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Who Is Afraid of Nelson Goodman?
On the Relevance of a Philosophical Model of Worldmaking
for Narratology, Cultural and Media Studies

- Vera Nünning/Ansgar Nünning/Birgit Neumann (eds.), *Cultural Ways of World-making: Media and Narratives*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 2010. VIII, 361 p. [Price: EUR 89,95]. ISBN: 978-3-11-022755-0.

1. Scope and Theoretical Assumptions of the Essay Collection

Narratology, as David Herman pointed out in his 2009 article »Narrative Ways of Worldmaking«,[1] was reluctant to try and account for the referential and worldmaking properties of narratives as long as it was influenced by structuralism. For the past twenty years, though, due to an opening up of narrative theory to contextual approaches and its growing interdependence with cultural and media studies, there has been a marked interest in how storyworlds are constructed by readers and how these fictional worlds relate to nonfictional ones. This has resulted in studies such as Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991) or Ruth Ronen's *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (1994), which use philosophical theories of possible worlds to construct viable models for narratological use.[2]

The essay collection *Cultural Ways of Worldmaking*, published as the first volume of the newly created series »Concepts for the Study of Culture« by De Gruyter, sets up a wider framework by probing the philosophical theory of worldmaking for its applicability to cultural, media and literary studies. The sixteen contributions are based on conference papers that were initially presented during a symposium entitled »Ways of Worldmaking: Narratives, Archives and Media«, held by the European Summer School in Cultural Studies (ESSCS) in July 2007 in Giessen and Heidelberg. As indicated by the choice of title, the conference and collection took Nelson Goodman's study *Ways of Worldmaking* as a point of departure – an anti-realist theory of worldmaking that is based on the assumption that ›our world‹ as a verifiable, given entity does not exist.[3] Instead, Goodman claims that only diverse and conflicting ways of worldmaking, of subjective world-modelling exist. His philosophical approach – one particular variant of possible worlds theory – can therefore be aligned with positions of radical constructivism.

And it is exactly this kind of radicalism which poses a problem for quite a few of the contributors to this collection. Even though the relevance of worldmaking processes for various academic disciplines seems undeniable, the question arises why the editors have chosen Goodman's model as a sole reference. As earlier studies have shown, the notion of a multiplicity of subjective but equally valuable world versions existing side by side might be insufficient to explain why even fictional characters (let alone human beings) most of the time would seem to share and agree on certain properties of their universe. Goodman's notion of worldmaking is a dynamic, productive, creative one, the underlying idea being that symbol systems or world versions are never static mirrorings of some pre-existing real world but human contrivances. Even though ›truth‹ is no longer viewed as a correspondence relation, certain ›standards of rightness‹ such as »utility, credibility, probability, coherence, deductive and inductive validity« (11) do seem to be valid for Goodman. This means that a hierarchy of

world versions is assumed to exist. Yet it remains unclear what might be the standard against which aspects such as probability or utility are measured. We may have to turn to other theorists of possible worlds or worldmaking in order to find a satisfactory explanation – an obvious solution that is not taken into consideration in this volume, though. Another deficiency remarked upon by a number of contributors is Goodman's tendency to view worldmaking as a decontextualized process largely independent of cultural factors. A significant blind spot of this essay collection is therefore the fact that alternatives such as the indexical worldmaking model developed by David Lewis are never even mentioned.[4]

2. Introduction by the Editors

The actual essay collection is preceded by a well-argued introductory essay by **Ansgar and Vera Nünning** which provides the theoretical basis for as well as an overview of the collection's structure and content as a whole. Nünning/Nünning consider Goodman's theory of worldmaking, developed in the 1970s, to be congenial with today's cultural studies approaches because of some of the central questions he poses: »»In just what sense are there many worlds? What distinguishes genuine from spurious worlds? What are worlds made of? […] What role do symbols play in the making? And how is worldmaking related to knowing?‹« [5] The authors of this article focus on how narratives figure in worldmaking processes and argue that they are essential in generating self-making (through story-telling, with genres providing the necessary plots and frames), community-making, i.e. in producing a repertoire of cultural, collective plots and that they are indispensable for creating literary worlds. Also, they claim that academia employs worldmaking in Goodman's sense: academic disciplines construct the objects they investigate themselves. Finally, Goodman's theory is shown to provide a paradigm for the study of culture because (of):

