufacture of a story before the story itself was written. Consequently, the reader somehow

gets an insight into the writer's mind while he is composing the story "Lost in the Funhouse". The narrator also interrupts Ambrose's talk with Magda to comment on narrative conventions of the depiction of character's interaction. Ambrose wants to persuade Magda to enter the funhouse with him and therefore he tells her what he thinks about the funhouse:

The important thing to remember, after all, is that it's meant to be *funhouse*; that is, a place of amusement. If people really got lost or injured or too badly frightened in it, the owner'd go out of business. There'd even be lawsuits. No character in a work of fiction can make a speech this long without interruption or acknowledgement from the other characters. (334)

One can define two reasons for the difficulty of interpreting the final paragraph of "Lost in the Funhouse": "He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator – though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed." (339) This paragraph refers to Ambrose as well as the narrator since the narrator is lost too in the funhouse. First, the blurring of the ontological levels of the narrator and the main protagonist makes it impossible to find a clear-cut distinction between statements. Therefore, statements might refer to the protagonist, the narrator, or both. Second, a further irritation results from the constant shift of the narrative perspective from an authorial narrator to a personal narrator. As a consequence, the distinction between the authorial narrator who comments on the story and the personal narrator who gives an insight into Ambrose's feelings and thoughts becomes obsolete:

At this stage, near the end of the text, the various narrative levels have become so entangled that any one sentence can be read as a statement of fact or as an observation on the part of Ambrose or as one of Ambrose's fantasies or as another suggestion offered by an author who wants to get on with his story. (D. Schulz 112)

In contrast to Schulz, Morrell favours another interpretation. He argues that the title "Lost in the Funhouse" refers not so much to Ambrose but to Barth and the reader: "Both are lost in the labyrinth of the world; to pass the time, the one

creates his own more pleasurable labyrinths while the other gets lost in them.”
(Morrell 88)

5.4. “Life-Story”

The title “Life-Story” suggests that the short story gives an account of the life of a main protagonist in an autobiographical way. In this short story, however, this expectation is immediately disappointed. The main protagonist does not give a traditional account of his previous life. He is an author who is not able to write a conventional story because he is too much aware of the literary traditions he writes in. Consequently, the author’s struggle with the principles of realism can be equated with the situation of contemporary literature in general:

This pairing of the stultifying self-consciousness of the main character and the crippling self-reflexivity of the narrative is evident, for example, in “Life-Story”, which is about an author struggling to write an entertaining and meaningful story at the exact midpoint of his life, which is exactly two-thirds of the way through the twentieth century. [...] Thus the narrator recognizes that the problems he is facing are problems facing literature in general at this point in the century. (Worthington 119)

In the course of “Life-Story”, it becomes obvious that the first-order author, called D, is not the sole protagonist of this short story. “Life-Story” consists of different ontological levels which centre on various authors who suffer from the same problems as D. Besides, D suspects that he is a fictional character in the work of an author who is situated on a higher level. Therefore, he tries to produce a persuasive argument which confirms his factual existence. Apart from this, the plot of the story is rather uneventful since only the “mehrmalige Schreibversuche der Schriftsteller – und [...] deren Scheitern” are described. (Wolf 1997, 41) However, throughout the course of the story the reader becomes aware that the main focus of the text lies not on a “Lebensgeschichte einer Figur”, but on the “Überlebensgeschichte des Erzählens in der Postmoderne”. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 47)

In contrast to “Lost in the Funhouse”, the end of the short story is straightforward. It is initiated by the wife of the author who enters the room and wishes her husband a happy birthday:

“Happy birthday,” said his wife et cetera, kissing him et cetera to obstruct his view of the end of the sentence he was nearing the end of, playfully refusing to be nay-said so that in fact he did at last as did his fictional character end his ending story endless by interruption, cap his pen. (2165)

It seems that the events that are depicted on the story level can be interpreted in a simple manner. However, the way in which this story is narrated is highly complex. This is why the discourse level needs to be further investigated in order to highlight the postmodern and metafictional qualities of this short story.

5.4.1. The complex structure of the short story: *Metalepsis*

Barth often refers to Borges’s idea that fictions about fictions disturb us metaphysically because they remind us of the fictitious nature of our lives. Similarly, the realization that all voices in a work of fiction are ultimately a single voice, that of the artificer, resonates in both ontological directions. We are reminded of the Lacanian possibility that we, too, are but the sounds of other people’s voices. (Harris 114)

The statement above discusses the irritations that metafictional texts can generate on the ontological level. These observations are also valid for the interpretation of “Life-Story”. In this story, the blurring of the fuzzy boundary between reality and fiction is highlighted as the authors reflect upon the artificiality and fictionality of life.

