1 Texts, Worlds, Stories
Narrative Worlds as Cognitive and Ontological Concept

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Every period in literary theory (or should I say in the humanities) has its favorite concepts. In the fifties and sixties, under the influence of Saussure's linguistics, we witnessed a so-called "language turn" that inspired structuralism, semiotics, New Criticism, and deconstruction and placed the notion of text or textuality at the center of attention. With its emphasis on the signifier, at the expense of the signified, this movement regarded the literary text as the gate to a meaning that was absolutely unique to it; it assumed (more or less tacitly) that if you changed a single word, the entire meaning was changed. When the term *world* was used, the textualist school meant some kind of infinite sum of meanings that could not be paraphrased (a favourite battle cry of New Criticism was indeed: "The heresy of paraphrase")[1]. It follows from these positions that the text was the only mode of access to its world. Because textualism is reluctant to isolate a narrative level of meaning from the global textual world, it implicitly adhered to a strict formula: 1 text—1 world—1 story.

After the linguistic turn came the narrative turn of the eighties, and "narrative" or "story" became prominent. One of the effects of the narrative turn was a shift of focus from the signifier to the signified. While stories are transmitted by discourse, which means by text, they remain inscribed in our mind long after the signifiers have vanished from memory. This means that a story is a cognitive rather than a linguistic construct. The fact that stories can be summarized, adapted, and translated, and that they can be told by various media, emancipates them from language and makes them somewhat independent from the particular signs through which they are transmitted. The structuralist idea that *Cinderella* and a Chinese folk tale can be versions of the same story, which was heretic for textualism (Smith 1981), becomes very acceptable for a narratologist. Instead of 1 text, 1 world, 1 story, one could now have the possibility of many texts—1 world—1 story.

As narratology has expanded from literature to other disciplines and media, we have seen the emergence of yet another theoretical concept, the concept of "world." In earlier days, "world" was a totality of meanings associated with authors or with genres. Critics would speak of "the world of Proust" or "the world of Kafka" or even "the world of epic poetry," meaning by this a distinctive set of values, themes, or objects of thought. In its new

narratological use, "world" is no longer the world of an author or of a genre, but rather the world of a story—literally a "storyworld." It combines a spatial dimension, the setting, and a temporal dimension, the narrative events.

The new theoretical prominence of the concept of world further weakens the formula 1 text—1 world—1 story. Contemporary culture, whether popular or highbrow, practices an aesthetics of proliferation that implements the full range of possible relations among text, world, and story. This proliferation can take several forms. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the first two.

- Narrative proliferation: a world with many stories.
- Ontological proliferation: a story (or a text) with many worlds.
- Textual and medial proliferation: many different texts targeting the same world, especially texts of different media. This is the phenomenon currently known as transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006).

As the Czech narratologist Jirí Koten (2010) observes, the narratological concept of world can be traced back to two lines of ancestry. When we speak of *storyworld* the influence comes mainly from cognitive approaches to narrative (Herman 2009), while when we speak of fictional world the influence comes from schools and disciplines interested in the ontological status of imaginary entities: philosophy of language, formal semantics, and more particularly possible worlds theory (Pavel 1986; Doležel 1998; Ryan 1991). Yet the association between storyworld/cognitive approach and fictional world/ontological approach should not be taken in an exclusive sense, for storyworlds can raise ontological issues, and the recognition and evaluation of fictional worlds involve cognitive operations.

The concern of the cognitive perspective is self-evident: It asks how the mind constructs stories and their world(s), either as an encoding, productive activity or as a decoding, interpretive activity. While the first of these questions has received in the past a lot of speculative attention by authors and philosophers interested in the nature of creativity, especially under the influence of Romanticism and its cult of genius, our far more empirically minded period has overwhelmingly focused on the second, because it is much more amenable to experimentation, or at least to self-examination. Few critics are creators, but all of them can ask: What goes on in my mind when I read (watch, play with) a narrative text? In contrast to the cognitive perspective, which focuses, at least in principle, on operations that every interpreter performs, the ontological perspective asks theoretical questions that go far beyond the concerns of ordinary people. These questions concern the nature, or mode of existence, of creations of the imagination. We can read/watch/play stories, especially fictional ones, without asking ourselves about the ontological status of the characters (or objects) that occupy our thoughts or about the relations between their world and the world we live in; yet insofar as stories can contain many worlds, and worlds with

various existential modalities (material, imagined, dreamed, feared, desired, anticipated, etc.), the recognition of these ontological differences and of the borders that separate them (borders occasionally transgressed) is an integral part of the cognitive processing of stories. Ontological questions, therefore, can dovetail with cognitive ones, and they are not necessarily abstruse metaphysical issues raised for the pure pleasure of theoretical debate.

STORYWORLDS

The concept of world is intuitively very accessible. The nine definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary reveal two dominant themes: world as a *planet* (preferably the planet Earth, but there are also extra-terrestrial worlds), and world as a *totality of things*, as "everything that exists." In this second sense "world" becomes synonymous with "universe." Of these two conceptions the second is more useful to narratology, since a theoretical concept of world should apply equally well to a narrative of space travel, such as *Star Wars*, and a narrative that focuses on a small area, such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857).

