

Marie-Laure Ryan, 2022. *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: What Is, What If, As If* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press)

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Marie-Laure Ryan's contribution to the development of narratology cannot be overestimated. Since the late 1970s she has published – mostly as an independent scholar – an impressive array of monographs, edited collections and articles that have helped shape the discipline. The major strands of her cutting-edge research – possible worlds theory and virtual reality, transmediality and intermediality, interactivity and immersion – coalesce into a highly original poetics of narrative in her latest publication, provocatively entitled *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds*. While the approach she proposes is undoubtedly new in its transcending the dominant trends in current narrative research, her subversion of received narratological truths paradoxically involves a return to and a re-assessment of the scholarly tradition extending back to Plato's and Aristotle's first attempts to identify the distinctive qualities of literature. As the title makes abundantly clear, her aim is to ground narratology in the concept of the (story)world, that is, the world evoked by a story, by dissecting the latter into its major component parts.

She self-consciously juxtaposes her own understanding of how narratives work with the four major schools in contemporary narratology distinguished in a highly influential overview of the discipline *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, co-authored by such leading figures in the field as James Phelan, Brian Richardson, Robyn R. Warhol and David Herman. Ryan polemically engages the rhetorical, unnatural, feminist and cognitive approaches to narrative they respectively represent. The first of them, in her view, proposes too narrow an understanding of narrative with its assumption that it always involves somebody telling somebody else a story on some occasion and for some purpose, a definition that is not easily applicable to fictional narratives. Just as the rhetorical approach privileges conversational storytelling, unnatural narratology moves towards the other extreme by focusing on experimental literary texts, which, Ryan argues, are often antinarrative and occupy the margins of narrativity construed in scalar rather than binary (natural vs. unnatural) terms. Despite

her reservations, Ryan readily recognises the contribution of these two trends to our understanding of narrative and incorporates relevant concepts developed within their frameworks into her own model, seeking to make it as comprehensive and nuanced as possible. Her attitude to feminist narratology is far more sceptical. She argues that “there is no such thing [...], if by this term one understands a separate narratology needed to address questions of gender in narrative” (10–11), for they can be adequately explored by employing the existing narratological concepts in support of feminist reading. As Ryan herself notes, her model is closest to broadly understood cognitive narratology, though her endorsement comes with a caveat concerning the limitations of narrative application of cognitive science. What makes her approach cognitive is rather the focus on what happens in the recipient’s mind during an encounter with a particular narrative, a product of another mind.

The axioms of Ryan’s storyworld-focused approach to narrative are succinctly expressed in the subtitle of her monograph: *what is, what if, as if*. The first phrase highlights the fact that narrative evokes to imagination “a collection of entities – characters, objects, events – that exist in some world, that are causally interconnected, and that either undergo or cause transformations” (7). The *what if* principle describes the imaginary nature of this world, while *as if* refers to “an imaginative recentering into fictional worlds, an operation through which they become real in make-believe” (9). With the concepts of storyworld and world-building central to her understanding of narrative, the elements that have been singled out in earlier narratological studies as defining narrativity, such as the story understood as a sequence of events or the act of narration, become its aspects: the former belongs to the temporal dimension of the storyworld and the latter to the process whereby it is projected. Ryan’s conceptualisation of narrative makes it independent from the medium and transcends the verbal bias of classical narratology: it is equally applicable to narrative fiction, film, theatre, video games and VR projects, though admittedly verbal narratives appear to occupy the prototypical position in her model. At the same time, it allows her to set boundaries and exclude from or in many cases simply move to the margins of narrativity verbal, filmic or digital artifacts that do not meet or only partially fulfil the *what is, what if, as if* criteria.

In Ryan’s narrative poetics the focus on the storyworld ties in with rejection of rigid binary oppositions in favour of scalar conceptualisations, fuzzy sets or various possible combinations of supposedly exclusive features. This approach

enables her to develop a comprehensive model that covers a wide range of narrative phenomena. As an attempt to do justice to their variety and complexity in both practice and theory, her monograph comes across as a level-headed, rational and lucid defence of the somewhat unfashionable middle ground, even though it does not refrain from a polemical or evaluative stance. Her critique of other approaches or contrived narrative devices, however, always relies on either a careful examination of their assumptions or an insightful analysis of well-selected examples.