In “Life-Story”, Barth explores two narrative techniques that account for these confusions. First, “Life-Story” is structured according to the principle of Chinese boxes.⁵² The second technique is called metalepsis. Wolf defines metalepsis in the following way as the:

⁵² In literature a Chinese box structure refers to a literary text which is told in the form of a narrative inside a narrative.

Einbau von sog. 'narrativen Kurzschlüssen', (erzähl)logisch 'unmöglichen' Missachtungen der Differenzen zwischen eigentlich getrennt zu haltenden Erzählebenen (z.B. in der Quasi-Identifizierung der Handlungsräume und Frauenfiguren, obwohl sich diese auf unterschiedlichen Stufen der Sequenz eingelegter Geschichten befinden). (Wolf, *Life-Story* 43)

The structure of this short story is highly complicated. The first-order author D tries to devise a new literary text but he fails to find a satisfying idea that is worth developing. This fact triggers the author's reflections on the non-existence of a "ground-situation" in his text. The author asks how meaning can be created out of a diverse range of equally possible circumstances. The reference to "life-story", the opposition between reality and fiction, suggests that the processes of meaning creation are similar in both domains:

Concluding these reflections he concluded these reflections: that there was at this advanced page still apparently no ground-situation suggested that his story was dramatically meaningless. If one regarded the absence of a ground-situation, more accurately the protagonist's anguish at that absence and his vain endeavors to supply the defect, as itself a sort of ground-situation, did his life-story thereby take on a kind of meaning? A "dramatic" sort he supposed, though of so sophisticated a character as more likely to annoy than to engage. (2163f.)

Additionally to this writer's block, D suffers from another problem. D is convinced that he is a fictional character in the story of another author. Since he notes down his suppositions in his workbook, he concludes that he is the main character in his own account. This metaleptic confusion is further enhanced. In fact, the character of D's short story, called E, is himself an author who tries to write a similar short story:

In our authors case it was the "vehicle" that had vouchsafed itself, first as a germinal proposition in his commonplace book – D comes to suspect that the world is a novel, himself a fictional personage – subsequently as an articulated conceit explored over several pages of the workbook in which he elaborated more systematically his casual inspirations: since D is writing a fictional account of this conviction he has indisputably a fictional existence in this account, replicating what he suspects to be his own situation. Moreover, E, hero of D's account, is said to be writing a similar account, and so the replication is in both ontological directions, et cetera. (2156)

Wolf defines the relationship between these two different ontological levels as the principle of Chinese boxes. In “Life-Story”, this principle of Chinese boxes can be described as an endless regress. In the course of the short story the amount of authors who reflect on the process of story-writing increases dramatically. Since the protagonists are only introduced with capital letters, they cannot be identified via specific character traits and are indistinguishable. Besides, it is not possible to determine any kind of relation between these different authors: (Wolf, *Life-Story* 41)

Why is it L wondered with mild disgust that both K and M for example choose to write such stuff when life is so sweet and painful and full of such a variety of people, places, situations, and activities other than self-conscious and after all rather blank introspection? Why is it N wondered et cetera that both M and O et cetera when the world is in such parlous explosive case? Why et cetera et cetera et cetera when the word, which was in the beginning, is now evidently nearing the end of its road? (2159)

Additionally, there are two other elements that further complicate the interpretation of the short story. According to Wolf, these elements can be defined as implicit metafiction. Apart from the structure of the short story, Wolf draws attention to the use of temporal information and the seemingly unmotivated changes between a third-person and a first-person narrator. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 41ff.)

The distribution of temporal information given in footnotes and termed as “Barth’s note” seems to support a chronological line of events. There are altogether four instances where the reader is provided with temporal information, namely “9:00 A.M., Monday, June 20, 1966” (2156), “10:00 A.M., Monday, June 20, 1966” (2158), “11:00 A.M., Monday, June 20, 1966” (2158), and “11:00 P.M., Monday, June 20, 1966” (2164). Since the temporal information is given in a chronological order, one might suggest that all refer to the same ontological story level of “Life-Story”. However, a close analysis shows that the temporal information refers to another level of narration. It is 9:00 a.m. on the story level when first-order author D sits in his study and works on the beginning of his short story. The reader is informed that “now” it is 10:00 a.m., when author G, who is situated on an ontologically lower level, reflects on the kind of fiction he wants to play a role in, namely in a conventional narrative

full of “heroes I can admire, Heroines I can love, memorable speeches, colorful accessory chapters, poetical language.” (2158) The subsequent temporal information concerns yet another author namely Y since at 11:00 a.m., “Y’s wife came into the study as he was about to throw out the baby with the bathwater.” (2158) At 11:00 p.m., at “this hour of the world”, a third-person narrator is introduced who addresses the reader with the following complaints:

For why do you suppose – you! you! – he’s gone on so, so relentlessly refusing to entertain you as he might have at a less desperate hour of the world³ with felicitous language, exciting situation, unforgettable character and image? (2164)

This chronological time line contradicts the diversity of ontological levels that the time information refers to. Thus, confusion is also created through a “unwahrscheinliche Überdeterminierung der Ordnung”. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 42)

On the story level the reader encounters a further complication of the distinction between the various ontological levels. The reasons for this are the descriptions of the female figures and their actions in different levels of the short story. Not only are the female figures described in a similar manner as either wives or mistresses but also their actions are identical. They enter the study of the respective author as does the wife of Y (2158), “his mistress whereof he had none” (2161) and the wife of the anonymous third person narrator at the end of the short story (2165).

This analysis of the highly complex structure of “Life-Story” shows that both implicit and explicit metareference are employed. It is foremost the complex structure and the similar events on the different ontological levels that draw the attention to the artificiality and fictionality of the story. These metareferential events are found on the story level as well as the discourse level. “Life-Story” fulfils the aim of metafiction to make the reader aware of the underlying processes that are hidden in conventional literature:

Die Vermutung liegt natürlich nahe, daß hier Metafiktion vorliegt, genauer: ein implizit metafiktionales Erzählen, in dem durch die experimentelle, normabweichende Konstruktion der Geschichte der Blick

auf deren Gemachtheit bzw. Fiktionalität gelenkt werden soll. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 43)

5.4.2. The role of the narrator

5.4.2.1. Explicit metafictional comments on how to (not) write a story

In this short story there is an extensive use of explicit metafiction. Interesting in this context are especially the statements where the *fictum*-status of a literary text is discussed. The key question which is raised is whether there is any difference between reality and fiction. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 43) The short story starts in the following way:

Without discarding what he'd already written he began his story afresh in a somewhat different manner. Whereas his earlier version had opened in a straightforward documentary fashion and then degenerated or at least modulated intentionally into irrationalism and dissonance he decided this time to tell his tale from start to finish in a conservative, 'realistic', unself-conscious way. (2156)

It becomes obvious from the quote above that the main protagonist of this short story is an author who tries to write a unique literary text but has problems to find a satisfying way to start it. Even the first sentences of the short story are autoreferential since the narrator discusses explicitly the difficulties of writing a satisfying beginning. Besides, the main problem of the author here is to decide whether he wants to write a conventional or a postmodern short story. Since the author encounters various problems in his writing process and reflects which mode/style is the most suitable for his story, it can be argued that autoreferentiality can be found even on the story level of this short story. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 40)

In "Life-Story", Barth investigates both the conventional way of writing a story as well as the postmodern approach towards the writing of fiction. While writing his story, the narrator D reflects on the literary possibilities of story-telling and provides the reader with definitions of realistic and mimetic literature opposed to

postmodern metafictional literature. It is interesting to note that here the conventional way of writing seems to be preferable to D, at least because he suspects that readers mostly seek entertainment. Here, D gives his definition of postmodern literature and notes one of its typical features, namely the examination of literary conventions:

What a dreary way to begin a story he said to himself upon reviewing his long introduction. Not only is there no "ground situation", but the prose style is heavy and somewhat old-fashioned, like an English translation of Thomas Mann, and the so-called "vehicle" itself is at least questionable: self-conscious, vertiginously arch, fashionable, solipstic, unoriginal – in fact a convention of twentieth-century literature. Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus in infinitum! Who doesn't prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes? That doesn't continually proclaim "Don't forget I'm an artifice!"? (2157)

In "Life-Story", the beginning is clearly unconventional and postmodern and it is marked by the narrator's reflections on different literary styles. It seems obvious that the narrator favours conventional story-telling. However, later in the story the author abandons realism and confesses that he is not satisfied with beginning the story in a conventional way either: "God so to speak spare his readers from heavy-footed forced expositions of the sort that begin in the countryside near ----- in May of the year ----- it occurred to the novelist ----- that his own life might be a -----, in which he was the leading or an accessory character." (2163)

The rejection of postmodern literature becomes visible in a further point. The authors in "Life-Story" do not want to be fictional characters in "some piece of avant-garde preciousness". (2158) Consequently, the question arises why author D and also the subsequent authors on the other ontological levels do not write a conventional short story but render their story in a postmodern style. Furthermore, the reader might wonder why he or she is reading a postmodern short story when the protagonists give several good reasons for conventional story telling. "Life-Story" offers the answer in a straightforward manner because the key argument of Barth's aesthetics is introduced: "He rather suspected that the medium and genre in which he worked – the only ones for which he felt any vocation – were moribund if not already dead. The idea pleased him." (2159)

