
Story Identity and Story Type

I. INTRODUCTION

The foundational claim underlying nearly all narrative theory is that a distinction can be made between the story and its telling. Indeed, Jonathan Culler calls this the “indispensable premise of narratology.”¹ The general distinction has been labeled in a variety of different ways, such as ‘histoire’ and ‘discours,’ ‘histoire’ and ‘récite,’ ‘narrative’ and ‘narration,’ ‘story’ and ‘discourse,’ and even ‘plot’ and ‘story.’² Most influentially, to mark the distinction, the Russian formalists supplied the labels *fabula* (story) and *sjuzet* (discourse).³ Leading narratologists as different as Seymour Chatman and David Bordwell may adopt different terms, but they accept roughly the same distinction. Bordwell describes the *fabula* as that which “embodies the action as a chronological cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and spatial field,” and the *sjuzet* as “the arrangement and presentation of the *fabula*.”⁴

Chatman argues that the basis for thinking that such a distinction can be drawn is what he calls the “transposability of the story,” which amounts to the notion that the same story can be told in a different way, even in a different medium.⁵ For instance, one can change the order in which events are relayed in any given narrative: “Cinderella” could begin in *media res*—starting with the ballroom scene as the handsome prince pulls her close during their first dance, then flashing back to her ignominious floor-scrubbing past. Not only can one reorder the presentation, but one can also tell the same Cinderella story in a graphic novel, a film, or a stage play. According to the transposability thesis, no matter the medium, if it is capable of narration, it can tell “Cinderella.”

In the introduction to *Narratology*, Mieke Bal uses the example of Tom Thumb to explain the same idea: “Everyone in Europe is familiar with the story of Tom Thumb. However, not everyone has read the story in the same text. There are different versions; in other words, there are different texts in which that same story is related.”⁶ But what exactly constitutes the “story” that is retold? Although it seems plausible to say the same story can be retold, it is difficult to say exactly what this means. The primary difficulty for proponents of the transposability thesis is to come up with an acceptable theory of story identity. The theory of story identity that is the likely product of the “story-discourse distinction” is too strict. It has the undesirable consequence that stories can rarely be retold. However, any attempt to develop a more lenient theory of story identity will encounter a series of difficult problems.

In what follows I attempt to show the central difficulties in developing an adequate theory of story identity. I begin with the strict theory of story identity. Since the strict theory turns out to be too strict, I consider a few modifications that might bring it into closer alignment with our intuitions. I argue that the most compelling modification would require an odd theory of fictional reference. Given these problems with the strict theory, I move on to consider more lenient theories of story identity. I identify two major problems for such theories. First, there is no clear principle for determining what elements are essential for any given story that does not make reference to how prominent they are in a particular discourse. Second, and more importantly, I argue that more lenient theories risk collapsing an important distinction between story identity and story type.

II. THE PRIMARY DILEMMA

It is fair to say that the primary assumption of much narratology is the “transposability of the story” thesis. As noted above, the basic idea is that the same story can be retold. Claude Bremond describes the notion as follows:

[The story is] independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties; the subject of a story may serve as [the] argument for a ballet; that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen; one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and this can be the same story.⁷

We can rearrange the order of the presentation, perhaps even reversing the order of revelation à la *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), but the story remains the same. The artwork may be radically different on such rearrangement, but the story is left untouched. Similarly, when we translate a short story into another language, the resulting translation is not the same artwork as the original, but most think that the story can be the same. Further, it seems that the same story can not only be retold in the same medium, but also that the story can be retold in different media altogether. The story in Richard Matheson’s novel *I Am Legend* (1954) can be told in print, on stage, or on the screen.⁸

Hence, if the same story can be told in different ways, then the telling must be distinct from the story. Although Chatman argues that the transposability of the story provides support for the story-discourse distinction, it is not clear how this could be the case, since the very notion of transposability presupposes a distinction between *what* is told (the story) and *how* it is told (the discourse).⁹ To reiterate, according to the popular distinction adopted by Chatman, the story is the content and the discourse is the expression.¹⁰ The story, on this account, includes both the events and the existents—the characters and setting. One can tell the same story again by describing the same events and existents. But what exactly does this include?

