Raphaël Baroni
(Lausanne)

The Garden of Forking Paths:
Virtualities and Challenges for Contemporary Narratology

1. A Forking Path for "Classical" and "Postclassical" Narratologies

Nowadays, it has become almost impossible to deal with central issues in narrative theory such as narrative sequence, plot, tellability, narrative interest, or even narrativity without investigating how the story is embedded in a complex network of virtual *fabulas*. By contrast, these questions were largely neglected in formalist and structuralist theories. As stated by David Herman: "[Propp's] approach gave an overly deterministic coloration to narrative sequences […]. Part of the interest and complexity of narrative depends on the merely probabilistic, not deterministic, links between some actions and events" (2002, 94). Along the same line, Hilary Dannenberg adds: "An analysis of narrative's story tells us very little about the true dynamics of plot and about the fascination of fictional worlds for the reader; this stems from the fact that narrative does not simply tell one story, but weaves a rich, ontologically multidimensional fabric of alternate possible worlds" (2004, 160).

With the emergence of the analysis of "alternate possible worlds" as a central field of investigation, narratology has departed from its original formalist paradigm and overcome its methodological limitations. As pointed out by Emma Kafalenos in an attempt to describe the evolution of contemporary narratology, recent studies tend to highlight more the role of the reader and the indeterminations of narrative: "What I see as new […] is the specificity of the analysis of how readers' decisions contribute to the construction of the narrative world. […] Further developments along this path, if it occurs, will bring us an increasingly precise account of sites where indeterminacy can enter a narrative representation, and of conditions that heighten the interactivity between representation and reader in constructing narrative worlds" (2001, 114).

If this evolution can be seen as a general trend in narrative theory, and if the analysis of "alternate possible worlds" appears, at first sight, to be a coherent field of investigation for contemporary narratology, the unity of

this field, as well as the complementary or convergent nature of the theories dealing with these questions, cannot be taken for granted. Reviewing the various ways narrative virtualities have been examined offers a good opportunity to describe the current state of narrative theory. By doing so, I shall try to highlight the forces at play, those encouraging the consolidation of the discipline or, conversely, those pushing towards diversification.

2. Ts'ui Pên's and Borges's Garden of Forking Paths

A short story by Borges entitled "The Garden of Forking Paths" will be used in order to illustrate the various ways we can deal with the virtualities of narrative. This fiction can be considered both a metanarrative and a spy story, and both aspects will be useful for the following discussion. On the metanarrative side, Borges refers to the work of Ts'ui Pên, a Chinese ancestor of the protagonist who has supposedly written a book titled *The Garden of Forking Paths*, a book described as a "maze" and as a "labyrinth of time." One character, Professor Stephen Albert, explains that "In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible to disentangle Ts'ui Pên, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, thereby, 'several futures', several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork" (Borges 1999 [1941], 125).

Ts'ui Pên's book has often been associated with interactive storytelling, especially hypertext fictions and digital media.[1] Indeed, in these kinds of narratives, all alternatives have been programmed or written and fully belong to the structure of the work itself, even though the reader (or the player) actualizes only one path, leaving the other paths unexplored. Still, we can notice that Ts'ui Pên's book, weird as this fiction is, is defined as a "novel." Borges further highlights the fact that "alternatives" belong to "all fictions." Even though these alternatives are not textualized, they can be imagined, both for the character, who is planning his next move, and for the reader, who is wondering how the narrative is going to develop. More generally, it is entirely possible to state that all narratives, since they are representations of actions carried out by characters and addressed to audiences, are interactive and comprise alternative "paths."

---

[1]   See for example Moulthrop (1991) and Ryan (2006a).

On the spy story side of the tale, the narration recounts a fictional event that occurred during the First World War. The story is in homodiegetic narration, purportedly the fragment of a deposition, "dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English in the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao" (119). At the same time, Yu Tsun is a Chinese spy working for the Germans, and when the story begins, he is about to be arrested by Captain Richard Madden, an Irishman working for the British Government. After discovering that the identity of his accomplice, Viktor Runeberg, has been exposed, Yu Tsun loses all hope of saving his life. Nevertheless, he decides to accomplish a final mission. He succeeds in communicating the name of a place where the English artillery is located, a city called Albert. In order to carry out his mission, Yu Tsun kills a man whose name is Dr. Stephen Albert. The assassination of Dr. Albert is reported by the newspapers and thus comes to the attention of the German authorities. Unfortunately for Yu Tsun, his victim turns out to be a friendly man and a sinologist doing research on the work of Ts'ui Pên, one of his ancestors. So the Chinese spy concludes his confession by stressing that he has "abhorrently triumphed" (127) and he expresses his "endless contrition" and "weariness" (128).