The totality conception of world is particularly useful in the case of storyworld. A storyworld is not just the spatial setting where a story takes place; it is a complex spatio-temporal totality that undergoes global changes. Put more simply, a storyworld is an imagined totality that evolves according to the events in the story. To follow a story means to simulate mentally the changes that take place in the storyworld, using the cues provided by the text. However, this rough definition leaves some questions unanswered. For instance: Does the concept of storyworld apply to all narratives or only to fictional ones? For nonfiction, could one simply say that the storyworld is the world of the text, this is to say, the real world? I believe that a distinction should be made between storyworld and reference world. A text of nonfiction describes the real world, but it may do so more or less accurately and always incompletely. Imagine that a text of nonfiction presents a distorted, false, or deliberately inaccurate version of reality—in other words, that it tells lies. In this case the audience may be capable of making a distinction between the world projected by the text—the storyworld—and the world that serves as referent. When a story is told as fiction, however, the storyworld cannot be distinguished from the reference world, since the story creates its own world. While in nonfiction the storyworld provides information that can be integrated into our representation of reality, at least if we believe it; in fiction, we construct the storyworld largely for its own sake.

Another problematic issue concerns what kind of information belongs to the storyworld and what kind does not. Extending Gérard Genette's typology of narrators (1972, 256), we can distinguish two types of narrative elements: *intradiegetic* elements, which exist within the storyworld, and *extradiegetic* elements, which are not literally part of the storyworld

but play a crucial role in its presentation. Storyworlds are larger than what is directly shown in the text, larger than the narrative "here" and "now." Let's take the example of drama. It frames a certain time span, and it shows events that take place in a specific location, the location that occupies the stage, but the storyworld also includes events that precede the beginning of the action, as well as events that do not take place on stage but are narrated by the characters. The same distinction can occur in novels, for instance in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925): The novel takes place over a single day, and its setting is London, but it references many events that precede that day and that take place elsewhere, for instance the traumatic World War I experience of Septimus Smith. In other words, storyworlds encompass not only the story *per se*, but also the backstory, and sometimes the after-story (such as the later life of the protagonists, as represented in epilogues), and not only the scene of the story, but all the places that characters think or talk about. Storyworlds should therefore be divided into an inner circle occupied by the events that constitute the focus of the story and an outer circle that represents a larger spatial and temporal frame (Figure 1.1).
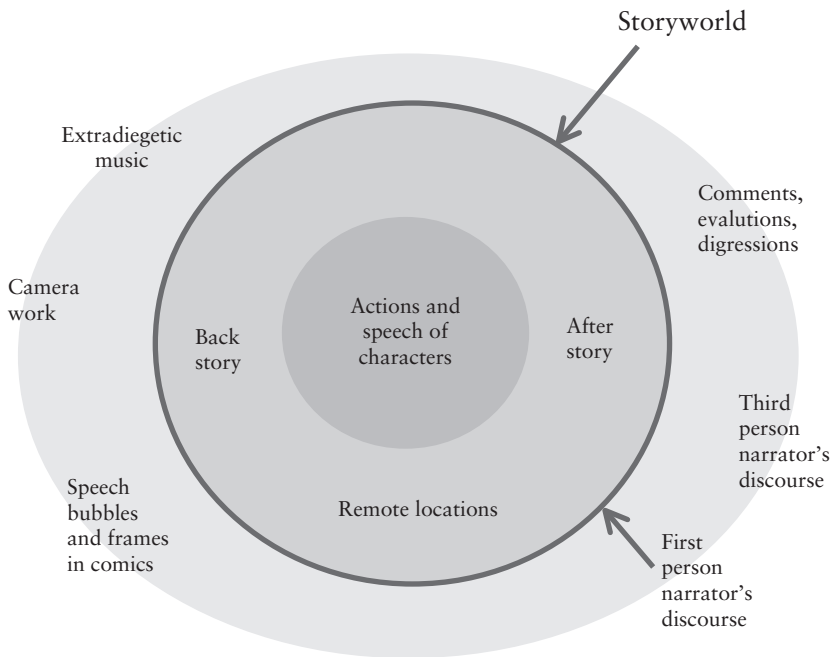

Figure 1.1 The scope of storyworlds.

Let's now return to the difference between intradiegetic and extradiegetic elements. A good example of this difference is the sound track of movies. Film theorists have long been aware of the distinction between diegetic music—music that originates inside the storyworld and is perceived by

the characters—and extradiegetic music, which controls the expectations and emotions of the spectator but does not exist within the storyworld. In drama, the objects on the stage are (normally) part of the storyworld, but the stage directions are not; they are rather instructions by the author on how to put together a storyworld. In literary narrative, the speech of characters is clearly part of the storyworld, but the status of the discourse of the narrator is more problematic. Here we can distinguish three possibilities.

