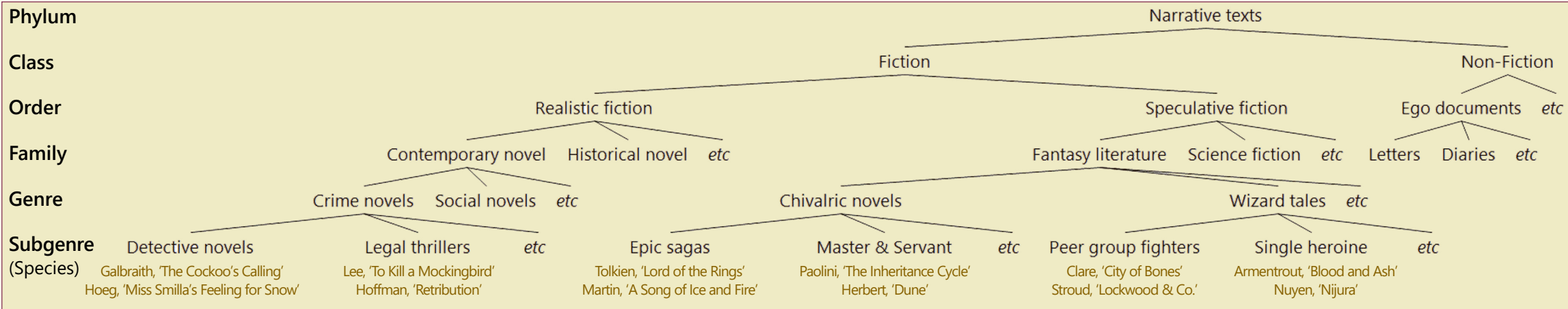# The Three Dimensions of Fiction

A Narratological Consideration *by Stephan Kessler*

In literary studies, fictional works are assigned to literary genres. The circle of genres has no system, although professional readers know what constitutes a particular genre. Countless scholarly descriptions of specific genres and their history bear witness to this awareness. However, it is much more complicated with assessments such as 'contemporary novel' or 'fantasy fiction'. One would hardly want to speak of 'genres' here. This short, graphic essay attempts to shed light on the terminological gap by transferring the biological taxonomy to the world of fiction *mutatis mutandis*.

Level						
Phylum			Narrative texts			
Class		Fiction			Non-Fiction	
Order	Realistic fiction		Speculative fiction		Ego documents	*etc*
Family	Contemporary novel	Historical novel *etc*	Fantasy literature	Science fiction *etc*	Letters	Diaries *etc*
Genre	Crime novels	Social novels *etc*	Chivalric novels		Wizard tales *etc*	

Subgenre (Species)	Detective novels	Legal thrillers *etc*	Epic sagas	Master & Servant *etc*	Peer group fighters	Single heroine *etc*
	Galbraith, 'The Cockoo's Calling'	Lee, 'To Kill a Mockingbird'	Tolkien, 'Lord of the Rings'	Paolini, 'The Inheritance Cycle'	Clare, 'City of Bones'	Armentrout, 'Blood and Ash'
	Hoeg, 'Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow'	Hoffman, 'Retribution'	Martin, 'A Song of Ice and Fire'	Herbert, 'Dune'	Stroud, 'Lockwood & Co.'	Nuyen, 'Nijura'

Grouping pieces of fiction according to various differentiating criteria and ascribing generic names to the result is a taxonomic task that has its counterpart in biology in classifying species. Unlike in literary studies, biologists have developed a differentiated classification with which they can record the diversification and relationships of living forms. From the most individualised group to the more general classes, these are 'species', 'genus', 'family', 'order', 'class', 'phylum', *etc*. It is obvious to borrow from here for literary studies. The six terms can be applied to classification problems in literary studies, as shown in the tree diagram. The diagram is not historically (phylogenetically) oriented but, character-based (phenetic). Of course, the subdivision of the lower classes and the assignment of example texts (taxa) is only an initial suggestion that follows my estimation. Using a tree diagram, as scientists do in biology, is perhaps inconceivable from the vantage point of literary studies, but I consider this to be an innovative method which helps my reader to better discriminate between the genres and to more quickly grasp the idea of literary order.

