THE POSSIBLE WORLD AS A METAPHOR OF FICTIONAL EXISTENCE

Carmen DOMINTE [*]

Abstract*: Inspired by Leibniz's philosophy and developed by the representatives of the analytic school, the concept of possible world was redefined and adapted to narrative texts. Considered a mental construct, the fictional world, re-created in the process of reading, becomes the actual world of the textual universe. Based on the reader's subjective experience, the possible world embodies all the alternative possibilities of the fictional existence. The study attempts to examine the artistic representation of the possible world as a metaphor for the fictional reality generated by a literary text and reflected in the art of painting.*

Keywords*: possible world, fictional existence, metaphor.*

The Concept of Possible World

When referring to the concept of *possible world* it is important to mention that it was initially developed by Leibniz's philosophy and later, in the second half of the 20th century, redefined by the main representatives of the analytic school among whom there could be mentioned Kripke, Lewis, Plantinga and Rescher. At that time, the concept was used in order to deal with topics such as the truth conditions of counterfactual statements and of propositions that could be modified by the modal operators in formal semantics. For defining the concept of possible world it is imperative to take into consideration Kripke's philosophy. The starting point reveals reality as a universe made of a plurality of distinct worlds. For a world to become possible it is necessary to be linked to the actual world, which is the central item of the system, by a relation of accessibility. (Kripke, 1963: 83-85) On the basis of logic, every world that is governed by the principle of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle could be considered a possible world. Going further, the common interpretation of the concept shows that the possible worlds are in fact different states of the same system. The model structure may be supplemented by a model which gives to each atomic proposition the value of truth for each world that belongs to the system. According to Kripke's theory, the propositions that are true not only in the actual world but also in all the possible worlds represent necessary truths. More than that, a proposition is possible in the real world only if it is true in at least one possible world which is accessible from our world. (*ibidem*, 90-94) In *The Nature of Necessity*, Plantinga also defines the possible world as a certain possible state of affairs[1] – one that is possible in the broadly logical sense. (Plantinga, 1974: 44)

In the attempt of giving an answer to the question if all that exists, really exists in a necessary way, the theory of modal logic used the concept of possible world as a means of describing the epistemic accessibility. Following Kripke's idea which states that the identity

[*] Hyperion University, Bucharest, carmendominte@yahoo.com

[1] According to Plantinga's theory, not every possible state of affairs could become a possible word. (Plantinga, 1974: 44)

BDD-A29814 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:06 UTC)

of any element is built into the possible worlds, David Lewis sustains that all possible worlds together with all their elements are as real as our world. The actuality of a given world resembles any indexical notion, such as *here, I, now*, and so on. (Lewis, 1973: 84-85) Thus, any given world could be actualized from the points of view of its inhabitants. But for Lewis, this modal realism makes a distinction between *real* and *actual*, in the fact that all possible worlds may be real in the sense that they exist independently of whether or not being imagined. In fact, the modal realism is a fundamental attitude towards the relation between the actual world and the truth of the possible worlds. The criterion of truth is always based on the idea of possibility. (*ibidem*, p. 90-91)

This concept also inspired the literary theoreticians, mostly L. Doležel, U. Eco, T. Pavel, M.L. Ryan and R. Ronen who adapted this concept to the fictional world theory. Even though the statute of the concept is still contested by several critics, based on its indeterminable character of the truth inside the fictional world, on the possible logical inconsistency and on the contradictory nature of fiction, the adaptation of the same concept to the imaginary worlds created by literature could be seen as a potential vindication of the model. (Ryan, 1992: 530) Using the Kripkean model structure, M. L. Ryan suggested the term *textual universe* as a referential reality generated by a work of fiction, or, as she put it, the actual world of the textual universe projected by the fictional text may be considered a fictional world. (Ryan, 1991: 23)

Generally speaking, fiction is given as true of a world other than the actual world. Fictional narratives differ from the counterfactual statements[1] in the fact that they are created from the alternate possible world perspective which, in the reading process, is regarded as the actual world. It is already known that readers imagine fictional worlds as the closest possible to the actual world being able to make changes that are written in the text. The reconstruction of the fictional world is based on its similarity to the actual world which was called the *principle of minimal departure*. The fictional world given by a textual universe[2] can be reconstructed in a similar way as the alternate possible worlds of nonfactual statements are reconstructed, mainly by conforming to the representation of the actual world. (*ibidem*, 50-51) Such a fictional world could be reconstructed on the basis of the reader's subjective experience which enables the reader to imagine a physical autonomous reality and also to assume the metaphor of the text as a whole fictional world. The process of reconstruction is intuitive and psychological. But the fictional world is insufficient capable to state its truth in the fictional discourse, only its metaphor whose reconstruction may have lots of possibilities. According to Currie, the fictional worlds should not be assimilated to possible worlds, mainly because of their indeterminate character. (Currie, 1990: 56) Knowing the possible worlds as alternative possibilities, as ways things might have been when generated by a textual universe, the metaphors of the fictional worlds could be interpreted as possible worlds. In doing so, the reader perceives

[1] The counterfactual statements usually describe an alternate possible world from the actual world perspective making use of the markers of irreality such as *if…then* or the conditional mode in order to acknowledge their alternative status.

