Richard Walsh

(York)

**Beyond Fictional Worlds:**

**Narrative and Spatial Cognition**

The relation between narrative cognition and other forms of cognition, notably spatial cognition, tends to be obscured in narratological discussions of fiction by the assumption that fictions produce and refer to fictional worlds. However, a world in this sense, as textually produced, is not a referential object but a mental model, and one that works in tension with narrative cognition. In this view, the (fictional) narrative text is not in itself essentially narrative, though it primarily cues our faculty of narrative cognition, but rather the semiotic object of an interpretation in which narrative always functions interdependently with other modes of cognition, such as spatial modelling. These are mutually informing interpretative paradigms, not the figure and ground they become in fictional worlds approaches. The reading of fiction is characterized by a negotiation between sequential and spatial cognitive frames, which involves no inference to the global, but only to the contextually relevant, within the constraints of the cognitive cost of the inferences made.

This essay begins with a discussion of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*, a novel that invites spatial interpretation in great detail. It explores the implications of critical argument about this novel for the issues of spatial cognition and fictional worlds with respect both to *Jealousy* itself and to fiction in general. It then seeks to draw together some theoretical conclusions about the relation between fictional narratives and narrative cognition.

It’s a curious fact that, while every English reader encounters Robbe-Grillet’s novel via a diagram, preceding the text itself, which shows the floor plan of the house, this diagram does not appear in the French original. Its provenance is uncertain; it seems unlikely to have been supplied by the translator, Richard Howard, familiar as he was with Robbe-Grillet’s essays (which he subsequently also translated). Those essays include several statements on the author’s own descriptive technique along the general lines of the following, from “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy” (French text first published in 1958):

The most common criticisms made of such geometric information—“it says nothing to the mind,” “a photograph or a diagram would show the shape better,” etc.—are strange indeed: wouldn’t I have thought of them first of all? As a matter of fact, there is something else involved. The photograph or the diagram aims only at reproducing the object; they are successful to the degree that they suggest as many interpretations (and the same errors) as the model. Formal description, on the other hand, is above all a limitation: when it says “parallelepiped,” it knows it achieves no Beyond, but at the same time it cuts short any possibility of seeking one. (Robbe-Grillet 1965 [1963], 72)

Robbe-Grillet’s concern is not to facilitate the reader’s imaginative reconstruction of the object of description—“I should prefer to keep him from doing so, in fact” (72)—yet such intentions seem to be directly subverted by this floor plan. The French critic might feel entitled to an ironic smile at one more demonstration of the relentlessly empirical turn of the Anglophone mind, but actually I think the questions raised are more fundamental and theoretical than that. This diagram does not only express a certain interpretative stance towards the novel, it also—according to many narrative theorists, at least—encapsulates something intrinsic to the comprehension of narrative fiction. Put succinctly, this is the view that reading fiction requires us to extrapolate the “world” of the narrative, in order both to understand the story and to engage with it imaginatively, thus providing for emotional involvement and “immersion.”

Not that Robbe-Grillet’s own accounts of the purposes and effects of his writing are wholly persuasive, or wholly consistent. At times the dominant impulse behind his descriptive writing appears, contrary to the declaration above, to be indeed an aspiration (hedged around with qualifications, to be sure) to reveal the object in its objectivity, stripped of the impositions of meaning: “To describe things, as a matter of fact, is deliberately to place oneself outside them, confronting them. It is no longer a matter of appropriating them to oneself, of projecting anything onto them” (Robbe-Grillet 1965 [1963], 70). Or again, “Optical description is, in effect, the kind which most readily establishes distances: the sense of sight, if it seeks to remain simply that, leaves things in their respective place” (73). But such a rationale for his objective method is not offered as an escape from subjectivity: “Objectivity in the ordinary sense of the word—total impersonality of observation—is all too obviously an illusion” (18). Nor does he hesitate to affirm the intrinsic role of subjectivity in observation: “As for ‘subjectivity’—principal argument of the opposition—how is its value diminished thereby? Obviously I am concerned, in any case, only with the world as *my point of view* orients it; I shall never know any other” (74).

None of the authorial declarations cited so far address the case of fiction with any specificity, but when Robbe-Grillet does so, he tends to compound the ambiguities of his position. At times the emphasis is very clearly upon the agency and impositions of the subject in the act of observation, and it is this dimension that supplies the point of the exercise:

Even if many objects are presented and are described with great care, there is always, and especially, the eye which sees them, the thought which re-examines them, the passion which distorts them. The objects in our novels never have a presence outside human perception, real or imaginary […]. Not only is it *a man* who, in my novels for instance, describes everything, but it is the least neutral, the least impartial of men: *always* engaged, on the contrary, in an emotional adventure of the most obsessive kind, to the point of often distorting his vision and of producing imaginings close to delirium. (Robbe-Grillet 1965 [1963], 137–138)

In this light, Robbe-Grillet’s novels (in his own conception of them) stage a dialectical encounter between subject and object of a sort that would be amenable to discussion under the rubric of “thing theory” (and indeed Robbe-Grillet’s essays and interviews betray his familiarity with the Heideggerian sources of that theoretical perspective).[[1]](#footnote-1) But even within the terms of this dialectic, Robbe-Grillet’s interest sometimes runs entirely in the other direction: “No longer will objects be merely the vague reflection of the hero’s vague soul, the image of his torments, the shadow of his desires. Or rather, if objects still afford a momentary prop to human passions, they will do so only provisionally, and will accept the tyranny of significations only in appearance—derisively, one might say—the better to show how alien they remain to man” (21–22). It would be only fair to acknowledge at this point that Robbe-Grillet’s essays, in his own conception, did not lay out an achieved theoretical position, but rather engaged in the pursuit of a dialectical development of ideas (12).

