

## NAVIGATING BETWEEN REAL AND VIRTUAL STORYWOLDS

**Bell, Alice, and Marie-Laure Ryan.** *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, edited by Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan, U of Nebraska P, 2019, 354 pp.

2020 marks forty-five years since the concept of “possible worlds” was introduced by Thomas Pavel in his article “Possible Worlds in Literary Semantics” (1975), which was later expanded into the book *Fictional Worlds* (1986), grounding a new approach to the ontological questions of truth and referentiality in textualist studies. The problem of text reality (as an actual world) and the reader’s actuality in the process of reading reality (as a possible world) was consonant with the cognitivist and narrativist turns in the scientific paradigms of the twentieth century, striving to shift the focus of attention from formalist and structuralist approaches to more interdisciplinary and dynamic ones, encompassing the power of intuition with scientific reasoning. The paradigmatic turn in scientific methods of the late twentieth century was a logical consequence of the long-lasting hegemony of empiricism and domination of *ratio* over *emotio*, which started to be questioned by scholars and philosophers (Cobley 4). These complex issues of the possible/impossible and the real/virtual, as well as the universal and the sporadic, Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan aim to solve with this comprehensive volume.

Specifically, in substantial “Introduction” to the volume, Bell and Ryan show the rich history of Possible World Theory (PWT) and explain the logic of the changes, which the theory has undergone during the last forty-five years in connection to the parallel development of postclassical narratology.<sup>1</sup> The scope of the evolution of PW theory is reflected in the logical composition of the chapters in the volume: (1) theoretical perspectives; (2) cognitive perspectives; (3) literary genre perspectives, and (4) PW and digital media. The volume crowns the “Postface” by the author of the PW notion Thomas G. Pavel, whose insightful comments on the essays presented in this volume provide further perspectives on the study of PW (such as history, myths, legends, etc.), reminding the re-

<sup>1</sup> The term “postclassical narratology” was introduced in 1999 by David Herman to denote a wide range of researches sprung out in France, Germany, and the USA in the late 1960s. See: Herman, David. *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. Ohio State UP, 1999.

ader how far the modern PW theory has gone into the research of the unnatural and virtual, skipping the very essence of fiction as “writing” (Bell and Ryan 319).

With the introduction of the concept of PW, as Bell and Ryan contend, the scholars accepted it more in a metaphorical way, as uncomfortable specters of human language and human logic relation<sup>2</sup> (9), succumbing to “the language-based view on storytelling” and “obscurity of formal logic” (8). Uncomfortable presuppositions were centered on the indexical nature of the real (actual world), viewed from the extravagant position of modal logic and Jaakko Hintikka’s (53) interpretation of language as “calculus,” that is as a flexible means to describe the world: “‘Actual’ is indexical, like ‘I’ or ‘here,’ or ‘now’: it depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located” (Lewis 184). These arguments make us believe, as Thomas G. Pavel states, that “the existing world is not the last world” (Bell and Ryan 316) and that fictional worlds stimulate imagination (and intuition) as they cannot be based on the laws of formal logic (Bell and Ryan 11). This adherence to the notions of “possible” vs. “impossible,” “real” vs. “virtual,” “truth” vs. “fiction” goes like a red line throughout the whole volume, forming a net of various correlations between these concepts in their application to different research material and methodological frameworks.

Extensive insights into the history of PW theory showed a wide range of theoretical problems, both about the known linguistic theoretical framework of *diegesis* and a new theoretical framework of possible and alternative versions of the actual worlds. Lubomir Doležel’s essay “Porfyry’s Tree for the Concept of Fictional Worlds,” opening the theoretical section of Part 1,<sup>3</sup> deals with the philosophical and scientific hypotheses about fictional worlds, advocating the incompleteness of fictional worlds versus the ontological completeness of PW postulated by logicians (Bell and Ryan 10). Doležel’s taxonomy of plots, based on different systems of modal logic, links the question of PW with the notion

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Ruth Ronen criticized the notions of “storyworld” and “possible world,” stating their metaphorical nature. See:

Ronen, Ruth. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and the Electronic Media*. John Hopkins UP, 2001.