3. Possible World(s) Asserted by the Author

Borges's story not only reflects on narrative virtualities, but it also actualizes all kinds of virtual worlds that we can find in narrative. We begin our survey with the kind of virtualities focused on by Thomas Pavel (1975) in his work on possible worlds and modal logic. At this stage, we can consider the narrative world as a whole, and not in its progressive actualization. Umberto Eco (1984, 235) insists on the fact that, even if possible worlds are actualized through a series of stages, all these moments ultimately belong to the same possible world as the author planned it: a possible world in an assertive mode that must be contrasted with other possible worlds imagined by the characters in the story or by the readers. Here, modal logic provides useful tools for explaining how fictional worlds are shaped, based on information we possess concerning the real world. Thus, from the perspective of a phenomenology of reading, the "possible" must be considered a "parasite" of the "actual." As Ryan puts it: "when readers construct fictional worlds, they fill in the gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own experiential reality. This model can only be overruled by the text itself; thus if a text mentions a blue deer, the reader will imagine an

animal that resembles her idea of real deer in all respects other than the colour" (2005a, 447).

Of course, we know that the fictional characters of the story by Borges are human beings endowed with attributes that don't have to be mentioned such as the fact that people normally have two arms and two legs. But we also receive relevant information about the characters. For example, we learn that the antagonists are Chinese and Irish and thus that they are working for enemies, i.e., the Germans and the English. We can infer further information from the first lines of the story:

> On page 242 of *The History of the World War*, Liddell Hart tells us that an Allied offensive against the Serre-Montauban line (to be mounted by thirteen British divisions backed by one thousand four hundred artillery pieces) had been planned for July 24, 1916, but had to be put off until the morning of the twenty-ninth. Torrential rains (notes Capt. Liddell Hart) were the cause of that delay—a delay that entailed no great consequences, as it turned out. The statement which follows—dictated, reread, and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English in the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao—throws unsuspected light on the case. (119)

There is no reason to wonder whether the book by Liddell Hart truly exists or to question what is truly written on page 242 of this book. What does matter here is what we should infer from the mention of a history book, based on what we know concerning the real world. Indeed, by mentioning a well-known historical context, the incipit provides valuable information we need in order to fill in the gaps of the storyworld. For example, we know that the story begins in the middle of a war that broke out in Europe in 1914 and that Captain Liddell Hart's book (a controversial book that truly exists, by the way, published in 1930) represents a version of the winners. We also know that in time of war stories are often told by unreliable narrators or that they are based on unreliable sources such as propaganda, for example. All of this information is important in order to understand the fictional text, correctly infer some of its implicit elements and interpret the text in a productive way.

It is interesting to notice that Borges suggests that we should call Captain Liddell Hart's version into question on the grounds that history books can never be considered to constitute an exhaustive, completely reliable and definitive version of what happened. Yu Tsun's deposition might be a fictional document, but in real life too, the way we understand history constantly changes. Borges adds a further level of complication

between two versions of the same fact. In his deposition, Yu Tsun states that "Runeberg had been arrested, or murdered" (119). However, an editor's note comments on this hypothesis as follows: "A bizarre and despicable supposition. The Prussian spy Hans Rabener, alias Viktor Runeberg, had turned an automatic pistol on his arresting officer, Capt. Richard Madden. Madden, in self-defense, inflicted the wounds on Rabener that caused his subsequent death" (119). In this case, obviously, the editor seems to possess more information than the narrator, a fact that he proves by revealing the real name of his accomplice. So we must admit that Runeberg was probably killed, and not arrested. But for the reader, how Runeberg was killed remains undetermined. Yu Tsun's hypothetical version might be partial, but the editor's version may have been manipulated by official sources in order to enable the agent to plead self-defense. I think that the *fabula* allows us to choose between the two versions—self-defense and murder—with the result that no assertion, fictional or factual, can be left undisputed, even though some assertions seem to be more credible than others.