That development goes some way beyond the relation of subject to object, however, especially when the specifically literary nature of the occasion is to the fore. Here, the equivocation between observing and describing that runs through many of Robbe-Grillet’s comments is resolved with decisive emphasis upon description as a textual phenomenon: “The entire interest of the descriptive pages—that is, man’s place in these pages—is therefore no longer in the thing described, but in the very movement of the description” (148). This shift provides for his polemical stance on the relation between form and content—an opposition he repudiates, yet nonetheless continues to rely upon as the foil for his own affirmations of form: “There are not, for a writer, two possible ways to write the same book. When he thinks of a future novel, it is always a *way of writing* which first of all occupies his mind, and demands his hand. He has in mind certain rhythms of sentences, certain architectures, a vocabulary, certain grammatical constructions, exactly as a painter has in mind certain lines and colors. What will happen in the book comes afterward, as though secreted by the style itself” (44).

Such a privileging of *écriture* is certainly in line with Roland Barthes’s view, as articulated in “Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet.”[[2]](#footnote-2) For Barthes it is the literary (and aesthetic) qualities of description that prevail over the representational functions it may serve in relation to its object. However, his account runs together two distinct kinds of opposition, only one of which correlates with Robbe-Grillet’s own emphasis upon the tension between discourse and its object, or form and content: “the *description* of the object somehow exceeds its function in every case, and at the very moment we expect the author’s interest to lapse, having exhausted the object’s instrumentality, that interest persists, *insists*, bringing the narrative to a sudden, untimely halt and transforming a simple implement into space” (Barthes 1965 [1954], 15). Barthes’s formulation seems odd until we realise that the opposition between descriptive discourse and object of description here is subordinate to an opposition between temporality and spatiality. This contrast of dimensions has a representational basis, but it is not part of the represented world: in fact, the object of representation here is in itself understood in discursive terms (it is communicative, signifying purposes that define its “function” and its “instrumentality” as an “implement”). It is the temporality of *narrative* that is arrested, subordinated to the spatiality of description. These two discursive modes get hold of different dimensions of their representational objects, yet obviously no world exists outside of time, just as no event occurs outside of space. Barthes is ultimately interested in the way temporality and spatiality pertain, reflexively, to the discourse itself. For him, Robbe-Grillet’s excess of description overwhelms its notional object, “exploding the traditional notion of space and substituting for it a new space, provided, as we shall soon see, with a new depth and dimension in time” (Barthes 1965 [1954], 20). This new space, with its new dimension in time, is that of the text, and it is possible to see here a foreshadowing of Barthes’s later decisive theoretical transition, in *S/Z*, from the paradigm of “structure” to that of “structuration” (Barthes 1974 [1970], 20).

My own concern, though, is to remain focussed upon the representational quality of the novel. The value, for me, of shifting the terms of the discussion from objectivity versus subjectivity to spatiality versus temporality is that it helps to clarify the senses in which *Jealousy* does and does not serve to confound the notion of a storyworld. In “Time and Description” (1958), Robbe-Grillet argues, very much in line with Barthes, that the descriptive insistence of the *nouveau roman* is a strategy for re-locating the temporality of the novel from the events to the discourse, or from the *histoire* to the *récit*: *Jealousy*, he says, “was not a narrative [*narration*] mingled with a simple anecdote [*anecdote*] external to itself, but again the very unfolding of a story [*histoire*] which had no other reality than that of the narrative [*récit*], an occurrence which functioned nowhere else except in the mind of the invisible narrator, in other words of the writer, and of the reader” (Robbe-Grillet 1965 [1963], 154). But if “the very movement of the description” is the positive basis of such a re-location of temporality, it is also cultivated by a negation of the temporality of the *histoire*. When Robbe-Grillet insists that the novel defies representational coherence, his claim is emphatically a matter of temporal logic:

[I]t was absurd to suppose that in the novel *Jealousy* […] there existed a clear and unambiguous order of events, one which was not that of the sentences of the book, as if I had diverted myself by mixing up a pre-established calendar the way one shuffles a deck of cards. The narrative was on the contrary made in such a way that any attempt to reconstruct an external chronology would lead, sooner or later, to a series of contradictions, hence to an impasse. (Robbe-Grillet 1965 [1963], 154)

