



Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative: where narrative theory and geography meet

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BOOK REVIEW

Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative: where narrative theory and geography meet, by Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, Maoz Azaryahu, Columbus, The Ohio State University Press, 2017, 254 pp., \$39.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8142-5263-5; \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-1299-8; \$19.95 (eBook), ISBN 978-0-8142-7407-1

In narrative and literary studies, questions of space have long occupied a relatively marginal position, in part because they were subsumed under description – a feature deemed superfluous to plot development and its temporal imperatives. The past decades have seen an increasing interest in spatial issues, with the appearance of separate subdisciplines such as literary urban studies and spatial humanities. During these same decades, an interest in narratives has gradually moved central stage in geography and urban studies. The adaptation of concepts and methodologies from one field to another has remained somewhat haphazard. Comprehensive book-length studies of approaches to space in literary studies that take into account geographical perspectives are relatively rare, as are examinations, in geography, of narrated space drawing consistently on narratology. Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu's book *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narratives* addresses this hiatus. It aims for an integration of approaches and for an advance toward a distinctive narrative geography, and a geographical narratology. *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narratives* is a timely and important book. Written in an accessible style, well structured, and with a wealth of practical case studies, it will speak to students and researchers across disciplinary boundaries. One of its distinctive features is that it is organized as a collective effort, in which all three authors (one from narratology, two from geography) have contributed to all the chapters, and this integrated authorial voice is one of its strengths.

Readers would have benefited from an orientation of how the proposed narrative geography is situated within geography and its subsidiary fields. While The Ohio State University Press arranges the book also under 'Human Geography', the book does not explicitly refer to cultural or human geography, or to how these have contributed to our understanding of literary and other narratives in space. Similarly, geocriticism is largely ignored, and the work by Bertrand Westphal in the field could have added important insights, particularly in relation to referentiality of narrated space, which is given little attention in *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative*. Other relevant work that is overlooked includes that by Marc Brosseau in literary geography. By contrast, the book's position within narrative studies is clearly articulated.

Following an introductory chapter, the book starts out with a narratological examination of how space is narrated in fictional narratives. A number of helpful taxonomies are introduced and applied; these include the differentiation between emotional and strategic relations in narrative space, and five basic levels of narrative space. The successive chapter, which focuses on the relationship between maps and narratives, provides an important introduction to an issue that is at the heart of the overlap between geography and narrative. However, it immediately raises questions on terminological consistency: How (other than metaphorically) is a map a narrative? 'Narrative' is used in this chapter in a somewhat vague manner, defined (quite bafflingly) as 'the result of encoding decisions that serve particular human interests' (p. 66), and 'narrativity' is used as a synonym for 'textuality' (p. 66). In chapter 4, a mapping case study is lucidly explored to connect the preceding observations on maps and narrative to considerations concerning cognitive

maps. Chapter 5, which focuses on space, narrative and digital media, shows ingeniously how a geographical narratology may be applied to digital media cases. The chapter points toward important future research directions for a narrative approach to space, with game studies, GIS-applications, and alternate reality games as particularly rich fields for study.

In the subsequent three chapters, the focus pivots toward a geographical perspective, with an examination of storytelling in street names, historical sites, and museums. The analysis of how spaces are made to tell stories in these chapters is fascinating and imaginative, and much of the source material offers innovative insights into the possibilities of a narrative geography. Particularly compelling is the argument that 'when stories are told "on site" ... space is often used as a surrogate for time' (p. 161). At times, the concept of 'narrative' is again used quite loosely, but the authors acknowledge this problem openly, noting that several of the spatial elements they examine have 'narrativity' – the ability to evoke known or new stories, rather than that they are 'narratives' proper. However, the most interesting (and most pressing) questions remain largely unanswered: How do these elements of narrativity become full-blown narratives? Who tells these stories, for what purpose? And how are they read? While the authors duly note that recent narrative theory 'points to the important role played by the reader, viewer, or listener in constructing meaning from narrative forms' (p. 179), much in these chapters is content to focus on formal features of spatial narratives.

The authors repeatedly note, in the final chapters, that examinations of narratives in space tend to lead to a critical approach, based on 'the insight that place names are not mere signifiers of objective reality but belong to structures of power and discourses of identity' (p. 140). However, in the treatment of place names and history museums, little is made of this potential. This feels strangely inadequate, in particular, given the abundant references in the book to the museification of military history in the U.S. and in Israel – the Palmach Museum (pp. 190-191) is a case in point. But reading the space of museums, history sites, and street names in terms of their narrative structure rather than for what these narratives mean (and are meant to mean) leaves many questions begging. It feels like a strangely noncommittal approach to treat, for example, the Mercedes-Benz Museum (p. 196) and tours of the Buchenwald concentration camp (p. 176) largely in identical ways: in terms of a formal description of spatial and narrative interaction, rather than for what they mean for our understanding of the historical moment within which they are constructed, or for the kind of discourses, power relations, or identity-construction they carry out within specific spatial, ideological, and historical contexts. In such instances, the final part of the book gives a rather limited idea of what a narrative analysis can bring to an analysis of space. This may also be related to the book's rather constrained idea of narrative itself, which is considered in this book primarily as *sequential*, while the understanding of narrative (during the last few decades) as a *mode for communicating experience*, for example, in the work of Jerome Bruner, receives less attention.

Narrating Space / Spatializing Narratives is a book that will be of interest for everyone working on the interdisciplinary crossroads where questions of space and narrative meet. It will set readers from a range of disciplines on track toward new sources, methods, and their applications. The book exemplifies some of the challenges still to be overcome, in particular, in terms of transposing the concept of narrative to other fields of study without diluting its terminological precision. While the opening chapters will provide a well-structured conceptual toolbox to any newcomer to the field, more advanced scholars from a range of backgrounds will find in this book new directions

for research in an exciting and burgeoning field that only recently has begun to fully explore the potential of a narrative analysis – on the basis of concepts and methods from narrative and literary studies – for questions of space.

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