

My Narratology

An Interview with Marie-Laure Ryan

DIEGESIS: What is your all-time favorite narratological study?

Ryan: I don't really have a single all-time favorite, but I can mention some books that I read from cover to cover and from which I learned a lot: Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987); Hilary Dannenberg's *Convergence and Divergence* (2008), and earlier, Mary Louise Pratt's *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (1977), a real ground-breaker in that it put literary study and discourse analysis on converging tracks. Pratt's book, together with two articles on the nature of fiction, John Searle's "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" and David Lewis' "Truth in Fiction," had a decisive influence on my approach to narrative and fictionality. While Pratt and Searle opened the door to a pragmatic approach to narrative, Lewis suggested to me a particular semantic model, the model of possible worlds theory, to describe both the nature of fiction and the semantics of story.

DIEGESIS: Which narrative would you like to take with you on a lonely island?

Ryan: I assume I would be stuck on it for a long time, so I would need a narrative that constructs a rich world allowing ever new discoveries, and this world should be imaginatively accessible without too much effort so as to provide pleasure. Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* fits the bill perfectly. I can easily fill in the blanks on the basis of my cultural and historical knowledge, and this leaves me with more mental energy to devote to the characters, abstract ideas and presentation of space, a topic of special interest to me. I would also take the Bible, especially the Old Testament, for all those stories that they don't tell you in Sunday school, and also because the narrative strategies are so different from what we are used to in Western literature. And finally, for relaxation, and to reconnect with my childhood, I would take the entire collection of the Tintin comic books by Hergé. Since I already know the plot, I would be free of the urge to turn pages, and I would be able to scrutinize each frame at length for its art and wealth of information, for Hergé, who never travelled, was incredibly well informed about the places that Tintin visits.

DIEGESIS: Why narratology?

Ryan: Because there are narratives. (This of course presupposes that we can define narrative, no easy task; but this problem occurs in most disciplines: think of the difficulties of defining life, the object of biology.) Though I come from literature, narratology affords me a broader perspective since it appears in many media and disciplines. In fact without using narrative as point of comparison, it would be very difficult to assess the expressive ability of different media and types of signs. Another reason I do narratology is that it allows me to participate in the building of a theory and in the design of analytical tools that can be used in the study of many texts, whether language-based or not. My work, consequently, has a broader relevance than the interpretation of individual texts.

DIEGESIS: Which recent narratological trends are of particular interest to you?

Ryan: Here I will focus on trends other than my particular research interests in digital narrative, space and narrative, and narrative across media.

I am very intrigued by cognitive narratology, but I think that it is still searching for a productive approach. There are experimental approaches, but they require a support team and a training that most people in the humanities do not have, and they mainly use simple stories specially made up to test a certain hypothesis rather than the kind of stories that we tell or read for their own sake; there are top-down approaches that look for the narrative manifestations of whatever new concepts cognitive science and philosophy of mind come up with, such as “distributed intelligence,” “mirror neurons,” or “embodied cognition” (and these approaches usually find what they are looking for); and there are bottom-up approaches based on self-examination: how do I construct narratives and their worlds? My personal preference would be for a bottom-up approach aware of new scientific ideas, yet not enslaved to them; but everything in a narrative involves the mind, so how can one isolate the “mind-relevant aspects” of narrative? And what kind of narrative tells the most about the mind: everyday oral storytelling, popular literature, or experimental fiction? It seems to me that the best way to capture the mind through narrative is to search for narrative universals, such as the types of plot or the themes that are found around the world. Patrick Colm Hogan has done work in this area, but it is a project of such magnitude that it can only be conducted by a whole team.

Another development of interest to me is the study of multi-modal texts such as comics, novels with illustrations, the relation between photos and text in journalism, or playable narratives that come with a tool-kit of objects. There are interesting narrative modes that are starting to receive attention and that involve very specific strategies: for instance, the simultaneous narration of films for blind people, live sports broadcasts, or the improvised narration that often accompanies films in African cultures.

And finally, Ansgar and Vera Nünning have recently initiated a project that I find long overdue and very promising: the study of the relations between ritual and narrative.

DIEGESIS: What is the future of narratology?

Ryan: There is a tendency in literary studies toward scientism and technologization that will also affect narratology. By this I mean several things. First, narratology will rely more and more on the vast databases that digital technology has made possible to gather: not only digitized print texts (cf. Google books), but also narratives collected from social media, blogs, chatrooms, etc. We have tons of data at our disposal, but we don't really know what to do with this data. Word searches or phrase search can be useful for the history of ideas (when for instance does a certain concept enter texts?), but they cannot reveal narrative structures or techniques of narration. In order to make good use of the databases we will need a close cooperation between narratologists, who will have to formulate questions both relevant to narratology and feasible for the computer, and programmers who will turn these questions into executable data-mining programs. Second, even when it does not use data-mining software, narratology will be more like scientific research in that it will consist of large team projects rather than of individual performances. The work of Franco Moretti, which examines the entire production of a period in order to detect general trends, or projects like the literary cartography of Europe currently developed at the ETH Zurich point the way in that direction. Third, cognitive narratology will be more and more focused on the level of neurons, and it will increasingly rely on brain scans, even though we still don't know how certain neuronal configurations are interpreted as meanings. Here I have described what I think will happen, not necessarily what I personally would like to do. Many people choose to study narrative for the fun of the creative individual performance, but there will be much less of this fun in the scientific and team-based approach. What I do hope will happen, is that narratology will become sufficiently recognized and emancipated from literature for people to find jobs on the basis of their narratological skills in various media, rather than by pretending to be a specialist of the literature of a certain period in a certain language and geographic area.

DIEGESIS: What other question would you like to answer?

Ryan: What aspects of narrative have been overtheorized, and what aspects are undertheorized? If we apply to narrative the semiotic categories of syntax (= discourse, narrative strategies), semantics (= story) and pragmatics (how narratives are used), I would say that the first has been explored in great detail, thanks to the useful tools devised by Genette and others, the second has been generally avoided after a promising start in the early days of narratology (Propp, Todorov, Bremond) because it is very difficult to approach in a formal, theoretical way (I listed Dannenberg's Convergence and Divergence in answer

to question 1 because it is one of the rare book-length studies of preferred plot configurations), and the third has only recently been discovered but is very promising. It's a matter of pragmatics, for instance, that allows distinction between retrospective and concurrent (real-time) narrative, or distant narration vs. narration on the location of the events. Among discourse concepts that have been overtheorized are focalization, unreliable narration, metalepsis, and the implied author (this last concept has no place in my personal narratology). The representation and conception of time in narrative has received a lot of attention, and justly so, because time is a very difficult but also very rich issue, but space, which is much easier to conceive than time, has been largely neglected. Finally, the nature of fiction, which is a pragmatic issue, has received much more attention from philosophers than from literary narratologists.

Marie-Laure Ryan has published widely on digital narrative, space and narrative, and narrative across media. Her books include, among others, *Possible World, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (1991), *Narratives as Virtual Reality. Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (2001), *Narrative Across Media. The Languages of Storytelling* (2004, editor), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005, co-editor), *Avatars of Story* (2006), *Intermediality and Storytelling* (2010, co-editor), *Storyworlds across Media* (forthcoming, co-editor).

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