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Transmediality

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Introduction

Ksenia Olkusz

Facta Ficta Research Centre

When we study culture, especially the contemporary one, as researchers and scholars we have a certain duty – the duty of capturing and describing with precision any fashion or phenomenon. This is all the more important as it will bring us to become “the annalists of upcoming changes”, and allow for appearing new impacts among the cultural texts. Thus, it is crucial to observe, describe and define transformations within the culture, the technological ones too, because they can shape it. Undoubtedly there is a need of closer observation of popular culture as a resonator of new trends.

Cognitive and transmedial narratology has grown out from an opposition to so called textocentric paradigm, according to, among others, Polish researcher, Katarzyna Kaczmarczyk:

Within the understanding of the transmedial narratology, the narrative is not only the language representation of causally associated events but also their mental representation, „a cognitive conception” which can be activated by different signs. This approach makes narratology independent from the language paradigm and the narrative itself places on the transmedial level as the category which is not connected just with one vehicle and vulnerable to adopting different shapes. It makes the relations between narrative and medium, with their possibilities and limitations, a very important matter (Kaczmarczyk 2017: 5).

The mentioned textocentric paradigm unfortunately lies at the basis of multiple duplicated belief of impossibility (or the lack of sufficient methodological motivation) when it comes to inclusion of comics, computer games or even TV-series or animation movies to the discourse. In this perspective it should be considered as a thing worth emphasizing, that in *Transmedial*

Narratology published in 2016 by Jan-Noël Thon, which is a kind of literary theory manifesto in the spirit of transmedial narratology, there are examples that mainly come from comics, computer games and science fiction and fantasy blockbuster movies.

This results from the fact that in the latest narratological reflection there is no place for any valuation – narrations circulate around different media as bodily fluids and just manifest themselves differently depending on demand of the specific medium.

Literary medium can better encourage multimodal experiments with textual tissue, medium of film empathizes the attractiveness of presentation of visual message, medium of opera, musical or rock-opera – on connecting visuality and audio-layer, and medium of computer games – on intensifying the impact on audience by stimulation of kinesthetic sensory due to increasing the share of interactivity.

Contemporary „media-conscious“ (Ryan & Thon 2014: 4) literary theory shows that there is a real basis for agreement between fascinations of fans and academic discourse, while looking at the subject without neither positive nor negative emotional attachment. This theory would have, as Ryan in her *Storyworlds Across Media* notes indicates, grow up of the reflection over the meaning of medium in the modern culture. Furthermore:

In the introduction to *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon propose to pivot the reflection on transmedial narrative strategies around the post-classical narrative concept of storyworld. Storyworlds here are defined as representations that transcend both media boundaries and the ‘native’ territory of language in narrative fiction – which allows for abandoning what Linda Hutcheon associated with the ‘realist imperialism’ of classical narrative studies, that is their dependence on exclusive real-world reference as well as Barthesian ‘having-been-there of things’ principle for constructing narrative meaning (Koskimaa, Maj & Olkusz 2018: 7-8).

About the advantages of transmediality in the view of TV-series writes, among others, Elisabeth Evans:

Transmediality plays with this central construct of a fictional world in terms of what Matt Hills has called a ‘hyper-diegesis’, or ‘the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, *only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text*’ [...]. With moments of transmedia storytelling new media platforms such as the internet or mobile phone are used to provide access to the parts of the text that are not available through the television episodes.

Transmedia storytelling makes particular use of fictional worlds, exploiting the fact that the viewer only sees part of that world and will be encouraged to subsequently seek out information on those hidden parts via the extensions onto multiple platforms (Evans 2011: 11).

All this testifies to the real need of conducting research to the large scale, in which the authors of articles published in this issue of „Facta Ficta Journal of Theory, Narrative & Media” participate too. The variety of topics in their research illustrates the „media-conscious” position towards the described phenomena as well as their media representations. What is more, the completion of the transmedial subject is an extensive interview with Thomas Elsaesser.