This last point illustrates a property of possible worlds semantics: the fact that, in some cases, it is possible to establish a hierarchy between opposing statements concerning the *fabula*, while in other cases we must accept the existence of multiple alternative worlds, since they cannot be reduced to mutually exclusive versions. This plurality of worlds can also be related to the history of narrative forms. As stated by Françoise Lavocat: "if the work stipulates the existence of many possible worlds, their modalities of engendering and configuration differ according to historical periods" (2010, 8; translation mine). Hilary Dannenberg also suggests that "An analysis of the historical development of plot shows how, with the rise of the novel, more sophisticated plots develop involving the *temporal orchestration* of alternate world versions: more than one version of the past or future is suggested as a possibility by the text" (2004, 161).[2] In this case, we could state that the indeterminate elements in Borges's story partly result from the fact that it was written in the middle of the twentieth century and that it is a parody of the paranoid genre of spy stories. Indeed, Dannenberg adds that "Fictional genres across the board, whether realist, semi-realist (fantasy, science fiction) or

---

[2]   Here, we can historicize what Brian Richardson defines as "unnatural narratives": those "representations that contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic conventions and the practices of realism" (2015, 3).

anti-realist (metafictional), all use alternate possible worlds, but with differing forms of ontological hierarchy" (2004, 161).

Here again, we can stress that, at this level, we are concerned with "possible worlds" *asserted* by the fiction: worlds that can be multiple or single, indeterminate or finite, indecisive or hierarchical. Either we compare the fiction with an external referent—with infinite possibilities but at the same the uncountable constraints of the real world—or we aim to contrast different versions of the same fact inside the possible world of the fiction. And in the whole process, either we find a clear hierarchy between the alternatives or we don't. Now, I shall try to be more specific on the nature of other kinds of virtualities that can be actualized, implicitly or explicitly, by narrative fictions.

4. Virtualities Expressed by the Discourse

The first kind I shall comment on, and probably the most obvious one from a formalist perspective, is explicit description by the narrative of events that don't belong to the *fabula*. In 1988, Gerald Prince introduced the category of the "disnarrated" in order to deal with this narrative modality that departs from mere assertions. Prince's definition runs as follows: "the category of the disnarrated covers all the events that did not happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text" (1988, 2). Here, we see that we are dealing with virtualities that fully belong to the text. The fundamental criteria are based on the explicit nature of the virtuality and non-assertive tone of the discourse. The disnarrated can be either: (a) an unrealized possibility imagined by a character; (b) a forking path in the realm of the possible outlined by the narrator; or (c) a narrative possibility not chosen by the creator of the textual universe but which is mentioned by an authorial voice. In "The Garden of Forking Paths," we can find examples of such disnarration actualized by the main character. The first example expresses a false guess about the antagonist, the other a hope about the future:

> For one instant, I feared that Richard Madden had somehow seen through my desperate plan, but I soon realized that that was impossible. (Borges 1999 [1941], 122)
> I told myself that my duel had begun, and that in dodging my adversary's thrust—even by forty minutes, even thanks to the slightest smile from fate— the first round had gone to me. I argued that this small win prefigured total victory. I argued that the win was not really even so small, since without the precious hour that the trains had given me, I'd be in goal, or dead. I argued

(no less sophistically) that my cowardly cheerfulness proved that I was a man
capable of following this adventure to its successful end. (121)

In both cases, we see a sharp discrepancy between the hope of the
character and the knowledge expressed by the narrator, since the latter
knows retrospectively that things will end up tragically. But the narrator
can also express his opinion about alternatives in the past, as in the
following statement: "Madden's presence in Viktor Runeberg's flat meant
the end of our efforts and (though this seemed to me quite secondary, or
should have seemed) our lives as well" (119).

5. Virtualities Shaped by the Characters and Belonging to the *Fabula*

Marie-Laure Ryan has proposed a different way of dealing with
virtualities. She is not concerned with the problem of describing all kinds
of virtualities expressed by narrative discourse, but rather with analyzing
the links between the "tellability" of the *fabula* and its logical complexity:

> [T]ellability is rooted in conceptual and logical complexity, and […] the
> complexity of a plot depends on an underlying system of purely virtual
> embedded narratives. Embedded narratives […] are the story-like constructs
> contained in the private worlds of characters. These constructs include not
> only the dreams, fictions, and fantasies conceived or told by characters, but
> any kind of representation concerning past or future states or events: plans,
> passive projections, desires, beliefs […]. Among these embedded narratives,
> some reflect the events of the factual domain, while others delineate
> unactualized possibilities. (Ryan 1991, 156)