Chatman argues that, on what he calls the “complete account,” the “story is in one sense the continuum of events presupposing the total

set of all conceivable details, that is, those that can be projected by the normal laws of the physical universe.”¹¹ Chatman’s suggestion is problematic, since indefinitely many supplementary details could be compatible with the contents of the story that the discourse relays, but not all such sets of details are consistent with each other. On the complete account, the story of *I Am Legend* includes all the conceivable details of Robert Neville’s life: his birth, when he learned to ride a bike, his first kiss, how he came to own the house on Cimarron Street, and so on. The problem is that we can conceive of multiple conflicting sets of details that are compatible with the laws of physics. Hence, if we accept Chatman’s proposal, there can be no story at all. For any given story, we can imagine at least two possible, contradictory backstories. Since contradictory entities cannot exist, it is logically impossible that all conceivable backstories be part of the same story.¹² So much for the complete account.

In a similar spirit one might try to develop a theory of story identity that avoids the problems with the complete account. What we can call the “strict theory of story identity” holds that the story is the complete set of event, character, and setting details that are presented in the work. Since it restricts the story elements to those revealed in the discourse, the strict theory avoids the initial problems with Chatman’s complete account. We cannot show that there is in fact no story by merely imaging contradictory backstories, since according to the strict theory these are not technically part of the story. The strict theory makes it logically possible for there to be a story, but, as we shall see, it makes it nearly impossible for there to be more than one instance of the same story—that is, it makes it practically impossible to transpose the story.

Imagine two versions of *I Am Legend* where the main character has a different eye, hair, or skin color; perhaps a translator made a slight mistake and wrote that Neville has a brown instead of blond beard. If the story is all of the event, character, and setting details relayed by the discourse, then the two hypothetical versions of *I Am Legend* do not present the same story. According to Leibniz’s law, two things with different properties cannot be identical. So, according to the strict theory these two instances, with just a minor difference in beard color, could not be the same story. And this is not an improbable, merely

hypothetical case. In fact it is nearly impossible to avoid incompatibilities when moving from print to stage, screen, or any other medium where details might be added. For instance, radio productions of stage plays and of works of fiction with dialogue cannot help but put a sound to a voice. And, as is frequently noted, films cannot easily withhold visual information, such as the way a character looks. This is precisely why it would be nearly impossible to film Charles Willeford's *Pick-Up* without losing the impact of the revelation of the main character's race on the last page.¹³

Unless a work of fiction is highly underspecified, aspects of the character and setting details will conflict in any likely film or stage production. And more importantly, it is impossible to avoid contradiction between different stage productions unless one uses the same actors and props. It is undeniable that Laurence Olivier's Hamlet looks and sounds far different from Scott Shepherd's Hamlet. Since identity is a transitive relation, if we say that Olivier's *Hamlet* is identical with the text (since there are no obvious contradictions) and that the Wooster Group's *Hamlet* is the same story as the text, we must say that the two are identical. But if the story is the complete set of event, character, and setting details presented in the discourse, Olivier and Shepherd are not presenting the same character: They are far from identical twins. Hence, on the strict theory the two productions cannot both be telling the same story. The strict theory of story identity is simply too strict.

The most basic problem with the strict theory of story identity is that any event, character, or setting details included in a retelling but not included in an original risk introducing contradictions. According to the strict theory of story identity, any difference in character or setting between two different putative tellings of the same story would technically not have the same story—that is, they would be new tellings of their individual, distinct stories, no matter how similar they might otherwise be. Hence, if we accept the strict theory of story identity, then we will seldom find the same story retold. In fact, the same story cannot be retold across or even within media with any variance in detail of character and setting according to the strict account. But this does not mesh with our common intuitions about when the same story is retold. Certainly it is an unacceptable consequence that no production of *Hamlet* could ever tell the same story as the play. What we mean by

the story must not be what is on the story side of the story-discourse distinction, if we are to draw it in this way.

Since the strict theory of story identity—the theory that the story is the complete set of event, character, and setting details presented by the discourse—leads to the unintuitive result that the same story can almost never be told twice, we will want to look for a less strict, more lenient theory of story identity. However, in what follows I argue that more permissive notions of story identity face several additional problems. Rather than a mere problem for the strict theory of story identity, we have so far uncovered the first horn of a dilemma.

