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NARRATIVE
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(Ryan, Marie-Laure. *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: What Is, What If, As If*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022, 248 pp.)

The foremost quality of the Swiss-American literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan's theoretical books is their open and curious way of digressing into all manner of classical and recent debates while still forming a coherent approach to their subject matter. In her previous books, such as *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (1991), *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), *Avatars of Story* (2006), and *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015), she has seemingly tirelessly developed and defended her understanding of narrative and fictionality inspired by the possible worlds theory. Indeed, Ryan's line of thought forms, if not exactly a system, then a theoretical framework. Her basic conceptualizations were already established in her first English-language book on narrative and possible worlds theory, and her later books are, in many ways, adjustments and further developments of these concepts.

Essential for understanding Ryan's framework are the concepts of 'recentering' and 'minimal departure.' Standing on the shoulders of, amongst others, the American analytic philosopher David Lewis and his so-called 'modal realism,' Ryan conceives fiction in terms of possible worlds. When we engage with fiction, she claims, we come to experience another world. There is, in principle, no ontological difference between this other world and our own actual world. The actual world is just where we are located here and now, but any other possible world could just as easily be actualized. To make the possible actual is, in Ryan's view, what fiction does. Once we are immersed in fiction, a 'recentering' takes place, relocating the reader (in the case of written fiction) into a new system of actuality and possibilities. Despite the fact that the possible world of fiction makes us experience different minds and spaces, it is not without ties to the reader's real world – and this is where the much-discussed principle of 'minimal departure' comes in. The principle is based on the assumption that readers will expect possible worlds of fiction to be similar to their own real world unless otherwise indicated. The reason why we would judge, for example, the claim that Emma Bovary's husband is one-

legged as false is that human beings normally have two legs, and nothing in Flaubert's novel indicates that this is not the case with him too. Fiction, in this way, is both capable of conjuring up an imaginative foreign world and is related to the familiar. This duality is essential to Ryan's framework and it is a thread that runs through all her work, including her most recent book.

A New Anatomy of Storyworlds consists of an introduction, followed by ten chapters, all but two of which have been previously published as journal articles or reference work chapters. As in most of Ryan's earlier books, the first chapters discuss fundamental theoretical concepts of narrative and fictionality: theories of truth, fiction, the narrator, characters, plot, and mimesis/diegesis. The later chapters turn to special cases, including examples related to science and new media: the idea of parallel worlds in quantum mechanics, logical contradictions, virtual reality, and transmedia worlds. In what follows, I will focus on some of the parts that have not been previously published.

The introductory chapter proposes a way of conceptualizing narratives, not least fictional narratives, by means of what Ryan terms the 'what-is, what-if, as-if approach.' The terminology is new but still consistent with her previous work. When we form a mental representation of a narrative text, we form what Ryan, following David Hermann, calls a *storyworld*. This concept of storyworld is both wider and narrower than her earlier concept of the fictional world. It is wider, because it applies to both fictional and factual narratives: "To be immersed in a narrative means to transport oneself in imagination to a storyworld, whether or not this world is regarded as an image of the real world" (Ryan 2022: 7). It is narrower, because it regards narrative sensemaking as the prime mode of creating mental worlds. Whether fiction can be non-narrative, and if so, whether it would still contain worldmaking properties, is less clear, and Ryan doesn't really engage with this issue here. At a basic level, *what-is* is an operator that refers to "factual texts that purport to represent the real world," while *what-if* describes "fictional texts that create imaginary worlds located at variable distances from the real world" (8). On a more complex level, however, *what-if* thinking is also a practical ability in real life, which we employ, for instance, when we make plans, form hypotheses, and generally create imaginary worlds in our minds. Narrative fiction, Ryan has it, is an extension of this practical ability to think in terms of *what-if*, but it is a mode that grants autonomy and, therefore, aesthetic value to the imaginary world of the text. *What-if* worlds of fiction are, in her understanding, different from the *what-is* worlds of factual narratives, yet when we immerse ourselves in them, they become actual to us. Through a game of pretense, the *what-if* worlds become *what-is* worlds of the imagination – or what she terms an imagination of "*as-if*" (9).

The second chapter of the book "Fiction: The Possible Worlds Approach to Fiction and Its Rival Theories" – one of the two full chapters

of the book that haven't been published yet – is arguably the most interesting. In this chapter, Ryan discusses five theories of fiction: the (easily dismissed) naïve theory that equates fictionality with falsity; John Searle's theory of fiction as pretended speech acts; Kendall Walton's concept of representational fiction as a prop in a game of make-believe; the pragmatic-rhetorical approach of Henrik Skov-Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh; and finally, the possible worlds theory, that inspired her own approach. Ryan is explicitly closer to Searle and Walton than to the pragmatic-rhetorical standpoint, and her discussions of the two former are perhaps less groundbreaking. More promising is her engagement with the more recent pragmatic-rhetorical approach, which she discusses entirely on the grounds of Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh's programmatic article "Ten Theses about Fictionality" (*Narrative*, 23, no. 1, 2015). The discussion is particularly enlightening because the pragmatic-rhetorical approach is founded on explicit opposition to the ontological-referential criteria of possible worlds theory: it sees fictionality as a form of communication, that is, as a rhetorical resource that authors employ to make statements about the real world and readers recognize by assuming that the relevance of the text will be pursued better by viewing it as invented. Moreover, it is a resource that can be found locally in works of fiction as well as in nonfiction. "An important point of the rhetorical theory," Ryan says, "is that fictional invention is never an end in itself but is a means to an end, a way to say something about reality" (36).