- his constructivist premises and defense of pluralism
- it can be applied not only to verbal symbol systems but also to nonverbal and performative ones
- it provides a flexible framework for comparative studies
- it provides a broad scope of inquiry and wide range of possible applications
- it foregrounds the concepts we employ in order to construct culture and not culture as such or cultural objects
- it has a self-reflexive dimension shared by the arts, the humanities and sciences

However, they also point out the deficiencies of Goodman's model, namely the neglect of the role of values, knowledge and history, which W.J.T. Mitchell already worked out in his 1991 article.[6] Moreover, Goodman is shown to underrate the political, the contextual, historical and situational conditions of worldmaking processes, which are of crucial importance to the study of culture. The proclaimed – and ambitious – intention of this essay collection is therefore to expand and modify Goodman's theory, apart from showing up ways in which it can be of use to cultural, literary and medial analyses.

3. Contributions: Theories of Worldmaking, (Inter)Medial and Narrative Worlds

The individual contributions to this essay collection shed some light on the conditions and especially the social relevance of worldmaking from the point of view of literary, media or cultural studies. The essays are grouped around three central issues or concepts, (1) theoretical approaches to worldmaking, (2) the impact of media on ways of worldmaking and (3) narratives as ways of worldmaking.

PART I

Within the first part of the collection, which looks at theoretical approaches to ways of worldmaking, **Steven Connor**'s article takes the stance that worldmaking is first and foremost not a subjective, individual process but more a collective, cultural one. He distances himself from Goodman's concept of worlds in that he claims that there is always and has always been ›a world‹, even though it is one constantly in the making. Connor insists that there is a material basis to the world, one which exerts a formative and sometimes constraining influence on its inhabitants (whose subjective world-versions may be highly relevant and determining to themselves but less so to the world at large): »A world is strongly determined but weakly determining. By contrast, the world is strongly determining but weakly determined.« (42) With the knowledge of literary history behind him, he investigates the worldhood of world, how a world comes into being, how it comes to be viewed as complete and what makes it go on or cease to exist – in short, he is interested both in the *bildungsroman* of the world and in its ›unworlding‹.

Herbert Grabes reads Goodman's theory of worldmaking critically from a literary-historical viewpoint, comparing it to similar earlier and contemporary theories from the wider context of literary studies. The latter include Roman Ingarden's theory of literary reception, which strengthened the role of the reader and relied on the central concept of spots of indeterminacy in literary texts that need to be filled by the reader. Another approach is that of Schank and Abelson, who rely on cognitive science to build a model of mental frames and scripts and schemata that are activated in the reading process. And, somewhat in passing, Grabes mentions one of the earliest and one of the most recent theorists in philosophical and literary worldmaking, Hans Vaihinger's philosophy of the ›as if‹ dating from 1911 and Ruth Ronen's theory of literary worldmaking from 1994. He is the only contributor who seems to have taken notice of Ruth Ronen's *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* but unfortunately he does not try to assess it against the foil of Goodman's ideas and ignores Ryan's influential study from 1991, which centres on the interface between possible worlds theory and narrative theory. His general conclusion is that Goodman's theory is far too abstract to be of immediate practical use in literary studies.

The two remaining articles in this part of the collection, one by Ben Dawson, the other by Frederik Tygstrup, are written from a philosophical standpoint. **Ben Dawson** searches for the philosophical origin of ways of worldmaking in Kantian and Hegelian idealism and investigates the power of fate over a world/worlds that are perceived to be insufficient. He also criticizes Goodman for remaining highly abstract and for a lack of contextualization. The essay could be described as a learned tour de force of the last 200 years of philosophies of worldmaking and may be difficult to access for literary scholars who are not well-versed with philosophical jargon.

Frederik Tygstrup's more readable essay is predominantly concerned with ways of social worldmaking, that is the politics of symbolic forms. Tygstrup corroborates the thesis (and basic assumption of all theories of narrative) formulated in the introductory article, namely that facts in themselves are brute and need narrative embedding in order to be intelligible. If worlds are made out of contingent facts, if systems of truth process facts and produce them, there is always a highly political interplay at work in societies between the rule of truth and the evidence of facts. An analysis of W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001) serves as an example of a literary text in which the politics of negotiating facts and truths is a central issue.