First, there is what Genette calls *intradiegetic narrators* (1972, 256), such as Emma Dean in *Wuthering Heights* (1847). These narrators are individuated characters who tell about their own life or about events they have witnessed. Their discourse is not the main support of the narration; rather, it is quoted by the main narrator. Since their act of telling is witnessed by other characters and may influence future events, it is clearly part of the storyworld. The discourse of these intradiegetic narrators is just an extended case of character speech. Another type of narrator that can be assimilated to the case of the intradiegetic narrator is the letter writers in epistolary novels. Their act of narration is clearly an event within the storyworld, since their letters can be intercepted by other characters and influence future events.

Second, there is the case of regular first-person narrators—narrators who are individuated characters, who appear as characters in the story, and whose discourse is the main support of narration, such as Robinson Crusoe in the eponymous novel by Daniel Defoe. These narrators exist as individuals within the storyworld, but their discourse is not perceived by the other characters, and it has no effect on the evolution of the storyworld. This is why Genette (1972, 256) calls these narrators extradiegetic. Their act of narration is what makes it possible for the reader to imagine the storyworld, but it is not an event within the story, and most of the time it does not imitate a distinct nonfictional ("natural," some narratologists would say) type of discourse, such as diary, testimony, or autobiography. Quite often in first-person narration we cannot tell if the narrator is speaking, writing, or just thinking. If it sounds paradoxical to regard standard first-person narrators as extradiegetic, compare their discourse with the camera in film. The camera in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) is what makes it possible to see the landing on Omaha Beach, but we certainly do not imagine that there was a camera and a cameraman on the Omaha Beach of the storyworld. The paradox of a narrator who exists in the storyworld, while his discourse is not part of the story, can be resolved by the well-known narratological distinction between the experiencing I, the narrator as character, and the narrating I, the narrator as camera. Another way to handle this paradox is to regard the narrator's discourse as ontologically part of the extended time frame, while the events represented by this discourse belong cognitively to the narrow time frame. The narrator, consequently, is situated at the outer edge of the outer circle.

The third case concerns impersonal third-person narrators, who often narrate from an omniscient perspective. These narrators clearly do not exist

in the storyworld, since they are not individuated, and if they do not exist as individuals, neither does their discourse. My personal inclination is to consider such narrators as disembodied entities whose function is that of a logical placeholder: They vouch for the (fictional) truth of their assertions; in fact they guarantee it, since they possess the highest degree of narratorial authority (Doležel 1998), but they do not exist as flesh and blood persons.[2] The position I am defending stands halfway between the non-narrator theories of third-person narration, proposed by Ann Banfield (1982), Richard Walsh (2007, chapter 4) and Sylvie Patron (2009), and theories that regard these narrators as individuals with distinct genders and personalities and the supernatural ability to read other people's minds and move freely within the storyworld, allowing a given object to be represented from various spatial points of view. I do not see how a narrator could both present individuating human properties and non-human abilities,[3] but this paradoxical combination of features is entailed by the position of those critics who regard third-person omniscient narrators as embodied persons. Moreover, I do not believe that it is necessary to assign the same ontological status to the narrator throughout a text. A good example is the narrator of *Madame Bovary*, who starts out as a schoolmate of Charles Bovary, but then disintegrates into an impersonal omniscient narrator. All in all, the mode of existence of the third-person narrator is typical of the kind of ontological question that fascinates theorists (cf. the passionate debates raised in the eighties by Banfield's proposal, recently revived, with equal passion, by Patron), but that ordinary readers do not have to consider.

FICTIONAL WORLDS

While the concept of storyworld transcends the distinction fiction/nonfiction, the concept of fictional world is constituted by its difference from the real world, a difference that lies in its mode of existence, or ontological status. The main source of inspiration for capturing this ontological status has been the philosophical concept of possible world. For possible worlds theory (also known as modal logic), a world is defined over a set of mutually compatible propositions. One way to conceive of the mode of existence, or more precisely the coming-into-being of possible worlds, is to associate them with future states of the real world. Out of a common matrix of truth values that defines the world of the present, different future worlds can be created by changing the value of one or more propositions. In accordance with the central tenet of possible worlds theory—which claims that there can be only one actual or real world from a given point of view—one of these worlds will become actual, while the others will remain unrealised possibilities. This conception of possible worlds is fundamental to strategic planning, since the basis of rational action is the computation of the various states (=worlds) that can result from the planned action, as well as from other behaviours.

Another explanation for the existence of possible worlds situates their origin in an act of the mind, such as imagining, dreaming, hallucinating, … or producing fictions. If one applies this conception of possible worlds to narrative fiction, fictional worlds will be created by the mind of authors for the benefit of audiences. Readers, spectators, or players relocate themselves in imagination into these worlds, pretending that they are actual (Ryan 1991). In the best cases, this game of pretense results in an experience of immersion in the fictional world.

An issue that could receive different answers depending on whether one takes a cognitive or an ontological approach to fictional worlds is the question of what exists in them. Consider the minimal narrative proposed by E.M. Forster as an example of plot: "The king died, then the queen died of grief."[4] Does this story project a world that extends beyond the objects mentioned in the text, a world that contains other existents and events, or are the facts mentioned in the text all there is to the storyworld? In other words, is the narrative an incomplete description of a full storyworld, or is it a full description of an incomplete storyworld? For logicians, an incomplete object is an object that presents ontological gaps, which means that there are properties that this object neither has nor does not have, in violation of the principle of the excluded middle. One could represent an incomplete entity as a wheel of Swiss cheese: It has gaps that stand no chance of ever being filled, because they concern information that simply does not exist.