In contrast to this standpoint, storyworlds, that is, fictional ones, have independent value in Ryan's understanding. They are "self-referential, and [their] construction by the user's mind is an end in itself" (38). The important point is that even though a reader can experience another world on its own terms, it does not mean that this world is only contemplated from within. The possibility of traveling in and out of a fictional storyworld explains both the experience of immersion (by the principle of recentering) and its aesthetic evaluation (by so-called decentering). This duality is what possible world-inspired theory offers and, in her opinion, what the pragmatic-rhetorical approach lacks. For "lovers of literature," she says, the rhetorical approach "reduces the work of the imagination to a didactic function and deprives it of autonomy" (40). And therefore, it fails "to tell the difference between utilitarian and autonomous uses of invention, this is to say, between invention used to say something about our world, and invention presented for its own sake" (55).

A notable aspect of the present book is its reluctance to explain fiction or fictionality in terms of a precise definition (and in this respect, Ryan is on par with the pragmatic-rhetorical approach, at least at the stage of its evolution that she engages with). The lack of a concise definition is partly due to her media-conscious stance. Ryan is generally sceptical towards the idea that paintings are inherently fictional – as Kendall Walton famously claimed – yet she believes that texts, as well as films and plays

can be fictional. However, when she states that she “[has]n’t found a way to define fiction through a single formula that covers both the telling and the showing forms” (44), that is only a half-truth. In a recent handbook chapter, Ryan does give a positive and concise definition. It reads: “Fiction is a use of signs meant by the producer to invite the user to imagine, without believing them, states of affairs obtaining in a world that differ in some respect from the actual world” (“Fact, Fiction and Media,” Fludernik & Ryan (eds.), *Narrative Factuality*, 2020, p. 78).

This definition, arguably, covers both the telling and the showing forms of fiction and could have been included and further elaborated on in the present book. It is interesting for two reasons. First, it extricates, at least in principle, the concept of fictionality from those of narrative and narrator, and secondly – by the wording “meant by the producer” – it opens for an interpretation of fictionality as not only ontological-referential but also pragmatic. Ryan’s conceptualization is indeed both ontological and pragmatic, and it could be stimulating to learn more about how she sees its similarities and differences from definitions of the pragmatic-rhetorical approach. Unfortunately, she only discusses Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh’s article from 2015. Should the dialogue continue, one would want to learn how her definition stands against the further advancements of the pragmatic-rhetorical approach. Nielsen and Gjerlseven, for instance, have recently defined fictionality just as succinctly as “intentionally signaled, communicated invention” (“Distinguishing fictionality,” Maagaard, Schäbler, and Lundholt (eds.), *Exploring fictionality*, 2020, p. 23). Perhaps the pragmatic-rhetorical approach, under this definition, is actually less distant from Ryan’s conceptualization than she presents it.

The relationship between fictionality and narrativity is complex in Ryan’s theory. When I claim that her recent definition in the handbook chapter only in principle extricates the question of fictionality from that of narrative, it is because narrativity seems to have become closer to an implicit prerequisite for fictionality – or at least for fictional world-making – in her later works. In her first theoretical book on possible worlds theory, Ryan systematically considered the possibility of both narrative and non-narrative fiction. With her turn to the concept of storyworlds, her view seems to have changed. One reason for this may be that she needs the concept of the narrator for her understanding to support a theory of fictionality inspired by the possible worlds theory. In the third chapter of the book (parts of which were first published in *Narrative*, 9, no. 2, 2001), she discusses how she sees the concept of narrator as necessary not only for homodiegetic (first person) narration but also for heterodiegetic (third person) narration (and perhaps also for storyworlds?). Engaging in this discussion and its relevance to her theory of fictionality would require a lengthy study.

A New Anatomy of Storyworlds is a lucid and inspiring book. Apart from updating and developing the terminology of Ryan’s framework, it

participates in an impressive number of classic and recent theoretical debates: whether fictionality is a matter of degree or a question of either/or; the relation between visual and language-based fictional forms; whether the notion of character is subordinated to the notion of plot or vice versa; the possibility of showing and telling in different media; cheap plot tricks in popular fiction, etc. Ryan's general interest in science, media, and computer-based narrative forms, which has become her trademark, is always captivating. On the one hand, chapters on the latter tend to become rapidly outdated. On the other hand, as they age, they often gain a different kind of interest. (One only needs to revisit the almost twenty-year-old chapters on hypertext fiction and web-based narratives in Ryan's *Avatars of Story* to see how those discussions now serve as a fine history of obsolete genres).

Going forward, it would be interesting to read a more systematic account of whether and to what extent fictionality and fictional world-making depend on narrativity in Ryan's framework. Although the present book does not really address this question, it is perhaps one of Ryan's best books to date. Also, for new readers looking for a concise introduction to her work, it is a good place to start.