III. MISDESCRIBED FICTIONAL REFERENCE

One might think that an easy solution to the problems encountered above would be to say that the character and setting details are not definitive but, perhaps, merely expressive of the details of the actual story. The claim would be that actors merely express a likeness to the characters and settings in the actual story. Although this would make differences noncontradictory, such a suggestion is highly counterintuitive. We do not encounter movies with the qualification that although the actor is such and such a height, the actual character in the story might be an inch or two taller. It is not as if we consider a close-up of an actor's face as something akin to a blurry image, a rough reference to the actual appearance of the real story character. No, the way the actor looks is precisely the way the film or play tells us how the character looks. Since it suggests otherwise, the expressive theory is a nonstarter.

One way to avoid the difficulties encountered with the expressive theory would be to accept something close to the strict theory of story identity while claiming that the discourse could be fallible in its presentation. Rather than claim that the discourse is merely expressive, one could claim that the discourse can be mistaken about some of the details. Consider a historical narrative of the Battle of Waterloo where the historian mistakenly describes Napoleon as an inch taller than the real personage. If we discover that Napoleon was actually 5'1" tall and not 5'2" tall as is currently thought, we do not also make the remarkable discovery that all the histories of the Battle of Waterloo in the library that describe Napoleon's

height as 5'2" do not, in fact, tell the same story. Although we can agree that you cannot tell the story of the Battle of Waterloo without reference to Napoleon, we allow a historical narrative to be about the Battle of Waterloo even if it fails to accurately describe Napoleon in every detail. Hence, a historical narrative that incorrectly documents Napoleon's height might misdescribe Napoleon, but it does not fail to refer to the actual personage. That is, we allow that one can refer to the same thing and mistakenly misdescribe the thing referred to. Similarly, we might want to say that Laurence Olivier's Hamlet refers to the same character as that of Ethan Hawke's Hamlet, but both misdescribe the character in many ways, such as in hair color, build, and height. Although this might be a viable solution to the problems facing the identity of the story in historical narratives, it is not as attractive when we consider fictional narratives, since it is not clear that fictions can misdescribe in the same way.

We do not need to develop a theory of fictional reference to note that if fictions can refer, then they most plausibly establish the truth of all their descriptions. The work is the best candidate to be considered as the final arbiter of what is fictionally true. Although narrators can be unreliable, we can only know that they are so when the fiction makes it apparent. We cannot discover that Shakespeare has misdescribed the fictional prince of Denmark as two inches taller than he really is, since there is no way in which Hamlet really is. If the play happened to tell us that Hamlet is 5'10" tall, then Hamlet would be 5'10" tall. Anyone who wants to take the misdescription route must provide a theory of fictional reference that allows for fictions to successfully refer but to misdescribe the referent in some ways. I do not have much faith that a viable solution is forthcoming.

One might try to avoid this problem by arguing that we do not need a theory of misdescribed fictional reference because it is neither true nor false that Hamlet is 5'10" tall, since Shakespeare did not specify his height. Terence Parsons, for instance, argues that fictional objects are unlike real objects in that they are incomplete in some ways—unlike statements about real objects, some statements about fictional objects are neither true nor false.¹⁴ Similarly, one might argue that if the original instance of the story lacks particular event, character, and setting details, then any additional details included in a subsequent telling are neither

true nor false. Since, on this account, there is no misdescription, the "no truth value theory" obviates the need for a theory of misdescribed fictional reference.

Although the no truth value approach avoids the problems with the expressive theory and it does not require a theory of misdescribed fictional reference, it faces several other problems. Putting aside questions of the coherence of the "no truth value theory" of unspecified fictional reference, the theory of story identity under consideration leaves the story too fragile to mesh well with our intuitions. The slightest contradiction with the foundational text, with the features that do have a truth value, would make a new telling a different story. Minor features that do have a fictional truth value, such as the color of the hair of the protagonist of *I Am Legend*, would have a counterintuitively strong influence in the determination of story identity. Since Matheson describes Neville's beard as blond, the color of his beard has a fictional truth value. Accordingly, this detail would be essential for the story. Any adaptation that depicted the character with a brown beard would necessarily tell a different story, no matter how faithful it might otherwise be to the novel. Odd details would become essential merely because they were mentioned in the foundational text. This consequence is wildly divergent from common intuitions and critical practice.

More problematically, the no truth value theory requires that we have a foundational text to set the limits of what is true, false, or neither about a story; but, in many cases we have no such texts. And even if we do, it is very odd to think that a film production could not really be stating anything about Hamlet's height just because the folio text does not happen to mention it. It is more plausible to say that the Wooster Group's 2007 production is making a claim that is analytically fictionally true, rather than a claim that is neither true nor false because an earlier, less specific text exists. In this way, the no truth value theory is as counterintuitive as the expressive theory. Again, misdescription appears to be a more attractive solution.