From a cognitive point of view, the answer to the fullness of fictional worlds depends on the texts' power of immersion. If a text manages to make a world present to the mind, inviting the user to imagine much more that its signs can describe or imply, then it projects a full world. What is not known about this world is not treated as ontological gaps, but as missing information. On the other hand, a text like "The king died" hinders immersion, because all it does is to ask readers to consider a set of propositions and their implications. While a full world can always yield more discoveries, a set of propositions is easily exhausted. We know all there is to know about "The king died" after a quick reading. No critic will write a long essay trying to interpret its world.

A purely ontological approach to the question of worldness, by contrast, wants an objective answer valid for all fictional texts, rather than a variable answer relying on a criterion as subjective as power of immersion. (You may find a text immersive while I find it exceedingly boring.) Partisans of incompleteness (e.g., Doležel) will argue that since texts are finite, but the propositions that describe a full world infinite in number, fictional texts can never list all the properties of a world or of its inhabitants, and they cannot, consequently, create ontologically full worlds. On the other hand, partisans of completeness will argue that if the properties of Forster's queen were those and only those specified by the text, she would be only a partial human being, able to experience love and grief over the loss of a loved one but no other emotion. The properties of being beautiful, nice, jealous, cruel,

or of having had children would be like holes in the Swiss cheese of her being since the text says nothing about these features, and she would be a very strange creature indeed, one that we cannot really imagine. To avoid this counterintuitive view, fictional characters and fictional worlds could be regarded as intentional objects of thought, brought to the reader's mind through a command to the imagination issued by the author. I doubt that it was Forster's intent to have the reader imagine a creature who is, on one hand, a human being but on the other hand lacks determination on most of the properties normally associated with human beings. Since Forster's text differs from realistic types of fiction in the number of objects it asks readers to imagine and in the quantity of information that it provides about these objects but not in the quality of this information, the ontological question must receive the same answer for Forster's story and for *War and Peace* (*Voina i mir*, 1869). The choices are: (1) All fictions that project a world project a complete world, because worlds are by definition complete; (2) fictions do not project worlds, but rather, assert a certain number of propositions on the basis of which readers form incomplete mental representations of existents; (3) fictions project "small worlds" (Eco 1990) consisting of relations among a limited number of existents, but within their perimeters, fictional worlds are imagined as ontologically complete. Applied to Forster's story this last solution (to which I am partial) yields: There is a world with a king and a queen who must be imagined on the model of real-world royalties, but there is nothing more in this world than the scenes described in the story. This solution ascribes a unified ontological status to all fictional worlds—they are all small, compared to the real world, but since their size varies with the amount of information provided by the text, they differ cognitively.

WORLD AS COGNITIVE *VS.* WORLD AS ONTOLOGICAL CONCEPT

To illustrate the distinction between a cognitive and an ontological conception of world, I propose to look at two fictions (or rather three). The first two are the novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004, by David Mitchell), which was made into a film in 2012, directed by Lana and Andy Wachowski and Tom Tykwer. Both the novel and the film consist of 6 separate stories, which take place at different times and in different locations. The first one concerns the journey of an American lawyer sailing from the South Pacific back to California in 1850; the second one is about a young musician who writes down scores for a famous composer in the 1930s in Belgium (though the film sets the story in England); the third is set in California in the seventies, and tells about a young reporter who investigates the attempts by a nuclear power company to cover up the dangerous flaws of the plant it is building; the fourth follows the misadventures of an elderly, eccentric book publisher who is committed

against his will to a nursing home in contemporary England; the fifth tells about a dystopic future society in Seoul, South Korea, where human beings can be cloned, and the clones are used as slaves; and the sixth, set in Hawaii in a very distant future, depicts how mankind has regressed to a primitive state after a mysterious event called The Fall.

From an ontological point of view, *Cloud Atlas* projects a (nearly) unified world. The six stories take place in different places, at different times, and involve different characters, but they do not represent mutually exclusive possibilities. Even though they are not linked to each other by relations of causality, we can imagine that the stories correspond to various moments in the history of the same global world, strung together like the beads of a necklace. The only exception is story 3, which is revealed in story 4 to be a novel and not an account of real events,[5] but when we read it for the first time, we take it as factual account. Indeed, the kind of events that it reports could very well happen in the same world as the other stories. The ontological connection of the stories is hinted at by the dominant themes of the narrative: the repeated claim that "everything is connected" and the presence of an identical birthmark on the shoulder of the main character of each story, which suggests that these characters are reincarnations of the same individual, despite their widely different personalities. In the movie, the theme of reincarnation is reinforced by the fact that the same actors play different roles in different stories, a device that would not be possible in a novel.

