

# *Narrative Renewal Theory: A Brief Introduction*

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recipient conceives of the memory as a particular combination of mental images abstracted from given events, character actions, and so forth. The combinations of separate mental images are indefinite and mutable, but more often than not, they can be integrated into sharply defined images that typify the narrative discourse and its story sequence per se.

#### **4. Story, Storyworld, and Mental Image**

Let us summarize the points in developing a theory of narrative renewal: Narrative renewal occurs as the transformation of a storyworld. If storyworlds are, as Marie-Laure Ryan appropriately indicates, “totalities that encompass space, time, and individuated existents that undergo transformations as the result of events” (Bell 2019: 63), the all-embracing “totality” of a storyworld should also be evoked as a combination of narratively-related, representative images that transcend genre or medium. With these points in mind, I suggest that the representation of a storyworld is nothing less than its mental images regarded as one that epitomizes and evokes the entire narrative. Only by being represented as a mental image, does the storyworld have an ontological status in the recipient’s mind and can always be simulated as if it were a real world comprising specific scenes, characters and their actions, events, or settings. To be more precise, the recipients mentally compress the story content decoded from the narrative discourse into a combination (both

recurrent and new) of representative events, characters, and thematically-important scenes with indispensable existents, all of which enable them to summon the entire storyworld at any time. As the storyworld is “an imagined totality that evolves according to the events in the story” (Ryan 2016: 13), or that which constitutes the innermost essence of a given narrative, the recipients’ construction of it will directly or indirectly be influenced by the event or sequence of events they consider to be a “totality.”

To fully elucidate this continuous renewal process, then, we must first examine the interaction occurring between the mental image and the storyworld in the decoding and encoding processes. The initial stage of narrative renewal is conceptualizing the spatiotemporally ordered storyworld by engraving the overall narrative in one’s memory, whether through an act of reading a novel, watching a film, or playing a video game. Ideally, the mentally formulated image of the storyworld is all-encompassing, but due to an incomplete or failing memory, it can only be called up in fragments. However, one cannot exhaustively visualize all the variable images of a narrative. Not being able to remember the entire image, the recipient of the narrative must settle for trying to recall and reproduce only separate scenes or events; these are manifested as mental images that are assumed to be representative and totalizing.

The process of decoding/encoding is reversible, and just as the

decoding process develops in accordance with their choice of mental image(s) abstracted from the storyworld, the encoding process begins by invoking the mental image that is stored in our memory and ends when the new narrative discourse is newly enacted by the storyworld. The elements comprising the storyworld, as far as the narrative experience is concerned, can be shared and appreciated by all kinds of recipients of a narrative, whether they are professional author-creators or not.

Although a narrative manifested in any medium theoretically has only one holistic storyworld, it does not always create the same mental image(s) in different recipient's minds. Since human memory is unreliable, out of sheer necessity, recipients have no choice but to create a mental representation of a narrative by selecting individually some impressive scenes that they think play a dominant role in shaping the core image of the totalized memory for the narrative sequence. Juliet's monologue on the balcony, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" and Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be, or not to be, that is the question," are just two well-known language-based examples among many. Alternatively, we can recall the memorable scene of Huck and Jim drifting down the Mississippi on a raft as the representative image of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Thus created at the very core of the recipients' understanding in the process of their narrative experience, a mental image becomes and functions as an easily available piece of information required

for recalling the storyworld as virtually totalized, like certain unforgettably imprinted scenes (Juliet's monologue, Hamlet's soliloquy, or Huck and Jim's floating on a raft) that leave such a distinct impression that they can recapitulate the entire narrative, by virtue of which the memory of its storyworld is always accessible.

Typically, it is the mental images regarded as recurring and the same being handed down from preceding to derivative narratives that make the process of renewal possible. It is not, however, all that we have to address as the problems in narrative experience, for everything that seems invariable does not change through the renewal process. On the contrary, it is possible that even entirely new narrative sequences will appear. Then both mutability and immutability are subsumed in the idea of narrative renewal. Narrative renewal is not enacted without both old and renewed discourses being endured and even totally new stories being created in their "palimpsestuous intertextuality," to invoke Linda Hutcheon's phrasing again. These recipients can access the old text even after the new one appears, and new possibilities present themselves in an almost countless diversity of intertextual narrative experiences.