PART II

The second part of the collection, which is concerned with media as ways of worldmaking, is opened by an excellent essay co-authored by **Birgit Neumann** and **Martin Zierold** on the relevance of media to processes of social worldmaking. Worldmaking depends on media use and medial externalization, they argue; media thus have a worldmaking potential. At the same time, medialised worlds also have a socializing function in that individuals learn how to evaluate social phenomena through active media usage. Based on constructivist and intermedial assumptions, Neumann and Zierold provide an assessment of the role of media and genre-related structures in the dynamic construction of cultural knowledge – which is here seen as equivalent to social worldmaking. They centre more specifically on recursive processes of cultural worldmaking with their tight network of intermedial references which allow for an aura of authenticity, in other words reality effects. This process is investigated concretely by focussing on national stereotyping in 18th-century England – a specific form of inter- and transmedial worldmaking analysed in a broad range of text types and media (travelogues, poems, comedies, even iconography).

Of the four remaining articles in this section two centre on media theory, without any clearly discernible relationship to Goodman's theory, and two focus on architecture. **Knut Ove Eliassen** problematizes the term ›media‹ from a historical perspective, arguing that media as such have only existed since the 19th century. Within an 18th-century context, it would be more appropriate to speak of ›mediation‹ because the dominant cultural view of worldmaking was a different one. While for the 18th century, the world was a product basically constituted by the activity of the human senses, for the 19th century the world was a given. How this shift in historical mentalities (triggered by media formatting and new technologies of reproduction) could be explained in terms of Goodman's model of worldmaking is left for the reader to gauge. Even less reference to worldmaking processes and theory is provided by **Stephen Sale**'s critique of Friedrich Kittler's work on media theory, which he claims has devalued the subject in its insistence on the post-human autonomy of technology.

Ulrik Ekman, who is mainly interested in architecture, looks at Diller & Scofidio's Blur Building, which was opened in 2002 as a contribution to the Swiss National Expo. A real drawback for the average, non-specialised reader is that not a single photograph or graphic illustration of the project is included (a decision which is not accounted for, even though some graphic sources are indicated in a footnote) and that the setup is not explained in any satisfactory way. This makes the argumentation hard to follow for anyone not familiar with the architectural project.

In comparison, **Matthew Taunton**'s article on the history of a particular phenomenon of British architecture – the London council estate – is far easier to approach from a cultural studies perspective. Among all the contributors, he is the one who is most explicit about the greatest

deficiency of Goodman's theory of worldmaking: it is his relativist position, which precludes the existence of any world beyond the plural mental world visions of individuals and deems any such claim to be inappropriate. Taunton considers such a stance of radical constructivism anything but helpful and even labels it »a frivolous and solipsistic game« (187). Moving from theoretical critique to concrete analysis, he looks at the formation of the London council estate as a culturally constructed and medialised phenomenon on the basis of two films – Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth*, 1997, and Michael Winterbottom's *Wonderland*, 1999. Although these two films offer very different portrayals of British council estates and make very different points about social class and culture, both relate to the same kind of world (which Goodman would deny exists), even though this world is definitely not a static, fixed entity but constantly in the process of being shaped and reshaped.

PART III

With seven contributions altogether, the third and last part of this collection entitled »Narratives as Ways of Worldmaking« is the most extensive one and certainly the most relevant to anyone interested in literary worldmaking processes. In his highly readable article, **Ansgar Nünning** investigates worldmaking from the standpoint of narrative theory (a dimension which Goodman did not devote a lot of attention to) and proves narratives to be powerful tools of worldmaking and performative cultural forces. Citing the example of David Herman, Nünning points out that only in the last few years narratology has taken notice of worldmaking as a useful conceptual tool. He emphasizes the particular relevance of worldmaking concepts to transmedial narratology since they can account not only for fictional narratives but also for media events. His own narratological contribution consists in uncovering the step-by-step process by which mere incidents are turned into narrative events, which are then emplotted and which, with the help of perspectival ordering and storytelling devices, eventually yield narrative worlds.

The examples he uses – storytelling in Shakespeare's *Othello* and in the administration of George W. Bush – could not be further apart but interestingly, both types of ›text‹ are shown to have a social, political, even potentially dangerous dimension of reality-changing stories. He argues that events do not emerge naturally and are not mere givens but must be understood as the outcome of processes of narrative worldmaking (such as selection, ordering, emplotment, perspectivization) and concludes that Goodman's model needs to be supplemented by more specifically narrative features of worldmaking in order to be of use for literary and cultural studies.