What can also be seen from the tree diagram, most of all, however, is a lack of clear criteria to distinguish the respective literary families, genres, and subgenres from one another. As to the genres and subgenres, I propose to make the main characters, their professional position, and their social involvement the criterion. For example, I would classify fantasy literature according to whether the plot centres on knight or wizard characters. This is not to be confused with the question of whether such characters appear in the narrative text at all. Instead, most of the narrator's discourse time should be devoted to them. The subgenres then result from the question of the social context in which the fictional knights or wizards act. Do they work together in a peer group, are they a duo in which one must act subaltern, or is the individual hero at the centre of the narrative? These manageable constellations of characters are typically contrasted in this literary family by the sagas whose authors know how to use a veritable tangle of characters.

Nevertheless, this visual essay will be about literary families, the definition of which will also affect the understanding of literary order. Every piece of fiction is subject to the fundamental assessment of being either realistic or speculative. But certain literary families are seen only in one order or only in the other. The classification 'realistic fantasy novel' would be a *contradictio in se* if 'realistic' is to denote the order here.

Therefore, I developed appropriate criteria for determining the families of fiction by scrutinising respective literary works. I hold there are only three dimensions with which authors and readers can position a narrative in the 'mental' space of written fiction. The three dimensions are presented on page 2, followed by pictures epitomising the dimension scores on page 3. Different levels or degrees can be named between the two poles of each dimension, for a piece of fiction fulfils each dimension in a certain way. The scale values are defined in more detail on page 4. On page 5, I can then determine several literary families by classificatory sets of typical scale values. The values are roughly estimated.

In the final step, we should identify the threshold level at which we have a piece of fiction pass into the literary order of Speculative Fiction. This concerns the values of all three dimensions, but above all, the dimension of Imagination. This last step remains a desideratum.

Edition notice

The Dimensions and Their Levels

The prerequisite is ...

... that the narrative under investigation is fictional.

A text is fictional if the following condition is met: S→R and S–T–R are **not** equivalents in the communication of S with R. For, if S–T–R is a communicative equivalent to S→R, the text is factual.

Legend: S = sender; R = receiver; → = particular speech act, T = text; – = course of communication.