Ryan opens her explication of the storyworld anatomy with a discussion of the fundamental notion of the truth, in which she juxtaposes the truth-as-make-believe of fiction with the authoritative truth of myth and the scientific conception of truth as correspondence. Not only does she defend the fictional truth as grounded in the epistemological anatomy of an imaginary world, but she also acutely observes the ironic reversal of positions as regards the truth and science between the political right and left, with climate denialism and vaccination resistance pushing to the extreme of perversion the postmodern deconstruction of truth. Neither completely positivist nor relativist, Ryan's own position is pluralist, as she recognises the need for correspondence and verifiability in natural science, while acknowledging the applicability and relativity of other conceptions of truth in other domains.

The first chapter thus prepares the ground for a subsequent exploration of fictionality, a notion for long time taken for granted and simply neglected in narratology. Taking as her starting point the five theories of fictionality, which she labels naïve, rhetorical, speech-act, make-believe and possible-world, Ryan tests their explanatory power in relation to such issues as fake news, imitation of nonfiction, counterfactuals and thought experiments as well as the border between fact and fiction. She argues that the indexical understanding of the possible world theory with its distinction between a unique actual world and multiple nonactual possible worlds provides the best phenomenological account of the recipient's experience of being transported to an imaginary world presented in literary, dramatic, filmic and digital narratives. At the same time, she admits that some works, such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* or Art Spiegelman's *Maus* combine fact and fiction in a manner that would require a parallel merger of binary and scalar approaches on the conceptual level and offers the notion of fact-fiction hybridity as her own solution to this conundrum.

The next, third chapter constitutes an incisive intervention in the perennial narratological discussion whether the narrator is a mandatory or an optional

element of narrative. Drawing on the extensive studies into this category, Ryan cogently demonstrates that the act of narration is far from simple and can be divided into a number of functions. As she succinctly puts it, “‘narratorhood’ is therefore a matter of degree: the presence, visibility and psychic density of the narrator depends on how many of these functions are fulfilled by the storytelling agent” (59). The narrator thus understood becomes a gradable category, extending from the disembodied theoretical construct to the fully developed humanlike individualised character, though by linking narratorial functions with language pragmatics Ryan limits its applicability to verbal transmission and questions its obligatory presence in film or drama.

An analogous, scalar approach proves equally effective in the case of fictional characters. By applying indexical theory of possible worlds to characters, Ryan transcends the textualist dogma that characters are nothing but language-based objects, most famously championed by Roland Barthes. With recourse to the philosophical reflection on the peculiar ontological status of fictional characters as abstract artifacts and questionable referentiality of statements made about them, she correlates their mode of being with the perspective from which they are perceived. Characters are real when approached from within the storyworld, but from the point of view of our actual world they are abstract artifacts, this dual perspective reflecting the reader’s experience of characters. Just like “narratorhood,” “characterhood” is for Ryan a scalar property, extending from the inscrutability of Godot to the fully developed personality of Elizabeth Bennet.

With the possible personhood of characters firmly established, Ryan proceeds to discuss another staple element of narrative theory, the plot, from the refreshing vantage point of the conflict between the author’s design and the characters’ motivation. This is an openly evaluative section of her monograph, devoted as it is to cheap plot tricks and plot holes. The former category designates devices like coincidence or *deus ex machina* that an author employs to develop the plot in the desired direction, whereas the latter refers to inexplicable and psychologically improbable alterations in characters’ behaviour. Attributing their acceptability to the historical context and the genre, Ryan notes their gradual renunciation with the development of narrative fiction towards the modernist novel and their return as an ironic, self-reflexive strategy in postmodernism. Her passing remark on their persistence in popular literature and film begs to be developed into a full-fledged typology, for Hollywood blockbusters thrive on plot contrivances Ryan identifies in 17th-century French literature.

In what amounts to reversed chronology, the last two categories that Ryan revisits are arguably the two oldest literary-theoretical notions – mimesis and diegesis. Having juxtaposed Plato's and Aristotle's understanding of these two terms, she conceptualises them as two complementary modes of representation, with mimetic narratives operating through imitation and enactment, and diegetic ones through language-based storytelling. But then again, just as in the case of other aspects of narratives, Ryan does not petrify them into a set of binary oppositions and discusses multiple ways in which they can intertwine, paying special attention to their cognitive implications.