It is immediately apparent that such an authorial strategy only works on the assumption that the reader does indeed attempt to reconstruct such a chronology (or is only relevant if readers are prone to making such wilful attempts). Nor is it so utterly implausible to do so, once you have grasped the novel’s insistent perspectival alignment with a jealous husband figure whose presence, actions and speech are never directly represented, but who nonetheless emerges very clearly from the spatial, epistemological and affective implications of the narration, and indeed from its emphatic sensory embodiment throughout the novel: “This brightly illuminated profile still clings to the retina”; “But a fainter sound, something like a hum, makes the ear strain” (Robbe-Grillet 1960 [1957], 69, 71–72). *Jealousy* remains strictly ambiguous between first- and third-person narration (and indeed there is little at stake between the two possibilities, if it is granted in the latter case that the focalization remains consistently aligned with the husband throughout), but it is not in doubt that the text implies such a husband figure as clearly as it describes Franck and A…, the house and the plantation. The character of the husband—his attitudes and emotions, his imagination and even delirium~~—~~has laid the foundations of every recuperative reading of the novel, from Bruce Morrissette’s influential early essay onwards. Still, such interpretative strategies cannot assimilate just any contradiction: if the contradiction is to be motivated in terms of character, it has to be relevant to character. That is straightforward for the increasingly hallucinatory accounts of the centipede scene—the centipede is “as long as a finger” (33) yet “covers the area of an ordinary dinner plate” (79)—charged as it is with significance for the adultery plot; likewise for the narrative’s vagueness about when this scene occurred, at one point specified as “last week, at the beginning of the month, perhaps the month before, or later” (17). The husband’s disturbed subjectivity also clearly motivates the several (imagined) accounts of events during Franck and A…’s trip to the port. But it is far from obvious how the husband’s emotions might bear, for example, upon the chronology of events at the house relative to those down by the stream and in the plantation beyond. These events do present a number of sequencing problems, however. At the time of A…’s letter furtively passed to Franck on the veranda, one of the five logs over the stream below has been replaced (54), but when their affair has progressed to the point of their plan for the dubiously-motivated trip to the port, work on the bridge has not yet begun (41–42). Also at this time when no work is being done on the bridge, the patch of banana trees opposite has been fully harvested (41), yet the same patch is only half harvested when all but two of the logs have been replaced (58–59), which is also the period of the innuendo about Franck being a bad mechanic, following the trip to the port (54–55). And though the patch opposite is half-harvested when the five men by the stream are in the midst of their task, it has not been harvested at all when they begin (52–53).

All of which goes some way towards corroborating Robbe-Grillet’s claim to have designed an inherently self-contradictory narrative chronology. At the same time, however, the temporal ambiguities of the narration prevent any of these apparent contradictions from being indefeasible. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the scene frequently shifts unannounced between paragraphs in the novel, to the point where a presumption of continuity, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, ceases to be justified. Rather, temporal continuity between paragraphs becomes a warranted interpretation only on the basis of substantial evidence *in support* of such an inference. Second, it is clear that while some events are repeatedly narrated in the novel, there may also be repeated or iterative narration of recurring events. The cyclical nature of life on the plantation is frequently emphasized, extending from Franck’s visits to the continual round of planting and harvesting, even perhaps to the periodic replacement of the log bridge. And while the trip to the port is a necessarily singular and irreversible change in the course of the plot, other events that seem to be in the same category may not be. The apparently indelible stain of the squashed centipede on the dining room wall, for example, is successfully removed on page 64. In short, just as the excess of description both facilitates and obstructs any effort to extrapolate the novel’s spatial logic, the achronological narration both defies and allows for the hypothesis of a coherent chronology.

One way to view this somewhat muddled state of affairs is to assume that Robbe-Grillet is playing a double game, designed to accommodate both the literary cognoscenti and the general reader. Such an assumption is supported by his response to Maurice Blanchot, who had objected to the way the jacket blurb for the first edition, by emphasizing the perspective of the jealous husband only implicit in the text, foreclosed the novel’s preoccupation with the literary event and the primacy of writing, which he found its most important quality. Robbe-Grillet, according to his own account, agreed: “Blanchot was right. I wrote to him that he was right, but that it was I who had written this blurb and that, in fact, it was not intended for him, but for those hurried critics who do not have time to read the books they have to write about in papers” (quoted in Zalloua 2008, 17). Yet if the implication here is that these two kinds of reading are incompatible, the representational overturned by the aesthetic, Robbe-Grillet apparently wants not only to court both kinds of reader but to be both kinds of author: “Sometimes, too, exasperated by objections such as [...] ‘A jealous husband doesn’t behave like the one in *Jealousy*’ […] I myself try to situate my arguments on the realistic level, and I speak of […] this agonized husband fascinated by his wife’s suspect (or too natural) behaviour. And no doubt I hope that my novels and films are defensible from this point of view as well” (Robbe-Grillet 1965 [1963], 162). It seems that Robbe-Grillet wants both to have his cake and eat it. But his difficulties are of his own making, or at least they are the product of his inability to step outside of the terms of the literary debates within which he, and French literary culture, were embroiled in the 1950s and 60s. It is all a matter of form versus content, subject versus object, text versus world, *scriptible* versus *lisible*, and because it is above all a literary aesthetic that is at stake, the extra-literary ground he takes as a foil is never really scrutinized. My suggestion is that the questions of fiction foregrounded by *Jealousy*, its critical reception and Robbe-Grillet’s essays are in certain respects more fundamentally questions of narrative in general as a mode of representation and cognition.