A narrative with a maximal positive value in every score would be realistic fiction to the highest degree. This can only be achieved if the narrator assigns a clear reality status to the story told (e.g. to be a report, a dream, or a stream of consciousness). As Todorov (1973, 25–33) expounds, a narrative inevitably becomes fantastic fiction when the narrator leaves the reader in the dark about the reality status of the narration.
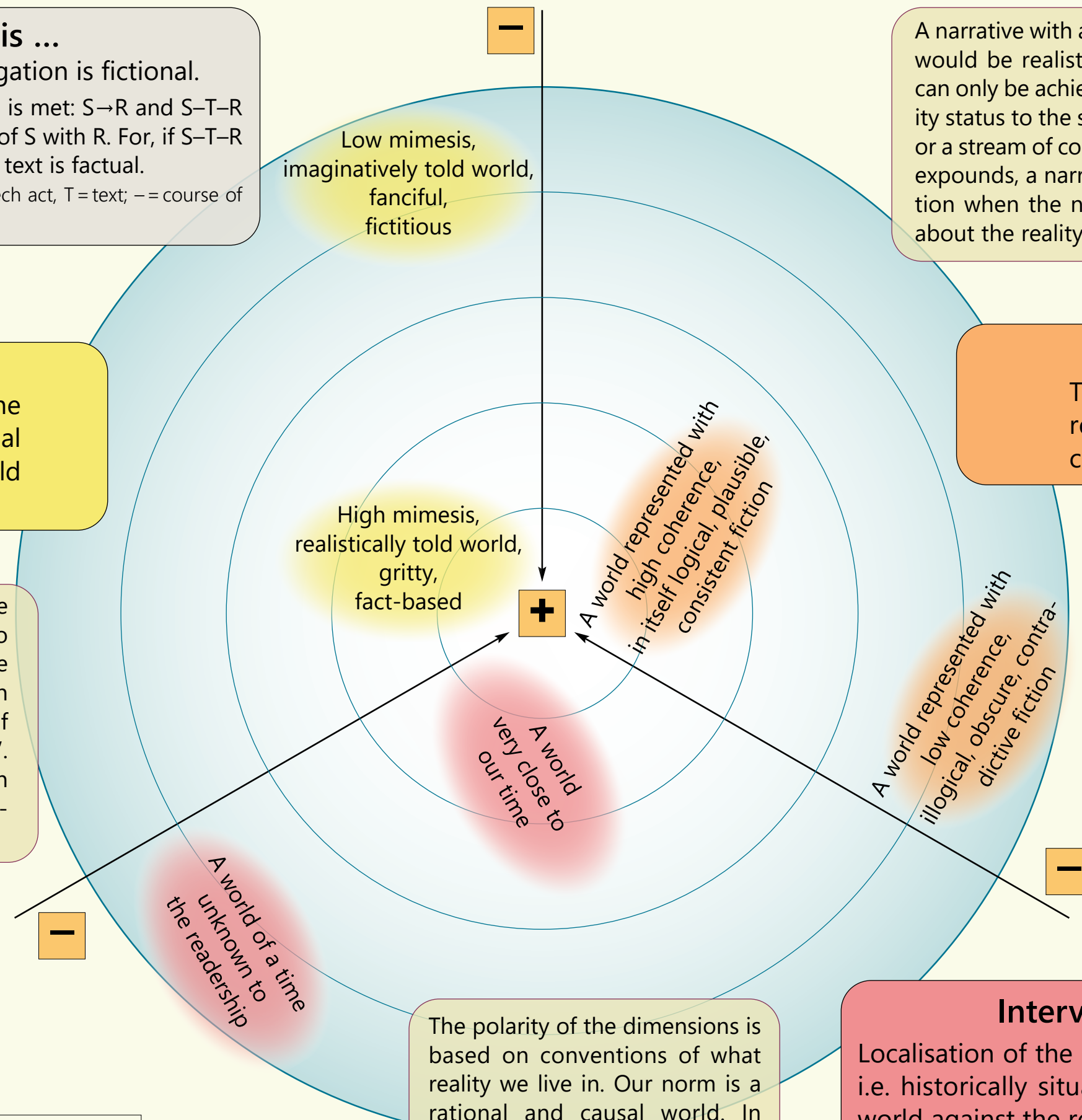
Imagination Score

Degree of mimesis, truth value of the piece of fiction; i.e. degree of referential congruence between the narrated world and the reader's reality.

Coherence Score

The kind of logic inherent in the represented world; i.e. degree of coherence in the fictional reality.

The positive values in the center reflect the reality of the reader. This is applied both to the assessment of objects, facts, and the time frame referred to in the piece of fiction as 'true' or 'real', and to the acceptance of the inherent logic of narration as 'plausible'. Nevertheless, the reader's reality is not an objective entity. The assessments and acceptances change over time.

Low mimesis, imaginatively told world, fanciful, fictitious

High mimesis, realistically told world, gritty, fact-based

A world represented with high coherence, in itself logical, plausible, consistent fiction

A world represented with low coherence, illogical, obscure, contradictive fiction

A world very close to our time

A world of a time unknown to the readership

The polarity of the dimensions is based on conventions of what reality we live in. Our norm is a rational and causal world. In another culture or era, one might come to different insights.

Interval Score

Localisation of the narrative's time frame; i.e. historically situating the represented world against the reader's present.

Reference:
Todorov, Tzvetan (1973), *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, transl. by R. Howard, Cleveland–London. (Orig. French, first published in 1970.)

Example Dimension Scores

Star Wars Trilogy, 1973–1983

'Great power I sense!'

Maurits Cornelis Escher, 1946

Low mimesis,
an imaginative world,
fanciful,
fictitious

Imagination Score
Degree of mimesis, truth value of the piece of fiction; i.e. degree of referential congruence between the narrated world and the reader's reality

Coherence Score
The kind of logic inherent in the represented world; i.e. degree of coherence of the fictional reality.