The unity of the text as a whole is further established by a system of embedding that locates each story as a material object within the next story. For instance, the text of the first story is the diary of a character named Adam Ewing. The hero of the second story, Robert Frobisher, discovers and reads this manuscript. Frobisher composes a musical work titled "Cloud Atlas," and writes a series of letters to his lover. Both of these media objects fall into the hands of Luisa Rey, the reporter of the third story. The Luisa Rey novels are read in story four. The memoir written by Timothy Cavendish in story five is filmed, and viewed by Sonmi-451, the heroine of story five. The confession she makes before being executed becomes the sacred text of the religion of story six. The fact that story three is a novel and consequently a fiction within a fiction rather than a representation of the same world as the other stories creates a breach in this neatly symmetrical pattern. If Luisa Rey is a character in a novel, how could she meet Sixtus Sixsmith, the lover of the now dead Robert Frobisher, both of whom belong to the fictionally real world, and how could she read in story three the letters addressed by Frobisher to Sixsmith in story two? Two answers can be proposed: (1) Frobisher and Sixsmith have counterparts in the fictional world of Luisa Rey, and the letters that Luisa discovers belong to these counterparts; or (2) thanks to a collapse of ontological boundaries, the fictional Luisa Rey is able to communicate with real individuals. This collapse would be a case of metalepsis (defined below). Given the self-reflexive, postmodern slant of the whole novel, the metaleptic interpretation is the more satisfactory solution,

though it creates a logically impossible situation. On the other hand, the fact that Timothy Cavendish, the protagonist of story four, has access to the Luisa Rey novels is not a paradox, since real people do read novels that transport them into fictional worlds. Characters of a lower ontological level have epistemic access to worlds of higher levels through books and stories (though they can only enter these worlds in imagination), but characters of a higher level have no knowledge of the worlds of a lower level.

While from an ontological perspective all but one of the stories of *Cloud Atlas* belong to the same world, from a cognitive perspective each story projects its own storyworld. When the readers or spectators pass from one story to the next, they experience a world where nothing is familiar: neither setting, nor characters, nor social environment, and they must construct the storyworld from an almost blank state. The defamiliarization that takes place with every new story explains why readers, upon encountering story three, do not think of it as a novel. The organization of the text on the discourse level does little to alleviate the cognitive burden of constructing six different storyworlds. In the novel, the stories are divided into two parts (except for the sixth story), and these parts are presented in the sequence 1-2-3-4-5-6-5-4-3-2-1.This pattern actualizes a structure known in computer science as a stack (Ryan 1991): The various elements are piled upon each other, and they are processed according to the principle "first in, last out." The stack principle means that when readers reach level six, they must keep five half-told stories in the back of their minds. Only story six unfolds as an uninterrupted whole. Once story six is completed, the text returns to story five, which is still reasonably fresh in memory. But as the reader is sent back to older levels, it becomes more and more difficult to remember what the story was all about. It is fortunate that the medium of the book allows readers to return to earlier pages and to refresh their memory.

The spectators of the movie do not have that luxury. In the film the symmetrical stack structure is replaced with a chaotic organization. The stories are fragmented into many more elements than in the novel, and these fragments, which tend to become shorter and shorter as the film progresses, are presented in a seemingly random order. For spectators who see the film without having read the novel, and this was my case, it is very difficult to reconstitute the plot. When I left the theatre I was totally confused, and the first thing I did when I got home was to look up the Wikipedia article to make sense of the film.

While the various storyworlds of *Cloud Atlas* differ cognitively, but are logically compossible and could therefore be part of the same global world, we find the reverse situation in Tom Tykwer's earlier film, *Run, Lola, Run* (1998). The film represents a genre that David Bordwell (2002) calls "forking path" narratives. These narratives focus on a decision point, out of which several different futures develop depending on the character's deliberate choice of action or on random coincidence. In *Run Lola Run* the decision point is a phone call to Lola from her boyfriend, Manni, who has lost a

large sum of money he owes to a crime boss. He will face dire consequences if the money is not delivered within 20 minutes. The film explores three forking paths in which Lola tries different courses of action to get the money in time. In the first "run" Lola tries to borrow the money from her father, a banker, but he refuses. Then she helps Manni rob a supermarket, but she gets shot and apparently dies. In the second run she robs her father's bank, but Manni is hit by a car as he runs toward her to get the money. In the third run, Lola wins the money at the casino, but in the meantime Manni has recovered the money he lost, so everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

The three worlds that fork out of the common decision point are clearly different from an ontological point of view, since they contain incompatible events, but in all three branches, Manni has the same problem, Lola has the same goal, the setting is constant, and the network of interpersonal relations remains unchanged. As the clock is rewound and a different alternative is explored, the spectator is taken back to a familiar situation, and no additional cognitive effort needs to be devoted to the construction of the background.

OTHER TYPES OF PROLIFERATION

Cloud Atlas and *Run, Lola, Run* illustrate two basic forms of proliferation: a world that includes many stories for *Cloud Atlas* and a story (or text) that includes many worlds for *Run, Lola, Run*. The case of a world with many stories is found in many different genres and media: for instance, in TV soap operas, which represent the interleaved destinies of many characters and follow multiple plot lines; in novels of magical realism, which often consist of many little stories taking place in the same setting rather than of a unified narrative arc; or in a film like *Babel* (2006), which presents three different stories, one located in Mexico, another in Morocco, and the third in Japan. The spectator knows that these stories take place in the same world because they present common elements.

