

## Diagrams, narratives and ‘reality’

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Review of *Creative Dynamics. Diagrammatic Strategies in Narrative* [*Iconicity in Language and Literature* Vol. 11], by Christina Ljungberg. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2012. 190 pp.

Much has been written about the role of diagrams and mappings in epistemology, cognition and semiotics in recent years – it seems about time to fertilize these results in the investigation of fictions and narrative in literary studies, not least given the increasing amount of fictions using more or less fictive icons, maps and diagrams as integrated parts of their plots. Few would be better positioned to undertake that task than the Swedish-Swiss scholar Christina Ljungberg, one of the main initiators of the influential “Iconicity in Language and Literature” movement with biannual conferences.

Her book *Creative Dynamics* introduces the general diagrammatical view of mappings and cartography in the first chapter, then applies those tools on the special subject of (more or less) fictive narrative in the string of ensuing chapters. First, she takes the classic-modern novel, the prototype being Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, with Thomas More, Jonathan Swift and Madeleine de Scudéry as further examples, charting the different roles played in these narratives by fictive maps printed as part of the work. From there, she goes into (post)modern novels, beginning with Victorian cases like Lewis Carroll’s ironic Bellman’s map (showing a complete blank slate, hence the optimal map because of displaying the summit of possibilities), Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* where the whole plot was prompted by the author’s map drawing, existing before the novel, William Morris and Thomas Hardy. Going further, Ljungberg moves into postmodern waters under the headline of the “crisis of representation”, addressing novelists such as Carol Shields, Paul Auster, and W. G. Sebald. This forms the introduction to “postcolonial mappings” addressing the political issue of how maps have been used by colonial powers – especially Britain – and how postcolonial authors may critically reuse and change such mappings in their critical analyses of colonial and postcolonial reality. Michael Ondaatje, Jamyang

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Norbus, Rudy Wiebe, Aritha van Herk are among the map-uses analysed here – in all cases giving occasion for reprinting the maps used by the authors, forming in itself an interesting collection of cases. A further chapter widens the scope to investigate another iconic device, that of photography, in postmodern fiction and autobiography, also conceived of under the headline of diagrams, to finish with a chapter interpreting the text-icon interface in terms of Fauconnier and Turner's blending theory.

The result is a rich catalogue of examples from which is extracted a typology of diagram strategies in fiction. As to the classic novels, for instance, the following functions are isolated: maps may mirror the structure of the narrative; they may indirectly criticize political and social conditions; question claims for scientific exactitude and discuss authenticity; metaphorically provide mappings of non-geographical domains such as emotions; etc. Similar typology lists appear in the postmodern and postcolonial chapters with some overlaps as compared to the classic typology. Variants of social and political criticism occur in all Ljungberg's lists, while the "post"-typologies add recent standard ideas such as addressing mutable identities, making explicit problems in the visual-narrative interplay and enhancing the unreliability of narrators. A very basic role – that of simply providing an overview of the fictive world in which the narrative unfolds, as in Tolkien's Middle Earth or Tove Jansson's Moomin Valley or Baum's *Wizard of Oz* topography – is covered in connection with children's books. A comparison of these different typologies is not presented; the similarities and differences between them, however, seem to call for such a synthesis, suggesting universal as well as time-and-place specific roles played by maps in fictions. An integration of these results might have been the object of a conclusive chapter which may be now left to the reader's own wishful thinking or diagrammatic imagination.

The largest scientific problem in the book, surprisingly, is not explicitly addressed by the author. It rather stands out as a symptom in the author's recurrent use of scare quotes with certain terms like 'real', 'reality', 'truth', 'authenticity', 'objectivity', 'scientific', etc. There are literally hundreds (not 'hundreds') of examples throughout the book. The use of such scare quotes is, of course, to swiftly voice a criticism of the concepts so marked, and implicitly to place the author on an epistemological high ground, capable of looking through the allegedly naive use, by lesser spirits, of the terms mentioned. Such a scare quote strategy was widespread in poststructuralist criticism where it most often functioned as the indication of a more or less explicit theory behind it, claiming a doctrine saying approximately that no reality nor truth exists, that all claims to represent such things are illusionary and merely the result of deceptive tools used ("representations"), in some cases taken to reflect gloomy power interests on the part of the persons using such terms, but never what those terms themselves claimed. Often, the notion of fiction was generalized so that any

representation of anything was taken to be fictitious, cf. the “crisis of representation”. Indeed, the very purpose of fiction was never to experiment with alternate reality versions, it was believed, rather it was didactically to teach the reader to see through the fundamental unreliability of representations as such.<sup>2</sup> Such was the doctrine of a sect, the so-called Scare Quote believers, inhabiting a network of English departments in the 1980s-90s, themselves at such a safe distance from reality that it might make their faith understandable. Especially in the two “post”-chapters, parts of the book recycle such standards from literary theory of the 1980s and 1990s. The basic problem is that those standards do not immediately fit with Ljungberg’s overall take on icons, diagrams, and maps.