As summarized by Dannenberg, Ryan (in contrast to Prince) "admits
counterfactual worlds into this category only if they are a product of the
speculative activity of a character" (Dannenberg 2004, 172). Indeed, Ryan
argues that "the disnarrated [produced by the narrator] could be deleted
from the text without consequence for the logical coherence of the
narrative events" (1991, 169). Additionally, she also includes implicit
virtualities that must be reconstructed by the reader, as for example when
a character's intention is not specified. In the example already mentioned,
Yu Tsun makes a supposition concerning the past based on information
that he has just received: "Madden's presence in Viktor Runeberg's flat
[…] meant that Runeberg had been arrested, or murdered" (Borges 1999
[1941], 119). These suppositions (even though some of them are proven
to be false) are extremely important in order to understand the course of

the narration, since the future actions of the protagonist are based on this diagnosis concerning the past. The second example shows an explicit intention of the protagonist, the narrator explaining that it won't be followed by action:

> Something—perhaps the mere show of proving that my resources were non-existent—made me look through my pockets. I found what I knew I would find: the American watch, the nickel-platted chain and the quadrangular coin, the key ring with the comproming and useless keys to Runeberg's flat, the notebook, *a letter which I resolved to destroy at once (and never did)*. (120, emphasis added)

The last example refers to a "plan" that is mentioned, though not explicitly, since, to preserve narrative interest, it is not yet revealed how the goal will be achieved:

> If only my throat, before a bullet crushed it, could cry out that name so that it might be heard in Germany. But my human voice was terribly inadequate. […] I vaguely reflected that a pistol shot can be heard at a considerable distance. In ten minutes my plan was ripe. The telephone book gave me the name of the only person able to communicate the information: he lived in a suburb of Fenton, less than a half hour away by train. (120)

In distinguishing "tellability" from "strategic point," Ryan highlights the difference between narrative interest that relies on the complexity of the plan devised by the character and interest that relies on discourse strategies, for example the fact that the plan is momentarily unclear for the reader:

> Narrative suspense derives, for instance, from the confrontation of characters of limited foresight and a reader who anticipates—correctly or not—the situations into which they should run. The reverse strategy is also an efficient way to capture the reader's interest: delaying the reader's understanding of a sequence of actions by preventing access to the set of embedded narratives that motivate the agent. While the plot sets up a field of possibilities, the strategies of narrative discourse may guide the reader along certain paths. (Ryan 1991, 174)

Ryan stresses the differences between virtualities shaped by the characters and those shaped by readers. This brings us to the next stage of our investigation. Here, the focus will be on gaps in the narrative that elicit

active participation on the part of the interpreter by making inferential walks into the woods of the fiction.

6. Virtualities Shaped by the Reader and their Esthetic Effects

Several narratologists have distinguished between two types of narrative interest according to the temporal orientation of the virtual scenarios shaped by the readers. The first was Tzvetan Todorov, who made this distinction with regard to detective fiction:

> The first can be called *curiosity*, it works from effects to causes: starting from a certain effect (a corpse and some clues), we must find its cause (the culprit and what drove him to the crime). The second form is *suspense*, and it works from causes to effects: first we are introduced with the causes, initial data (some gangsters who prepare a mischief), and our interest is elicited by the expectation of what will happen, in other words, the effects (corpses, crimes, clashes). (Todorov 1971, 60; translation mine)

Of course, this distinction can be generalized far beyond the scope of detective stories, and Dannenberg argues that "complex novels involve the interweaving of possible versions of both past and future world" (2004, 160). Along the same lines, authors such as Meir Sternberg (1978), Peter Brooks (1984) and James Phelan (1989) have investigated the links between the affective engagements of the reader and progression in the text, including analysis of the strategies used to "generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interests in narratives" (Phelan 1989, 15). Among these strategies, Sternberg focuses especially on "expositional modes and temporal ordering" that can be linked to suspense, curiosity and surprise, considered as universal functions of narratives.

I won't discuss here the differences between these authors, but I want to stress that, overall, their theories are limited to considering the relations between certain narrative techniques and the two major kinds of interpretive procedures that they elicit in the reading process: *prospection* and *retrospection*. Other studies have taken a more adventurous path by trying to provide a description of *how* prospection and retrospection are transformed into concrete hypothetical scenarios in the reader's mind. Umberto Eco (1984) opened this field of investigation up by linking the inferential walks of readers with modal logic, possible worlds semantics, Peircean semiotics and the more general notion of encyclopedia. Eco was building on the pioneering works of Thomas Pavel (1975) and Lucia Vaina (1977), but his model already comprised three levels: 1) the

possible worlds asserted by the author; 2) the possible worlds shaped by the characters; and 3) the possible worlds inferred by readers based on "common" and "intertextual frames" (Eco 1984, 32).