Another example of a world with more than one story comes from a structure that may be called non-ontological narrative embedding, i.e. the embedding of a story that refers to the same world as the framing story and extends its representation, rather than transporting the reader into a new world. For instance, in "Sarrasine," the short story by Balzac that was made famous by Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1970), the narrative begins with the description of a lavish reception in the Parisian house of a rich family. Among the guests is a withered old man who awakens the curiosity of a marquise. The narrator tells the story of the old man to the marquise in exchange for a night of love—which he does not get in the end, because the marquise is too upset by the tale to keep her promise. Since the embedded and embedding stories refer to the same world, they complement each other,

and passing from one to the other does not require the crossing of an onto-logical boundary.

In contrast to "Sarrasine," works like *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Decam-eron* or *The Arabian Nights* are not worlds with many stories, but rather texts with many worlds. These texts feature a framing story and many embedded ones, told by the characters of the framing story. Insofar as the embedded stories are presented as fictions, they do not refer to the same world as the framing story. For instance, the characters in *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves* or *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* are not part of the world where Scheherazade tells stories to the Sultan to postpone her execution, and there is no chance that Scheherazade could meet Aladdin, except in a postmodern parody. These examples illustrate the case of ontological proliferation: a text that sends its readers into many other worlds than the primary fictional world, where the embedding story takes place. (See Ryan 1991, chapter 9 on the two types of embedding.)

In most examples of ontological proliferation, the ontological borders of the worlds are respected. By this I mean that these worlds do not bleed into each other, that their casts of characters remain distinct, and that the events of the embedded worlds have no direct effect on the embedding world. (They can of course have an indirect effect, as when Scheherazade is saved by the spellbinding stories she tells the Sultan.) But some narratives engage in a playful transgression of ontological boundaries. This is known as metalepsis (Pier 2011), and it is a common phenomenon in postmodernism. Metalepsis creates ontological paradoxes by staging interactions between a character from the world that the fiction presents as real and a character from a repre-sentation that exists within this world. A prototypical example of metalepsis is Julío Cortázar's short story "Continuity of Parks" (1967), in which a reader is murdered by the character of the book he is reading. Through metalepsis, embedded stories and their worlds become part of the embedding storyworld.

Another way for stories to entangle several ontologically distinct worlds is by creating an alternative to the cosmology of the standard version of possible worlds theory. Here I am thinking of narratives that rely on the so-called many-worlds cosmology, also known as multiverse. While in the stan-dard cosmology only one of many possibilities can be realised, and only one world can be actualized, in the many-worlds cosmology, all possibilities are realised, and there are countless parallel actual worlds that come into being whenever certain conditions are met. Some physicists have endorsed this cosmological model to explain the weird behavior of subatomic particles, such as the fact that they seem to be in several places at the same time. The many-worlds cosmology has been enthusiastically adopted by science fiction writers, and there is a number of novels based on the idea of a multiverse where characters have counterparts in other worlds (Ryan 2006). To turn this cosmology into a unified plot characters are made to travel to parallel worlds and meet their counterparts, which can lead to some rather intrigu-ing narrative situations.

But the most common way for a story to encompass several worlds is when its basic reality is split into ontologically distinct sub-realities, such as the realm of the gods *vs.* the realm of the humans in Homer, England *vs.* Narnia is C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* chronicles, or, in *The Matrix* (1999), the "free" world of Neo and Morpheus *vs.* the virtual reality created by the machines.

WORLD *VS.* STORY AS SOURCES OF INTEREST

While worlds are spaces that contain stories, stories are mental constructs that imply a world. Yet texts may be more or less "world centered" and "story-centered," and there is a full continuum of intermediary forms between these two poles (Figure 1.2).
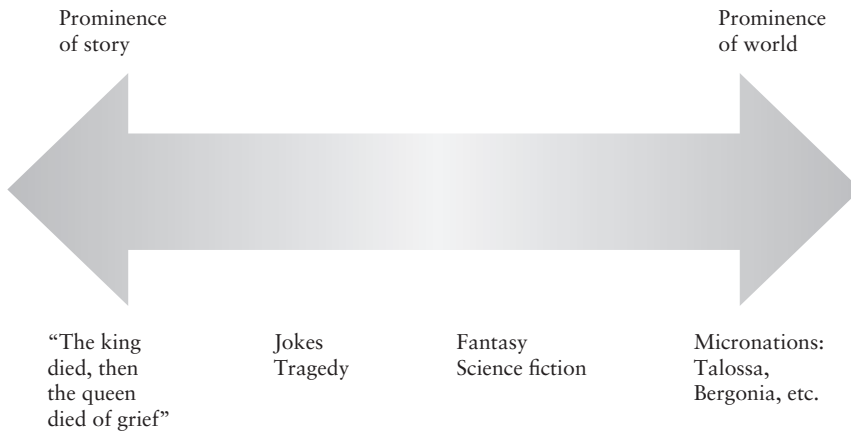
Prominence
of story

Prominence
of world

"The king
died, then
the queen
died of grief"

Jokes
Tragedy

Fantasy
Science fiction

Micronations:
Talossa,
Bergonia, etc.

