

The Third Element; or, How to Build a Storyworld

(iii) **Worldmaking/world disruption.** *The events represented in narrative are such that they introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld involving human or human-like agents, whether that world is presented as actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc.*

Narratives as Blueprints for Worldmaking

Storyworlds can be defined as the worlds evoked by narratives; reciprocally, narratives can be defined as blueprints for a specific mode of world-creation. Mapping words (or other kinds of semiotic cues) onto worlds is a fundamental – perhaps *the* fundamental – requirement for narrative sense-making; yet this mapping operation may seem so natural and normal that no “theory,” no specialized nomenclature or framework of concepts, is necessary to describe and explain the specific procedures involved. In the present chapter, I argue for the need to slow down and de-automatize the rapid, apparently effortless interpretive processes involved in experiencing narrative worlds. Exploring the third basic element of narrative necessitates taking the measure of these processes – that is, identifying what is distinctive about narrative ways of worldmaking as opposed to other methods for using symbol systems to make and unmake worlds.

The classical, structuralist narratologists failed to come to terms with the referential or world-creating properties of narrative, partly because of the exclusion of the referent in favor of signifier and signified in the Saussurean language theory that informed the structuralists’ approach (see chapter 2). Over the past couple of decades, however, one of the most basic and abiding concerns of narrative scholars has been how readers of print narratives, interlocutors in face-to-face discourse, and viewers of films use textual cues to build up representations of the worlds evoked by stories, or *storyworlds*. Such worldmaking practices are of central importance to narrative scholars of all sorts, from feminist narratologists exploring how representations of male and female characters pertain to dominant cultural stereotypes about gender roles, to rhetorical theorists hypothesizing about the kinds of assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes that must be adopted by readers if they are to participate in the multiple audience positions required to engage fully with fictional worlds, to analysts (and designers) of digital narratives interested in how interactive systems can remediate the experience of being immersed in the virtual worlds created through everyday narrative practices. New ways of characterizing the third basic element of narrative, its intrinsic concern with more or less richly detailed storyworlds, have arisen from this re-engagement with the referential, world-creating potential of narrative. That re-engagement has received additional impetus from foundational theoretical studies of narrative worlds – studies that I discuss later in this chapter and that draw on ideas developed by philosophers, psychologists, linguists, and others concerned with how people use various kinds of symbol systems to refer to aspects of their experience. In parallel with the account developed in Herman (2002a: 9–22), I use the term *storyworld* to refer to the world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative, whether that narrative takes the form of a

printed text, film, graphic novel, sign language, everyday conversation, or even a tale that is projected but never actualized as a concrete artifact – for example, stories about ourselves that we contemplate telling to friends but then do not, or film scripts that a screenwriter has plans to create in the future. Storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of the situations and events being recounted – of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner. Reciprocally, narrative artifacts (texts, films, etc.) provide blueprints for the creation and modification of such mentally configured storyworlds.

1 Storytellers use the semiotic cues available in a given narrative medium to design these blueprints for creating and updating storyworlds.

2 In print texts, the cues include the expressive resources of (written) language, including not just words, phrases, and sentences, but also typographical formats, the disposition of space on the printed page (including spaces used for section breaks, indentations marking new paragraphs, etc.), and (potentially) diagrams, sketches, and illustrations. In graphic novels such as *Ghost World*, by contrast, the nonverbal elements play a more prominent role: the arrangement of characters in represented scenes, the shapes of speech balloons, and the representations of the scenes in panels that form part of larger sequences of images and textual elements, can convey information about the storyworld that would have to be transmitted by purely verbal means in a novel or short story without a comparable image track. Likewise, interlocutors in contexts of face-to-face storytelling, readers of short stories and novels, and members of the audience watching a film draw on such medium-specific cues to build on the basis of the discourse (or *sjuzhet*) a chronology for events (or *fabula*) (what happened when, or in what order?); a broader temporal and spatial environment for those events (when in history did these events occur, and where geographically?); an inventory of the characters involved; and a working model of what it was like for these characters to experience the more or less disruptive or noncanonical events that constitute a core feature of narrative representations, which may in turn be more or less reportable within a particular discourse context or occasion for telling.