[2] The textual universe also implies a reference which could be represented by the actual world or by another textual universe, in the case of inter-textuality.

BDD-A29814 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:06 UTC)

the literary text as a welcoming and intimate space and environment, very similar to his or her own actual world.

The Possible World as a Metaphor for Fictional Existence

Any narrative text is able to generate not only one possible world but an infinite number of possible worlds, functioning as a machine of producing possible worlds. (Eco, 1984: 246) These possible worlds may belong to the *fabula*, to the characters within the fabula and of the reader from outside the fabula. Considering that fabula represents a succession of distinct states mediated by events which could correspond to the actual world of the narrative system, all the possible worlds that were imagined by the author are designed to correspond to those states of the fabula. These states of affairs are expressed by a set of propositions outlining a set of possible individuals that are defined through their properties and, since some of these properties are regarded as actions, a possible world develops a possible course of events. More than that, any course of events generated by a narrative system is not actual but depends on the propositional attitude of the author and implicitly by the characters making the possible worlds to be imagined, believed, wished and so on, but not actual and real. (*ibidem*, 219)

The same imagined, believed, wished possible worlds are to be reconstructed by the reader, at any disjunction of probability, enabling the further states of affairs either to approve or to disapprove the original fabula. For the reader the model for recreating the possible worlds that are proposed by the fictional world is the actual world, focusing his or her attention on those features that resemble more the actual world. But most of the times, each imagined, believed or wished possible world is not corresponding entirely to the fictional world within the fabula.

When defining the fictional world it is necessary to regard it as a set of specific entities, namely places, characters and objects, and of certain networks of relationships which could be described as organizing principles, such as spatio-temporal relations, event and action sequences. (Ronen, 1994: 8-9) Thus, fictional worlds are constructed as certain worlds having their distinct ontological position, and, as worlds presenting their self-sufficient system of structures and relations, they are capable to function as autonomous modal systems.

Following the theoretical perspective suggested by Ronen, the fictional world system is considered an independent system mainly because all the fictional facts were not destined to relate to what could have or could not have happened in reality, but to what did occur or/and could have occurred in fiction. This fact entitles the fictional worlds to function independently from the actual world, whatever the type of the fiction generated them. (*ibidem*, 10-11)

The textual universe projects the fictional world which, in its turn, develops an entire fictional existence which contains all the under-worlds imagined, believed in and wished by the characters. These under-worlds function as projections of the characters, according to the amount of information they could access. At the same time, there are other under-worlds that were imagined, believed in and wished by the reader, generated in the process of reading by the same textual universe. These under-worlds represent the result of a series of hypothetical inferences which the text validates or not. Either coming from the reader or

BDD-A29814 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:06 UTC)

from the characters, all these under-worlds could be considered as possible worlds, organized as branches of the fictional existence. Regarded as mental constructs able to function autonomously, these possible worlds are perceived as derivative worlds, as metaphors of the fictional existence.

The Possible World Model

The reconstruction of a possible world suggested by the fictional existence is made during the process of reading and it is based on the literary conventions and on the cultural frames that are historically determined. Thus in the process of fictional assertion, the reader reconstructs the central world of a textual universe according to his cultural frame which is related to the all the other literary and historical conventions more or less. The reader may accept or reject totally or partially those conventions that do not inspire or help him or he may also adapt them in his own way. Anyway, the reader re-creates the central world of the fictional existence in the same way as he re-creates the alternate possible worlds of non-factual statements: conforming, as far as possible, the central world to his representation of the actual world. During the process of re-creation the reader is projecting upon these worlds everything he knows about reality, at the same time, making the adjustments allowed by the text. Considering that the possible worlds are mental constructs, the reader stands the chance of approaching to an understanding of thoughts and emotions that the author is communicating re-creating those new worlds as metaphors for the fictional existence. (Levin, 1988: 3)

Taking as an example Voltaire's *El Dorado*[1] the analysis attempts to apply the theoretical frame of possible worlds as metaphors for the fictional existence generated by a textual universe on the art of painting. It is the case, among many others, of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*[2].

