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The Aesthetics of Narrative Immersion

Marie-Laure Ryan's *New Anatomy of Storyworlds*

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: What Is, What If, As If*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2022. 248 pp. USD 89.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1508-1

There's little doubt that someone as attentive to detail as Marie-Laure Ryan carefully chose the noun *anatomy* to describe her recent book, as opposed to a top-down term like *theory* or *model*. The word releases the author from the obligation to have every particular example conform to an overarching, internally-consistent structural account of what storyworlds are and how they work. Instead, *anatomy* connotes an exploratory, locally descriptive approach – a bottom-up attitude of working toward a model from specific examples rather than trying to fit everything into an overarching system. The term also makes sense given that these chapters offer a retrospective of sorts on Ryan's decades-long work on storyworlds, albeit with older material updated to account for recent developments in narratology. It is not only an anatomy of storyworlds but also a look back on the distinguished career of one of the most vital and original thinkers in the study of narrative.

A New Anatomy of Storyworlds contains an introduction and ten chapters, eight of which are based on previous publications (going as far back as 1998). To Ryan's credit, her updates of these pieces are genuine revisions rather than an added paragraph here and there – the updated versions take into account responses to Ryan's original work, as well as examples drawn from more recent narratives. Each chapter takes up a central concept or aspect of storyworlds, starting from fundamental narratological concepts such as fiction, narrator, and characters, moving in an arc toward what I might call more external or speculative storyworld-related ideas: parallel worlds, impossible worlds, virtual worlds, and transmedia worlds. Where the earlier chapters explore concepts that are constitutive of narrative itself, the later chapters address more recent trends in narrative worlding, both in prose narrative and in more popular cultural narrative worlds across media.

As the title indicates, the concept of storyworld is the through-line connecting each chapter, whether examining the role storyworlds play in truth claims, or the need for storyworlds to establish other narrative elements such as plot and character. Ryan's approach to narrative is staunchly opposed to the structuralist, and textualist, origins of narratology, which in Ryan's view does not and cannot ac-

count for the imaginative, transportive qualities of reading or viewing a narrative. “*Story*,” Ryan declares, “is a cognitive rather than a linguistic construct” (p. 5). To put it in classical, structuralist terms, this assertion clearly stakes out Ryan’s primary concern as the formation of *fabula* in a reader’s consciousness rather than the intricate architectures of *synzhet*; the latter is relevant only as it facilitates the former. But Ryan’s conception of storyworld even differs from fellow post-classical theorists such as Monika Fludernik and David Herman, who recast narrative’s *sine qua non* as experientiality, or what Herman colloquially phrases as “what it’s like.” For Ryan, experientiality is a necessary orientation toward a storyworld but is not itself sufficient to meet the threshold of narrative.

What characterizes narrative, for Ryan, is an experience of *immersion*, which she describes as “the ideal narrative experience” (p. 6). Immersion, for Ryan, is a key trait in determining what makes a successful narrative, but its value as an experience is left somewhat unexplained. A good narrative immerses; but what is the nature and value of that immersion? Moreover, Ryan grants that immersion still keeps the reader with one foot in “native reality” (p. 39), otherwise we would never survive our first good reading experience. So not only is immersion partial, but one is led to wonder exactly how immersion happens, to what degree immersive qualities are inherent within narratives, and if immersion is an unqualified good. Ryan writes that immersion is “to transport oneself in imagination to [a narrative’s] storyworld” (p. 7). Not only does this devalue, or even disqualify, narratives that frustrate world building, but on a more fundamental level it can only define the term in a circular way – immersion is what transports you into a story, and stories are transportive because of their immersiveness. How, then, does a reader get out of an immersive state, or never get drawn into one in the first place? It seems there may be some cognitive or psychoanalytic insights that might theorize the experience of fictional world building beyond the quasi-mystical state of immersion.

The focus on immersion also implies that narrative works best as a kind of retreat or escape from reality, that the storyworld is fundamentally a world apart. As recent forays into the relationship between an ecologically vulnerable planet and the worldbuilding involved in narrative (such as Marco Caracciolo’s *Narrating the Mesh* [2021] or Erin James’ *Narrative in the Anthropocene* [2022]), it becomes increasingly difficult to see storyworlds as a value-neutral imaginative realm whose productions should be thought of as an inexhaustible resource, with more opportunities for reader, viewer, or player immersion equaling an undiluted good. It is perhaps only when Ryan confronts the topic of transmedial storyworlds, in the book’s final chapter, that the material relation between storyworld production and consumption – in the form of multimedia franchises such as the extended *Star Wars* universe or the Marvel Cinematic Universe – are brought up in terms of their potential to be marketed and consumed.

After this kaleidoscopic tour through the multidimensional realm of storyworlds, one phrase seems to be implied by the book’s subtitle. After considering “what is,” “what if,” and “as if,” one might be led to another question: “what for?” As narratology enters the second quarter of the current century, and liter-

ary study more broadly confronts questions of economic inequality, climate change, and technological transformations of the human, the categorical celebration of immersion can read as a kind of naïve escapism. To Ryan’s credit, the question of technology is front and center in the chapter on virtual reality, though it focuses largely on the ability of the technology to deliver the experience of immersion. Ryan also begins to touch on questions of capital and narrative in the aforementioned chapter on transmedial worlds. Because these chapters touch on the role of technology and capital in the formation of storyworlds, a Pandora’s box is opened that is left to the critical reader to explore. But having anatomized storyworlds so thoroughly, Ryan leaves other critics with a well-stocked toolbox for future analysis.

Even as it leaves the reader with questions, *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds* is a rigorous and ambitious exploration of the concept of storyworld in nearly every corner of the narratological map. Ryan’s work has been instrumental in bringing narratology to a point where we can ask the “what for”-question. The next generation of narratology needs to offer compelling answers to this question if it is to remain relevant to the humanities, and culture at large, in an age when the most important storyworld is the singular, precarious one in which we happen to live.

Bibliography

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