Therefore, the conventional way of story telling is exhausted. As everything has already been said, it is impossible to write something genuinely new. Thus, it is obsolete to continue with realistic premises and to write a realistic and mimetic story that claims to present an account of real life. As a consequence, the only theme that an author can write about is the fictionality and artificiality of literature, thereby to explore the functions and effects of conventional literature and aesthetic illusion. Worthington puts it this way:

In other words, Barth argues that fiction should both portray and become – or be performative of – the postmodern exhaustion it discusses. [...] Rather, the argument is that because traditional narrative forms have been “exhausted”, a good artist must respond by depicting that very exhaustion. (Worthington 120)

5.4.2.2. Explicit discussion of the boundaries between fiction and reality

A crucial topic of “Life-Story” is the postmodern theme of blurring the boundary between fiction and reality. Besides, the question arises whether there is any boundary at all. The author seems to suffer from writers block, “dried up inspiration and depletion of subject matter.” (Schulz 14) The loss of his creative power is not the only problem of this author who writes “Life-Story”. In the next lines the reader is informed that the author has severe difficulties in distinguishing between reality and fiction. He suspects that he does not have a factual existence but is just a literary character invented by another author:

He being by vocation an author of novels and stories it was perhaps inevitable that one afternoon the possibility would occur to the writer of these lines that his own life might be a fiction, in which he was the leading or an accessory character. He happened at the time¹ to be in his study attempting to draft the opening pages of a new short story; its general idea had preoccupied him for some months [...] but certain elements of the conceit, without which he could scarcely proceed, remained unclear. (2156)

¹ 9:00 A.M., Monday, June 20, 1966

In the course of the story, the author struggles to present a concise and logical argument that proves his factual existence. Wolf argues that the discussion of this problem and its resolution is one of the wittiest parts of the short story. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 48) At the end of the story, the anonymous author claims that he has found manifold evidence that his assumption is not accurate:

[...] he could not after all be a character in a work of fiction inasmuch as such a fiction would be of an entirely different character from what he thought of as fiction. Fiction consisted of such monuments of the imagination as Cutler's *Morganfield*, Riboud's *Tales within Tales*, his own creations; fact of such as for example read such fictions. More, he could demonstrate by syllogism that the story of his life was a work of fact: though assaults upon the boundary between life and art, reality and dream, were undeniable a staple of his own and his century's literature as they'd been of Shakespeare's and Cervantes's, yet it was a fact that in the corpus of fiction as far as he knew no fictional character had become convinced as had he that he was a fictional character in a work of fiction. This being the case [...] it followed that his conviction was false. (2165)

The author has re-established the boundaries between fiction and real life but in such a way that the reader is once again confronted with the fuzziness of this distinction. In a close analysis of the author's arguments it becomes obvious that he employs a wrong line of argument. First of all, this author is a fictional character in the short story "Life-Story" despite his contrary exclamation. The second argument states that he would be the first fictional character who is aware of his fictionality. This claim is evidently inaccurate. As a counterargument, Wolf refers to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. As Wolf explains, the main protagonist of *Don Quixote* actually meets his fictional self in the course of the second book. This is especially noteworthy since Cervantes is frequently mentioned in this short story. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 49)

5.4.2.3. Explicit discussion of the relationship between author, text and reader

The last part of "Life-Story" focuses primarily on the audience. The main protagonist of this third part is an anonymous author who reflects on the relationship between author, text and reader:

Had he written for his readers' sake? The phrase implied a thitherto-unappreciated metaphysical dimension. Suspense. If his life was a fictional narrative it consisted of three terms – teller, tale, told – each dependent on the other two but not in the same ways. (2160)

As Harris argues, the dependency between these three factors is not only discussed explicitly, but also mirrored in the events of the story level. (Harris 117) At first, the conviction of the main protagonist D that he is a fictional character in the work of another author seems to be his individual psychological problem. Since all authors subsequently mentioned also share this suspicion, it can be argued that Barth discusses here a central theme of literature. Barth observes the difficulty of defining the relation between reality and fiction as well as the relationship between author, text and reader. In his analysis, Harris points out that author and readers are equal parts in the process of writing and reading literature:

Not only does the reader give life to the characters and situation in the author's story, but in a real sense the reader gives the author life, since he makes his role possible. By that same token, the writer as well as his story makes possible the reader's role. Tale, teller and told thus become linked in a reciprocal process. Writing is not a monologue in which a Godlike author creates a world which he then dispenses to a passive auditor; rather, it is – [...] – a *conversation*. (Harris 118)

Harris further argues that this observation is also valid for "Life-Story" because "the importance of an audience – real or implied – to the narrative process is emphasized." (Harris 117) Suddenly, the author addresses the reader directly with an insulting speech. The author seems to be tired of story-telling and tries to persuade the reader to stop his reading process. Besides, the author angrily admits that the reader has the power to force him to continue the story endlessly. (Harris 117)

The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where's your shame? (2164)

Hence, the author investigates not only the questions if he is a fictional character and in what kind of narrative he features as a character but also on the question what kind of reader would be interested to read his story, the story of his life:

[...] he concluded and caused the “hero” of his story to conclude that one or more of these three things must be true: 1) his author was his sole and indefatigable reader; 2) he was in a sense his own author, telling the story to himself, in which case in which case; and/or 3) his reader was not only tireless and shameless but sadistic, masochistic if he was himself. (2164)

Moreover, the interdependency between author and reader is analysed. This author investigates the unquestioned premise of realism that the author is the God-like creator of the literary text that the reader has to approach passively. In contrast to this conventional dictum, “Life-Story” revalues the role of the reader. Since this author denies the validity of the “analogy between Author and God” (2165), he comes to the conclusion that fiction must acknowledge both its *fictum*-reference and *fictio*-reference to overcome the “Literature of Exhaustion”. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 46)

To what conclusion will he come? He'd been about to append to his own tale inasmuch as the old analogy between Author and God, novel and world, can no longer be employed unless deliberately as a false analogy, certain things follow: 1) fiction must acknowledge its fictiousness and metaphoric invalidity or 2) choose to ignore the question or deny its relevance or 3) establish some other, acceptable relation between itself, its author, its reader. (2165)

As a result, the importance of the reader is highlighted because it is only through the reception process of the reader that the fictional text exists. Thereby, the author does not only acknowledge that the reader has an eminent influence on the reception of the literary text but also on the life of the author. It is a common fact that every author needs an audience to be a successful writer.

With regard to the implicit and explicit metafiction in “Life-Story” Wolf concludes that

Die Metafiktion in "Life-Story", sowohl die implizite wie auch die explizite, dient der Proklamation einer neuen, autoreflexiven postmodernistischen Ästhetik, welche die alte (noch für den Modernismus wichtige) Autorenenzentriertheit und Werkästhetik verabschiedet, dient aber auch der Rechtfertigung des eigenen Textes, der ganz offenbar dieser Ästhetik folgt: Damit zeichnet sich als bedeutendste Funktion der Metafiktion in "Life-Story" die eigentextzentrierte Diskussion jener Ästhetik ab, die der Geschichte selbst zugrundeliegt – [...]. (Wolf, *Life-Story* 47)

6. Conclusion

After having analysed in detail the postmodern qualities of four specific short stories, the focus will now be on the functions of metareference and the differences and similarities between "The Magic Poker" and "The Elevator" by Robert Coover and "Lost in the Funhouse" and "Life-Story" by John Barth.

Coover as well as Barth challenges the reader in these postmodern and metafictional texts. As these texts are highly complicated and defy any easy interpretation they crucially rely on reader activation and collaboration because the reader is supposed to become aware of fictionality, textuality and mediality. All four short stories are self-reflexive and include numerous instances of metaference. They clearly question the mimetic conventions of literature by investigating their own fictionality and artificiality. Both Coover and Barth demonstrate the limitations of realistic literary concepts by devaluating the story level and making the discourse level over-prominent. This becomes most evident in the analysis of the structure of the short stories, the role of the narrator and the disruption of the narrative line. However, Coover and Barth employ different strategies to achieve their goal.

In *Pricksongs and Descants* Coover digests philosophical ideas that have evolved in the development of postmodernism. Coover reworks fairy tales and popular biblical stories to show their internal contradictions and weaknesses by highlighting aspects that have not been discussed until now. Furthermore, Coover investigates the relevance of myths for individuals and societies. It one of his major aims to make the reader aware of the fictionality and

constructedness of reality in order to point out the manipulative powers of myths. It is Coover's central aim to show that reality is produced via the same means as fictional accounts. These myths can be defined as metanarratives that are used to explain the world in a totalizing way. In his short stories Coover shows that these traditional myths are no longer relevant for contemporary readers. This is why the author has to deconstruct them and thereby to evaluate the conventional ways of story writing.