3 At the same time, as discussed in chapter 3, interpreters seeking to build a storyworld on the basis of a text will also take into account complexities in the design of the blueprint itself – complexities creating additional layers of mediation in the relationship between narrative and storyworld. Such mediation affects the interpretive process in, for example, cases of unreliable narration such as Browning's *My Last Duchess*, where the teller of a story cannot be taken at his or her word, compelling the audience to “read between the lines” – in other words, to scan the text for clues about how the storyworld really (or probably) is, as opposed to how the narrator says it is. Likewise, in *Ghost World*, during a sequence in which Enid fantasizes about one of her teachers, Mr. Pierce, the use of a distinctive font or typeface within the speech balloons (not to mention the content of the sequence – e.g., Enid naked in the shower with Mr.

Pierce clad in a formal suit) indicates that the represented scenes and utterances are ones that Enid has imagined, rather than events that took place within the storyworld to which the characters orient as actual or real (Clowes 1997: 32). Both of these examples entail complex processes of worldmaking. For its part, the Browning poem compels readers to sift out from the Duke's elliptical, distorted version of events a divergent or rather more complete account of what happened, affording through these indirect means a blueprint for building the domain of factual (or at least probable) occurrences. The world that emerges through this process is one in which the Duke, despite or rather because of his own best efforts at spin or damage control, figures as an insanely jealous, homicidally possessive, and controlling spouse. Meanwhile, Enid's erotic fantasy demonstrates in another way the multifacetedness of storyworlds, which typically encompass not just worlds that are socially and institutionally defined as "given" but also private worlds (Ryan 1991) or subworlds (Werth 1999) consisting of characters' beliefs, desires, intentions, memories, and imaginative projections. Some of these subworlds may never be expressed outwardly to other characters, as is likely the case with Enid's fantasy – hence Clowes's use of a typeface that distinguishes this sequence from other conversational exchanges represented in the text. But what would a more general account of how narratives evoke storyworlds look like? And how do narrative ways of worldmaking differ from other representational practices that involve the construction or reconstruction of worlds, in a broad sense? In other words, when it comes to world-creation, what distinguishes narrative representations from other contexts in which people design and manipulate symbol systems for the purpose of structuring, comprehending, and communicating aspects of experience? I explore these issues in my next section.

Narrative Ways of Worldmaking

To capture what is distinctive about narrative ways of worldmaking, this section begins with an overview of Goodman's (1978) broad account of "ways of worldmaking." The building of storyworlds involves specific procedures set off against this larger set of background conditions for world-creation. I start to outline these procedures by developing an account of narrative beginnings as prompts for worldmaking. This in turn sets up my next section, where I survey a range of approaches to world-creation in narrative contexts, moving from accounts that characterize the experience of narrative worlds in a relatively macrostructural or gestalt way toward more microstructural approaches that seek to anchor types of inferences about storyworlds (including their temporal and spatial dimensions) in particular kinds of textual designs. In his study *Ways of Worldmaking*, the philosopher Nelson Goodman develops ideas that afford context for my own analysis. Adopting a pluralist instead of a reductionist stance, Goodman argues that "many different world-versions are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base" (Goodman 1978: 4), for example, the world-version propounded in physics. As Goodman puts it, "[t]he pluralists' acceptance of [worldversions] other than physics implies no relaxation of rigor but a recognition that standards different from yet no less exacting than those applied in science are appropriate for

appraising what is conveyed in perceptual or pictorial or literary versions” (1978: 5). More generally, Goodman asks, In just what sense are there many worlds? What distinguishes genuine from spurious worlds? What are worlds made of? How are they made? What role do symbols play in the making? And how is worldmaking related to knowing? (Goodman 1978: 1)

Arguing that worldmaking “as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking,” Goodman goes on to identify five procedures for constructing worlds out of other worlds: composition and decomposition; weighting; ordering; deletion and supplementation; and deformation (1978: 7–16). Brief definitions and examples of each procedure follow:

- **Composition and decomposition:** “on the one hand . . . dividing wholes into parts and partitioning kinds into subspecies, analyzing complexes into component features, drawing distinctions; on the other hand . . . composing wholes and kinds out of parts and members and subclasses, combining features into complexes, and making connections” (1978: 7). Ethnographic investigation of an indigenous population, for example, may uncover the presence of several subcultures where only one had been recognized previously; conversely, the formation of new “hybrid” disciplines or subdisciplines (algebraic geometry, biochemistry, information design) results in new, more complex world-versions.