Hence, the idea of a narrative matrix within which all the narrative possibilities are subsumed. Such a new discourse, which can be generally recognized as belonging to the same category of stories, joins what could be called a matrix, an inclusive concept that

explains the entire process of continuous renewal. Every conceivable narrative development can be said to be contained within an all-inclusive matrix already. A matrix is an aggregate formulated in our mind of all the narrative possibilities, which can be shared and simulated by all the recipients/creators. While a mental image conceived out of a narrative discourse represents the entirety of an event and a storyworld's existents, themes and messages, whether narratively important and reiterative or not, but in extreme cases regardless of their narrative importance and sometimes even including the story sequence that deviates considerably from the original, a narrative matrix is an ideal whole formed by an infinite number of potential storyworlds that are supposed to be known as variable mental images by the creators and recipients alike, both of whom are equally active participants in the process of decoding and encoding. They are both on a more or less equal footing and contribute to the formation and development of a matrix, reusing still extant story contents or presenting a newly created story sequence. In one narrative matrix all the potential story events are relativized, and it is supposed that anything can happen in its storyworld, aside from whether it is good or bad story sequence. Even the thoroughly opposing story lines can coexist. The narrative matrix of *Moby Dick*, for example, could include both the death and survival of Captain Ahab in its story possibilities. In almost all the *Moby Dick* story variants, Ahab meets his death at the end of the

story, but in a rare instance he survives and even is united with his sweetheart as in the 1926 silent film adaptation *The Sea Beast* and the 1930 talking film version *Moby Dick*. In the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, despite the fact that in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel Arthur Dimmesdale finally perishes after his confession of the adultery, it is still possible that he does not die but leaves the colony with Hester Prynne and Pearl, as in the 1995 film adaptation. Let us take still another example. The ending of *West Side Story*, in which Maria survives in spite of Tony's death is another case of the narrative matrix of *Romeo and Juliet* adding still another image of its possible storyworld, where either one or both of the two lovers survive.

We can theoretically argue that when every recipient experiences a narrative, he or she can draw from the narrative matrix all the information of its possible storyworlds given by every preceding or derivative narrative that is assumed to belong to the matrix. Even an original (ingenious and not derivative) narrative discourse is formed with its own storyworld, since it is also molded on a mental image (newly conceived or not) and renewed at this stage of (re)creation. Therefore, the storyworlds of the old and the new essentially overlap in various proportions and combinations, sharing a variety of narrative components, sometimes with something new added or something old deleted in accordance with the mental image conceived by the individual narrative recipient/creator. One typical example is Ernest Hemingway's short



story, “The Killers,” and its two film adaptations: Robert Siodmak’s 1946 film, *The Killers*, develops its own story, but it is considered to be a possible sequel to the ending of Hemingway’s source text, which displays the solution to the mystery of how things resulted in the murder of a man. Don Siegel’s 1964 film is not so much based on Hemingway’s original as a remake of Siodmak’s film, but it creates a new narrative possibility that the two killers play a role as the active characters who dig up their victim’s past in a violent way. We should also note that the 1964 version shares neither setting (time and place) nor story events with Hemingway’s source text and the 1946 adaptation.

Let us take another example. In a more loosely inspired case of *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, some recipients undoubtedly regard the storyworlds of the two narratives to be quite different, with no apparent renewal relationship at all. A renewed narrative that would belong to the same matrix is actually created out of its reorganized mental image. The balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* conveys the pathos of the entire tragic love story. Of course, we may recall other scenes as well that are associated with the details of Romeo and Juliet’s life and death. However, many people may remember the mental image of Juliet on the balcony as an iconic scene and the predominantly representative event in the play’s storyworld as it appears to condense the entire storyworld of the play and its thematic concern as well. If we perceive that different

discourses, as in the case of *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, share the mental image that can be regarded as the same (for example, the former's balcony scene and the latter's fire escape scene), then we can recognize that there is a renewal relationship between them as the storyworld and its mental image(s) are shifted from the previous text and transplanted to the next.

Thus, it may be safely inferred that when the storyworld is renewed out of the old (in accordance with the transplanted mental image) and a new discourse is added to the existing matrix, the same mental images traverse different discourses (and sometimes different storyworlds). These recurring images could manage to create a narrative matrix, no matter how different and variable they may be. One matrix can subsume all the narrative possibilities, from the most to the least probable story sequences, carrying the narrative's potential for renewing itself, making its storyworld continuously and almost infinitely variable. Major examples include, among many others, four contemporary series: *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *Sherlock Holmes*, and the *James Bond 007*. Likewise, *Wicked* (both the novel and its musical adaptation) and the film *Oz the Great and Powerful* are side stories or prequels to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, both of which constitute a part of what could be called *The Wizard of Oz* matrix, along with L. Frank Baum's source text and its classic 1939 film adaptation. The case of the 1964 film *Mary Poppins* and the 2018 sequel film *Mary Poppins Returns* affords

another example. Both of the films belong to the *Mary Poppins* narrative matrix, into which are included their source texts, that is, P. L. Travers' *Mary Poppins* books.