In contrast to this, Barth is more concerned with the aesthetic basis of postmodernism. Barth's main claim is that the conventions and traditional literary techniques of realism are exhausted and that the authors need to develop new concepts of story writing in order to rejuvenate the old traditions of storytelling.

Both Coover and Barth make the conventions of traditional storytelling visible on a very basic level, namely the way of arranging the story. The reader has to deal with stories that question the necessity of conventions such as the beginning or the ending. Nevertheless, the structure of the short stories is one of the key differences between the short stories of Coover and Barth. In Coover's short stories the most disturbing effect on the reader is achieved through the discussion of the external structure. In contrast to this, the complexity of Barth's stories lies in the internal structure whose core characteristic is the unusual role of the narrator.

Coover even rejects the traditional way of the layout of the literary text and thus implicitly highlights how used the audience has become to the run-on text. Thereby, Coover also shows that the audience expects a coherent whole that is divided into a beginning, the main part of the story and an end. "The Magic Poker" and "The Elevator" are aleatory arrangements and can be defined as "garden-path-stories". The stories consist of spatially fragmented segments that are not ordered temporally or logically so that reality is depicted as fragmented. This external structure has most disturbing effects on the reader since this is a completely new arrangement of the literary text. Besides, both stories lack a coherent story line and narrate various changing accounts of the same event so

that various plot lines evolve. Since these story lines are situated on the same ontological level it is impossible to define on story level as the true version of the story.

In “The Magic Poker”, “Lost in the Funhouse” and “Life-Story” the reader encounters narrators who are completely different to the narrators of realistic literature. They explicitly reflect on the premises and principles of realism and so point out the artificiality of these texts. In this respect, Barth’s short stories can be described as more complex since the narrators in these stories are themselves authors who struggle with the traditional way of storytelling. In both stories, this internal structure is complicated by the employment of metalepsis and the production of the texts like a Moebius strip. In Coover’s short story the narrator has a story line of its own that is completely separated from the story line of the protagonists whereas in Barth’s stories the distinction between the narrator and the protagonist is blurred.

In “The Magic Poker” critique of realist principle is given explicitly and implicitly. There are two distinct ontological levels that divide the narrator and the fictional protagonists. The explicit discussion of conventional techniques takes place on the level of the narrator whereas the mutually exclusive story lines that are incompatible with the principles of realism are an implicit critique. On the story level any distinction between reality and fantasy is obsolete since the story deals with the various possible worlds of the main character who tries to come to terms with her past and the current state of her life. The instability of the setting in both stories highlight the fact that it is always invented by the author and has to fit to the story and the genre.

The narrator in “The Magic Poker” has its own story line where he reflects overtly on his role as creator and mediator of the story. In the beginning the narrator claims the absolute power over his narrative and seems to be in command of his story like the authorial narrator of realistic literature. The only difference here seems to be that this narrator explicitly discusses the *fictum* and the *fictio*-status of the literary text. Soon, however, the critique of the belief that literature is unmediated is further deepened. The narrator is forced to question

his control over the characters. This is clearly against traditional concepts that deny the autonomy of literary characters. The narrator thematises his difficulties in writing the story and the loss of control over his characters and the action. Besides, he discusses the relationship between reality and fiction by asking himself if his island can become real in the minds of his readers and if they perceive it as if it was real.

In "Lost in the Funhouse" and "Life-Story" the boundary between narrator and protagonists is blurred by the employment of a highly complex structure that can be described as a Moebius strip and metalepsis. The narrators are authors who are very aware of the literary traditions they write in and explicitly reflect on their writing process. They overtly discuss the principles of realism and show why they are no longer relevant for the production of contemporary literature. Besides, the focus lies on the author's relationship towards his literary texts. These reflections are part of the story because they are not separated from the protagonist's story line. Thereby, the discussion of narrative techniques is foregrounded. The narrator comments explicitly on the story in progress and on literature in general. The author-narrator compares realistic and postmodern story writing. The key conclusion of this comparison is that realism is like postmodernism a literary technique to create the aesthetic illusion of depicting reality. Besides, every literary text is the invention of an author.