Besides the unenviable metaphysical project there is an additional reason why the misdescription route is undesirable; namely, it sits as uncomfortably as both the expression theory and the no truth value theory. Just as it seems very strange to say that Olivier's physical appearance is merely

expressive of the appearance of the fictional Hamlet, it is odd to say that is wrong. It is far more natural to say that these kinds of details do not matter—that they are not essential to the identity of the story. Making such a move marks a radical departure with the kinds of theories we have been considering, since it takes us to a theory of story as a higher-level type. I turn now to explore the problems with such a theory.

IV. ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES OF A HIGHER-LEVEL TYPE

The two previous attempts to identify the story both started with the notion that the story is a rich set of event, character, and setting details. The proposal that the story includes all the event, character, and setting details that a work presents leads to the unsatisfactory conclusion that the same story can rarely if ever be told twice. If we continue to think of the story as including all of these kinds of details, but argue that the presentation can be wrong about some of the details, then we will find ourselves tasked with an unenviable metaphysical project. We would have to explain how a fictional work could misdescribe what it successfully refers to. Perhaps the way to escape from these difficulties is to reconsider what we think makes up a story.

The preceding two attempts have both been what we might call token identity claims. But we might try a type identity theory. That is, we might claim that what we are after when we are trying to identify a story is a type—a type that can be tokened in various concrete instances. The story on such an account would be of an ontologically different kind. When we say that Olivier's production of *Hamlet* tells the same story as the Wooster Group's production, the claim would be that they are both instances of the same general type—the *Hamlet* story type. The question any such theory must be able to answer is what must be the case for a story identity claim to be true. What must be the case for something to be the same story?

If we propose that stories are some kind of higher-level type, most plausibly, we will need a theory of the essential attributes for any such type. These might include event, character, and setting details. Let us start with the events. It seems perfectly acceptable to say that one can omit some minor events on a subsequent telling, as long as all the pivotal events are included.

Chatman makes a distinction between “satellite” and “kernel” events that gets to the heart of this notion. Satellite events are minor events that can be omitted without destroying the “narrative logic,” whereas kernel events are major events that are necessary. Chatman describes them as follows: “each major event—which I call *kernel* . . . — is part of the hermeneutic code; it advances the plot by raising and satisfying questions. Kernels are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events.”¹⁵ Hence, according to Chatman a necessary condition for a telling to count as a retelling of the same story is that it includes the same kernel events. But, on a closer look, we can see that this is not sufficient. Kernel events are not enough, since typically many character and setting details also need to be present in order for something to count as a retelling of a story.

There are numerous stories that are tied to a particular setting: a city, a house, or even a room. You can plausibly retell the story behind *Richard III* in Nazi Germany, *Othello* in a high school, or *Hamlet* in modern day New York. But you could not retell the story in the film *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002) set outside of Rio de Janeiro. Similarly, there are not many episodes of *Sex and the City* (Darren Star, 1998–2004) that could be told outside of New York City. Could *Jane Eyre* be set in a house without an attic or the “Yellow Wallpaper” in a blue room? It does not seem so. Hence, sometimes aspects of the setting are essential for story identity, but not always.

Similarly, different kinds of character attributes are of variable importance. The skin color of the main character of *I Am Legend* is unimportant to the story, while the skin color of *Othello* is important. Other cases are not so clear. Must the alien in the *Twilight Zone* episode “Will the Real Martian Please Stand Up?” (Montgomery Pittman, 1961) have an eye in the middle of his head, or would a small tail have been sufficient? As the preceding examples indicate, nearly any element could potentially be essential for story identity. Although we might be able to retell the story behind an episode of *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1991–2007) using someone besides James Gandolfini to play Tony, it is not clear that the actor could be thin or nebbish: A thin Tony would not be the right Tony, and it is not *The Sopranos* without him. Perhaps this is what it means to say that an actor “owns a role.” In many cases, it is

extremely difficult to think that the same story could be retold with a different character playing the part. I admit that intuitions are not entirely clear on what aspects are essential, but this is precisely the point.

