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Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture by
Jan-Noël Thon (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

☞ Jan-Noël Thon. *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*. Lincoln, London: U of Nebraska P, 2016. xxii + 527 pp. \$60.00. ISBN: 978-0-8032-7720-5.

A new publication in the University of Nebraska's Frontiers of Narrative series is Jan-Noël Thon's revised PhD thesis, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*. It provides a theoretical framework for research on transmedial strategies of storytelling as well as case studies of narrative representations in three different media: contemporary film, comics, and video games. In this case, these media represent "contemporary media culture." The book is divided into three parts, each of which focuses on one of three transmedial aspects of narrative representation. These are (1) the representation of storyworlds, (2) narratorial representations, and (3) subjective representations of characters' consciousnesses. In each part, Thon first builds up a theoretical basis and subsequently shows the concept "at work" in methodological analyses across the three media.

Thon's contribution fills a research gap, namely the need to create a "*genuinely transmedial narratology*" (xviii) for media studies in particular but also for literary studies of narrative representations. Although he primarily focuses on the three mentioned media, his approach is not limited to them. He intends the categories he deals with to be open to adaptation and the analysis of other media or even of convergent narrative works of different media. Likewise, his transmedial approach leads to a critical reconsideration of existing narratological concepts and terms.

In the first chapter, "Toward a Transmedial Narratology," Thon situates himself in relation to various theoretical discourses in both narratology and media studies and makes it clear that his book provides not only a theoretical framework but, in particular, a method "for the analysis of prototypical aspects of narrative across media" (6). Although his approach is clearly

associated with transgeneric and intermedial movements in postclassical and neoclassical narrative studies, he does not fail to clarify the connections between his approach and the other two main research areas in narratology, contextualist and cognitive narratology. Comparing different understandings of *media*, *mediality*, *intermediality*, and *transmediality*, for the most part Thon discusses the approaches of Marie-Laure Ryan, Irina Rajewsky, David Herman, and Werner Wolf, arguing that a transmedial narratology should not be “a collection of medium-specific narratological terms and concepts” (15). Instead, it should focus on continuous and neutral aspects that appear *across* media, while preventing media-blindness as well as media-relativism. His aim, therefore, is to “examine a variety of strategies of narrative representation across a range of conventionally distinct narrative media while at the same time acknowledging both similarities and differences in the ways these media narrate” (31).

Part I is thus concerned with “Storyworlds across Media,” expanding upon the classical story/discourse distinction by referring to storyworld conceptions established by researchers such as Herman, Ryan, and Lubomír Doležel, all of whom emphasize that there is more to the story (“implicit narrative content”; 37) than that which is explicitly presented. Storyworlds are therefore “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate” (Herman, *Story Logic* 9, quoted on 44f.). Because the spatial, temporal, and causal relations between the represented events and existents also contribute to the constitution of the storyworld, Thon describes storyworlds as “intersubjective communicative constructs based on a given narrative representation” (54). Consequently, Thon states a need to clearly differentiate between the internal mental representation of a world, its external medial representation and the storyworld itself (cf. 51). He points out that the recipients of a narrative representation do two things: they (1) “fill in the gaps” with their world (and fictional) knowledge, which researchers commonly agree upon; but also (2) willingly ignore aspects of the representation that are medium-specific and do not represent the storyworld. Thon writes with recourse to Gregory Currie’s *representational correspondence* (60) and Kendall L. Walton’s *principle of charity* (61) about the “medium-specific forms of charity” (70) recipients provide. In doing so, they seek to make sense of seemingly implausible occurrences, before assuming the represented world to be in itself contradictory, illogical, or impossible.

The analytical chapter in Part I deals with the different multimodality of the three discussed media: films as audiovisual, comics as verbal-pictorial, and video games as interactive representations of storyworlds. Within Thon's transmedial concept, representations of storyworlds must still be discussed in medium-specific terms in each case, and this applies to the three discussed categories. Thon's contribution offers in-depth analyses of filmic narrative representations, for example, of spatial and temporal relations in *Pulp Fiction*, of causal and ontological relations in *eXistenZ*, and the way in which these relations are intentionally left open in *Run Lola Run*. The principle of medium-specific charity becomes evident in the handling of verbal-pictorial representations in contemporary comics. Thon emphasizes the importance of clearly differentiating between the representing and the represented (cf. 86) and adapts Currie's categories, "representation-by-origin" and "representation-by-use" (88) in his *Narratives and Narrators* (OUP, 2010). Thon's analyses focus on *Maus*, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, *The Sandman* series, and *The Unwritten* series. According to Thon, interactive representations of storyworlds are characterized by incompleteness and nonlinearity and less predetermination than the other discussed media, which affects representational correspondence. Hence, scripted and ludic events can even be represented simultaneously. The video games that Thon analyzes in this respect are *Halo*, *Alan Wake*, and *Dragon Age: Origins*.