In these stories the inner doubts of the authors become obvious as they are torn between life and art. In "Lost in the Funhouse" the diminishing distinction between the thoughts of Ambrose and the reflections of the narrator lead to the fact that in the end the narrator and the reader are lost in the funhouse of the text. This effect can be defined as a Moebius strip because at the same time as the reader is informed about Ambrose's fate in the funhouse, the reader is provided with insights into the author-narrator's process of composing the story. Therefore, the reader is at one point inside the story and reads about Ambrose but in the next line he finds himself outside the story world and watches the narrator telling the story. Another technique that heightens the reader's confusion is metalepsis, the constant shift of the narrative perspective between an authorial narrator and a personal narrator who describes Ambrose's inner

feelings. Therefore, it becomes impossible for the reader to decide whose voice is speaking/narrating. This is most disturbing on the level of paragraphing since Ambrose's thoughts and the narrator's reflections stand in the same paragraph without further explanation. The narrator provides the reader with different possibilities of what could happen in the funhouse so that in the end it is difficult to say whether Ambrose actually entered the funhouse at all. In this story the problems of narrating a story in a coherent fashion with a logical development that gives rise to suspense is further discussed on the level of the protagonist. Ambrose invites Magda to visit the funhouse with him but Magda prefers his brother Peter and Ambrose is left behind alone. In this threatening situation Ambrose decides to become an author and starts to tell the story of his life in order to give meaning to it, to create meaning.

"Life-Story" has the most complex and self-reflexive structure. The narrative is comprised as Chinese boxes and consists of various ontologically different levels where the main protagonists are authors who try to write a literary text. The first-order author D writes about an author E who too suffers from writer's block. The relationship between author D and author E is the only one that is explained so that the employment of metalepsis, in this story the existence of similar characters and events leads to a further confusion of the levels. Similar to the structure of "Lost in the Funhouse" the structure of "Life-Story" can be described as a Möbius strip since it is a story about a writer writing a story about a writer writing... The main content of this story is the fear of the first-order narrator D who is convinced that he is a fictional character in the work of another author. D openly declares that he does not want to be a character in a postmodern text. However, the narrator gives a reason why he writes "Life-Story" in a postmodern way: He claims that the themes and techniques of realistic literature are exhausted and are not usable for a contemporary author who wants to write an original text. Since "Life-Story" questions the traditional role of the author as the sole creator of the literary text the story also discusses the role of the reader. The reader is directly addressed.

In "The Elevator" Coover touches highly philosophical questions, namely the instability of identity, the boundary between reality and fiction, the difficulty of

interpreting reality and the uselessness of metanarratives. As in "The Magic Poker" the story consists of spatially divided segments that present mutually exclusive story lines that shatter the reader's expectation of character and setting stability. The main protagonist of "The Elevator" does not follow the mimetic conception of characters since he shows different character traits and his actions are not always logically motivated. Coover violates the principle of the fixedness of character identity. Here, the theme of the instability of identity is discussed implicitly by presenting various layers of the same character in the different segments. The setting differs between a self-service elevator and an elevator with an operator girl. These two opposing opening segments are situated on the same ontological level so both story lines are equally probable. In "The Elevator" the ending highlights the difficulties of interpreting events that are externally motivated. Martin has to make sense of the crash of the elevator. Individuals do not have full access to reality since their perception is always pre-structured and an objective viewpoint cannot be attained. The only means to grasp reality is language. The ending reflects on the postmodern belief that language is not an appropriate tool to refer to reality that lies outside language. The main protagonist has to struggle to find a word that captures his extraordinary experience. His choice falls on "inscrutable" which also refers to the intransparency of reality. Individuals need language to interpret the world. In postmodern thinking the individual is no longer capable of arriving at an objective perspective from which to analyse the events. Like Martin, the individual can only acknowledge his inferior position and accept the fate that total understanding is illusory.

In both of Coover's short stories the denial of overarching systems of meaning include myths that are accepted unquestioned. In "The Magic Poker" the fairy-tale myth of love is rejected. In "The Elevator" the dependency of the individual on his surrounding is stressed since Martin's identity changes according to the events that happen to him. Both Coover and Barth examine the relationship between reality and fiction. Coover's short stories point at their fictionality and artificiality by highlighting the unbridgeable gap between realistic literature and reality. Both authors highlight the yearning of the individual for significance and meaning in a world that cannot be totally explained by the means of language.

Thus, while, Coover deals with philosophical problems of postmodern thinking
Barth discusses the aesthetic basis of postmodern literature.