The important thing to note is that if we do accept a theory that identifies the story with a higher-level type, the elements that are essential for any given story will be highly idiosyncratic. The variability begs for an explanation: Which elements are essential and why? It seems that the elements that we think are essential for a particular story are those that are salient—those that stand out in our memories, those that grab our attention. The problem is that the salience of any given character, event, or setting detail is largely a product of the presentation. If salience is sometimes relevant, retelling a story would not simply be a matter of what was told, but of how it was told.

The transposability of the story requires that the what (the story) is independent of the how (the discourse). In order for the story to be transposed—to be retold in a different medium with different means of presentation—we need to be able to distinguish between the story and the presentation. If what constitutes the story is sometimes dependent on what elements the presentation emphasizes, then one worry is that a new presentation could make new elements not present in the original salient. If so, the story that we would abstract from the new telling would not be the same as that of the original. We might include all the features that were essential to the original, but if salience were the mechanism whereby we identified essential attributes, a new telling would almost inevitably introduce new essential attributes.

The genre of the fantastic presents a related problem for the transposability of the story and the underlying story-discourse distinction. Narratives in the ambiguous fantastic genre frequently present cases of irresolvable ambiguity, where both supernatural and natural explanations are supported by evidence from the work. One strategy for creating this kind of ambiguity is to filter aspects of the presentation through the perspective of a psychologically unstable character. For instance, all of the evidence of the supernatural in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is filtered through the unstable character Nell. Robert Wise's movie version of the story, *The Haunting* (1963), follows a similar pattern. We would not consider Wise's version the same story had he

resolved the ambiguity another way, as does the Jan de Bont adaptation, *The Haunting* (1999). Hence, the story of *The Haunting of Hill House* cannot be retold in just any way; it must be retold in a particular way. This shows that there are at least some cases where the what (the story) cannot be divorced from the how (the discourse).

If, as I have suggested, the characteristic that makes some event, character, and setting details essential to story identity is salience, the problem that is pronounced in the genre of the ambiguous fantastic extends much further. The salience of event, character, and setting details is largely a product of the emphasis they are given in the discourse. It does not seem that one can account for salience by mere causal impact. For instance, it is not clear that Tony Soprano's weight has much if any causal impact on narrative events, but it is nevertheless plausible that his weight is essential to his character's identity. The very transposability of the story is put in question if the defender of the theory of story identity as an abstract type must make reference to element salience, since salience is at least partly determined by the discourse from which the story is supposed to be independent.

V. STORY IDENTITY OR STORY TYPE

Supposing the defender of the "abstract type theory of story identity" could come up with an account of what makes event, character, and setting details essential to story identity that did make reference to the way they are presented; there is at least one additional problem to solve. If we make recourse to a theory of stories as something akin to abstract types, then we need to be able to account for the common intuition that a distinction can be made between the same story (story identity) and the same kind of story (story type). However, the "abstract type theory of story identity" risks dissolving this important distinction.

It seems clear that the Wooster Group's production of *Hamlet* tells the same story as Laurence Olivier's production. When we say that these two productions have the same story, we mean to say that the stories are identical. However, our meaning is not so clear in other contexts. Critics claim that *Pretty Woman* (Gary Marshall, 1990) is a Pygmalion story and that *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2002) is a Cinderella story, but we should not understand such claims

as expressing identity claims. Instead, critics are assigning a property to the movies—the property of being a certain general type. In classifying the story types, we might think of the statement as using the “is” of predication rather than the “is” of identity. And if there is an identity claim stated, it is one stating type identity. If pressed, surely no one would want to say that *Maid in Manhattan* and Disney’s animated *Cinderella* (1950) have identical stories or that they are telling the exact same story.¹⁶ Rather, they are both called Cinderella stories, in the same way that a newspaper headline might describe a rags-to-riches story as a “real-life Cinderella story.”