Nor do I consider myself to be intervening in a debate that played out half a century ago, since it resonates with issues in narrative theory that have been brought to the fore in recent years precisely by the cognitivist turn in narratology and the sometimes convoluted ways in which that frame of reference has been accommodated, addressed and adopted in the study of literary narrative. Indeed, Maria Mäkelä has offered a reading of *Jealousy* itself as a kind of premonitory allegory of the conflicting notions of the reader enshrined, respectively, in the semiotic and cognitive traditions in narrative theory. Robbe-Grillet’s descriptive technique, she suggests, literalizes Dorrit Cohn’s view (1999, 13) that “a work of fiction itself creates the world to which it refers by referring to it” (quoted in Mäkelä 2012, 146), so that the novel simultaneously proffers and undermines such an interpretative premise. Mäkelä plausibly aligns the two sides of this contradiction with the different model readers hypothesized in structuralist narratology and natural narratology, as represented by Jonathan Culler and Monika Fludernik: “Both Culler and Fludernik speak of sense-making in the sense of form-finding; yet the implied notions of coherence in these theories are fundamentally different: in natural narratology, coherence means experiential familiarity, whereas in structuralist narratology, coherence is the result of a perceivable network of relations between semiotic patterns” (Mäkelä 2012, 148). The notional world of the fiction is either hypostasized as the object of experience or sublimated into semiosis.

It is not my intention to negotiate the question of narratives and worlds by way of a reconciliation between readings of *Jealousy* in the non-mimetic tradition (including Blanchot and Jean Ricardou 1967) and those in the recuperative tradition following Morrissette. Not only have such synthetic interpretations been offered before (e.g., Stoltzfus 1985), but they are also implicit, in a duck-rabbit sort of way, in the double game of Robbe-Grillet’s own essays. Instead, I will take as given the fact that *Jealousy* does offer, in exceptional detail, a basis for the reader’s interpretative construction of the “world” of the story and seek only to clarify what such interpretative activity amounts to. I propose to embrace that activity wholeheartedly, and in order to get under way, I shall return to the helpful plan of the house that precedes the English translation of the novel. The detail of this plan is not beyond criticism, especially perhaps on issues of scale, but on the whole it corresponds well to the descriptive details provided in the text. Two obvious points need stating, however. First, this is not the house referred to in the novel. It is itself a representation, one that differs from the descriptions in the novel in its medium (it is an iconic, visual representation) and in its perspectival orientation (it extrapolates from the novel’s own restriction to the husband’s perceptual and cognitive point of view—or rather, to a perspectival orientation that implies the husband’s point of view—and offers instead a semi-abstract top-down perspective). It collates the descriptions in the text and presents the information they convey in another form, but the house itself, or the idea of the house, is no more present in this diagram than it is in the novel. Since the house itself, we would be well advised to assume, does not exist (this is offered as fiction), we might ask what the idea of the house is; and we must necessarily respond that it is just the product of the same inferential processes that produced this diagram. It consists in an open set of mental models that relate to the text just as this diagram does—that is, as correlated representations. The value of these mental representations consists in the extent to which they facilitate the inferences that may be drawn from the text itself. The unitary idea of the house is constituted only by the pragmatic cognitive horizons to that inferential activity.

Second, if the idea of the house is never finally realized, how much less so is the reader’s mental model of the “world” of the novel? The diagram is very far from exhausting the range of inferences possible from the text, so if the reader’s concern is to extrapolate from it to the spatial environment it represents, there is much work still to do. Such a reader would need to digest the wealth of spatial information provided by the novel’s elaborate and precise descriptions of the view from the house, which allows for detailed modelling of the terrain of the plantation itself (10–11, 58, 86), with its several precisely surveyed fields of banana palms in their quincunx pattern, enumerated row by row (19–22, 41–42), as well as its stream and log bridge (20–21, 22, 58–59) and even the exact configuration of the pile of new logs (52). Beyond this, the descriptions extend to the road to the north, running east-west below the plateau that bounds the valley, and ending with the rocky spur to the west (10, 12, 103). Information on these features saturates the novel to the point where full page references would be pedantic. But the interested reader, working methodically through the text, can legitimately extend the diagram of the house to a very detailed map of the terrain in which it sits. I should add at this point that the reader to whom I refer is not an abstract or hypothetical model reader; it is me. I have done precisely this—in a spirit of mischievous perversity, of course, but also with a compulsive fascination for the task—and the results, both for the model of the valley just discussed and for the further extrapolations below, are available for public scrutiny.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A valley, of course, is not a world. If we are signed up to the quixotic project of extrapolating that world, we will need to go further, and in fact the novel does provide us with the resources to do so. We are told explicitly that this is not Africa (9), so if we correlate the banana crop, the local fauna and the port to the west with a contextual knowledge of the history of French colonialism (and indeed the biography of the author), we might geographically locate this plantation in the south of Martinique, the port being the island capital, Fort de France. Such an inference is not entirely without dividends for our understanding of the novel: it lends weight, for example, to the description of the centipede on the dining-room wall that alarms A..., and that Franck deals with so decisively. According to this description, encounters with centipedes are not uncommon, and “this kind [a Scutigera] is not one of the largest; it is far from being one of the most venomous” (33). Later, the far more venomous Scolopendra is mentioned (63), and indeed Martinique furnishes Scolopendra gigantea, which can be up to a foot long and preys upon lizards, snakes, birds, mice and bats. According to apocryphal lore, if you tread on its tail it will arch over and bite you through your shoe. So in regarding the centipede on the wall as relatively innocuous, the husband is (as in much else) entirely correct—and entirely beside the point. This double evaluation of the husband’s views applies also to his perspective as manifested in the narration of the novel, and it bears not only upon the character motivation implied by that narration’s stylistic qualities, but also upon the thematics and aesthetics of Robbe-Grillet’s descriptive technique—and upon the theoretical lessons I wish to draw, as we shall see.