Since then, Bertrand Gervais (1990) and David Herman (1997), among others, have adopted cognitive models developed in AI studies to describe how our knowledge about the logic of actions can shape how we interpret narratives. Among these frames we find notions like "scripts" and the schematization of intentional actions. According to these studies, narrative interest results from destabilizing a stereotyped situation,[3] and its development generally involves the realization of a more or less complex series of planned actions leading to a specific goal. Emma Kafalenos (2006) has also used an abstract model, inspired by Propp's functions, in order to define the causal configurations that readers build progressively while they progress through the text. Building on Sternberg's model, Kafalenos especially highlights the effect of deferred or suppressed information on this ever-changing reconstruction of the story logic. In other models, authors have stressed the intertextual knowledge that orient the inferential walks of the readers. Among them, John Pier has shown that "intertextual frames" (2004, 240) contribute to narrative configurations on the basis of abductions concerning the past, present and future of the *fabula*. In *La Tension narrative*, I have combined these different perspectives: the rhetorical investigation of textual devices arousing narrative interest together with a description of the anticipations entertained by interpreters in the process of narrative configuration, including the full range of "endo-narrative skills"[4] (semantics of action) and "transtextual knowledge" (Baroni 2007, Ch. 3–4).

Let us see now how this approach can be applied to our case. From the perspective of Yu Tsun, his spying activity is a routine regulated by scripts. The revelation of his identity opens a less predictable development and thus increases the interest of the narrative progression. From this point, the story revolves around two parallel goals, which involve the planning of a series of actions: the first, seemingly impossible, is to escape the deadly chase by Captain Richard Madden; the second (that will be successful) is to convey secret information to a distant recipient.[5] The difficulty of the task builds suspense in the chronological

---

[3]   On stereotypes, see also Dufays (2010).

[4]   For my use of AI studies, see Baroni (2002). For the relation between intertextual and actional frames, see Baroni (2005, 2016).

[5]   It can be noted that the "quest" of the hero is both successful and unsuccessful, adding coextensive virtualities to the story.

unfolding of the narration. In addition, the strategic delay of the revelation of the plan devised by the protagonist, as already mentioned, helps to increase narrative tension (in this case curiosity) by urging the reader to make hypotheses concerning *how* the goal might be achieved. The genre of "spy stories" also provides useful configurations which help the reader to explore the virtualities of the narrative. For example, we recognize that the "transmission of a secret" and the "chase" are stereotypes usually found in this narrative genre, enabling us to refer to previous fictions in order to formulate hypotheses as to how the conflict may develop or how it may be resolved. The genre also induces indeterminacies in the virtual scenarios of the reader, since stereotypical spy stories involve the paranoid assumption that no one should be trusted and that the final resolution must be unexpected.

Ryan mentions yet another important aspect concerning the virtualities shaped by readers, namely, their resistance to reiteration: "Even after the possible has been exhausted by the actualization of a certain course of action, the interpreter revisits mentally the paths that have fallen into the domain of the counterfactual, so as to assess the ethical or strategic decisions of the character, as well as the aesthetic decisions of the author" (Ryan 2005b, 628). In an involuntarily ironical statement, Doctor Albert says: "Time forks, perpetually, into countless futures. In one of them, I am your enemy" (Borges 1999 [1941], 127). And Yu Tsun replies, just before killing his interlocutor: "But I am your friend" (127). I think that the reader will have to admit that in the possible worlds of the fiction, Stephen Albert and his guest were both friends and enemies at the same time and also that, even if the crime has been committed (and the future is already written), Yu Tsun could or should have spared his friend. This is precisely this alternative that makes the crime of Yu Tsun an "abhorrent" triumph, causing "endless contrition" and "weariness." So an ethical judgment is always combined with the comparison between what happened in the *fabula* and what else could have happened.