---. *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. Cambridge UP, 1994.

---. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Indiana UP, 1991.

Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. *Why Fiction?* U of Nebraska P, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned by the editors, some portions of Part 1 were previously published in “How to Reach Fictional Worlds” in 2015 (Doležel 219).

of transfictionality and different types of intertextual relations between texts: expansion, displacement, transposition. Dwelling on the ways of fictional meaning creation, Doležel stresses its arousal from “the radical indeterminacy” and existence of “blank” and “filled” areas, specified and unspecified information (Bell and Ryan 10–11). Most of his ideas concerning PW theory, presented in his *Heterocosmica*, became widely known worldwide, especially in the East European scholarship, and have been continued in Bohumil Fort’s *An Introduction to Fictional World Theory*.<sup>4</sup>

Stating the benefit of PW theory in a fictional world to create the feeling of experiencing another world, where the reality “unfolds itself to us as beings-in-the-world” (Bell and Ryan 113), Marina Grishakova in her essay “Interface Ontologies: On the Possible, Virtual, and Hypothetical in Fiction” adopts Ryan’s attention to narrative semantics and *diegetic* representation and develops an idea about hybrid diegesis of embedded virtual voices (Bell and Ryan 89). By defining embedded, hypothetical, impersonal, fictive, metaleptic, and alternative voices, Grishakova grounds the concept of narrative complexity<sup>5</sup> as having derived from simplicity, showing the complex interrelations of human and her cultural environment, the idea very close to Jakob von Uexküll’s notion of *Umwelt* (1957), mentioned in the same volume in Marco Caracciolo’s essay (Bell and Ryan 113). Hence, Marina Grishakova’s investigation of the notion of embodiment serves as an excellent transition to Part 2 of the volume, dealing with the enactivist perspective of fictional world interpretation by the reader in ecocritical (or more *biolinguistic*) approach in the essay of Marco Caracciolo “Ungrounding Fictional Worlds: An Enactivist Perspective on the ‘Worldlikeness’ of Fiction” (Bell and Ryan 113).

Considering David Herman’s definition of “storyworlds” broad enough to reflect the processes of reader’s engagement with the text, Marco Caracciolo suggests an alternative view on story world construction, grounded on the philosophy of enactivism, inspired by the works of Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, and “modern enactivist thinking in mind sciences” (Bell and Ryan 116). An ambitious synthesis of psychology, phenomenology, and evolu-

<sup>4</sup> The comparison of Doležel’s and Ryan’s PW models is given in Peter Huhn’s *The Living Handbook of Narratology*.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed account on embodied cognition and narrative complexity see: Grishakova, Marina, and Maria Poulaki. *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*. U of Nebraska P, 2019.

tional biology allowed Caracciolo to articulate his own key notion for narrative world grounding – “worldlikeness.” The revolutionary character of Caracciolo’s approach lies not only in changing the approach to the notion of “storyworld” into the dynamic one but also in defying the origins of PW theory in the modal logic (where it actually originated). By taking the enactivist stance, Caracciolo appeals to the notion of “experiential dynamics,” which allows us “to capture storyworlds in their phenomenological becomings” driven by emotion and not by “cold” reasoning and inference making” (Bell and Ryan 117). Having taken a radical examination of rhythm and the logic of unfolding, Caracciolo recognizes the existence of certain cognitive forms in semiotic mediated storyworlds, which Teun van Dijk and Walter Kintsch call “situation models,” on each level of the reader’s engagement with the “groundless” text in a form of its co-construction (qtd. in Bell and Ryan 127–28).

