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Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki’s edited volume *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution* offers an interdisciplinary approach to narrative by examining new and complex narrative forms that emerge as a result of their merging with (new) media technologies. The volume provides perceptive links between narrative and cognition, as it can be examined and read alongside other theoretical works focusing on narrativity and cognitive studies; at the same time, it draws upon the intersection of narrative theories/studies and digital media, while also frequently resorting to examples from popular culture and films.

A number of theoreticians on narrative studies have promoted a rather broad perspective of narrative in recent bibliography. Namely, H. Porter Abbott, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2002), talks about a “larger definition of narrative” (13), noting that examining the extent to which a textual form could be regarded as narrative is an essentially subjective process. He observes “that there are, and will always be, gray areas in a field like narrative that has so much to do with subjective human response” (23). Marie-Laure Ryan extends Abbott’s observations by also calling attention to the subjective dimension of narrative. She argues: “When we are presented with a text of unknown origin, . . . we may diverge in our answers, . . . because we apply different criteria of narrativity, and because we can decide whether or not the text fulfills these criteria by paying attention to what it says” (“Towards” 32). What becomes clear here is that, similarly to Abbott, Ryan also proposes a “broad[er] conception [of] narrative” (“Narrative” 518), which is something that Grishakova and Poulaki explicitly mention in their introduction to this volume. Interestingly, in her more recent article, “Narrative,” Ryan expands the concept of narrative even further, contending that “since the label ‘narrative’ can now apply to invisible, elusive representations that exist only in the mind,” narrative can now turn “into a highly versatile tool that can be applied to many disciplines and problems” (526). Additionally, Abbott claims that “[n]arrativity is a matter of degree” (25), while Ryan avoids viewing “narrativity as a strictly binary feature, that is, as a property that a given text either has or doesn’t have” (“Towards” 28). In her attempt to define narrative, Ryan devises “a scalar conception of narrativity,” categorizing texts according to their “degree of narrativity” (“Narrative” 518-519; “Towards” 30). In fact, she differentiates between the conditions of “being a narrative” and “possessing narrativity,” emphasizing that texts can have different degrees of narrativity, depending on their ability to “evok[e] a narrative script in the mind of the audience” (*Narrative across Media* 9). The gap that Grishakova and Poulaki’s volume seeks to fill results from an effort to “[e]stablish” narrative studies of complexity (Grishakova and Poulaki 1), in other words, to examine the notion of complexity from a narrative point of view. To this end, the essays in this volume adopt a broad conception of narrative in their attempt to “account for the complex narrative forms” they approach (14). The main idea that connects all the essays in the
collection is the argument that narrativity is constantly reconsidered and reinvented, as it “may be inherent in a multitude of narrative-like forms” (15).

At the same time, recent advances in the field of cognitive studies have stressed the cognitive aspects and processes of narrative reading, which constitute a major topic of discussion in this edited collection. Primarily, N. Katherine Hayles brings forward these processes of reading in How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis (2012). Hayles has famously stressed the complexity of cognitive processes in reading works of digital fiction, demonstrating that “[r]eading has always been constituted through complex and diverse practices[,] [and] [n]ow it is time to rethink what reading is and how it works in the rich mixtures of words and images, sounds and animations, graphics and letters that constitute the environments of twenty-first century literacies” (79). These observations bring to mind the newly-emergent field of cognitive narratology, which, according to David Herman, is “the study of mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices, wherever—and by whatever means—those practices occur . . . encompass[ing] the nexus of narrative and mind not just in print texts but also in face-to-face interaction, cinema, radio news broadcasts, computer-mediated virtual environments, and other storytelling media.” Herman underscores a shift in the ways in which we think about narrative, thus arguing that “earlier narratological scholarship” should be “reconsidered from a cognitive-narratological perspective,” and “can be read anew, providing further insight into the cognitive processes underlying the (re)construction of narrative worlds.” Grishakova and Poulaki’s contribution in this volume lies exactly in calling attention to the multiple cognitive processes taking place in the human brain in narrative experiences, and while comprehending the complexity of diverse narrative forms and practices appearing in, through, and across various media. In other words, the collection attempts to capture the complexity of broadly defined narrative forms.

The book is divided into four sections, approaching different aspects of narrative complexity. The first part, “Narrative Media and Complexity,” examines complexity in new media narratives and interfaces, such as locative and digital narratives. In “Narrative as/and Complex System/s,” Ryan views complexity as an inherent element of narrative; David Ciccoricco and David Large investigate the binary opposition of simplicity and complexity as it becomes evident in digital fiction, while Noam Knoller coins the term “userly text” in his attempt to demonstrate the new narrative and cognitive strategies that are required, namely embodied cognition, in order to comprehend the narrative complexity emerging from the users’ interactions with technology in the post-PC era (103). Emma Whittaker’s “The Wave-Crest: Narrative Complexity and Locative Narrative” offers a framework for the narrative complexity of locative narratives by shedding light on several case studies, while Ulrik Ekman calls attention to the ways in which autobiographies and narratology are updated and informed by the recent developments in ubiquitous computing and big data.

The essays in Part Two, “Cognition and Narrative Comprehension,” focus on the ways in which the human brain processes the complexity that is evident in multimodal, visual, and multimedia narratives (Joseph P. Magliano, Karyn Higgs, James Clinton, and Neil Cohn) as well as in movies (James E. Cutting), while also contending that AI systems cannot comprehend and process the complexity of human language (Hamid R. Ekbia).

The third part, “Experience, Subjectivity, and Embodied Complexity,” sheds light on a new paradigm shift in cognitive studies that entails both mind and body participating in as well as
expanding the narrative experience. How embodied cognition, which can be understood as “learning through encounter” or “awareness through physicality” (Didur and Fan 92), contributes to narrative complexity constitutes the focus of these essays. Interestingly enough, the essays written by Mieke Bal, Poulaki, Pia Tikka, and Mauri Kaipainen draw evidence from complex cinematic narrative experiences in an attempt to explain how the body-mind ensemble reconstructs narrative, while Ellen J. Esrock resorts to literature, with attention paid to Virginia Woolf’s fiction, in order to prove that the human body renders narrative an essentially complex process. Last but not least, Martin E. Rosenberf, deals with music, underlining that jazz improvisation can be considered a kind of storytelling that involves multiple cognitive processes.

The essays in the final part, “Narrative Complexity and Cultural Evolution,” argue that narrative is in a state of constant evolution and mutation. The authors share Ryan’s broad conception of narrative and the idea that narrativity is ubiquitous as well as an essential part of human cognition. For example, Marina Grishakova underlines “the presence of narratives or narrative-like structures in various modes and media” (369). Additionally, James Carney views “narrative as a blend of automatic and reflexive modes of cognition” (391), while José Angel García Landa goes so far as to argue that “any emergent process is cognitively grasped as a narrative configuration and communicated through narrative structures” (429-430).

Overall, this collection offers a multidisciplinary approach to narrative by deftly bringing together narrative studies, cognitive studies, popular culture, and new media. It thus constitutes a valuable guide for students and scholars interested in narrative theory and studies as well as in media and cognitive studies.

Works Cited