7. The Theory of Possible Texts

A study of all forms of virtualities that can be associated with stories would be incomplete if we only considered virtual paths that are intentionally incorporated into the text by the author. Marc Escola sees the possibility for a new kind of critic, called the "interfering critic" (critique interventionniste), inspired by the works of Pierre Bayard, a scholar who wrote academic bestsellers such as *Sherlock Holmes Was*

Wrong: Reopening the Case of the Hound of the Baskervilles, and *How to Improve Failed Literary Works*.

> The contributors to this *Theory of Possible Texts* have learned from P. Bayard that a reader is under no obligation to adopt the conclusions which the author claims to be the final ones, that literary criticism can be a continuation of the creation by other means, and that ultimately there is not a big gap between the reading of a work and its reinvention or its refection. (Escola 2012, 10; translation mine)

We can apply this "theory of possible texts" to Borges's story in various ways. For example, when we read that the first two pages of Yu Tsun's deposition are missing, we can suppose that this hidden part of the story might shed an unexpected light on the events. Some creative readers may even try to write or comment on these missing pages, and by doing so, invent an alternative version of the facts. We might also focus on apparent inconsistencies in the story. For example, we can cast doubt on the truthfulness of Yu Tsun's confession by pointing out the unlikely coincidence that the victim, chosen at random in a telephone book, turns out to be linked to his killer in a surprising way. The story would then have to be rewritten according to a more credible scenario. After all, the whole deposition of the narrator could be a lie, a complete invention in order to protect some darker secrets (maybe Doctor Albert was an accomplice who had to be killed for some other reason). Here, we are still talking about the virtualities of the narrative, but the initiative has been transferred from the text (and the hypothetical intention of an implied author) to an empirical reader, who can exploit or comment on the text and make it take unexpected directions.

8. Is Contemporary Narratology a Garden of Forking Paths?

Of course, the virtualities of narratives represent only one issue among many others for contemporary narratology. At the same time, I think that the epistemological problems raised by the various ways that virtualities have been dealt with casts light on a number of important issues faced by the discipline in its recent history. As I have shown, research on narrative virtualities is itself a kind of garden of forking paths. What looked, at first sight, like a simple problem, has produced a number of distinct, and sometimes opposed, theories. Tensions may occur when different paradigms describe similar phenomena, for example when a disnarrated event is also an embedded narrative in the form of character discourse and

a virtuality that the reader might ponder in the course of reading. In some works, we can observe a kind of continuity in the history of narratology. By expanding on the formalist notion of *fabula*, Ryan has only added to its complexity by exploring the virtualities shaped by the characters. We can also consider Prince's concept of disnarration as a mere expansion of the taxonomy of narrative "figures" developed by classical narratology (especially in Genette's works). In both cases, we find once again the old distinction between *story* and *discourse* reinterpreted in the light of the virtualities of narration.

On the other hand, many works dealing with virtualities, including Ryan's, have crossed an additional threshold by linking narrative structures to the function they play in discursive interaction. Despite a proliferation of epistemologies (functionalism, constructivism, rhetoric, cognitive science, etc.) in their midst, postclassical narratologies converge by stating that in order to understand the dynamics of plots, we must take into account the "dialectical interplay between narrative and consciousness" (Herman 2007, 257). Here, two attitudes are possible: the first, advocated by James Phelan, is to admit that, from a rhetorical perspective, we are dealing with some kind of "authorial audience," one that realizes the intention of an "implied author." In this case, there is no reason to turn our back on earlier perspectives because the virtualities that belong to the logic of the *fabula,* and those expressed by the narrative discourse, must in some way shape the inferences of this ideal audience. To these perspectives must be added the extratextual knowledge that comes into play when a reader fills the gaps of the narrative, or when s/he tries to predict its unfolding by resorting to scripts, the logic of intentional actions, stereotypes, intertextuality, generic knowledge and so on. It must also be admitted that all readers are not equal when it comes to mobilizing extratextual knowledge in an attempt to explore the virtualities of a text.

The second attitude would be to focus on empirical audiences. Here, the clash with old paradigms appears to be more obvious. As stated by Michael Toolan, "The difficult and interesting question is not *whether* readers experience surprise, evasion, predictability, etc., but pinpointing the conditions, generalizable beyond a case-by-case annotation, conducive to those conditions. Are the conditions specifiable in formal terms at all?" (2004, 220). This question is still an open one, I think. Some, like Umberto Eco (1984) or Wolfgang Iser (1978 [1976]), believe that the "model reader" or the "implied reader" is mostly a construction of the text and also that this abstraction is a good approximation of

statistically homogenous empirical readers.[6] Others have stressed the initiative of the *empirical reader* and the unpredicatiblity of his or her interpretations.