However, the issue „Facta Ficta Journal of Theory, Narrative & Media” is important because it also summarizes the Facta Ficta Research Centre’s conference project *Expanding Universes. Transmedial & Transfictional Ways of World-building*¹ which was created in 2016 by Krzysztof M. Maj. For this reason one of the „International Journal of Transmedia and Literacy” issues has been published.

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¹ It is worth adding that it was during this conference that a lecture was held by Marie-Laure Ryan. It’s available online: <https://factaficta.org/wyklady/#ryan>.



Transmediality

Defining Participatory Worlds: Canonical Expansion of Fictional Worlds through Audience Participation

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Abstract

'Participatory culture' is a concept which gives consumers an active role in the production and design of commodities and content. Companies embracing user co-creation practices enable consumers to become contributors and producers of the products and services they care about. However, the approach taken by entertainment industries, IP owners of the most popular and beloved fictional worlds, generally gives little room for user involvement in the development and production of their entertainment franchises. These franchised worlds commonly become transmedia giants through commissioning works to professionals and subsidiary and/or external companies and by issuing brand licenses to third party organisations. Collaboration among these elites makes possible for franchise owners to control the intellectual property while increasing the revenue. Even though user participation might be encouraged to a certain degree, this call generally responds to a marketing strategy to strengthen the sales and the bonds between the company and the fan community. User narrative contributions to these imaginary worlds are merely treated as fan-fiction and are, in many cases, liable to be exploited by their franchise owners.

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Located at the other extreme of the user-agency spectrum, participatory worlds are shared and interactive worlds generally supported by independent ventures which allow and encourage audiences to contribute meaningfully and canonically to their development and expansion. Contributions may be shared in a variety of media modes, genres and formats and through different channels for collaboration and circulation. Similarly, participatory worlds often are spaces where audiences can challenge and divert the original authors' plans about the progress of the storylines and, even, the whole imaginary world. The nature of these spaces commonly goes beyond the 'traditional' notions of authorship, audience and participation advocated by the entertainment industries and the mainstream system of textual production. This paper attempts to give a more accurate definition of participatory worlds and demonstrate how audiences can contribute meaningfully to expand them.

Keywords

Co-creation, participatory culture, participatory worlds, transmedia franchising, audience participation, fictional worlds

As audience members, we experience our favourite fictional worlds through official and unofficial texts. These texts are representations of ideas based on story-worlds (for example designs, merchandising, discussions and fan stories). Some texts are considered official and usually are produced by the world owner and the third parties authorised to monetize the intellectual property (IP), while others are catalogued as unofficial material, commonly coming from works based on worlds already in the public domain and fan-produced texts inspired by copyrighted worlds. The constant supply of new content, official and unofficial, based on a fictional world leads to its expansion. This paper will explore the concept of participatory world, a practice which allows audience members to produce official and canonical content for fictional worlds.

In his book, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, Mark J. P. Wolf dedicates slightly more than two pages to talking about participatory worlds. He states that “[a] participatory world [...] allows an audience member to participate in the world and its events, and make permanent changes that result in canonical additions to the world” (Wolf 2013: 281). This is one of the few explicit references to participatory worlds in academic literature, a concept that has often been associated with other practices and has neither been properly defined nor delimited. Participatory world is more than a concept, it is a practice and a model of production, which involves the negotiation and co-operation between audience members and producers. Indeed, participatory worlds allow audiences to take part in their development and expansion with contributions which may end in canonical changes and additions to the world. Wolf also suggests that role playing games and virtual environments are suitable scenarios for hosting participatory worlds (Wolf 2013). However, this paper will demonstrate that there are other spaces where they can operate. Although participatory worlds are different from other practices in producing and managing story-worlds, there is no comprehensive research which defines and analyses participatory worlds that can be used for this purpose.

Therefore, it seems necessary to determine what defines a participatory world. This is precisely the aim of this paper. The article attempts to build a foundation for future research by shedding some light on what participatory worlds are and are not in relation to some of the existing practices, and to show how audiences can contribute to the expansion of the worlds in some of these projects.