Part II focuses on narratorial representation across media. Following on from Richard Walsh and others in their "optional-narrator-theories" (127), Thon sees the overlapping of authors (fulfilling narratorial functions) and characters (fulfilling authorial functions). With Currie, he distinguishes between "narrative-making" and "narrative-telling" (154). Looking for a transmedial basis on which to conceptualize the narrator, he revisits several existing theories from literary studies and media studies as well as cognitive narratology. He emphasizes the importance of narrative comprehension processes (i.e., focusing on recipients) as well as questions of authorship, based on his assumption that narrative is an intentional artifact. These artifacts across media often provide an author collective that fulfills authorial (as well as narratorial) functions. Thon is aware that his conception of the term is fairly broad, that is, that it includes every contributor to the narrative work within the author collective. Moreover, he distinguishes a "hypothetical author" (133) from "author figures" that are represented in paratexts, as well as "authoring

characters" (134) that often also function as narrators. Hence, limiting his concept of narratorial representation to narrators-as-narrating-characters, he excludes "covert" extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators or narrating instances on the basis that they are "not sufficiently distinguished from 'implied authors'" (142). Therefore, according to his approach, it is not necessary to fully attribute the representation of a storyworld to one narrator; rather, several (especially audiovisual, verbal-pictorial, or interactive) aspects can be considered part of a "nonnarratorial representation." This nonnarratorial representation can be attributed to the author collective. It is "the combination of narratorial and nonnarratorial representation that primarily defines the medium-specific forms and functions of narrators across media" (164). The narrator's verbal narration can be further differentiated as a spoken, written, or "thought" representation. Thon also makes a distinction between the framing and the nonframing narrator, a difference based on whether the narrator is in overall control of the represented or not. Whereas strong textual markers are required to identify a framing narrator, according to Thon, nonframing narrators are the default case.

The verbal narration of the extradiegetic and heterodiegetic voice-over in *Run Lola Run*, for example, can be easily construed as a narrating character on the basis of his voice qualities. Whereas narratorial representation is commonly used to orient the spectator within the space and time of the filmic storyworld, unreliable narrators are used to disorient recipients, as in the case of *The Usual Suspects* and *Fight Club*, which Thon also analyzes, convincingly illustrating the operability of his method. The highly metaleptic *Adaptation* is analyzed in terms of ontological indeterminacy and the intentional blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction. His analysis thus shows authorial functions being fulfilled by narrating characters. The rest of this chapter provides analyses of comics such as the *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series, *Habibi*, *The Sandman* series, and *Maus*, as well as video games like *Dragon Age: Origins*, *DeathSpank*, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, and *Bastion*, which also cover the full range of narratorial representation.

In Part III, Thon develops new terminology for the categories of perspective, point of view, and focalization. Discussing the difficulties of using these overlapping concepts, he points out that there is no common understanding of them. The two approaches he leans on most heavily are those

by Edward Branigan and Jens Eder, while simultaneously adopting Mieke Bal's innovation of differentiating between focalizing subject and focalized object. He thus distinguishes between "objective representation," "inter-subjective representation" (240), and "the subjective representation of a character's consciousness or mind" (238). The kind of "intentional mental state" (244), upon which he predominantly focuses, is what Eder calls the "perceptual perspective." He thus neglects "epistemic," "evaluative," "motivational," and "emotional" (244) perspective, aspects that are interrelated with (quasi-)perceptual aspects of characters' consciousness anyway. In doing so, he develops narratorial as well as nonnarratorial strategies of subjective representation (and combinations thereof). Building upon Dorrit Cohn's categories of characters' interiority from *Transparent Minds* (Princeton UP, 1978), Thon proposes a transmedial discussion of (1) the "narratorial representation of a character's mind," (2) the "narratorial representation of a character's (quasi-)perceptions," (3) the often unmarked "narratorially framed representation of a character's internal voice," and (4) the "nonnarratorial representation of a character's internal voice" (255f.). Moreover, Thon transmedially expands upon Branigan's concepts of "POV," "perception," "projection," and "mental process" (258). He differentiates between (1) a "spatial point-of-view sequence," which is the "least subjective"; (2) a "(quasi-)perceptual point-of-view sequence" (259) that is much less intersubjectively valid; (3) a "(quasi-)perceptual overlay," which represents aspects of a character's consciousness (such as sound perception) without approximating his or her spatial position; and (4) the "nonnarratorial representation of internal worlds" (261f.), which calls for a change of diegetic level. As markers for sequences of subjective representation he differentiates between (a) contextual, (b) representational, and (c) narratorial markers, which can be made use of either simultaneously, a posteriori, or a priori.