It often happens that a mental image subsumes more than one storyworld; not only does it contain preceding storyworlds, but it also foresees and anticipates forthcoming ones not yet realized. A new storyworld is contained in a pre-existing mental image by being set into the narrative matrix as the complex network of a story that already exists. Different mental images can yield different storyworlds, and they implement different narrative renewals. Some narratives encourage recipients not only to hold invariable images, such as Hamlet's soliloquy, but also to create completely different images, such as the film adaptations of "The Killers." A media franchise like *Star Wars* presumably has some elements of a storyworld in common among its film series (as Ryan [2013: 369-71] proposes in her comprehensible image of different overlapping circles); however, each movie in the series also has an individual storyworld. If the different storyworlds share the same mental image, the audience readily identifies them as belonging to the same narrative matrix. The newly conceived storyworld would undoubtedly make some change in the mental image(s) of the old, and yet something would remain identifiable.

To take an interesting example (also discussed at length in Hutcheon [2013: 72-77]), in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, the

author-narrator recounts that Captain Vere died in battle shortly after Billy's execution. However, in the novella's opera adaptation, the Captain somehow survives the subsequent battles and in his old age reminisces about the events leading up to Billy's last moment. Captain Vere's survival and the fact that he appears as a retrospective focal character in the stage adaptation is not only a new story element in *Billy Budd*'s narrative matrix, but it also depicts an element in the reader's mental image that could potentially have been anticipated. It must be noted that *Billy Budd*'s narrative matrix could afford both the possibilities of Vere's survival and of his death. The storyworld of *Billy Budd*'s opera adaptation is slightly different from that of Melville's source text, but in spite of that difference it still belongs to the potentialities of the narrative that can be subsumed under the same generic title. Even Melville, the author of the source text, chose only one among manifold narrative possibilities; he opted for the Captain's death while the opera adaptation did the opposite. In this sense, the source text is not an origin of the narrative but only a possible variation in the continuous process of reception and creation. Both the source text and its adaptation share the same mental image, in this case, condensed in the climactic scene in which Billy gives Captain his blessing: "God bless Captain Vere!" (in the source text), or "Starry Vere, God bless you!" (in the opera adaptation). In either case Billy inevitably dies, but that still offers no proof that there is no

possibility of his survival in the continuously renewed storyworld that belongs to the narrative matrix of *Billy Budd*.

In our theoretical model, the construction of storyworlds and the workings of a mental image play a crucial role in the continuous and transfictional process of renewing a narrative. A mental image is a variable reference point where the storyworld keeps its concrete identity and allows for the possibility of its almost unlimited variations. While a mental image conceived out of a narrative discourse represents the entirety of an event and a storyworld's existents, themes and messages, whether narratively important and reiterative or not, a narrative matrix is an ideal whole formed by an infinite number of potential storyworlds that are supposed to be known as variable mental images by the creators and recipients alike, both of whom are equally active participants in the renewal process. The decoding of the narrative discourse is this process by which the variable images of the storyworld are mentally constructed. The recipient decodes the narrative discourse into the totalized entity as one possibility of the storyworld, which can only be recalled as a mental image. The ensuing creative process of encoding a renewed narrative discourse begins with the transformation of these mental images into another storyworld. It can also be explained as being analogous to the decoding process as all the narrative recipients are possible creators (in so far as they keep the memory of the narrative as the mental image of the storyworld).

The process of reception and creation in narrative renewal can be more clearly understood by focusing on transfictionality, that is, the transference or re-formation of a storyworld throughout the decoding and encoding processes. Lubomír Doležel introduced the three ways in which a narrative world can be related to another fictional world: expansion, modification, and transposition (1998: 206-07). Marie-Laure Ryan adds “quotation” to Doležel’s taxonomy (2013: 366-67). In “From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds: On the Worldness of Narrative Representation,” Ryan also classifies basic operations of transfictionality into five categories: extension, modification, transposition, crossover, and embedding (Bell 2019: 71). The mental image is a cognitive construct abstracted from and transformed into the storyworld in the transfictional process of narrative renewal. If the mental image of a narrative can change flexibly, from one recipient/creator to another, then it is no wonder that not only the components of the image that one commonly shares but also the extension, contraction, digression, misunderstanding and even contradiction of that process can be included in the ontological concept of a storyworld, making it potentially and illimitably variable. If we regard storyworlds as “intersubjective communication constructs based on a given narrative representation” incorporating “both a complex understanding of situations and more abstract reconstructions of their spatial, temporal, causal, and ontological relation” (Thon 2016: 54), then we

can certainly infer that ideal constructs of a storyworld or those of a mental image obtained and transformed in the transfictional decoding and encoding process, as noted above, are virtually nonexistent. This is because the storyworld and its mental image are aggregates of variable referential meanings that would coexist in a narrative matrix. Thus, in the continuous process of narrative renewal, the storyworld makes and is made by the mental image.