Wolf's definition outlines three key characteristics about participatory worlds: audience participation, world expansion and canonical contributions. The simultaneous use of these three characteristics makes participatory worlds different from other creative practices. First, in participatory worlds, participation is enabled through defined and enduring channels available to the world's audience for making contributions. These channels for participation allow audience members who wish to participate to submit their contributions to the producers/world owners for consideration. Second, world expansion refers to the enhancement of the story-world with new contributions. This paper mainly focuses on narrative fictional contributions since it is assumed that they demonstrate more clearly their impact in the expansion of the diegetic world. Third, when a contribution has reached canonical status, this means that it has been validated by the world owner to be part of the official narrative and world features. This effectively implies that to keep the coherence of the world participants would have to keep in mind the new canonical elements and events in future contributions.

This paper explores these three key elements to draw differences and similarities with other existing practices. The first section addresses audience participation. It identifies participatory worlds as a subset of interactive worlds and compares them with other collaborative projects, such as the 'networked book' *A Million Penguins* (2007) and the crowdsourced documentary film *Life in a Day* (2011). The next section centres on world expansion. It defines participatory worlds as shared worlds and shows how they can be expanded through audience participation. The third section focuses on canonicity and the distinction between participatory worlds and fan fiction. Each section discusses examples of two case studies, *Grantville Gazette* (2004a) and *Runes of Gallidon* (2008), in order to explain how the three aforementioned key elements operate within these participatory worlds.

Grantville Gazette is an e-zine rooted in Eric Flint's *1632 Universe*. The story-world, which combines alternative history and time-travel, introduces the US city of Grantville which is transported in time and space to Germany in 1631, into the middle of the Thirty Years war, with no way back. *1632 Universe* comprises several novels, anthologies, short stories, a role-playing game and the *Grantville Gazette*. The *Gazette*, which also has

a few printed issues, publishes stories from fans and established authors, which become part of the story-world canon. It has been running since 2003 and recently released its 69th issue (by January 2017).

Runes of Gallidon (runesofgallidon.com) was an Internet-based project running from 2008-2012, which featured a medieval, human-centric story-world. The project, created by Scott Walker, Tony Graham and Andy Underwood, welcomed user contributions produced in any medium and rooted in the world of Gallidon as long as they followed the rules of participation. These rules were basically oriented to secure the suitability and coherence of the proposed content with respect to the story-world, promote respect towards other authors' contributions and avoid any copyright infringement (*Runes of Gallidon* 2009). Contributions were posted on the official website under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA) licence.¹

Audience participation

According to the Oxford Dictionary, participation is “the action of taking part in something”.² Audience participation relates to the capacity that audience members have to get involved in a determined activity or practice. In participatory worlds, this is enabled through the use of defined channels for participation. A channel for participation is the route that audience members should follow (including the platform they need to use) in order to submit their contributions. For example, *Grantville Gazette* asks participants to post their submissions on a forum, where other fans can read them and provide some feedback (Flint 2014). Authors are encouraged to use this feedback to improve their works. Subsequent versions of the works would also need to be posted on the forum. *Grantville Gazette* editorial board members will follow the discussions and the changes in the whole pool of unpublished stories posted on the forum, and decide which ones will be included in each monthly issue. The channel for audience participation in the *1632 Universe* is, therefore, associated with *Grantville Gazette* and mainly centres on the official forum.

An important characteristic of channels for participation is that they should be enduringly available for receiving contributions. Consequently, when a story-world presents a one-time opportunity to participate in the

¹ More information about the Creative Commons licences can be found in the official website: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>.

² More information: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/participation>, [accessed 20.01.2017].

world (i.e. a contest as part of a marketing campaign), it should not be considered a participatory world. An example of this is the contest launched by the producers of the TV mini-series *What Lives Inside* (2015), where audiences were invited to design a monster and submit their sketches to the producers prior to the completion of the show by using the official website. The selected ideas were reproduced on the screen, while the channel for participation had closed-down a few months before the show was released (Cicero 2015).³ Similarly, if the audience members cease to get access to a participatory channel in a participatory world, the world should no longer be considered as such.