We can’t become too attached to Martinique, though, since it is hard to accommodate the large plateau, or A... and Franck’s four-hour journey to the port (61) which, even on bad roads, somewhat exceeds the scale of this island. This is fiction, after all, and not necessarily bound to actual geographical space. Geography only affords contingent spatial heuristics, on this or any other scale. But rather than becoming disheartened, we can further pursue our enterprise of world construction in other directions. The bedroom, we learn, is in fact a cube, as high as it is long and broad (77); on that basis we can begin to expand upon the floor plan and construct an accurate three-dimensional model of the house. It would be possible (I know, alas, for I have done it) to elaborate along these lines, generating a high-fidelity model that incorporates such details as the dimensions of the horizontal planks that clad the building (77); the exactly specified windows, with their mouldings and pediments (77–78) and the enumerated slats of their sets of wooden *jalousie* blinds (85–86); the flagstones of the veranda (36); the wooden balustrade with its flaking grey paint (18, 23); the six-foot drop to the garden (10); etc. While I can find no interpretative use for such detailed modelling of the spatial environment represented in the novel, it is undeniably an inferential process that is textually well-founded. But this is the construction of complementary spatial representations, not a process of reading through the text to its reference world, and it is in no way intrinsic to making sense of the narrative, whether your interpretative interests are non-mimetic *or* recuperative.

One teasing possibility remains. It is prompted by a somewhat anomalous feature of the floor plan of the house, which is that it includes a representation of the shadow of the southwestern column of the veranda roof. The representation is rather approximate and betrays an uncertain grasp of the physics of light, but the curious thing is that it is there at all, marking, as the legend tells us, the position of the shadow “at the beginning of the novel.” This, then, is a temporal marker (the choice of words nicely equivocates between discourse time and story time, but let that go). The thought behind its intrusion into the domain of this spatial representation is, I take it, the same as that which lurks in Morrissette’s description of the novel’s setting as a “tropical plantation house whose porch columns cast upon the terrace shadows like those of a sun dial” (Morrissette 1965, 7). A sun dial, like this shadow, makes time spatial, anchoring time in the world. Given the insistence of Robbe-Grillet’s references to different phases of this shadow throughout *Jealousy*, does it present an opportunity to cross-reference spatial and temporal inferences in order to clarify the novel’s vexed chronology?

Not that the hour of the day is at issue here; that is readily manifest from the textual information anyway and will not clarify the chronology of an action extending over weeks or months. But given that we have established the basis for an accurate three-dimensional model of the house, as well as a good fix on its geographical co-ordinates, a more ambitious prospect opens up: a solar calendar. Modern three-dimensional computer modelling, combined with geo-location, actually makes this a relatively straightforward task for anyone with curiosity, patience and access to the Internet. I am accordingly able to declare with good authority that the opening of the novel is at 2.19 p.m. on the 26th of March.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is true that there is also a moment in September when this specific shadow configuration occurs. However, there is also a scene in the novel, later in date than the first (some time after Franck and A…’s trip to town), where the sun at its zenith casts the whole veranda into shadow (95), and this can only be in June. There is also a very specifically-described afternoon shadow which must be on another date again (100–101), establishing a scene that takes place, apparently, on the 5th of April. Indeed, the same date meets the requirements for two other descriptions of the shadow: another zenith, where a specific proportion of the veranda is in sunlight (66); and a moment described late in the novel, towards evening, as the cocktail hour approaches (102). In case this seems too neat and tidy, though, there is also a scene in which the morning sun illuminates A...’s hair in the bedroom, which can only be a date some two months earlier (89).

I could go further (I’m tempted to do so), but perhaps that’s enough now. These revelations, however startling, are clearly not a significant advance in scholarship on the novel. Even within the recuperative, mimetic paradigm of interpretation I have been assuming (and which I think is intrinsic to understanding the text, whether or not it is conceived as the ultimate interpretative point of the exercise), and even in the case of a text that offers exceptionally detailed information, it is still not the case that our reading proceeds via the extrapolation of the world of the novel. Making representational sense of it entails making inferences based upon contextual assumptions, internal and external to the novel itself, and these depend upon both spatial and temporal cognitive paradigms. We often need to correlate spatial and temporal logic in the process, but the synthetic product of doing so is not a fictional world, it is merely the relevant cognitive context for the textual particulars themselves. In interpretation we do not extrapolate a global model of the world of the text, as I have just done (a model, note, not a “world” itself; we can only have recourse to complementary modes of representation), and inspect it for information that will supplement the text’s own representation. Rather, we make direct inferences from the textual information using a range of available contexts within the limits of a pragmatic economy of cognitive accessibility and relevance.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is the difference between what I have done and noting, for example, that a reference to the sun being in the west implies evening.

