



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Narratives as Virtual Reality (review)

Hava Cohen-Ritter

Poetics Today, Volume 23, Number 2, Summer 2002, pp. 364-366 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27901>

Chapter 4 deals with Josipovici's dramatic oeuvre and his radio plays. Fludernik provides detailed analyses of the plays *Dreams of Mrs. Fraser* (1971) and *A Moment* (1979) as well as the radio plays *Mr. Vee* (1988) and *Playback* (1973). The chapter closes with a discussion of the rewriting of the short story "Brothers" as *kin* (1983) and the film *Many Little Lies* (1987), an adaptation of his novel *Contre-Jour*. Fludernik finds in Josipovici's oeuvre recurrent thematic and technical concerns that closely link his fiction and his dramatic work. For this reason it is to be hoped that an edition of the author's drama and radio plays will soon make these texts available to a wider public.

The close readings in chapters 1 through 4 are followed by an attempt to situate Josipovici on the general map of present-day British literature. Fludernik starts with external attempts at classification according to periodization, theme, and genre and then moves on to text-internal aspects. She pays particular attention to the narrative techniques employed by Josipovici, such as external focalization. Also, Fludernik deals with Josipovici's debt to Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter and compares Josipovici's texts with the French *nouveau roman*. She argues that as far as Josipovici's plays are concerned, he joined hands with Beckett and Pinter in the attempt to extend the language of drama, whereas in fiction, Josipovici goes his own way beyond Beckett and the *nouveau roman* toward more idiomatic and more playful versions of the same communicational and existential problems.

Jan Alber, Freiburg

**Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narratives as Virtual Reality*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 400 pp.**

Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narratives as Virtual Reality* is a readable scholarly study of immersion and interactivity in print and electronic media. In this book Ryan rethinks textuality, mimesis, narrativity, literary theory, and the cognitive processing of texts in light of the new modes of artistic world construction that have been made possible by recent developments in electronic technology. She transfers the two concepts of immersion and interactivity from the technological domain to the literary domain and develops them into cornerstones of a phenomenology of reading or, more broadly, of art experiencing.

After describing how hypertext has been connected to postmodernist aesthetics, Ryan refutes the claim made by hypertext scholars that the interaction of the reader with the text turns him or her into an author, as if the reader's immersion were a passive experience. The book starts by discussing the virtual as philosophical concept; moves on to virtual reality (VR) as

technology and explores its two experiential components, immersion and interactivity; and concludes with what for her is the ultimate goal of art: the synthesis of immersion and interactivity. This trajectory runs to four parts and ten chapters. In the “interludes” between the theoretical chapters are short case studies of actual texts that anticipate, allegorize, or concretely illustrate one or both of the dimensions of VR experience.

The first chapter discusses some ideas of the virtual in relation to the work of two prominent French theorists: Jean Baudrillard for the virtual as illusion and Pierre Lévy for the virtual as potentiality. In the second chapter, Ryan turns to VR “proper.” Here immersion is discussed both from a technological viewpoint, concerned with the features of digital systems that produce an immersive experience, and from a phenomenological viewpoint, which addresses the sense of “presence” through which the user feels corporeally connected to the virtual world.

The second part of the book develops a theory and poetics of immersion in phenomenological terms: consciousness as a sense of being-in-the-world, which presupposes an imaginative relationship to a *textual* world populated with individuated objects. In the third chapter, Ryan discusses the work of some scholars on the outskirts of literary studies—cognitive psychology, empirical approaches to literature, and analytic philosophy—who have addressed the issue she calls immersion under a variety of other names. These scholars include Victor Nell, Richard Gerrig, Kendall Walton, and St. Ignatius of Loyola. In chapters 4 and 5, Ryan associates three narrative elements (setting, plot, and characters) with three distinct types of immersion (spatial, temporal, and emotional, respectively) and analyzes the narrative devices that favor each pairing.

Part three explores the poetics of interactivity. The sixth chapter examines the shift in metaphor that marked the transition from immersion to interactivity as artistic ideal. Whereas the aesthetics of immersion attaches the text to a “world” that serves as the environment of a virtual body, the aesthetics of interactivity presents the text as a game, language as a plaything, and the reader as a player. The most recent interactivity largely owes its existence to electronic technology, whose mechanisms enable the reader to actualize the “text” of the text as a visible display of signs and to control the dynamics of its unfolding. The seventh chapter examines a variety of rhetorical problems associated with interactivity, and the eighth questions the possibility of creating genuinely narrative structures in an interactive environment.

The fourth part of the book is a quest for other immersive environments, an exploration of the possibilities of reconciling immersion with interactivity. In chapter 9 Ryan surveys environments like children’s and adults’

games of make-believe, fairs and amusement parks, ritual, baroque art and architecture, and certain types of stage design in the theater. Chapter 10 expands the search for immersive interactivity to digital projects, such as computer games, MOOs (a computer program that creates a virtual space in which many users can be connected simultaneously), automated dialog systems, installation art, and even interactive drama.

Hava Cohen-Ritter, Tel Aviv