

Marie Laure Ryan: *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. A Review by Julian Kücklich.

In his novel *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* (2000), Tom Robbins puts the following words in the protagonist's mouth: "Virtual reality is nothing new. Books, the ones worth reading, have always generated virtual reality. Of course, unless one can get past its cultural and sensorial levels, what is reality *but* virtual?"

I have chosen this as the opening quote of my review of Marie-Laure Ryan's book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) for several reasons, some of which might not be as obvious as they seem. First of all, both Ryan and Robbins identify the distinction between old and new media as an arbitrary one, but the similarity between the two authors resounds still deeper. Not satisfied with eliminating one artificial dichotomy, they tackle the much more profound distinction between real and virtual. However, in neither case, this should be misconstrued as a lament about the loss of an unrecoverable immediacy, but rather as an attempt to reconcile seemingly incompatible concepts, or, in Leslie Fiedler's words, to "cross the border, close the gap."

While Robbins' assertion that reality is nothing but virtual might smack of a witticism that quickly turns stale upon closer inspection, Ryan's arguments are much more substantial. As she reminds us in her introductory chapter, "The Two (and Thousand) Faces of the Virtual", the word *virtual* is by no means intrinsically connected to the world of electronics, although it has come to be associated almost exclusively with computers within the last 15 years or so. What is so remarkable about this approach is not so much Ryan's careful reconstruction of the historical semantics of virtuality (from the Latin *virtualis*, potential), but rather her uncovering of the fact that the concept of virtual reality is in and of itself virtual. However, it is not created by means of state-of-the-art computers and innovative VR-equipment, but with tools that have been at the disposal of humankind for thousands of years: words.

As she writes at the beginning of the second chapter: "The popular perception of VR was primarily shaped by the declarations of [...] Jaron Lanier, who coined the term *virtual reality*, and of an imaginative journalist, Howard Rheingold [...]." While it might be an embellishment to claim that the popular conception of virtual reality stems solely from these sources, a pattern begins to emerge when we take into account other literary distributors of the VR meme, such as William Gibson and Neil Stephenson. As of yet, nobody has been immersed in something even vaguely resembling the virtual realities these authors describe. And yet they are there, they are *real*, insofar as these ideas have captivated the minds of millions of readers. The concept of virtual reality might be an illusion, but its implications are very tangible indeed.

By this simple trick, Ryan demonstrates that the virtual reality generated by words on a page has not only been around for much longer than the virtual reality environments of the silicon age, but that it is also vastly superior to them. This becomes evident in a chapter entitled "Virtual Realities of the Mind", where Ryan takes the reader on a tour of the works of Baudelaire, Huysmans, and Cooper. Undaunted by the obvious superiority of word-based fiction over the meagre results of current VR-technology, she then embarks on a journey through the world of "interactive entertainment" in search of works able to match the creative power of literature. From Ignatius of Loyola's spiritual exercises to *Doom*, from hyperfiction to

interactive movies, she leaves hardly a stone unturned in her quest for the *real* virtual reality. In many cases, these investigations do not come to a conclusion, but rather leave the reader with a sense of wonder.

In effect, this is the greatest merit of *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. The hypotheses put forward in this book are as likely to mystify the reader as they are to enlighten her, as Ryan's explorations of the virtual are often highly subjective. Some readers are likely to be puzzled by the rollercoaster ride through the theme park of "Participatory Interactivity", as one chapter is tautologically called, while others will delight in its display of narrative architecture next to children's games and erotic scenarios. While many of the finer points of Ryan's argumentation are decidedly debatable, if not downright questionable, they are never predictable or easily refutable. In many cases, the reader will find her distinctions blurred, her convictions shaken, her opinions put in a doubtful light.

Ryan's book fosters critical thought and debate, and it does so without being overly provocative or deliberately vague. In this respect, it is more similar to a work of fiction than an academic study. By this, I do not mean to imply that it is a book to be taken lightly. It is not even an easy read at all times, although some chapters will keep the reader turning the pages until the end. But while it is certainly thoroughly researched and based on a solid theoretical foundation, it often requires a sort of "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of the reader. Ryan's line of argumentation is not always easy to follow, at all times associative, often bordering on the incoherent. But the sheer breadth and scope of Ryan's knowledge will keep the reader involved in the virtual reality the book creates. That Ryan succeeds in bringing forth the very phenomenon she sets out to explore is clearly her greatest achievement. *Narrative as Virtual Reality* is one of those rare books that practice what they preach, and this makes it an invaluable resource for researchers of old and new media alike.