High mimesis,
a realistic world,
gritty,
fact-based

A believable, coherent world; in itself logical, plausible, consistent fiction

Aleksandr Rodčenko, 1928

A world very close to our time

An incoherent, inconsistent world; illogical, obscure, contradictive fiction

Maurits Cornelis Escher, 1953
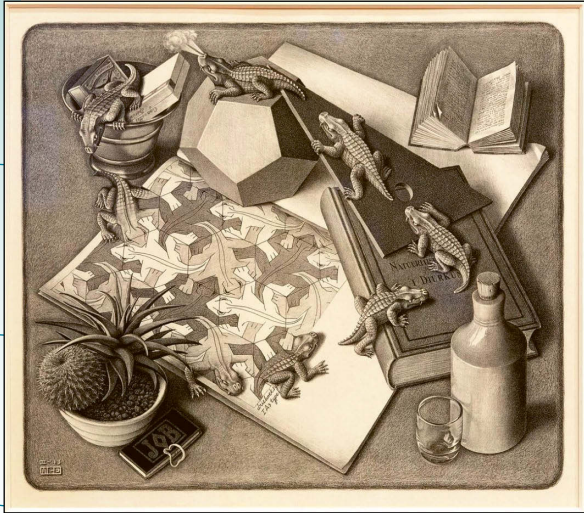
#tatort

Tatort (serial), since 1970

Interval Score
Localisation of the narrative's time horizon; i.e. historically situating the represented world against the reader's present.

A world of a time unknown to the readership

Space: 1999 (serial), 1975–1977

Legend:
◯ = Localisation of the depicted within the dimension

All images are from Wikimedia and were in the public domain at the time of download.

Dimension Scores and Their Values

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Wissen lockt. Seit 1456

The numerical values are shown in italics.

Imagination Score

Degree of mimesis, truth value of the piece of fiction; i.e. degree of referential congruence between the narrated world and the reader's reality.

Legend:
❶ The real, i.e. conformity with the conventions of representation (cf. Todorov 1973, 16);
❷ the unearthly, Todorov's 'uncanny', includes most of the popular horror stories (e.g. 'Twilight');
❸ the fantastic, the inexplicable, the mysterious, includes 'true' horror fiction (cf. Todorov 1973, 28–9);
❹ the allegorical (Todorov's 1973, 30–2: 'allegorical'); and
❺ the imaginary, the completely invented, the visionary, the utopian.

Coherence Score

The kind of logic inherent in the represented world; i.e. degree of coherence in the fictional reality.