Dealing with one of the key notions of postmodernism – the notion of play and game with the reader, Michelle Wang in her essay “Postmodern Play with Worlds: The Case *At Swim-Two-Birds*” widens the scope of PWT application to a gaming domain (games of mimicry or imitation, etc.), generated by the author as a make-believe strategy. Driven by the idea of the high demands of postmodernist literature on the part of the reader, Wang stresses the play as the starting point of the literary invention (Bell and Ryan 319), on the one side, and reader’s perception, on the other. Grounded on Ryan’s principles of minimum and maximum departure, the process of postmodern meaning creation is realized through more or less radical text departures, causing various interpretations of an ontological plot, and inviting the reader “to play with the text” (Bell and Ryan 132).

In his “Logical Contradictions, Possible Worlds Theory, and the Embodied Mind,” Jahn Alber addresses what is called “impossible narratives” of anti-mimetic texts, challenging human understanding of times and space and putting the reader in front of conflicting and confronting real knowledge events.<sup>6</sup> Alber’s profound analysis of “unruly” narrations in three pieces of postmodern fiction is based on the enactivist framework, allowing the sensorimotor reaction of the body, i.e. “protointerpretation” (Bell and Ryan 159) as the first stimulus for the reader’s engagement with the unexpected, “unruly” situation, and followed by

---

<sup>6</sup> This trend of “unnatural narratology” is by far developed and well formulated by the representative of the Ohio School Brian Richardson. See: Richardson, Brian. *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century: Theorizing Unruly Narratives*. Ohio State UP, 2019.

an emotional reaction triggering the personal experience of the reader and his general knowledge to make sense of the emotional impulse. In this aspect, Jahn Alber's work is consonant with Marco Caracciolo's conclusion on the dominant role of emotions in storyworld creation, both being based on the enactivist philosophy of the reader's engagement. Alber's essay paves the way for Christopher Bartsch's "travel and play in time" (Bell and Ryan 179) in Part 3.

The multilayered representation of time in Bartsch's analysis of Jack London's *The Star Rover* can be viewed as a gentle solution to the problem of narrative time duality, seen as its core characteristic by structuralists. By breaking the boundaries of "personal time," when the protagonist is leaving his body in a form of the avatar, Bartsch shows the elasticity of TAT ("textual actual time") (Bell and Ryan 181) in its correlation to external time (following Lewis's distinction between external and personal (character's time)). Bringing to the fore the postmodernist notions of play again, this time the subject of the play is time in its unprecedentedly extraordinary fashion, while the unreal narrative causes disbelief of the reader in the truth of the events, which might have been hallucinations *per se*, as Bell and Ryan suggest in the "Introduction" (33).

The ontological nature of narrative fiction and fiction in a wider sense is constantly questioned by the creativity of post-modernist literature in regard to different genres. Thomas L. Martin in his "As Many Worlds as Original Artists': Possible Worlds Theory and the Literature of Fantasy" (Bell and Ryan 201) defends the aesthetic creativity of the most popular genre of fantasy, ascribing it to its "extraordinary capacity for the invention" (Bell and Ryan 319). Notably, the long-lasting debate about "kitsch" in art and literature can come to a resolution in the terms of PW theory, while the existence of possible is hard to question, and thus it becomes real under those circumstances in which it exists or arises. Yet, at the same time, as Thomas Pavel rightly states in his "Postface" to the volume, "[g]ames of make-believe [are] being still the most frequent" to treat literature as "ecreture" (Bell and Ryan 319), which Martin calls "pseudoscientific" and "so-called realistic bias" (Bell and Ryan 33). These scientific biases are later confronted by Mattison Schuknecht in relation to the genres of utopia and dystopia in the essay "The Best/Worst of All Possible Worlds? Utopia, Dystopia, and Possible Worlds Theory" (Bell and Ryan 225).

PW theory approaches the notion of genre from two positions: through the world external approach by Maire-Laure Ryan and the world internal approach,

based on Doležel's plot taxonomy (Bell and Ryan 25). Placing the notion of tellability (conflict) in the center of narrative development in dystopia, Schuknecht argues for its higher narrativity in comparison with utopias (where conflict is restricted to a minimum by the genre cannons). Suggesting a narrative explanation of the genres of utopia and dystopia, Schuknecht refers to renowned utopias of Plato and Thomas More as purely didactic genres, thus formulating a narratively-bound definition of the latter.