Figure 1.2 Story-prominent vs. world-prominent narratives.

From a strictly logical point of view, the case of a story that does not project a world is very problematic. The core constituents of narrative are events, but there cannot be events without existents, and since existents are objects with spatial extension, they must exist somewhere. This means that there must be a world that contains them. But this world may be left largely implicit. Consider again "The king died, then the queen died of grief." If this is a story, it offers little to the imagination. Readers will register the information that something happened in some abstract fictional world, but they will not be tempted to visualize the scene and to fill in the blanks in the story.

A narrative genre that minimizes world-creation is jokes. Not only are jokes too short to display a rich storyworld, the same joke can be told about different kinds of people. For instance, jokes that used to be told of certain ethnic groups are now told about blondes (assumed to be stupid), and jokes about lawyers are recycled by musicians into conductor jokes.

The fact that the butt of certain jokes can be easily transformed from one category of people to another demonstrates that the appeal of these jokes lies in some properties of the story that transcend the particular embodiment of the characters. Another narrative genre that privileges plot over world is tragedy: The genre downplays particular social circumstances, to focus on a network of personal relations that could happen anywhere, anytime. This is why Greek tragedy is best performed on a bare stage with no distracting props.

The case of world without story is much more feasible that the case of stories without worlds. A good example is the phenomenon of the micro-nation. The Internet contains many imaginary countries created for the pure pleasure of playing God. They have names like Bergonia and Talossa, and they are brought into being by documents that represent an encyclopedic sum of knowledge. The creators of these micro-nations can play as many roles as they want: ethnographer, geographer, political scientist, linguist, cartographer, historian, and climatologist. But one role they do not play is that of novelist. For this reason, visiting these countries is like reading all the descriptions in a novel and skipping the action parts.

While jokes and tragedy come the closest to the story pole, science fiction and fantasy are the closest genres to the world pole. In these genres, the plot serves as a trail that takes the audience through the storyworld and provides a glimpse into its distinctive natural features and cultural institutions. As noted science-fiction author Philip K. Dick said in an interview: "The first thing is the idea. A pure idea. The next thing is characters who will be confronted with the environment based on that idea. … In other words I translate an idea into a world. Then you need people who live in that world" (Dick 1984). Or, as Henry Jenkins writes on his blog: "It's long been a charge directed against science fiction works that they are more interested in mapping complex environments than in telling compelling stories. Many of my favorite SF novels—*Snow Crash*, for example—break down into near incoherence by the end, yet they offer us richly realised worlds that I would love to be able to explore in greater detail than any one narrative allows." The greater the distance of a fictional world from ordinary reality, the more the interest of the reader or spectator will be directed toward the world, at the expense of the plot, because the invention of a world that differs from reality is a true feat of the imagination that rivals the creative power of God (Wolf 2012). It does not take a very original plot to make a narrative successful when the world attracts a lot of attention.

But the one-dimensional schema of Figure 1.2 is misleading, because it suggests that the more prominent the world, the less interesting the plot, and vice-versa, the more indeterminate the world, the more interesting the plot. This is certainly not the case, as we can see from the example of "The king died, then the queen died of grief." Here there is hardly any world, but this lack of worldness does not add to the appeal of the plot. The story is very boring. On the other hand, there are great works of literature—here

I think especially of the great novels of the nineteenth century—where plot and world are both very developed and none takes second seat to the other.

To represent this situation we need a two-dimensional diagram, where the y axis represents "worldness" and the x axis "plotness," or "tellability." On this diagram, "The king died" will be low on both counts. Figure 1.3 transposes Figure 1.2 in two dimensions.
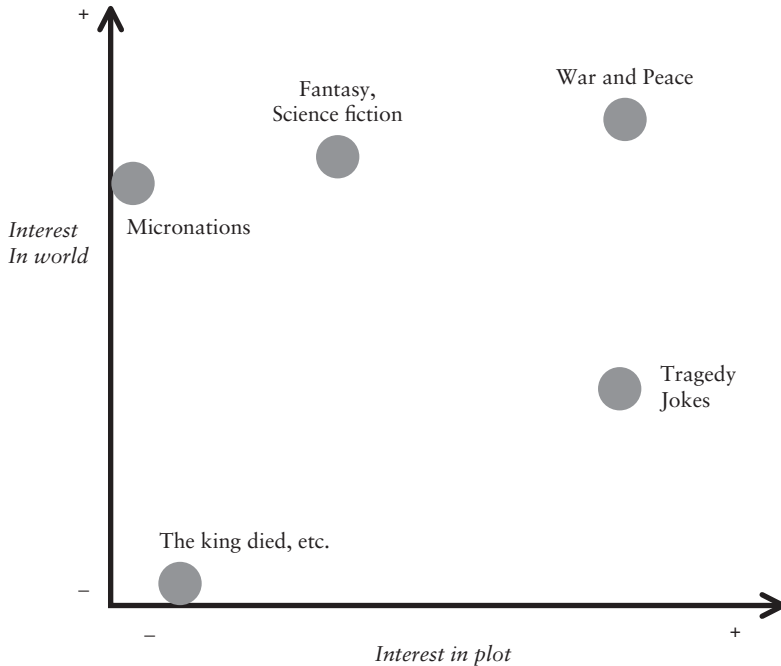

Figure 1.3 A two-dimensional representation of Figure 1.2.