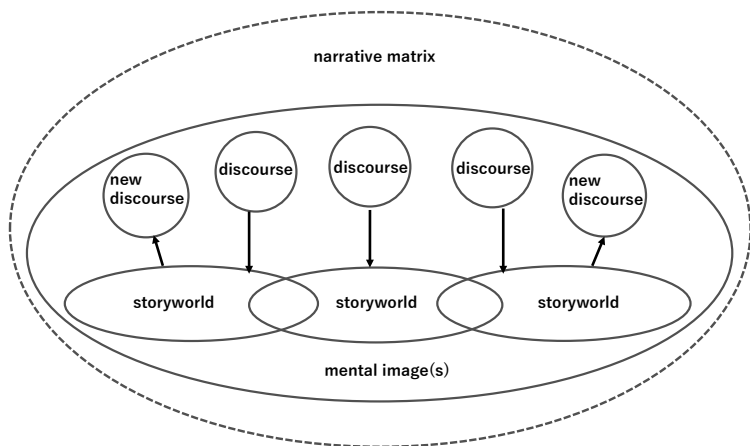
As Marie-Laure Ryan demonstrates, “the storyworld is the meaning” (2014: 34), and this meaning can engrave its mental image in our memory. We experience a narrative and transform it in our memory into a storyworld. In order to understand the narrative, we decode the discourse into story components such as events, existents, and settings, and then we integrate or condense them into a specific idea of an entire storyworld. When we produce our image, we encode it into a renewed storyworld, out of which a new narrative discourse is created. In this continuous decoding/encoding process we make and remake the storyworlds through mental images. As clearly shown in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, a mental image is most likely going to elicit more or less the same scene or situation in the narrative (although the details may be transformed in some or the other way); however, this is not always the case. The specific mental images in the renewed narrative do not always appear as the dominant scenes in a constant and stereotypical manner. Indeed, some renewed narratives can feature different

mental images that never appeared in the source text, such as in the two film adaptations of “The Killers.” In either case, the storyworlds and mental images evoked by them are, almost without exception, contained in the narrative matrix, and are theoretically shared by all those who engage themselves, intentionally or not, in experiencing discourses and/or creating the matrix.

As narrative renewal extends almost continuously over many periods and through different cultures, so the matrix continues to become increasingly extensive and expansive. As it is encompassing, a mental image can yield different storyworlds, which in turn are to be transformed into new narrative discourses. There are cases in which the original and the renewed narratives share their storyworlds to one degree or another. In those cases, the combinations of variable and invariable storyworlds can explain the entire process of ever-changing narrative renewal. Figure 1 shows the decoding/encoding process (denoted by the arrows pointing down and up, respectively).

For the sake of convenience, it is shown that individual storyworlds partially overlap each other, but there are some cases in which storyworlds belonging to the same narrative matrix never overlap, as in the case of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film adaptation, *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*. Still, both of them can be considered to join the same





**Figure 1: The process of decoding/encoding in its entirety within a narrative matrix.**

narrative matrix since they recognizably share the same kind of mental image like the balcony scene where the two young lovers meet (though the scene is transformed into the swimming pool in the Capulet garden in the latter case) that stipulates they be called by that title. A new discourse, such as an adaptation from a novel, is technically encoded by the recipient/creator by referring to an already existing storyworld of the preceding narrative within a matrix, or, that of the source text. However, the process of conceiving storyworlds may vary among recipients, since they

cannot grasp the entire storyworld of a narrative. If there is an adaptation that invites its audience to entertain an entirely different storyworld from that of the source text, then the adapters' inspiration and imagination may have stemmed from their own mental images, which are stored in their minds and, if necessary, are readily available, thus never persisting in a fixed, specific ontological status of the storyworld. Accumulation of mental images abstracted from the source text and of its derivative remakes creates and varies the narrative matrix, the totality of which is theoretically shared by recipients and creators alike. There is the possibility that the transformation of the storyworld will lead to the segregation of these features to the point that a completely new narrative matrix emerges. Even when a new discourse with a storyworld that differs widely from those of the older discourses can be created by the recipient/creator, its mental image quite possibly serves to bind together different storyworlds and (re)create the narrative matrix.

The process of renewal is highly relevant to the formation of the narrative matrix. One receives a narrative only through decoding its discursive formation and understands the story content by reorganizing it into the entire memory of the storyworld (which is represented as a mental image), and the mental image can be the creative source for the encoding process of the narrative renewal. When the recipient/creator advances the process of narrative