

## *Book Review*

Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon. *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

When it comes to blockbuster films, 2015 appears to be yet another successful year for Marvel Studios. As of June 1, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*—the second big-screen convergence of superheroes Iron Man, Thor, Captain America and the Hulk, each having their own film series – has already grossed more than a billion dollars worldwide (boxofficemojo.com) and *Ant-Man*, Peyton Reed’s new installment in the franchise, set to debut mid-July, looks unlikely to be the Disney subsidiary’s first outright flop. But the genius behind the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is precisely that it has stopped being solely cinematic—that it has come to inhabit television series (such as the critically acclaimed *Agent Carter* (ABC, 2015–) or *Daredevil* (Netflix, 2015–)) and tie-in comic books (that either adapt or expand the MCU). In other words, Marvel have created the most successful example of what Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon refer to as a transmedial storyworld in their recent and highly relevant edited volume *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Storyworld is a concept that one can grasp quite easily and intuitively, but that is nevertheless fairly difficult to define in a theoretically rigorous manner, as Ryan points out in her earlier article “Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality” (364). To put it briefly, storyworld refers to the world projected by a narrative (or by a number of narratives when it comes to transmedial or serial projects); this world, as Ryan, notes is not a static repository for a story’s building blocks, but “a dynamic model of evolving situations, and its representation in the recipient’s mind is a simulation of the changes that are caused by the events of the plot” (“Story/Worlds/Media” 32). To return to my previous example, the storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe refers to the world inhabited by its characters, as it evolves—both spatially via the introduction of new elements, and temporally via the development of plot lines—and as it is experienced by the audience. What is more, when it comes to transmedial storyworlds, we are faced with two different—and influential—theoretical conceptualizations, as Ryan and Thon expertly point out: Henry Jenkins’s “transmedia storytelling”—with its emphasis on logical, coherent world building across a variety of platforms, without internal inconsistency or contradiction—and Lisbeth Klastrup & Susana Tosca’s “transmedial worlds”—which would, in turn, understand storyworlds as “abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms” (qtd. in Ryan and Thon 15), what the editors describe as an imaginative approach to the concept. The MCU, for instance, would qualify as a logical

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<sup>1</sup> The volume’s chapters are based on papers that were presented at the *Storyworlds across Media: Mediality—Multimodality—Transmediality* conference (Johannes Gutenberg-University of Mainz, June 30-July 2011), organized by Ryan and Thon with Karl N. Renner (“Acknowledgements”).

storyworld, if we were to take into account only the movies, television series and tie-in comic books (at least the ones that do not break continuity), but also as an imaginative storyworld, if we were to further take into account the tie-in videogames and comic-books that break continuity or perhaps even the larger Marvel Universe from where the characters and plot lines largely originate.

*Storyworlds across Media* is, therefore, a much welcome attempt at dealing with the transmedial revolution that is currently sweeping our media landscape. Itself a sequel of sorts to Ryan's earlier *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), the edited volume represents above all else an attempt at fostering a "media-conscious narratology"<sup>2</sup> (4)—a narratology that takes into account the narrative affordances and limitations of each medium, that pays careful attention to the way that media interrelate and influence one another, and that is capable of charting and analyzing the phenomenon of transmedial storytelling. As such, the volume is divided into three main parts: "Mediality and Transmediality," "Multimodality and Intermediality" and "Transmedia Storytelling and Transmedial Worlds"—numbering fifteen chapters in all. Of these, the best and most relevant offer narrative readings and conceptualizations that are keenly aware of what Ryan and Thon refer to as the crucial distinction between medium-free, transmedial and medium-specific narratological concepts (3-4),<sup>3</sup> while at the same time paying careful attention to the way in which narratives may develop both transmedially and intermedially.

I would like to specifically mention here Ryan's "Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology," which builds on her previous work to advance a clearer definition of storyworld (31-37); Thon's "Subjectivity across Media: On Transmedial Strategies of Subjective Representation in Contemporary Feature Films, Graphic Novels, and Computer Games," which explores the various strategies that a narrative may use in order "to represent the consciousness of characters" (67) by putting forward a number of transmedial narratological concepts and charting their specific medial actualization; Frank Zipfel's "Fiction across Media: Toward a Transmedial Concept of Fictionality," which likewise takes a transmedial concept and explores its realization in film, literature and theatre; Jared Gardner's "Film + Comics: A Multimodal Romance in the Age of Transmedial Convergence",<sup>4</sup> which looks at the intertwined institutional history of film and comics, while rightfully cautioning against the

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to suggest a parallel here to Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney's similar efforts toward greater media-consciousness in the field of cultural memory studies (particularly their edited volume *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* and Erll's *Memory in Culture*).

<sup>3</sup> Character, event or setting would count as medium-free, for instance, while interactivity would be an example of a transmedial concept (since it is not applicable to all media). Comic book concepts such as gutter or frame would count as media-specific (4).

<sup>4</sup> Reading Gardner's chapter I was reminded of Christian Fuchs's critique of Henry Jenkins' 2011 ICA talk "Spreadable Media" (<http://fuchs.uti.at/570/>), where he accuses Jenkins of "cultural reductionism"—of ignoring the economic realities of content production and reception. To my mind, a thorough reading of any given transmedial narrative has to be profoundly aware of the part played by multinational corporations (which produce and distribute the vast majority of successful transmedial franchises) in shaping the values and aesthetics of the narratives we consume.

assumption that media convergence is “necessarily a force for the emancipation of narrative and its readers” (209); Jason Mittell’s “Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television”, which focuses on the recent television series *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) in order to better define the concept of storyworld by arguing for the existence of two main strategies: a centrifugal or story-world driven approach by which creators attempt to coherently expand the storyworld (264) and a centripetal or character-driven approach aimed largely at developing the characters (by placing them in out-of-continuity situations to explore how they would react, for instance) (269); and Colin Harvey’s “A Taxonomy of Transmedia Storytelling”, which offers a very intriguing transmedia categorization by locating a fertile ground between transmedial narratology and memory studies (282-283).

In an age of media convergence and transmedial storytelling, *Storyworlds across Media* is a highly recommended volume that largely achieves its ambition of furthering a more media-conscious narratology. The high quality of scholarship collected here may help us come to a better understanding of our media ecology—both of the profound changes that have taken place over the last decades and of the developments to come.

### Works Cited

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