I’m not, in the end, concerned with the question of this particular novel’s mimetic coherence, with or without the mediating filter of a jealous husband’s psychological state. Ultimately I think it does not cohere, even in terms of that distorted subjectivity. But I also suspect that the same would be true of many novels, if subjected to the same type and degree of scrutiny. In any case, the descriptive insistence of the narration is not primarily of representational interest for the object of description, but for the subject it implies. The text has the form it does because it is aligned with the husband’s strenuous efforts to maintain control of his environment, to abstract himself from the doubts and fears that torment him into an ideal objectivity. He surveys his plantation with a scrupulous precision that affords him the illusion of a colonial mastery, just as he surveys his domestic environment in order to shore up his crumbling sense of patriarchal mastery. His sense-making effort accords a hugely inflated role to spatial cognition, precisely because he is trying to elude a certain narrative logic—one of the most archetypal and inexorable there is: a narrative of illicit desire. It is incidental to the theoretical question that concerns me whether this motivated interpretation is taken as itself the point, or merely as a pretext for the thematic and aesthetic exploration of descriptive discourse and the subject/object relations it negotiates. I did not choose *Jealousy* as an example of a novel for which the notion of a fictional world doesn’t work (it is no different from other fictions in that respect), but as one which foregrounds and thematicizes that notion.

I want now to draw together some of the theoretical lessons of this discussion. As I noted in relation to Robbe-Grillet’s own comments on his fiction, these are best framed in terms of the relation between narrative cognition and narrative texts in general. By doing so, I suggest, we can cut through some of the muddle (and not just Robbe-Grillet’s) surrounding fictional representation. As a first step, it is important to insist that narrativesare not purely narrative. A narrative is of course very likely to include description, argument and exposition as well as narrative discourse; but more pointedly, narrative discourse itself—by which I mean a stretch of discourse that conforms to a narrative text-type[[6]](#footnote-6)—cannot achieve its meaning, as narrative, independent of other kinds of meaning. That is, narrative discourse may *foreground* narrative meaning, but understanding it more or less inevitably requires us to deploy other modes of sense-making as well; spatial modelling, for example. So while spatial modelling is most obviously elicited by descriptive discourse, it is demanded to some degree by almost any narrative representation imaginable.

The foregoing distinction between narratives, narrative discourse and a certain kind of meaning we can appropriately term “narrative” implies that narrative is best conceived as a mode of cognition, as a distinct way of making sense—a distinct representational logic—that is fundamental to our mental functioning, but of specific, limited scope. It is hard to overstate the importance of this universal human cognitive faculty, which would appear to be more fundamental and more primitive than language, intimately bound up with the emergence of consciousness, and a primary determinant of the parameters of any conceivable system of values. It is, nonetheless, possible to overstate its importance, and the paradoxical consequence of doing so is that narrative comes to seem so inclusive and ubiquitous that it loses specificity as a concept and becomes vacuous. This is one reason why I think it is necessary to emphasize the limits of narrative as well as its importance.

In order to set those limits, I propose to define narrative cognition in a way that avoids theoretical presupposition, as far as possible, and gives the concept full scope whilst specifying its limits in theoretically consequential ways. Narrative cognition, then, is *the semiotic articulation of linear temporal sequence* (you’ll note that unlike most such definitions, it avoids mention of events, agency, causality, or even representation). Understood thus, narrative meaning is an imposition of form, an articulation of perceptual or conceptual data that acquires value by virtue of that articulation and the cognitive assimilation it affords. Narrative cognition is not merely the vehicle of raw experiential content; it belongs to the domain of meaning rather than experience *per se*. Every cognitive process is grounded in, and shaped by, the mind’s physical embodiment along with the continuity such embodiment entails between mental function and experiential environment. But while embodiment has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the limits and affordances of narrative, it is equally crucial to recognize that narrative cognition does not reduce to embodiment, but emerges out of it.[[7]](#footnote-7) Note also that narrative cognition is not equally fit for every kind of temporal process, but privileges sequential over systemic processes. Indeed, to the extent that systemic interactions cannot be manageably reduced to parallel sequential processes, they exceed both narrative understanding and, consequently, our cognitive grasp.

One immediate implication of this limit is that narrative cognition and spatial cognition conform to different logics and are thus incommensurable.[[8]](#footnote-8) In order to grasp the multiple, network-like interrelations among the elements of a spatial field (the scene before you now, for example), we must suspend consideration of the sequential development of any one relation, or of the aggregate of them all, because in either case the multiple, reciprocal, systemic nature of those relations is obscured. And vice versa: to conceive of a sequential development in narrative form is to isolate it from the systemic context it inhabits. These are different kinds of sense-making, one predicated upon the serial logic of temporal sequence, the other upon the systemic logic of the spatial field; each achieves conceptual integrity only by excluding the other.

It follows that narrative cognition does not, and cannot by itself, comprehend the spatio-temporal reality we inhabit. Narrative sense-making is partial, provisional and interdependent with other modes of sense-making. This complementarity is irreducible in cognitive terms; like the word “spatio-temporal” itself, the whole is a product of conceptual juxtaposition, not a synthesis.[[9]](#footnote-9) To treat narrative as if it were such a synthetic whole—as if it offered the means to a synoptic understanding of the way the world goes—is to exaggerate the scope of narrative, inflating its importance only at the price of serious misunderstanding.