The use of Cinderella as an example of a transposable story is particularly troublesome, since it is largely recognized as what folklorists call its own tale type, of which thousands of variants have arisen around the globe.¹⁷ If Cinderella is our paradigmatic example of a story that is retold, then we will be unable to make the necessary distinction between story identity and story type. This is because Cinderella is a type of story, not a particular story. It is more like a demi-genre than a particular story. If we consider Cinderella to be a particular story, rather than a more general type, we will end up with far too many of the same story. The obvious result is something along the lines of Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s argument to the effect that what we find in all cases of putatively transposed stories are simply versions of other similar narratives.¹⁸

Certainly, if we take a tale type as our story paradigm, we will come to a similar conclusion, but this would be a mistake. Smith stacks the deck in her favor by using the example of Cinderella as the model. In response, we need only point out that there are numerous other cases where we clearly want to say that the same story has been retold: transposed from page to stage or stage to screen. In contrast, the thousands of variations of Cinderella—from those where the primary conflict is a result of the envy of the stepmother to those where it is a result of the father’s incestuous lust—mark this as a clear case of a story type.¹⁹ Although we do not feel the need to say that *Maid in Manhattan* is the same story as Disney’s *Cinderella*, we do want to say that the BBC version of *Middlemarch* (Anthony Page, 1994) tells the same story as George Eliot’s 1872 novel. Any theory of story identity must respect this distinction; it is a fundamental constraint on any viable

theory of what counts as an essential property of a story.

Clearly, our everyday notion of the story is much looser than Chatman’s complete account, but the problem is in explaining story identity in a way that makes it distinct from simply an account of a story type. Under a lenient theory of what comprises a story, we end up with too many of the same thing. Consider this high-level description of the plot of *Night of the Demon* (Jacques Tourneur, 1957): A monster exercises its powers. The principal character discovers the existence of the monster. The principal character confirms the discovery of the monster and convinces others of its existence. Together they confront the monster. At this level of abstraction, we have described one of the most popular horror fiction plot structures: onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation.²⁰ We might say that this identifies a certain type of horror story, but we definitely do not think that any horror narrative meeting this description tells the same story. That is, we do not think that the bulk of what is classified in the horror section of the local video store is in fact the same story. The set of event, character, and setting details that identify a story as a particular story and not just a general type must be more specific than a high-level abstraction.

The only apparent way to draw the distinction between story identity and story type in a manner consistent with the “abstract type theory of story identity” would be to say that to count as the same story, a narrative must have all the essential properties; however, to merely count as the same type of story (such as a Cinderella story) a narrative must merely have some but not all of the common properties. Narratologist Tomoshevsky draws a distinction between free and bound motifs that may be of use.²¹ Free motifs, much like Chatman’s satellite events, are those motifs that could be omitted without destroying the story; but bound motifs, like Chatman’s kernel events, cannot be omitted if one wants to tell the same story again. However, the general clutter in folklore-tale type indexes goes to show that it is not always clear just what should count as a bound motif.

Folklorists have extensive indexes of various motifs, which include all kinds of event, character, and setting details.²² What they call “tale types” are simply collections of motifs. A particular story can belong to multiple tale types, and many do.

Numerous stories that have all or most of the motifs of a variety of different tale types are multiply crosslisted in the Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index. A major problem for any such index is to account for the variations of a tale, since it is not altogether clear which motifs are necessary for a story to be considered close to a general type. And even if one can come up with a plausible set of necessary properties, additional elements can plausibly invalidate a classification. Consider a Faust or genie story that has all the appropriate elements, but one additional: The person granted the wish ultimately outsmarts the genie, as in the episode of *The Twilight Zone* called “I Dream of Genie” (Robert Gist, 1963). The important thing to note is that even though folklorists have extensive motif indexes and a tale type classification system, it is not always clear when a story belongs to a particular type. The difficulty is so pronounced that one suspects that motifs are highly inadequate for story identity.

Hence the general worry for the type theory of story identity is that just as it is difficult to decide when a story should fall under a general type (such as a Cinderella story), it will be difficult to say when we should consider something the same story. Since the type theory of story identity considers the story to be a higher-level type, it risks failing to be able to make the distinction between story identity and story type in a non-ad hoc manner. If we include all the event, character, and setting details presented in the discourse, then we end up with the strict theory of story identity and all of its problems. If we omit too many details, then we will be forced to say that most horror fictions tell the same story. If the type theory of story identity is to be viable, it must provide a principled explanation of where we can draw the line that is not based on salience.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although it seems plausible to say the same stories are often retold, it is difficult to say exactly what this means. The primary difficulty is in coming up with an acceptable theory of story identity. In this article I have presented a dilemma for any plausible theory of story identity: (1) If the story is the complete set of events and existents included in the work, then the same story can rarely be told twice and can never be transposed, or (2) Not all the event, character, and setting details presented

are part of the story; that is, some are part of the discourse.