Legend:
❻ The true, the everyday, the evident;
❼ the credible, the possible, the probable;
❽ the extraordinary, the coincidental;
❾ the implausible, the improbable; and
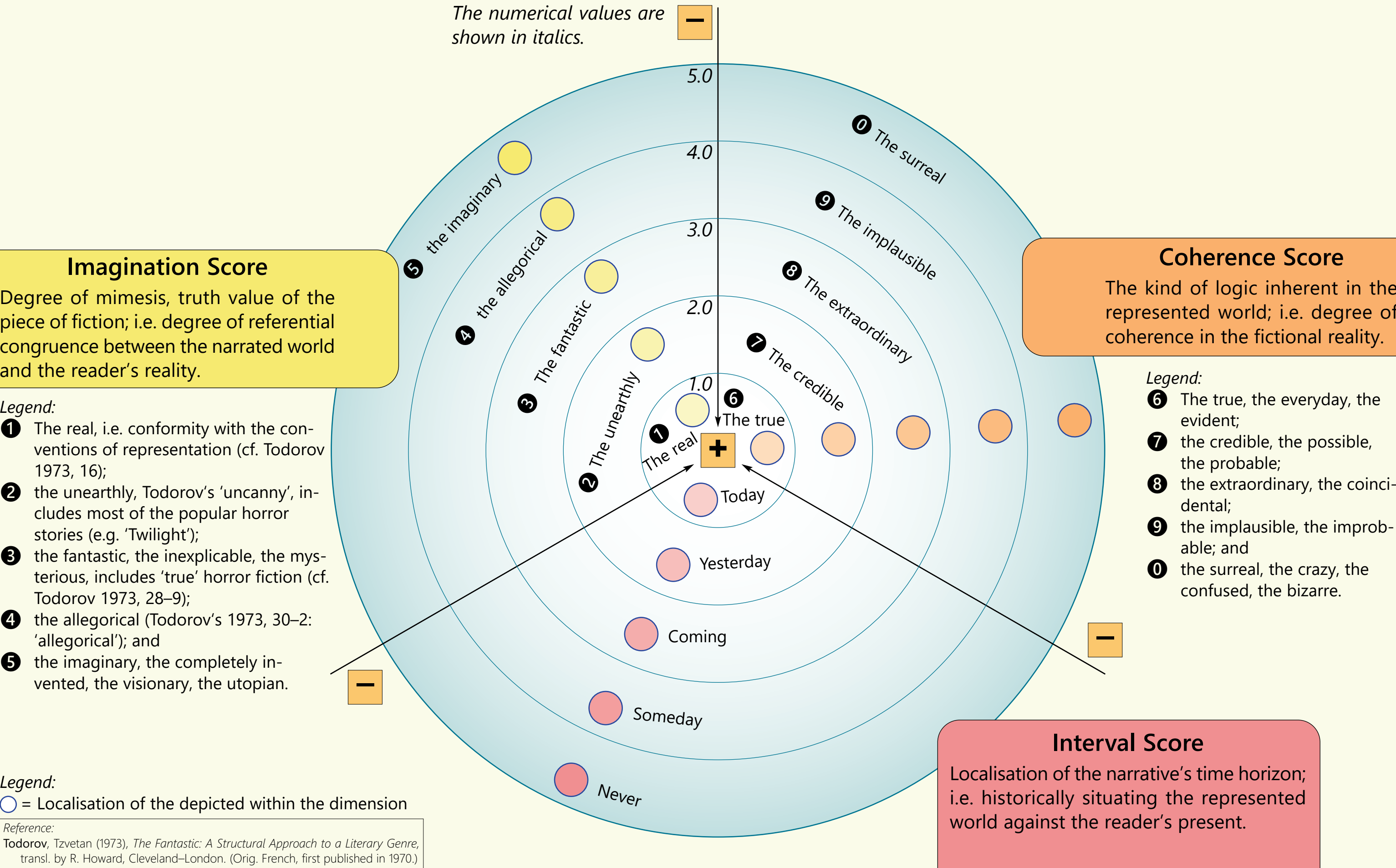❿ the surreal, the crazy, the confused, the bizarre.

Interval Score

Localisation of the narrative's time horizon; i.e. historically situating the represented world against the reader's present.

Legend:
◯ = Localisation of the depicted within the dimension

Reference:
Todorov, Tzvetan (1973), *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, transl. by R. Howard, Cleveland–London. (Orig. French, first published in 1970.)

Diagram labels:
- 5.0, 4.0, 3.0, 2.0, 1.0
- ❺ the imaginary
- ❹ the allegorical
- ❸ The fantastic
- ❷ The unearthly
- ❶ The real
- ❻ The true
- ❼ The credible
- ❽ The extraordinary
- ❾ The implausible
- ❿ The surreal
- Today
- Yesterday
- Coming
- Someday
- Never

Dimension Sets of Literary Families

Legend:
- Contemporary fiction
- Historical fiction
- Utopian fiction
- Science fiction
- Fantasy fiction
- Surreal, Kafkaesque fiction

The numerical values are shown in italics.

Imagination Score
Degree of mimesis, truth value of the piece of fiction; i.e. degree of referential congruence between the narrated world and the reader's reality

Coherence Score
The kind of logic inherent in the represented world; i.e. degree of coherence in the fictional reality.

Interval Score
Localisation of the narrative's time horizon; i.e. historically situating the represented world against the reader's present.

Set Scores (approx. up to):

Fiction	Imagination	Coherence	Interval
Contemporary	2.0	0.5	0.8
Historical	3.0	1.0	1.5
Utopian	3.5	2.1	2.6
Science	4.0	1.8	3.5
Fantasy	5.0	3.0	4.5
Surreal	3.5	4.8	3.5