- **Weighting:** “Some relevant kinds of the one world, rather than being absent from the other, are present as irrelevant kinds; some differences among worlds are not so much in entities comprised as in emphasis or accent, and these differences are no less consequential” (1978: 11). From a macrohistorical perspective, the shift from a religious to a secular-scientific world-version entailed a reweighting of the particulars of the phenomenal world, which came to occupy a focus of attention formerly reserved for the noumenal or spiritual realm.

- **Ordering:** “modes of organization [patterns, measurements, ways of periodizing time, etc.] are not ‘found in the world’ but *built into a world*” (1978: 14). As suggested in chapter 4, taxonomies of plants, animals, or other entities are in effect world-versions built on a hierarchical systems of categories that may be more or less finely grained (and more or less densely populated), depending on whether one has expert or only a layperson’s knowledge of a given domain. My world-version currently contains names for (and concepts of) only a few common types of insects, in contrast with the world-version of an entomologist.

- **Deletion and supplementation:** “the making of one world out of another usually involves some extensive weeding out and filling – actual excision of some old and supply of some new material” (1978: 14). I might study entomology, and supplement my world-version with new knowledge and new beings; alternatively, if because of climate change an insect species becomes extinct, the entomologist’s world-version will undergo compulsory excision.

• **Deformation:** “reshapings or deformations that may according to point of view be considered either corrections or distortions” (1978: 16). Here one may think of arguments for a new scientific theory in favor of an older one (e.g., the geocentric vs. the heliocentric models of the solar system) from the perspective of those who are parties to the debate.

As my examples of each worldmaking procedure indicate, there is nothing distinctively story-like about the worlds over which Goodman’s account ranges, though there is nothing about the analysis that excludes storyworlds, either. Narrative worlds, too, might be made through processes of composition and decomposition: think of allegories fusing literal and symbolic worlds, or decomposition in texts such as *The Canterbury Tales*, where the narrative ramifies into a frame tale that constitutes the main diegetic level and embedded or hypodiegetic levels created when characters within that frame tell stories of their own. Weighting may also be a generative factor: consider postmodern rewrites that evoke new world-versions by reweighting events in their precursor narratives, as when Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* generates a new storyworld on the basis of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* by using as a metric for evaluating events not Jane Eyre’s or Edward Rochester’s perspective (as refracted through Jane’s telling) but rather Antoinette Cosway’s. So too with ordering: narrative worlds can be made when new time-scales are deployed, as when Alain Robbe-Grillet as a practitioner of the *nouveau roman* in France produced novel worlds by drastically slowing the pace of narration (Robbe-Grillet [1957, 1959] 1965), or when the average shot length in Hollywood films diminished over time to produce more rapid cuts between scenes (Morrison forthcoming). Deletion and supplementation likewise find their place in the building of storyworlds. I may tailor my recounting of my own life experiences to adjust for differences among groups of interlocutors, going into more detail among close friends and less detail when asked a question during a job interview. And as for deformation, the film version of *Ghost World* can be viewed as a reshaping of the graphic novel version, and more generally any adaptation of a prior text in another medium for storytelling will result in alterations of the sort that Goodman includes under this rubric (cf. Genette [1982] 1997).

In short, Goodman’s is a broad, generic account of worldmaking procedures, operative in both non-narrative and narrative contexts. The basis for distinctively narrative ways of worldmaking must thus be sought in other, more specific procedures set off against this larger set of background conditions for world-creation. In my next subsection, I discuss how story openings trigger particular kinds of worldmaking strategies that cut across storytelling media and narrative genres, but that are also inflected by the specific constraints and affordances of various kinds of narrative practices.