Herman has stated that "In 1983, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan […] expressed hope that deconstruction, at that time a comparatively new development on the theoretical scene, might enrich narrative theory rather than render it obsolete" (1999, 1). My opinion is that, thirty years later, while postclassical studies have embraced new perspectives far beyond the mere description of formal attributes of narratives, the trench between two major currents of narrative theories still depends on how we deal with the "challenge" of deconstruction. Is contemporary narratology entering in a period of consolidation or diversification? It all depends on the way we look at the garden of forking paths, what might be called one's "narratological posture." In the first case, we can have a global look at the garden as a whole and consider every path as an interesting heuristic way to enlighten the innumerable virtualities of narration. Of course, in each part of the garden the kind of virtualities we are dealing with looks quite different. But it is possible to admit that these different paths are complementary perspectives on a complex issue. From this standpoint, we need to take a long walk to explore every corner of the garden, drawing a map to see where we've come from and where we stand and to get an idea of the regions that still need to be explored. This is the posture adopted by Hilary Dannenberg when she expresses the hope for "a comprehensive model of the counterfactual in fiction" (2004, 172). I think Herman shares the same view when he says "Rethinking the problem of narrative sequences can promote the development of a postclassical narratology that is not necessarily poststructuralist, an enriched theory that draws on concepts and methods to which the classical narratologists did not have access" (1997, 1048–1049).

Others, however, prefer to stress the conflicting nature of the different perspectives. Sternberg has formulated radical criticisms concerning formalism and cognitivism[7]. According to him, these approaches are unable to reflect the true complexity of narrative structures and the multiplicity of their possible effects on empirical readers. He also considers that the functionalist paradigm is not simply a new layer in a continuous narratological history, but a completely different way of

---

[6]   Eco (1984, 261–262) contains an example of such a statistical verification of "model reading."

[7]   For a critique of formalism, see Sternberg (2011, 43), and for a critique of cognitivism, see Sternberg (2003).

approaching narrative phenomena: "I do not want to overdramatize matters, but it comes to an either/or choice. Indeed, the trouble with some people who have taken up my approach, to this day, is that they want to hold on somehow to the bad good old formalism, to the old French structuralism" (Sternberg 2011, 43).

For Emma Kafalenos, when we distance ourselves from a formalist description, we inevitably have to deal with the complexity of empirical interpretations: "I emphasize the instability of a fabula as it grows and expands during the process of reading, and I propose that contradictions […] permit readers of narratives to participate in an endless play of signification. Such a view supports a theoretical position that narrative is not a univocal mode of communication" (1999, 60). We can also point to the fact that the "possible texts" theory developed by French critics such as Pierre Bayard or Marc Escola clearly exceeds the scope of both formal and functionalist narratologies, since it is clearly oriented toward the infinite production of commentaries and alternative stories.

When dealing with non-literary texts, things might look quite different. It is clear that in digital media, especially in videogames where the player has the choice of several alternatives for continuing the story, the status of what belongs to the *fabula*, and of what is counterfactual, changes completely. Moreover, transfictional worlds (cf. Saint-Gelais 2011) such as the world of *Starwars*, created by Georges Lucas and now proliferating in a wide variety of products including cartoons, comics, novels, videogames, fanfictions, etc., open up new perspectives by integrating into a single storyworld a potentially infinite range of "possible narratives." Whether the form and functioning of these storyworlds constitute something which is radically new or whether they perpetuate traditional forms of narrative in a new guise is still an open question.[8] Here are clearly a few new challenges for contemporary narratology.

In conclusion, I think that the richness of narrative theory can be attributed to the coexistence of contradictory pathways, thus providing the discipline with the right balance between forays into previously unexplored landscapes and the possibility of capitalizing on a long tradition in narrative studies and theory as well as with the continual necessity of engaging in discussion concerning the modalities of exploration, the validity of epistemological perspectives and methodologies. In any case, Thomas Pavel captures one of the common

---

[8]   For Ryan (2006a), such fictions are a continuation of the tradional forms.

principles that all contemporary narratologists would probably agree with, whatever their differences:

> To fully account for our relationship with fiction, it is not enough to identify what *is*, but it is also particularly important to consider the inferences caused by fiction. These inferences, like those of everyday life, unfold in a space of values, norms, and possible actions. (2010, 312; translation mine)