Vera Nünning's article is obviously intended to be another attempt at functionalizing Goodman's model of worldmaking for narratology. Her initial thesis that narrative worldmaking is not restricted to literary texts but is at work in cultures at large and even governs cognitive processes in the individual mind hardly needs to be proven. She finds Goodman's processes of worldmaking – composition/decomposition, weighting, ordering, deletion/supplementation, deformation/reshaping – helpful but suggests eight additional features that are involved in fictional worldmaking and need to be taken into account:

- Situatedness or cultural context (shared values and beliefs, canons, spatio-temporal settings)
- Structure (story and discourse)
- Narrative as a way of thinking and understanding (involving narrators and addressees)

- Referentiality and self-reflexivity (no verification of narrative facts is possible; verisimilitude is the only valid criterion in fictional narratives)
- Polyvalence and suspension of disbelief
- Embedded values
- Genre conventions
- Perspectivization and experientiality

In contradistinction to Goodman, Vera Nünning concludes that narrative worlds are distinct from the world of science in that specific processes are involved in fictional worldmaking.

The five remaining essays could be designated as case studies of narrative worldmaking. **Inger Ostenstad** offers a close reading of the speeches and texts of the Norwegian novelist Dag Solstad, who claims that power relations in literature cannot be compared to power in social worlds because literature is a nonpragmatic discourse. Ostenstad argues, however, that the author function of literature, the conjectures readers make about the enunciator of literature, prove that power relations are also involved in the literary field.

Caroline Lusin takes a look at recent British examples of the genre of fictional biography, including biographical metafiction and their worldmaking processes. Her analysis possibly comes closest to Goodman's assumption that there is no pre-existing, given world. She argues that the biographer has no unique real world at his/her disposal but can only have recourse to various, sometimes conflicting world versions. Her comparison of two fictional biographies based on the life of Henry James, David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004) and Colm Toibin's *The Master* (2004), yields interesting insights into worldmaking, perspective and the biographical subject, authorship and ethics, memory and truth. Another essay dealing with biography as a way of worldmaking (which does not immediately follow upon Lusin's article, though) is the one co-authored by **Elisabeth Waghäll Nivre** and **Maren Eckart**. They investigate 17th- and 18th-century biographies of a famous historical person, Queen Christina of Sweden.

Hanna Bingel's essay turns to the religious component in narrative worldmaking. She focusses on contemporary fictional narratives that engage with religion, the search for God and spirituality – often in a hesitant manner. As her literary example – E.L. Doctorow's novel *City of God* (2000) – shows, literary strategies serve to construct or deconstruct, reshape or affirm religious narratives.

Quite appropriately, the collection as a whole is rounded off by an article on post-apocalyptic issues in literature and the way they affect worldmaking processes. **René Dietrich** analyses what he calls examples of post-apocalyptic American poetry, which typically engages in scenarios of the end of the world, of a world in ruins and fragments. In W.S. Merwin's *The Lice* (1967) and Carolyn Forché's *The Angel of History* (1994) unmade and remade worlds constitute dominant concerns and both poetry collections foreground the idea of the speaker's vision as central.

4. Summary

At the end of the volume, some helpful biographical information about the contributors is provided. In sum, the wide range of topics, of media and texts discussed in this collection certainly allows for a diversified reading experience and some essays provide enlightening insights into cultural phenomena from different historical and geographical backgrounds. However, not all of the essays seem to be equally concerned with Goodman's model of worldmaking and only very few contributions actually make a serious attempt at modifying the model for the purposes of literary, media or cultural studies. It seems to me that a more thorough negotiation with existing studies of narrative and media proceeding from philosophical worldmaking models would have provided a more fruitful and consistent basis for discussion.

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Notes

[1] Cf. David Herman, Narrative Ways of Worldmaking, in: Sandra Heinen/Roy Sommer(eds.), *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, Berlin/New York 2009, 71–87.

[2] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 1991; Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, Cambridge 1994.

[3] Cf. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis 1978.

[4] Cf. David Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, Cambridge/MA 1973.

[5] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis 1978, 1.

[6] Cf. W.J.T. Mitchell, Realism, Irrealism and Ideology: A Critique of Nelson Goodman, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25:1 (1991), 23–25.