Another important aspect of participatory worlds is that the opportunities for participation should be available to their audience as a whole. Everyone should be able to become a participant by following the rules for participation, gaining the necessary knowledge to contribute and getting access to the technological requirements.⁴

Besides, participatory worlds can be considered as interactive worlds. Interactive worlds are those which “change the audience member’s role from observer to participant” (Wolf 2013: 138). An audience member can participate in how (s)he experiences the world by making choices or taking actions which will bring tangible results. These choices and actions do not necessarily bring canonical changes to the world and may be pre-defined by the text and/or code beforehand. According to Wolf, “participatory worlds are a subset of interactive worlds, since while all participatory worlds are inherently open and interactive, not all interactive worlds allow the user to make permanent changes to the world, sharing in its authorship” (Wolf 2013: 281). For instance, a game such as a “choose your own adventure” book or a video game gives the player the chance to confront a puzzle in a limited number of ways. If the player chooses A, then the result will be AZ. When choosing B, the outcome will be BZ. Both solutions and outcomes are already pre-defined beforehand by the developers/producers/authors. Therefore, audience members are gener-

³ There are other examples which are mentioned in the next section. All of them have similar differences with respect to participatory worlds.

⁴ Although, theoretically, local practices of story-building and world-building such as role-playing games based on original worlds (for example, a group of friends meeting in a room to play a role-playing game and extend the world’s canon they created with new additions) may be considered as participatory worlds as long as every audience member has the chance to participate in the expansion of the world (this would mean that if the fictional world circulates outside of that room, the external audience would also need to have the chance to participate), it can be certainly said that this aspect (audience participation) places participatory worlds in close relation to the digital age.

ally not authors in the story-world but active participants shaping their own experience (or collaborative experience if performed with others). As Murray states:

authorship in electronic media is procedural. Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions (Murray 1997: 152).

This approach may be complicated by the different definitions of the concepts of interactivity and participation. For Manuel Castells, interactivity is "the ability of the user to manipulate and affect his experience of media directly and to communicate with others through media" (Castells 2003: 201). By contrast, Jenkins prefers to associate the technological characteristics with "interactivity" while leaving the social and cultural aspects to "participation":

Interactivity refers to the ways that new technologies have been designed to be more responsive to consumer feedback. One can imagine differing degrees of interactivity enabled by different communication technologies, ranging from television, which allows us only to change the channel, to video games that can allow consumers to act upon the represented world [...]. The constraints on interactivity are technological. In almost every case, what you can do in an interactive environment is prestructured by the designer. Participation, on the other hand, is shaped by the cultural and social protocols [...]. Participation is more open-ended, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers (Jenkins 2006: 133).

Participatory worlds are interactive worlds because they hold channels for audience participation. Channels for participation are windows for audience members to interact with the world and its elements by enabling them to contribute meaningfully with canonical additions to the story-world. In order to do that, world owners should assign a degree of agency and authority to contributors and open for them channels for participation. As Murray states:

The more realized the immersive environment, the more active we want to be within it. When the things we do bring tangible results, we experience [...] the sense of agency. Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices (Murray 1997: 126).

According to Hammer, “agency describes the capabilities one has in terms of taking action within a space of possibility” (Hammer 2007: 72). User-agency in participatory worlds relates to the interaction between participants and the rules and channels for participation but also to the possibilities they have to intervene in the diegetic world. Another characteristic is the user-authority, which refers to “the ability to enforce and judge the results of those actions” (Hammer 2007: 72). As Hammer explains, these two concepts are closely related but are different from one another:

One can have agency without authority, which might be the ability to try many things but without any means to impose one’s will if resisted. One can also have authority without agency, lacking the ability to initiate, but able to decide the results of others’ actions” (Hammer 2007: 72-3).