Three final essays in Part 4 of the volume logically bring the reader to a reality of today's mediated world where virtual goes apace real, natural with artificial, etc. According to the editors, "[h]ypertext as the earliest form of digital writing" existed long before the web (Bell and Ryan 35). Linguists believe, however, that only with the introduction of the web hypertext started to perform its world-creating function at the crossroads of reality (Actual World) and the digital (Possible World). The application of PW theory to digital and virtual reality has already been successfully attempted<sup>7</sup> and has given rise to a range of interdisciplinary researches between the humanities and information science, known as "narrative intelligence" or "artificial narrative intelligence" in the domain of computational narratology. The tremendous development of digital media today is forming the cyberculture, as Françoise Lovacat shows in "Possible Worlds, Virtual Worlds" (Bell and Ryan 274), which is argued to be not just a part of but a whole self-standing culture of today. Indispensable cognitive operations supporting human activity in everyday life have re-accentuated into the digital mode. "Flickering," "refreshment," and "merging" are used for deeper reader immersion or reflection, inviting further quest for cues and hints, to proceed and find the answer. One of the valuable insights of Alice Bell's essay is connected with discovering a new, so-called "sincere," tendency in the postmodern digital fiction culture, which brings a positive stance to virtual reality to the opponents of artificial and virtual due to moral issues, as described by Françoise Lavocat on the example of *Second Life* (Bell and Ryan 272).

Quickly changing information technologies as a part of knowledge acquisition and science development call for the search of models on how this growing information is stored and retrieved and, moreover, how it interrelates with the data in short-term and long-term memory. In his "Rereading Manovich's Algorithm:

---

<sup>7</sup> See: Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Indiana UP, 1991. See also: Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and the Electronic Media*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

Genre and Use in Possible Worlds Theory” (Bell and Ryan 296), Daniel Punday reconsiders Lev Manovich’s metaphor of “‘narrative’ as ‘database’ to account for the way that digital artifacts are fragmented” (Bell and Ryan 37). As the editors of the volume assert, the application of certain algorithms to digital narrative is useful in terms of understanding the external schemata of text and meaning processing (following definite algorithms of story generation, encoded in various programs) (Bell and Ryan 37). Providing the availability of the necessary databases, the programs can generate various modifications of the event sequencing (depending on the type of plot development: linear, bunch or circular, etc.). The closer collaboration of the humanities and the information sciences thus forms the interdisciplinary perspective necessary to gain awareness of the algorithmic processes that accompany human reasoning and determines our choices in plot development or counterfactual thinking. The final essay of Thomas Pavel balances the multitude of different perspectives and approaches to PW theory and narratology in a coherent and fluent analysis of the state of art of modern narratology, which has appeared out of interdisciplinary ground and continues to absorb new tendencies in philosophy, culture, aesthetics, and information sciences.

The following volume presents the reader with a diverse but coherent account of modern narratology united by the concept of Possible Worlds, which represents a solid methodological ground for research of modern aspects of (inter)textuality and transmediality, once again affirming the pertinence and fruitfulness of Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan’s valuable contribution to the study of narrative.

### Works Cited

- Bell, Alice, and Marie-Laure Ryan, editors. *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*. U of Nebraska P, 2019.
- Cobley, Paul. *Cultural Implications of Biosemiotics*. Springer, 2016.
- Doležel, Lubomír. “How to Reach Fictional Worlds.” *Fiction and Art: Explorations in Contemporary Theory*, edited by Ananta Ch. Sukla, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 219–27.
- Hintikka, Jaakko. “Exploring Possible Worlds.” *Possible Worlds in Humanities, Arts and Sciences: Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 65*, edited by Sture Allén, de Gruyter, 1988, pp. 52–73.
- Lewis, David, K. “Possible Worlds.” *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality*, edited by Michael J. Loux, Cornell UP, 1979, pp.182–89.