But even this grid does not do justice to how audiences evaluate narratives, because it lacks a third dimension, the interest taken in the medium itself, whether it is attention to the form and style of the writing in language-based narrative, to the work of the camera and the play of actors in film, or to the quality of the art and the arrangement of the frames on a page in comics. Some texts that score rather low on worldness or tellability, such as postmodern experimental fiction, may be rehabilitated for intellectual audiences by a high score on "innovative use of the medium." It would take a cube with three dimensions to evaluate texts in terms of world, plot and medium,[6] and this cube could not be represented on a two-dimensional page, but we can transpose it into tabular form, a type of representation that can accommodate any number of artistic dimensions. Table 1 represents my very personal scores on some famous narratives:[7] first Forster's made-up story (which nobody would bother to tell for its own sake), then Aldous

Huxley's *Brave New World*, which stands for science fiction in general, then *War and Peace* as an example of a great realistic novel, then Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, a popular thriller that topped the best-seller lists in the U.S. for almost a year, then David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, an experimental postmodern novel, then James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a text in which language draws so much attention to itself that the construction of a world and of a story becomes virtually impossible. The ultimate artistic narrative would score the maximum on all three criteria, but this kind of narrative is probably a utopia, because human attention is limited, and intense focus on the medium distracts people from the story and from the world.

Table 1.1 Evaluating narratives on three criteria.

Interest in story	Interest in world	Interest in medium	
0	0	0	"The king died"
2	3	1	Brave New World
3	3	1	War and Peace
3	1	0	Da Vinci Code
1	2	2	Cloud Atlas
0	?	3	Finnegans Wake

Literary theory has long been dominated by a textualist attitude that locates the aesthetic value of texts in the dimension I call medium and that regards the interest taken in story and in world as symptomatic of popular, "low-brow" literature. It is time to abandon this view and to recognize that the ability to create compelling stories and worlds is no less a form of art than writing in a way that draws attention to language. While narratology has acknowledged for quite a while the pleasure provided by well-crafted stories as aesthetic, it is only recently that worldmaking has been recognized as a legitimate artistic activity. James DiGiovanna goes as far as claiming that worldmaking is a form of conceptual art in which the fictional world is the concept (2007, 115). By multiplying texts around worlds, worlds within stories, or stories within worlds, the aesthetics of proliferation bears testimony to the fascination that worlds exercise on the imagination.

NOTES

1. Title of chapter 11 of Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947).
2. Following Bordwell (1985) against Chatman (1990), I would not postulate a narrator for visual types of fiction such as film or drama, except in cases of voice-over narration, a phenomenon that remain to be satisfactorily theorized. It could be objected that postulating a narrator for language-based fiction but not for visually based media prevents a unified account of fiction, but visual and verbal fiction can be brought under a common denominator by invoking

the notion of make-believe. In both cases the audience takes something (the author's utterance, the actors' play) for something that it is not: a narrator's representation of facts, the behavior of real people. A theory such as Banfield's that postulates a narrator for some kinds of language-based fiction (first person), but none for third-person narration or for film and drama creates a discontinuity within the medium of language, and it has a hard time explaining how there can be noncommunicative forms of language, i.e., language without an utterer. As for theories that postulate a narrator for all fictions, they must pull a narrator out of nowhere like a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat for visual media. In language there is a mediating instance who reports the story, but in visual media the spectator can pretend to see and hear unmediated events.

3. This could happen in fantastic texts but not in realistic novels.

4. If the fact that the text was not composed as a story to be enjoyed for its own sake but rather as an example demonstrating the conditions of plot creates a problem, consider instead this minimal, much more moving short story attributed (probably apocryphally) to Hemingway: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

5. By contrast, all the other stories mimic nonfictional genres: Story one is a diary, story two a series of letters, story four a written autobiography, story five responses to an interviewer, and story six an oral narrative of personal experience told by the protagonist to his grandson. Stories 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 belong to a first-degree ontological level, while story three, as a fiction within a fiction, belongs to a second-degree level. I am indebted to Brian McHale for pointing out to me the fictional status of story three.

6. What about an axis for "characters?" I was asked during an oral presentation of an earlier version of this chapter. My answer is that characters are an integral part of the plot: Events cannot be separated from their participants. On the other hand, if the believability of characters, the vividness of their representation, and their ability to arouse emotions transcend the plot, then a fourth column could be easily added to Figure 1.3 to represent these features.

7. The criteria for the evaluations of "use of the medium" are as follows: 0, sloppily written; 1, elegantly written, but the writing does not attract excessive attention to itself; 2, consciously experimental writing; 3, a new kind of language, extremely self-referential and difficult to decode.

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