In the chapter that follows, Thon provides sample analyses in this regard. His analysis of the film *12 Monkeys* emphasizes how narrative comprehension changes as the plot unfolds. The examination of *Fight Club* focuses on nonnarratorial strategies of subjective representation. In his analysis of *A Beautiful Mind* he emphasizes sequences of (quasi-)perceptual overlay, and in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* the complex combination of narratorial and nonnarratorial strategies of subjective representation. There are analyses of five contemporary comics: *The Sandman* series and its representation of internal worlds; *The Arrival*;

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen and its use of spatial point-of-view sequences, (quasi-)perceptual point-of-view sequences, and (quasi-)perceptual overlay; *Sin City: Hell and Back*; and, finally, the two different homodiegetic narrators as well as formally inventive forms of nonnarratorial strategies in *Black Hole*. Thon repeatedly points out the “fuzzy” or “wavy” (285) frames of the panels as medium-specific markers of subjectivity. His analyses of video games emphasize their exceptional status among the examined media: their interactivity causes the strategies of subjective representation to fulfill not just narrative but also ludic functions. Thon discusses the first-person shooter game, *F.E.A.R.: First Encounter Assault Recon*, and the “first-person survival game” (311), *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, focusing on the narrative, representational, and ludic functions of the implemented “sanity meter.” Moreover, he analyzes *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and one of its features that allows the user to switch between an intersubjective mode of representation and a (quasi-)perceptual overlay. In *Alan Wake*, he stresses both narratorially and nonnarratorially marked representations of characters’ player-controlled, internal worlds.

As Thon himself points out in his conclusion, future research dealing with historical or contextual aspects of transmedial strategies of narrative representation may fruitfully build upon the theoretical framework and methodological concepts he provides. His methods could also be applied to media other than contemporary film, comics, and video games, as well as to intermedial adaptations or transmedial expansions of storyworlds. Furthermore, there is a need to conceptualize strategies other than the transmedial strategies he examines. These might be strategies of “plot design,” the “inventory” of storyworlds, authorial voices, or evaluative unreliability, as well as representations of characters’ subjectivity other than perception, that is, emotions, knowledge, or their motivations. Thon’s book is a cutting-edge contribution to transmedial narratology. For the most part heavily theoretical, it reflects the current overall state of discussion as well as discussions specific to the three media that he focuses upon. Although perhaps not the first choice as an introduction to the topic for students or nonspecialists, it does constitute a valuable contribution to the ongoing specialist discussion. His attempt to combine theory and method is highly ambitious (and sometimes leads to long discussions—and not infrequently to very long sentences—about issues not primarily relevant to his undertaking), but it is certainly convincing and

demonstrates analytical prowess in its enlightening sample analyses. These analyses are almost free of interpretation and thus show Thon's understanding of narrative studies as purely heuristic research. Moreover, the extensive index (493–527) is a great tool for orienting oneself more quickly within the various discussions. *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* is a highly recommended book and a solid foundation for further development in its field/s.

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☞ Gordon Teskey. *The Poetry of John Milton*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015. xvii + 619 pp.

Harvard professor Gordon Teskey has put a lifetime of devotion to Milton into his latest book, a book about only Milton's poetry, but about all his poetry. In spite of the book's daunting length, Teskey frequently laments that he must cut short his analyses and observations. Those analyses and observations combine the best of New Criticism with current insights into seventeenth-century English history as well as contemporary critical practice. Teskey's prose sweeps through the vast Miltonic landscape but frequently pauses to observe a flower of prosody or a concealed religious or theological allusion. In fact, Teskey continually shifts his perspective from Milton's great vistas to details revealed only by the closest reading, and in spite of these shifts, Teskey never loses sight of his own position *vis à vis* Milton's poetry.

Teskey's position is an historical understanding of Milton's development that furnishes an architectonic for the book. He divides Milton's poetic career into three rather Hegelian stages: transcendence, engagement, and transcendental engagement. By the latter, Teskey says he means "a struggle