Here we have two options: We can say that story elements can be misdescribed by the discourse or that the story is a high-level abstraction. If we take the first route then we have to come up with a plausible theory of fictional reference that would allow us to misdescribe but not fail to refer to fictional events, characters, and settings. If we do not want to say that every production of *Hamlet* will necessarily misdescribe numerous features of the main character, we need a viable theory of what makes something an essential attribute of a story. If this amounts to salience, then the story is not divorceable from the presentation. In addition, if we accept a theory that holds that stories are higher-level types, then we will have a problem making the common distinction between story identity and story type. Perhaps it is easier to simply take the first option and say that we can base a work on another story and that we can tell something very similar, but it is rare to tell the same story twice.²³

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1. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 171.

2. The labels ‘histoire’ and ‘discourse’ are from Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (University of Miami Press, 1971); ‘histoire’ and ‘récite’ from Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Cornell University Press, 1980); and ‘story’ and ‘discourse’ from Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Cornell University Press, 1978).

3. See, for example, Boris Tomashevsky, “Thematics,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee Lemon and Marion Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

4. David Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin University Press, 1985), pp. 49–50. Bordwell continues to argue that the fabula is constructed by perceivers: “The fabula is a pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences” (p. 49). One might object that although audiences might reconstruct the fabula, authors create it, since otherwise they could not tell it. If the fabula is merely the construction of the audience, then transposability would be difficult to explain. It is out of scope to explore this suggestion any further.

5. An additional reason to think that such a distinction is necessary is that there is a difference between story time and discourse time. I can film a scene in slow motion or skip part of an hour-long dinner. What may take an hour in the story might only take a few seconds in the discourse.

6. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 5.

7. Claude Bremond, "Le message narrative," *Communications* 4 (1964): 4–32, quoted and translated by Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 20.

8. The 2007 film version of *I Am Legend* carries the same title and some of the same elements, but it is unambiguously not the same story.

9. Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that we do not need to posit a two-level hypothesis (story and discourse) to account for such things as the ability of audiences to independently create similar plot summaries. My goal in this article is not to explain away the difference, but to see if a plausible theory of story identity is forthcoming. Smith argues that we do not need the distinction, whereas I am arguing that the distinction is very hard to draw in a way that meshes without intuitions. See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 213–236.

10. Paisley Livingston suggests that since the term 'discourse' has been used by postmodernists to refer to almost any cultural production, it might be better to use the term 'utterance' instead. See Paisley Livingston, "Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford University Press, 2005). To avoid introducing yet another label, I have adopted Chatman's labels.

11. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 28.

12. In addition, should not works of fantasy permit a broader set of supplementary details? Hence the "complete account" is not only too loose, it is also too stringent.

13. The *Twilight Zone* episode "The Eye of the Beholder" (Douglas Heyes, 1960) effectively withholds key visual information about the protagonist until the near end. Similarly, the early scenes of *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947) hide the presurgery appearance of the main character. The early shots are mostly perspectival and then the character is shown wrapped in bandages. My claim is not that it is impossible to hide visual information about a character, but that it is very difficult and requires a few obvious tricks.

14. Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (Yale University Press, 1980).

15. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, pp. 53–54.

16. Smith argues that all of these should be considered "versions" of the same story. She seems to think that calling them versions somehow allows her to avoid what she calls "naïve Platonism." However, I do not see why she thinks that this makes her position more compatible with nominalism. What exactly are Smith's "versions" versions of? The same question needs to be answered regardless. You cannot escape hard metaphysical problems by changing names.

17. On the Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index, Cinderella is type AT510.

18. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 213–236.

19. It is certainly a mistake to assume that the presence of the same tale type in different cultures indicates dissemination. It is highly plausible that Cinderella could have easily arisen independently in different times and places. Smith also argues that it would be odd to think of two versions of Cinderella that arose independently in different parts of the world as the same story. However, we should not jump to any conclusions here. If stories are eternal abstract types, then one could create an instantiation of a story just as one could create an instantiation of the same numeral. I do not think this is right, but this is a metaphysical issue that I do not take up in this article.

20. See Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

21. Wallace Martin provides a useful chart contrasting various story elements. See Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 112.

22. The most influential motif index is the six-volume Thompson Motif-Index.

23. I thank Heidi Bollich for helping me formulate the initial distinction between story identity and story type, for talking through the general argument, and for reading multiple drafts of this article. I also thank Noël Carroll for a helpful discussion on story identity and horror.