

From Geography to Narratology, and Back

Ryan, Foote and Azaryahu's *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative*

Marie-Laure Ryan / Kenneth Foote / Maoz Azaryahu: *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative. Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press 2016, 254 pp., USD 39.95, ISBN 978-0-8142-5263-5

As suggested by its title, Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu's *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative* (from now on *NS/SN*) moves in two opposite and converging directions. On the one hand ('narrating space'), it sets the basis for a more systematic application of narrative theory to space-related disciplines, especially – but not exclusively – geography, thereby enhancing the relevance of the so-called 'narrative turn' with regard to the study of space. This is the main focus of the second part of the volume, namely chapters 6 to 8. On the other hand ('spatializing narrative'), the book sets out to foreground the role of space in narrative, thus showing how narratology can profit from the 'spatial turn' in the humanities; this aspect is mostly explored in the first half (chapters 2 to 5). The twofold nature of *NS/SN* reflects the disciplinary background of its authors, since the project results from a productive dialogue between leading scholars in the fields of narratology (Ryan) and geography (Foote and Azaryahu) respectively. As outlined in the Introduction, the notion of space is addressed in the book on four different levels: 1) narrative space, or the storyworld in which the characters of a narrative live and move; 2) space as a context, and occasionally a referent, for the text, as best exemplified by "location-specific" narratives (p. 4) such as myths and legends on a given place, travel literature, stories inscribed at historical sites, etc.; 3) the "space taken by the text" itself in its material extension (pp. 4-5); 4) the "spatial form of the text" (p. 6), i.e. the "particular disposition of nonmoveable material supports of narrative in physical space" (p. 6), such as in memorials or museums.

On all of these four levels, *NS/SN* performs a double function – first of all, it outlines a useful overview of previous scholarly work on the topic; secondly, and most importantly, it provides groundbreaking insights into both narrative geography and spatial narratology, opening up to future developments in the dialogue between the two disciplines. In order to give a clear idea of the scope and the structure of the book, I will start by summarizing each chapter individually, with the exception of Chapters 1 (Introduction) and 9 (Conclusion); I will

then provide some general remarks, and suggest possible links with other studies on space and/or narrative.

Chapter 2: “Narrative Theory and Space”

This chapter, mostly authored by Ryan (as is the case with the whole first half of the book), successfully illustrates how narratology can benefit from a closer focus on the spatial implications of narrative; in particular, it provides a set of theoretical tools to investigate the ways in which narratives across various media can create new spaces, and project the reader (or viewer, listener, user, etc.) into them. One of the most remarkable parts of the chapter is Ryan’s analysis of James Joyce’s “Eveline” (from *Dubliners* [1914]), which is examined in light of the interplay between two basic functions of space – space as a ‘container’ versus space as a ‘network’ (cf. pp. 18-23, building on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* [1980]). In the following pages, “Eveline” is used as a case study to exemplify the different layers of narrative space, from ‘spatial frames’ and ‘setting’ to ‘story space,’ ‘story world’ and ‘narrative universe’ (cf. also Ryan 2014).

Another helpful distinction is the one between ‘emotional’ and ‘strategic’ conceptions of space (cf. pp. 39-43), which stands out as an innovative and flexible conceptual tool to analyze the multiple functions of space in narrative texts. As convincingly pointed out by the authors, strategic conception is “best represented in map view” (p. 39), while “emotional space is much less in need of mapping” (p. 62).

Chapter 3: “Maps and Narrative”

Chapter 3 offers a thorough exploration of the relation between maps and narrative, on three distinct levels: 1) maps of spatial context, i.e. methods for visualizing “sites of literary activity” (p. 46) and cultural landscapes, the geographic location of plots (as exemplified by Franco Moretti’s mapping of Jane Austen’s England, cf. p. 47), or the physical location of texts (e.g. in a library); 2) maps of spatial form, providing a “diagram of formal relations between narrative elements” (p. 48); 3) maps of narrative space, whether extradiegetic (Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver* [1726]) or intradiegetic (Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* [1883]).

Particular attention is paid to the last level, and to how stories can be “both the product and the source of a map” (p. 55). More precisely, building on Robert Stockhammer’s *Kartierung der Erde* (2007), four different “genealogical relations between maps and narratives” (p. 57) are examined: 1) map precedes the text; 2) author draws map during writing; 3) publisher puts a map in second or third

edition; 4) map is drawn by readers and critics. The fourth type is exemplified through an anonymous map of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and through Vladimir Nabokov's map of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915); the analysis of both examples points to the fundamental "interplay of precisely located and floating objects in the text's representation of space" (p. 63), and highlights a series of interpretive strategies that are further investigated in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: "From Cognitive to Graphic Maps"

How do readers construct mental models (or cognitive maps) of a storyworld? And how can cognitive maps be translated into graphic ones? In order to tackle such questions, Ryan discusses the results of a revealing empirical study she conducted, in which a group of high-school students were asked to draw maps representing the storyworld of Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981). Despite the informal set-up of the experiment, the results are extremely convincing, and set the basis for promising theoretical categorizations: cf., for instance, the classification of different textual cues from which cartographic data can be deduced (direct description, implication, narrativized description, object or character movement etc., pp. 81-83); or the establishment of general criteria for the evaluation of mapping strategies (inventory, representation of spatial relations, and mapping style, pp. 85-92).

Chapter 5: "Space, Narrative, and Digital Media"

Even more so than the previous ones, this section actively engages in the "trans-medial extension of narratology" (p. 137), by focusing on the spatiality of digital media – from computer games to 'generative cartographic projects' such as Memory Maps (cf. p. 121), as well as examples of 'locative narrative' such as [murmur] (murmurtoronto.ca), an online archive collecting people's stories about specific places in Toronto, Canada (cf. pp. 127-132). Ryan's survey offers new, helpful tools for the study of narrative forms that are still largely under-investigated; suffice it to mention the opposition between "strategic" and "mimetic" design of space in computer games (cf. pp. 105-108), or the foregrounding of the distinctive features of "on-site storytelling" (p. 132) as exemplified by locative narratives.