Rather, the author’s theory of diagrammatic representation runs directly counter to the Scare Quote doctrine, building instead on the robust pragmatist realism of Charles Peirce and one of his skilled contemporary interpreters, the German semiotician Winfried Nöth. In this doctrine, it is not only possible but indeed typical of icons, maps, diagrams, and photographs to truthfully represent aspects or parts of reality without any scare quotes involved. The tension between diagram realism and poststructuralism implies that the author makes claims, throughout the book, that seem hard to reconcile. On the one hand, maps and diagrams may be criticized for showing only selected aspects of the territory, for being conventional and arbitrary, even indicating they are outright misleading or could never possibly represent any ‘reality’ – on the other hand, it is more coolly realized that *all* representations are bound to make such selections, without this in any way preventing them from potentially representing the aspects so selected in a truthful way. Take, on the one side, the accumulation of scare quotes in this discussion of the appearance of maps of increasing precision in modern cartography: “The new unadorned and scientific map ‘look’ was thus an answer to the demands of cultural, political and ideological interests, which required ‘scientific’ information to be communicated in a code that appeared neutral and impersonal, and thus ‘objective’ and ‘true.’” (25). On the opposite side, the author repeatedly quotes with approval Lucia Santaella’s terse description of photographs as “fragments of the real”, now without this four-letter word requiring scare quotes (e.g. 133). On the one hand, we hear that cartography

<sup>2</sup> A further central idea of the Scare Quoters was identifying illusionary ‘reality’ as a specifically Western or European evil, as if striving to represent things was a European practice only. Ljungberg discretely criticizes a quote by Ondaatje representing this stance, addressing the island now known as Sri Lanka: “‘Serendip, Ratnapida (‘island of gems’), Taprobane, Zeloan, Aeian, Seyllan, Ceilon and Ceylon”, that is, Arab, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, or English – functioned as a mirror that “pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities” (1982: 64)” (103). Ljungberg’s insertion in the middle of the Ondaatje quote reveals that his list of European semiotic conquerors includes no less than two non-European imperial powers.

as such is but a "colonial practice" (99; did Europeans not map the territory of their own countries?); on the other, that maps "share certain basic topological features with the environment" (20) and that "diagrams such as maps, drawings, mathematical formulas or novelistic plots can both represent something that exists in the material world and have the potential to produce something" (152). On the one hand, map making is claimed to be culturally universal (20) and map reading skills even "innate" (19); on the other hand maps until recently "... were not intended to provide geographical information but served primarily cultural, political and private interests ..." (23), as if such interests could be furthered by maps failing to provide any geographical information at all. The Scare Quote belief – as it often happens – makes the author confuse the issue of whether a sign has a referent object with the independent issue of whether the sign is false, i.e. whether that referent is to some degree truthfully described or not: "Early modern maps lack a factual geographical referent, because there was not enough empirical evidence ..." (28). But mapping California as an island, as it often happened, is not a map without a referent object – it is a map actually referring to California, but describing it erroneously. Such claims confuse having a referent with describing that referent correctly: false maps are only possible, of course, if a real reference is made but incorrectly described. Such conflicting claims, evident from the fact that the word "real" appears interchangeably with and without scare quotes through the book, to some degree cloud the many important results of the discussion about the role of icons, diagrams, maps and photos in fiction.

The overall picture of the book, then, is that of an author heroically struggling with a heritage from 1980s literary theory by using diagrams and cognition as a weapon against the scepticism of that tradition. The density of scare quotes seems to increase in the "post"-chapters – maybe under the influence of the 1980s–90s post-modern novelists analysed there, authors who very often seem to share poststructuralist ideas of representations as something necessarily deceitfully simulating a 'reality' which the reader should be warned against (by "challenging" his or her "outdated" "presuppositions" etc.). Such observations easily give rise to a suspicion, at least in this reader: maybe a whole package of 1980s–90s literary theory and a bundle of novels from the same period were really made not only *for* but also *about* each other – celebrating the same antirealist doctrine, and one of them relying upon the other as the proof of its own claims. But maybe now could be the time to realize that this tendency is a strange phenomenon of the near past and that a more daring, less reality-frightened theory of narrative and fiction could evolve, fictions being particular, inventive ways of addressing and influencing selected, general features of reality rather than a general tragic condition, alienating humanity fatefully from all and every 'truth'.

The definitive book attempting to overcome this tension in literary studies has hardly been written as yet, but the present volume shows an author with a privileged position actually to do so. Elaborating in this direction the conclusion I think she owes us, might, at the same time, form a marvellous sequel to a great book full of fine examples and important observations.