This book was meant to dig deep into human imagination, exploring the descriptions of several cities through the eyes of a great traveller and explorer, Marco Polo. These descriptions were framed in the conversation between the emperor Kublai Khan and the Italian explorer. All the dialogues between the two characters were inserted into narration at every five to ten descriptions of the cities. The book sums up a total of fifty-five descriptions which cover nine chapters and are divided into eleven thematic groups of five each. The main character, in his descriptions, moves back and forth among the thematic groups, while moving also down the list[3] in a mathematical structure. The descriptions

[1] El Dorado is generally accepted as an embodiment of Voltaire's vision of an ideal society which may be regarded as a place of religious equality and advanced science, free of greed, pretention, suffering or religious contention. As a possible world, El Dorado becomes the ideal place defined as a standard of perfection mostly desirable but not entirely attainable, though more or less approachable. It inspired other derivative works such as paintings, book illustrations or cinematographic representations.

[2] The book *Invisible Cities*, *Le città invisibili*, was written by Italo Calvino in 1972 and published by Giulio Einaudi. The first English version was published in 1974 by Harcourt under the translation made by William Weaver.

[3] The list of the eleven thematic groups includes the following: Cities & Memory, Cities & Desire, Cities & Signs, Thin Cities, Trading Cities, Cities & Eyes, Cities & Names, Cities & the Dead, Cities & the Sky, Continuous Cities, Hidden Cities.

BDD-A29814 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:06 UTC)

themselves are brief prose poems describing the cities and being narrated by Marco Polo. The same poetical feature could also be recognized in those interludes between Kublai Khan and Polo functioning as a framing device which plays with the complexity of the descriptions. Although Marco Polo describes imagined cities that could not be recognized, being pure inventions of his mind, they seem as real as possible.

Bearing women's names, the described cities share the brief accounts of the cities Marco Polo had visited in his journey[1] through the Mongol Empire. All these descriptions are very similar to the descriptions of real places. Take for instance the city of Clarice: "Clarice, the glorious city, has a tormented history. Several times it decayed, then burgeoned again, always keeping the first Clarice as an unparalleled model of every splendour compared to which the city's present state can only cause more sighs at every fading of the stars." (Calvino, 1997: 97)

There are other descriptions which usually include at least one element that may have different poetic functions. For the city Tekla, it is *the fear* of being destroyed after removing all the scaffoldings and that is why the city remains always under construction. For Irene it is *the change* mainly because it changes while someone is approaching, it reveals itself differently for the person who is just passing by and for the person who is remaining. For Beersheba it is *the faith* of the existence of another heavenly city bearing the same name where all the virtues and good feelings are floating. The heavenly Beersheba represents the model for the earthy city. At the same time the underground Beersheba contains all the infernal features that the earthy city is projecting. Thus, Beersheba has two mirror projections, a heavenly and an infernal one. Sometimes it is an element in the form of an object as it is the case of Fedora: "In the centre of Fedora, that gray stone metropolis stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora." (*ibidem,* 31)

Either it is the fear, or the faith, or even the change or the crystal globe these poetic items function as metaphors linking one reality to another reality. Regarded as mental constructs these cities were imagined either by the author or by the reader as possible worlds functioning as metaphors for the fictional existence generated by the textual universe. These cities were the result of imagination: of the author, who described them as metaphors of his actual reality, of the main character, who always had in his mind the city of Venice – his actual reality: "Every time I describe a city [...] I am saying something about Venice" (*ibidem,* 86), and of the reader, who in his turn may keep in his mind other actual realities. Considering Kublai Khan as a potential reader, the one who Polo describes the cities, he is also imagining other possible places that are in fact metaphors for those invented cities. Following this theoretical procedure, the metaphors are multiplying similarly to the multiplication of the possible worlds, as branches of the same poetic description, or as Marco Polo highlighted: "I speak and speak, Marco says, but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. [...] It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear." (Calvino, 1997: 135)

[1] According to the historical background of Marco Polo's life, a major source of inspiration for the descriptions of the cities belonging to Calvino's book was Polo's travel diary which depicted his journey across Asia and was written in the thirteenth century.

BDD-A29814 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:06 UTC)

The imagined cities regarded as possible worlds may also represent the basis of further imaginary artistic works[1]. In the field of painting and illustrations the cities revealed in Calvino's book were the source of artistic inspiration for the exhibition entitled *Seeing Calvino* from April 2014. This was an attempt initiated by the artists Matt Kish, Joe Kuth and Leighton Connor to go beyond the textual universe and through their artistic creations to transpose the text into images. In fact, *Seeing Calvino* could also be considered a travelogue of imaginary places. In this case the described cities were regarded not only imaginary but also intentional states, inspiring derivative paintings and illustrations for each city. Based on the subjective readings of these fragments of poetic prose, the painters imagined the cities as abstract representations. The following illustrations are the images of the cities of Tekla, Beersheba and Irene.