Chapter 6: “Street Names as Story and History”

This is the first of a series of chapters (mainly authored by Azaryahu and Foote) focusing on the third and fourth levels of space first presented in the Introduction: the “space taken by the text itself” and the “spatial form of the text” (p. 138). The authors take a narrative perspective on toponyms, with particular regard to street names; the upshot of their compelling analysis is that, while potentially “possessing narrativity” (p. 139), such minimal texts cannot really be considered as full-fledged narratives in themselves. A key aspect of the narrativity of street names lies in their commemorative function (cf. pp. 142-145), i.e. their potential to serve as *lieux de memoire*.

Chapter 7: “Landscape Narratives”

The authors’ analysis of the storytelling potential of landscapes opens up extremely promising avenues for narrative geography. Based on a vast corpus of case studies, the chapter deals with a broad typology including ‘point,’ ‘sequential,’ ‘areal,’ and ‘hybrid’ narratives, depending on the ways in which the story or stories develop in space. Crucially, the section does not simply focus on “stories about landscapes,” but rather on “stories that are told by ‘draping’ them over the places where they occurred” (p. 163) – from the Little Bighorn Battlefield in Montana to the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Chapter 8: “Museum Narratives”

The final section of the ‘narrative geography’ triptych builds on a fundamental distinction between two kinds of museum: on the one hand the ‘collection-based’ museum, where the items are arranged thematically (as in Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum) and following a paratactic structure, resulting in low or absent narrativity; on the other hand the ‘narrative-based’ museum, whose driving principle lies in one or more storylines unfolding in space, as illustrated through the analysis of the Palmach Museum in Tel Aviv (cf. p. 191). Far from presenting these two stances as mutually exclusive, the authors emphasize the frequent interplay between thematic display and chronological storytelling within the same museum – a phenomenon which is insightfully compared to similar ones in biographical and historical writing (cf. p. 193). Later on in the chapter, the focus shifts to how museum narratives can be shaped or enhanced by architectural elements, thus providing yet another example of the advantages offered by reading space narratively (cf. pp. 196-201).

Conclusion

NS/SN marks a significant step forward in both spatial narratology and narrative geography, paving the way for further advances involving a variety of disciplines – from cognitive studies to the digital humanities. Some passages could be usefully placed in dialogue with other related studies: for instance, the inventory of the various strategies through which a narrative can “pull the reader into the storyworld,” including the observer being “replaced, metonymically, with a road” (Chapter 2, pp. 30-31), can be combined with Marco Caracciolo’s (2011) study on the degrees of “fictionalization” of the reader’s virtual body into narrative space – from “ambient focalization” and “figuralization” to “strict focalization” and “deputy focalizers.” In the same chapter, the idea that “emotional space is much less in need of mapping” (p. 62) compared to strategic space could be partly counterbalanced by the notion of “lyric maps,” i.e. geographical projections of a character’s subjectivity (cf. Herbert 2011, with particular reference to Kamila Shamsie’s novel *Kartography* [2002]).

In Chapter 4, the analysis of inventory (i.e. the narrative elements that are actually represented in the reader’s map) could be usefully combined Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* (1960), with its classification of five basic elements underlying the cognitive mapping of urban space – ‘paths,’ ‘edges,’ ‘districts,’ ‘nodes,’ and ‘landmarks.’ Lastly, locative narrative’s strong interest in neglected or “invisible” spaces, representing “what most visitors would regard as non-places” (p. 129) is mirrored by several contemporary examples of place-related narrative in more traditional media – from Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and Philippe Vasset’s *Un livre blanc* (2007, based on the wanderings of the narrator across the areas that are left blank in official cartographic representations of Paris) to the documentary cinema of Gianfranco Rosi (*Holy GRA* [2013]) or Nikolaus Geyrhalter (*Elsenwhere* [2001], *Abendland* [2011]). In this respect, Ryan’s insights into the historical development of spatial narratives up to post-modernism could be fruitfully expanded with regard to post-postmodernism and the much-debated “return to reality” in Western cultural production (cf. Rudrum and Stavris 2015).

But that being said, the amount and breadth of scholarly sources discussed throughout the book is already impressive as it is. Thanks to its innovative trans-disciplinary angle and to the strength of its findings, *NS/SN* fully accomplishes its overarching goal – that of “promoting space as a key concept for narrative theory, and narrative as a key concept for geography” (p. 225) –, and deservedly gains its place as a reference point for future studies in this field.

Bibliography

- Caracciolo, Marco (2011): "The Reader's Virtual Body: Narrative Space and its Reconstruction". In: *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3, pp. 117-138.
- Herbert, Caroline (2011): "Lyric Maps and the Legacies of 1971 in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*". In: *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47 (No. 2), pp. 159-72.
- Lynch, Kevin (1960): *The Image of the City*. Cambridge.
- Rudrum, David / Stavris, Nicholas (2015): *Supplanting the Postmodern*. London.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure (2014): "Space". In: *the living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg. URL: <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/space> (07.01.2018).

Dr. Alberto Godioli
University of Groningen
a.godioli@rug.nl

How to cite this article:

Godioli, Alberto: "From Geography to Narratology, and Back. Ryan, Foote and Azaryahu's *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative* [Review of: Marie-Laure Ryan / Kenneth Foote / Maoz Azaryahu: *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative. Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*. Columbus 2016]". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 7.1 (2018). 94-99.

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20180522-174212-5](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20180522-174212-5)

URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/304/484>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).