If the concept of narrative cognition assumes that narrative is a way of making sense, narrative communication requires us to make sense *of narratives*. Any given narrative is a communicative gesture that assumes a mutual context of narrative cognitive competence as the primary inferential basis for its meaning. And any communicative act is a narrative just to the extent that it privileges narrative cognition as its dominant interpretative paradigm. A narrative may cue interpreters to understand it as a narrative paratextually or internally, and with variable degrees of prominence; the communicative success of a narrative does not require that we understand it exclusively with reference to narrative cognition (and in fact that would probably be impossible), but only that narrative sense-making, narrative meaning, is relatively primed as the locus of its communicative point.

Accordingly, the hierarchical relation between narrative and spatial cognition in the interpretation of narrative is just a matter of semiotic priority; both are part of the effort to resolve meaning. While a narrative privileges inference to a context of narrative cognition, it also typically elicits other cognitive contexts, including spatial cognition; and inferences of this sort are also sense-making activities, elaborations of meaning; the spatial representations we mentally construct to make sense of a narrative are, no less than the mental representations of narrative cognition, products of semiotic activity.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the context of narrative discourse, spatial cognition is the junior partner in a joint-stock enterprise with narrative sense-making, and so its role tends to be occasional, tentative and auxiliary. Being the cognitive background of narrative interpretation is very different from being its referential ground.

The “world” of a narrative, then, cannot be a synthetic product of interpretation. A fictional world or storyworld, understood as a mental model, must itself of course be a representational cognitive tool, not an extra-representational referent, but it must also involve several distinct cognitive modelling strategies—notably, the systemic modelling of spatial cognition and the sequential modelling of narrative cognition. These are complementary but orthogonal modes of meaning; they do not synthesize into a unitary cognitive perspective. At stake, of course, is the nature of the “worldness” in concepts like fictional world and storyworld. In casual usage, worlds in this sense often appear to be taken as the ontological setting for the events of a narrative, the environment in which the action takes place. More rigorous discussions, by Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) and David Herman (2002), for example, readily acknowledge that such worlds are mental models, and that their particulars will inevitably be unspecified in some respects, to a greater or lesser extent. Nonetheless, it remains a fundamental premise of these nuanced accounts that our engagement with a narrative involves the extrapolation, in some sense, of its “world”; and it is at this fundamental level that my objections arise.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We have no use in interpretation for an inference to the global, or to a spatio-temporal whole. A totalizing global conception of a story world is too general and abstract to be of any interpretative assistance in itself and is not required as the basis for top-down comprehension of the narrative particulars. Making sense of narrative communication is a process to which we bring our set of cognitive faculties on the fly, and our inferences are necessarily partial and contingent.[[12]](#footnote-12) Top-down cognitive frames (concepts, generalizations, schemas) arise and proliferate as we engage with the specifics of a narrative, and only to the extent that we find use for them; they do not derive from, or converge towards, a totality.

Finally, while a cognitive perspective on meaning is founded upon embodiment and hence arises (in an ontogenetic or phylogenetic sense) from an experiential base, it does not therefore reduce to the experiential. Our cognitive engagement with a narrative is irreducibly semiotic, not experiential, and its effects are not “immersive.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The concept of immersion, as used with respect to fictional worlds or storyworlds, makes an appeal to the virtual worlds of immersive media, but immersive media are only immersive as media, not as representations. A simulation is an experiential environment in its own terms; it is also a representation of another environment. To understand this is to understand it as meaningful—and meaningful, moreover, in a systemic mode of representation. The experience of an immersive environment is something of which we may make narrative sense, but it is not itself narrative. Immersion, then, is an unhelpful metaphor for our engagement with a narrative. It proposes, redundantly, that we respond to meaning by reducing it to experience and then finding that experience meaningful; or conversely, it explains meaning only by appeal to an inflated concept of experience that itself subsumes meaning.

*Jealousy* includes several possible *mises en abyme* which may or may not illuminate the narration and the narrative as a whole. Among these are the native song (50–51) and the picture on the post-office calendar (75–76). But the most blatant is the African novel which serves as a vehicle for the flirtation between A... and Franck and which is summarized in a chaotically self-contradictory way near the end of *Jealousy* itself (this summary, however, like the rest of the text, articulates the husband’s perspective—the husband being the one who, precisely, has not read it). My own preferred choice of *mise en abyme* comes from the other end of the novel, before the beginning in fact, in the paratext provided in the English translation: the supplementary representation of the floor plan of the house. A paratextual *mise en abyme* is suitably paradoxical, and this one is also spatial. I find the room labelled number ten in the plan to be particularly symptomatic of the interpretative perversity I have been discussing: its caption helpfully explains that this room is a “storage room or other (not described)” (7).

**Works Cited**

Auyoung, Elaine. 2013. “Partial Cues and Narrative Understanding in *Anna Karenina*.” In Bernaerts et al. eds., 59–78.

Barthes, Roland. 1965 [1954]. “Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet.” In *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, edited and translated by Richard Howard, 11–25. New York: Grove Press.

——. *S/Z.* 1974 [1970]. Translated by Richard Howard. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bernaerts, Lars, Dirk De Geest, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, eds. 2013. *Stories and Minds: Cognitive Approaches to Literary Narrative*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

Blanchot, Maurice. 2003 [1959]. *The Book to Come.* Translated by Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Brown, Bill. 2001. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1): 1–22.