"If, dissatisfied with the answer, someone puts his eye to a crack in a fence, he sees cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffoldings that embrace other scaffoldings, beams that prop up other beams. 'What meaning does your construction have?' he asks. 'What is the aim of a city under construction unless is a city? Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?'

'We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over; we cannot interrupt our work now,' they answer. Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. 'There is the blueprint', they say." (*ibidem*, 112)



Matt Kish – Tekla

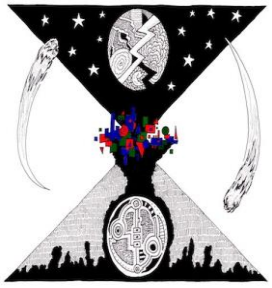
https://www.google.ro/search?q=seeing+calvino&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=667&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=OahUKEwjGkeueh7TOAhViKMAKHYN71

The text that is wrapping the illustration was the textual source that inspired the painter. The number of possible visual representations is infinite. There could be created lots and lots of other artistic derivative works starting from the same text, mainly because the number of readings of the same text is endless. Each illustration is able to function as a possible world, one among other possible worlds generated by the same text. The concept of possible worlds offers support for a view of fictionality in terms of semiotic world models. The textual universes are constructions of language and could be included in the class of semiotic objects which depend for their fictional existence and characteristics on the power of language. Thus the possible world reference is considered a discursive procedure dependent on extra-linguistic essences of objects (in this case the text) and also dependent on the semiotic convention that discourse constructs objects. These are the cases of the visual representations that became extra-linguistic objects created on the basis of a discourse, as in the examples from this article.

[1] The chapters about the cities of Armilla, Adelma and Isidora which were taken from Calvino's book represented the basis for an opera composed by Cerrone which was firstly produced by *The Industry* in October 2013 as an experimental production at the Union Station in Los Angeles.

BDD-A29814 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:06 UTC)

"This belief is handed down in Beersheba: that suspended in the heavens it exists another Beersheba. […] They also believe these inhabitants that another Beersheba exists underground." (Calvino, 1997: 100)



Leighton Connor – Beersheba

(The same electronic source)

"Irene is the city visible when you lean out from the edge of the plateau at the hour when the lights come on, and in the limpid air, the pink of the settlement can be discerned spread out in the distance below: where the windows are more concentrated, where it thins out in dimly lighted alleys, where it collects the shadows of gardens, where it raises towers with signal fires; and if the evening is misty, a hazy glow swells like a milky sponge at the foot of the galleys. […]
If you saw it, standing in its midst, it would be a different city; Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach it, it changes." (*ibidem*, 109)

Joe Kuth – Irene



(The same electronic source)

These visual representations are based on the subjective experience of the readers who felt free to imagine entire worlds as physical, autonomous realities furnished with palpable objects and populated by individuals, assuming the textual universe as a metaphor for the fictional existence which in the process of reading is transposed into a welcoming environment or, as in our case, another artistic representation. (Ryan, 1991: 138-139)

Conclusion

Seen as a coherent whole the fictional world generated by the textual universe of a narrative becomes the emerging point for all the other possible worlds that could be imagined while reading. Whether it has as a model the actual world or not the fictional world is constructed as a world with its distinct ontological position being capable of generating other self-sufficient systems containing their own structures and relations. Regarded as alternative possibilities of existence, the possible worlds develop as metaphors for the fictional world that produced them.

The possible world is a model that may function as an inside metaphor for the fictional reality generated by a literary text. The possible world is also a model that may also function as an outside metaphor for other artistic representations. Reading becomes the intuitive and psychological process that transposes the inside metaphor into the outside one. The art of painting is just another metaphorical reflection of a fictional existence that a literary text is offering.

BDD-A29814 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:06 UTC)

Bibliography

Calvino, Italo, *Invisible Cities*, London, Vintage Classics New Edition, 1997
Currie, Gregory, *The Nature of Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990
Eco, Umberto, *The Role of the Reader: Exploration in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloominton, Indiana University Press, 1984
Kripke, Saul, "Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic" in *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, no. 6, 1963
Levin, Samuel, *Metaphoric Worlds. Conceptions of a Romantic Nature*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988
Lewis, David, *Counterfactuals*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973
Plantinga, Alvin, *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974
Ronen, Ruth, Possible Worlds in Literary Theory, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994
Ryan, Marie-Laure, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Bloominton, Indiana University Press, 1991
Ryan, Marie-Laure, "Possible Worlds in Recent Literary Theory" in *Style* 26, no. 4, 1992

Electronic Resources

https://www.google.ro/search?q=seeing+calvino&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=667&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=OahUKEwjGkeueh7TOAhViKMAKHYN71 (9 August 2016)

BDD-A29814 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:06 UTC)