Works Cited

Baroni, Raphaël. 2002. "Le rôle des scripts dans le récit." *Poétique* 129: 93–114.
———. 2005. "Compétences des lecteurs et schèmes séquentiels." *Littérature* 137: 111–128.
———. 2007. *La Tension narrative. Suspense, curiosité et surprise.* Paris: Seuil.
———. 2016. "Virtualities of Plot and the dynamics of Rereading." In *Narrative Sequence in Contemporary Narratology*, edited by Raphaël Baroni and Françoise Revaz, 87–103. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
Bayard, Pierre. 2000. *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées?* Paris: Minuit.
———. 2008 (2008). *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong. Reopening the Case of the Hound of the Baskerville*. Translated by Charlotte Mandel. New York: Bloomsbury.
Borges, Jorge. 1999 "The Garden of Forking Paths." In J.B. *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, 119–128. London: Penguin.
Brooks, Peter. 1992. *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative.* Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press.
Dannenberg, Hilary P. 2004. "Ontological Plotting: Narrative as a Multiplicity of Temporal Dimensions." In Pier, ed., 159–189.
———. 2008. *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
Dufays, Jean-Louis. 2010. *Stéréotype et lecture*. Bruxelles, etc.: Peter Lang.
Eco, Umberto. 1984. *The Role of the Reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Escola, Marc, ed. 2012. *Théorie des textes possibles*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.
Gervais, Bertrand. 1990. *Récits et actions.* Longueuil: Le Préambule.
Herman, David. 1997. "Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology." *PMLA* 112 (5): 1046–1059.
———. 1999. "Introduction." In Herman, ed., 1–30.
———. 2002. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
———. 2007. "Cognition, emotion, and consciousness." In D.H. *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, 245–259. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———, ed. 1999. *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

Herman, David, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds. 2005. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London and New York: Routledge.

Iser, Wolfgang. 1978 [1976]. *Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Reception*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kafalenos, Emma. 1999. "Not (Yet) Knowing: Epistemological Effects of Deferred and Suppressed Information in Narrative." In Herman, ed., 33–65.

———. 2001. "Editor's Column." *Narrative* 9: 113–114.

———. 2006. *Narrative Causalities*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

Lavocat, Françoise. 2010. "Avant-propos." In Lavocat, ed., 5–11.

———, ed. 2010. *La Théorie littéraire des mondes possibles*. Paris: CNRS Editions.

Moulthrop, Stuart. 1991. "Reading From the Map: Metonymy and Metaphor in the Fiction of 'Forking Paths'." In *Hypermedia and Literary Studies*, edited by Paul Delany et al., 119–132. Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press.

Pavel, Thomas. 1975. "Possible Worlds in Literary Semantics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (6): 165–176.

———. 2010. "Univers de fiction: un parcours personnel." In Lavocat, ed., 307–313.

Phelan, James. 1989. *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Pier, John. 2004. "Narrative Configurations." In Pier, ed., 239–265.

———, ed. 2004. *The Dynamics of Narrative Form: Studies in Anglo-American Narratology*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter.

Prince, Gerald. 1988. "The Disnarrated." *Style* 22: 1–8.

Richardson, Brian. 2015. *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 1991. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

———. 2005a. "Possible-Worlds Theory." In Herman et al., eds., 446–450.

———. 2005b. "Virtuality." In Herman et al., eds., 627–629.

———. 2006a. "From Parallel Universes to Possible Worlds: Ontological Pluralism in Physics, Narratology, and Narrative." *Poetics Today* 27 (4): 633–674.

———. 2006b. *Avatars of Story*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Saint-Gelais, Richard. 2011. *Fictions Transfuges*. Paris: Seuil.

Sternberg, Meir. 1993. *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

———. 2003. "Universals of Narrative and their Cognitivist Fortunes (II)." *Poetics Today* 24 (3): 517–638.

———. 2011. "Reconceptualizing Narratology. Arguments for a Functionalist and Constructivist Approach to Narrative." *Enthymema* 4: 35–50. http://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema/article/view/1186 (Accessed 25 November 2015)

Todorov, Tzvetan. 1971. *Poétique de la Prose*. Paris: Seuil.

Toolan, Michael. 2004. "Graded Expectations: On the Textual and Structural Shaping of Readers' Narrative Experience." In Pier, ed., 215–235.

Vaina, Lucia. 1977. "Les mondes possibles du texte." *Versus* 17: 3–13.