Caracciolo, Marco. 2013. “Blind Reading: Toward an Enactivist Theory of the Reader’s Imagination.” In Bernaerts et al. eds., 81–105.

Chatman, Seymour. 1990. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Cohn, Dorrit. 1999. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Currie, Gregory. 2010. *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fauconnier, Gilles. 1985. *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Fludernik, Monika. 1996. *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*. London and New York: Routledge.

Grishakova, Marina. 2006. *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov’s Fiction*. Tartu: Tartu University Press.

Herman, David. 2002. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

——. 2009. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Mäkelä, Maria. 2012. “Navigating – Making Sense – Interpreting (The Reader behind *La Jalousie*).” In *Narrative, Interrupted: The Plotless, the Disturbing and the Trivial in Literature*, edited by Markku Lehtimäki, Laura Karttunen, Maria Mäkelä, 139–152. Berlin: De Gruyter.

———. 2013. “Cycles of Narrative Necessity: Suspect Tellers and the Textuality of Fictional Minds.” In Bernaerts et al. eds., 2013, 129–151.

Morris, Pam. ed. 1994. *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*. London: Edward Arnold.

Morrissette, Bruce. 1965 [1958]. “Surfaces and Structures in Robbe-Grillet’s Novels.” In *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, edited and translated by Richard Howard, 1–10. New York: Grove Press.

Ricardou, Jean. 1967. *Problèmes du nouveau roman*. Paris: Le Seuil.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain. 1957. *La Jalousie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

———. 1960 [1957]. *Jealousy*. Translated by Richard Howard. London: John Calder.

———. 1965 [1963]. *For a New Novel.* Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2001. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Stoltzfus, Ben. 1985. *Alain Robbe-Grillet: The Body of the Text*. Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Walsh, Richard. 2007. *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

Zalloua, Zahi. 2008. “Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie*: Realism and the Ethics of Reading.” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38 (1): 13–36.

1. I’m not aware of any work that approaches *Jealousy* itself from within such a paradigm, although Bill Brown did allude broadly to the *nouveau roman* in “Thing Theory” (Brown 2001, 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This essay was written before the publication of *Jealousy*, but pertinent enough to be included with it in the 1965 Grove Press edition, *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet:* Jealousy *and* In the Labyrinth, edited by Richard Howard. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The models are included in the Prezi presentation for the conference paper from which this article derives, which is available under the title “Some Commonsensical and Uncontentious Theses on Narrative and Spatiality, Leavened by a Perverse Reading of Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*” on my Academia.edu page:

 <http://york.academia.edu/RichardWalsh> The Prezi presentation begins with the “theses” which correspond more or less with the general theoretical remarks at the end of this article and may be profitably skipped if you prefer fancy graphics to theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I refer you again to the presentation mentioned in the previous footnote. The 3D modelling and geo-location software used for the latter part of the presentation was Google SketchUp in combination with Google Earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My language here is evoking the theoretical framework of relevance theory; for a discussion of which, in relation to narrative fiction, see chapter one of *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (Walsh 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The sense of text-type I am invoking here is drawn from Seymour Chatman’s use of this concept in chapter one of *Coming to Terms* (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A recent collection of essays entitled *Stories and Minds* (Bernaerts et al. 2013) offers an interesting range of views upon cognition and narrative understanding, among which I would pick out Auyoung (2013), Caracciolo (2013) and Mäkelä (2013) as of particular interest. I should say that none of these articles accords with the perspective advanced in this essay, however. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One helpful narratological exposition of the distinct modalities of spatial and temporal modelling, albeit ultimately subordinated to a synthetic spatiotemporality, can be found in Marina Grishakova’s *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov’s Fiction* (2006, 40–50). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Other relevant portmanteau words might be used to make the same point, namely that a terminological compound does not amount to a theoretical synthesis: most obviously, perhaps, Bakhtin’s “chronotope” See Morris (1994, 18–19, 180–182, 184–187). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The distinction I am drawing here, between the contingent semiotic construction of spatial contexts and reference to fictional worlds or storyworlds, is (within a specifically linguistic context) a premise of Fauconnier (1985), insisted upon in the introductory note. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. So for example, I can broadly accept many of the theoretical premises of Herman’s chapter on “How to Build a Storyworld” in *Basic Elements of Narrative* (2009) regarding the role of assumptions and inferences in narrative comprehension. We part company, however, when narrative artefacts are characterized as “blueprints for the creation and modification of […] mentally configured storyworlds” (107). And I am still less willing to accept that “the power of narrative to create worlds goes a long way towards explaining its immersiveness, its ability to transport interpreters into places and times they must occupy for the purposes of narrative comprehension” (119). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare Gregory Currie (2010), discussing story content in the context of an approach to narratives as intentional-communicative artefacts, who notes that with narratives “we expect rich but bounded relations of consequence between items within the corpus, partly to keep the quantity of information manageable, but also because we are looking for thematic unity […]” (8–9). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The stance I am taking here on the experiential base for narrative cognition implies that experientiality has an important role in the logic of narrative, but in a more abstract sense than that accorded to it by Monika Fludernik (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)