Having revisited and/or redefined the major aspects of narrative, Ryan proceeds to explore theories, narrative phenomena and technologies that require broadening the perspective beyond a single unified storyworld "contained" in a single work. She devotes chapters seven and eight to devices that shatter it from within, as it were. In the former she discusses the concept of parallel worlds as construed in philosophy and physics in relation to literary engagements with the idea of multiverse, extending from Jorge Luis Borges' famous vision of the novel presenting all possible courses of action in "The Garden of Forking Paths" to Larry Niven's dramatization of ethical implications of quantum cosmology in "All the Myriad Ways." Chapter eight, in turn, concerns impossible worlds. Even though logically speaking the phrase *impossible world* is an oxymoron, as Ryan herself points out, she uses it as a designation for a textual world which transcends the laws of logic and physics. With its exploration of the strategies whereby the reader can recuperate contradictions, ontological impossibilities as well as impossible time and space, this section of Ryan's study is much more related to the concerns of unnatural narratology than she seems willing to admit.

The subsequent two chapters expand the concept of the storyworld beyond primarily textual and only occasionally filmic instances that dominate in earlier parts of her book. In Chapter nine Ryan ventures into the realm of virtual reality, which she relates to two other forms of digital entertainment: electronic literature and computer games. Much as she has explored the semiotic potential of the former in her own research, she admits with blunt honesty that it remains a niche genre, more often than not self-reflexively obsessed with the medium and implementing interactivity at the cost of immersion. Computer games, in turn, successfully merge the two but at the cost of narrativity, as they subordinate the story to the gameplay. In between these two poles of avant-garde e-literature and popular

culture Ryan locates independent games, paying special attention to the forms of environmental storytelling. While this rather oversimplified, to put it mildly, overview does not do justice to the variety and complexity of digital genres, Ryan's typology of immersion, extending this notion to other cultural forms and media, is one of the most illuminating accounts of this elusive yet crucial aspect of narrative reception. Equally insightful is her discussion of the narrative potential of recently released VR projects, which prove to be highly amenable to analysis in world-centred terms, for it is precisely a particular environment that lies at their core. Paradoxically, it is also the reason, as Ryan cogently points out, why they provide high immersivity at the cost of narrativity. Rather than telling a story, they offer an experience of what it is like to be in a certain situation or environment. While for narratologists like Monika Fludernik or David Herman this experientiality would be sufficient evidence of narrativity, Ryan refuses to dismiss the importance of plot and suggests that "the potential of VR as a narrative medium depends on whether creators can put narrative effects in the service of experience, by instilling suspense, dramatic progression, or a sense that the outcome depends on the user's actions" (181).

Not accidentally, the final chapter of her monograph interrogates the cultural phenomenon supposed to turn narrative into a never-ending story – transmedia storytelling, another buzzword of the entertainment industry, ever since Henry Jenkins published his seminal *Convergence Culture*. Again, Ryan's approach proves particularly relevant here, for her analyses demonstrate that we should rather talk about transmedia worlds, the representation of which is distributed across multiple media. Ryan juxtaposes the ever-expanding universes of commercial mega-franchises with more modest and truly transmedial narratives, which co-deploy various media channels to tell a single story, such as alternate reality games or augmented books. To redress the frequently inflated claims of industry guidebooks to transmedia storytelling, she advocates a narratological analysis of transfictional, adaptive and mythical aspects of widely popular transmedia worlds as well as an inquiry into audience behaviour.

Throughout her erudite and timely monograph, Ryan moves with ease and grace across disciplines, augmenting narratological concepts with ideas derived from philosophy or physics. Equally impressive is the dazzling array of examples she adduces to illustrate her comprehensive methodology: they range from the Sokal hoax through Madame Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to Alejandro González Iñárritu's VR

installation *Carne y Arena*. With academic rigour instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with her earlier works, she disentangles complex theoretical issues and convincingly demonstrates the validity and necessity of her world-centred approach, a useful and welcome addition to the current narratological paradigms. A vital intervention into the narrative theory, Ryan's monograph will constitute an indispensable point of reference for future engagements with fundamental narratological notions as well as both familiar and innovative narrative works. By avoiding the pitfalls of excessive formalism and focusing on the recipient's experience of storytelling, it remains an accessible and lucid study that will appeal to anyone interested in how narratives build storyworlds within and across the 21st-century media.