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9. Appendix

Abstract

Diese Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit dem Phänomen des Postmodernismus in der zeitgenössischen Literatur. Der Begriff ‚Postmodernismus‘ wird in zahlreichen Disziplinen verwendet, weshalb es unmöglich erscheint, eine umfassende Definition dieses Begriffs zu finden. Im ersten Kapitel dieser Arbeit wird deshalb auf die Begriffsgeschichte eingegangen, um die wichtigsten Bereiche, in welchen der Begriff verwendet wird, untersuchen zu können. Für diese Analyse sind hier im Besonderen die Kulturwissenschaft, die Literaturwissenschaft und die Philosophie relevant. Der zentrale Fokus dieser Arbeit ist jedoch die Verwendung des Begriffs ‚Postmodernismus‘ als ästhetisches Prinzip, welches die Charakteristika des Realismus hinterfragt und daher als anti-mimetische Ästhetik, welche die Gemachtheit und Erfundenheit eines literarischen Texts hervorhebt, definiert werden kann. Dies wird erreicht durch das Sichtbarmachen eines der zentralen Gestaltungsmittel des Realismus, der ästhetischen Illusion. Ein weiteres Konzept, das mit dem Begriff ‚Postmodernismus‘ eng verknüpft ist, ist Selbstreferentialität. Deshalb beschäftigt sich das zweite theoretische Kapitel dieser Arbeit mit den Begriffen Metareferentialität und Metafiktion. Die Ergebnisse dieser Analyse werden in den darauffolgenden Kapiteln auf die Kurzgeschichten Robert Coovers und John Barths angewendet.

Im Besonderen beschäftigt sich diese Arbeit mit Coovers Kurzgeschichten „The Magic Poker“ und „The Elevator“ aus dem Kurzgeschichtenband *Pricksongs and Descants* und mit Barths Kurzgeschichten „Lost in the Funhouse“ und „Life-Story“ aus dem Kurzgeschichtenband *Lost in the funhouse*. Eine der zentralen Fragen, die diese Arbeit versucht zu beantworten, ist, inwieweit Coover und Barth als postmoderne Autoren bezeichnet werden können. In weiterer Folge wird untersucht, welche postmoderne und metafiktionale Merkmale die Kurzgeschichten aufweisen und ob es Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede in der Herangehensweise der Autoren an das Schreiben literarischer Texte gibt. Sowohl Coover als auch Barth demonstrieren in ihren Texten die Grenzen

realistischer Konzepte wie die Rolle des Erzählers, die Kontinuität der Handlung und auch das Layout des Textes. In allen Kurzgeschichten wird die Bedeutung der Ebene der story minimiert und die Ebene des discours hervorgehoben.

Coover und Barth verwenden jedoch unterschiedliche Strategien, um ihr Ziel zu erreichen. Coover arbeitet in seinen Kurzgeschichten die philosophischen Ideen, die im Zuge des Postmodernismus entstanden sind, heraus. Dabei konzentriert er sich auf die Rolle des Mythos und auf dessen Einflussnahme auf die Vermittlung und Interpretation von Realität. Im Gegensatz dazu analysiert Barth die ästhetische Basis des Postmodernismus und stellt fest, dass die traditionellen Konventionen des Erzählens erschöpft sind, weshalb der zeitgenössische Autor verpflichtet ist, neue Wege des Geschichtenerzählens zu entwickeln.

Abstract

In this thesis the phenomenon of postmodernism in contemporary literature is investigated. Since the term 'postmodernism' is used in various disciplines by different scholars it is impossible to find a simple definition of the term. Therefore, the first chapter of this thesis investigates the history of the term 'postmodernism' and the main areas in which the term is used, namely in cultural theory, literary theory and philosophy. The focus of this thesis lies on 'postmodernism' as an aesthetic practice that questions the premises of realism and can be defined as anti-mimetic aesthetics that highlight the artificiality and fictionality of literary texts by breaking the aesthetic illusion. Self-reflexivity, the examination of the underlying practices of fiction, is one key characteristics of postmodern literature. Consequently, it is vital to examine the terms 'metareference' and 'metafiction' to explore the relationship between postmodern and metafictional literature.

The practical analysis concentrates on the postmodern and metafictional short stories "The Magic Poker" and "The Elevator" from Robert Coover's short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants* and "Lost in the Funhouse" and "Life-Story" from John Barth's short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse*. The main questions that this thesis tries to answer are in what ways Robert Coover and

John Barth are postmodern authors and whether there are similarities and differences in their approach towards postmodern literature. Both Coover and Barth demonstrate the limitations of the realistic concepts of the role of the narrator, the continuity of the narrative line and even the conventional layout of texts. What these short stories have in common is the devaluation of the story level and the over-prominence of the discourse level.

There are, however, essential differences between Coover and Barth since they use different strategies to achieve their goal. The main aim of Coover's short stories is to investigate the philosophical ideas that have evolved in the development of postmodernism. Besides, he is concerned with the role that myths play in the construction of reality. Thereby he highlights the fact that reality and fictional accounts are produced by the same means. In contrast to this, the main aim of Barth's writing is to investigate the aesthetic basis of postmodernism. Barth declares that the conventions of traditional story writing are exhausted and that contemporary authors have to develop new concepts of story writing in order to be able to make it relevant to contemporary life.

Curriculum Vitae

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