Channels for participation and rules concerning contributions are giving the framework where user-agency is determined. Differently, the authority given to participants is frequently residual. As we will exemplify later, world owners have the last word about which contributions are and are not acceptable for the story-world. Regardless, communities and individuals may influence and even force producers to reverse their decisions in much higher degree than in media franchises. There is a simple reason for that: participatory world owners have a closer relationship with their audience (and may even delegate some power to them) than IP owners of media franchises. However, in some participatory worlds, participants receive a degree of authority regarding their submissions and proposals, being able to decide the final form the contributions should have when published. In both case studies, *Runes of Gallidon* and *Grantville Gazette*, changes to the contribution can be suggested by the producers and other participants but it is the author who has the final word on whether the suggestions would be incorporated to the text.

Allowing audience participation is a characteristic that differentiates participatory worlds from many other fictional worlds. However, there are other creative practices of collaborative production between producers and consumers. For example, “networked books” are closely related to collaborative writing practices. Andrew Dillon states that “if we accept a definition of collaborative writing as the activities involved in the production of a document by more than one author, then pre-draft discussions and arguments as well as post-draft analyses and debate are collaborative components” (Dillon 1993: 84). A “networked book” is “an open book designed to be written, edited and read in a networked environment” (Vershow 2006). Vershow considers *Wikipedia* as the networked book par excellence. Instead of perceiving the networked book as a single online element produced by multiple authors

(for example, the wiki novel *A Million Penguins*) or created by selected professionals and commented on by the readers (such as *The Golden Notebook Project* (2008)), this concept may be approached as a container (an online platform) for many stories to be told. By using this approach, we would understand that many contributions may be stored on the same location as part of the same project, as *Wikipedia* does. *A Million Penguins* was a literary and social experiment developed between the publishing house Penguin and researchers from De Montfort University, which ran between the 1st February and 7th March 2007 and whose main purpose was to create a collaborative wiki novel (Spencer 2011: 50). Anyone interested could register and contribute to the “networked book” by adding, removing or modifying the content. According to Spencer, “the perception of open collaboration caused chaos [...]. With a degree of textual freedom for everyone, the archived wiki novel, its text divided into several strands, is almost nonsensical” (2011: 51-2). The constant friction for the control of the narrative among the participants and the editors was recorded in the form of tracked edits. Precisely these documented social interactions become part of the narrative. As Spencer notices: “the networked book is a form of social text and these interactions between authors are of value. In many ways, the process of its creation is equally as important as the archived novel” (2011: 52). That collaborative text may build or be based on a fictional world, which is shaped by the user contributions. Transposing this example to participatory worlds, it may be perceived that the official website of *Runes of Gallidon*, where all contributions are published, acted as the online container for different stories. Every contribution was added to the existing content of the website and, therefore, this would expand the story-world. This approach would not be applicable to *Grantville Gazette*, since the *1632 universe* is being expanded by different media and platforms (i.e. novels, anthologies, an e-zine and a role-playing game). Spencer argues that “[t]he networked book becomes a book about dialogue as the annotations that surround the book in its networked environment becomes part of the book and can be read as part of its text” (Spencer 2011: 15). Both *Runes of Gallidon* and *Grantville Gazette* host online spaces for debate and discussion in the shape of forums. Particularly, the latter has an active forum where feedback can be received from other community members. However, these comments and discussions cannot be read alongside the published content. Although they keep some similarities, networked books and participatory worlds are different creative practices.

“Networked books” focus more on the activity of producing a text collaboratively than the collective expansion of an IP. Currently, they are more social and creative experiments than practices to share and expand story-worlds. A similar case is the crowdsourced film *Life in a Day*. The movie

is a remix of videos recorded on a specific day, 24th July 2010, by thousands of participants who sent their contributions via YouTube as a response to an open call from the producers. The director, Kevin Macdonald, stated that some cameras were sent to least developed countries in order to reach a broader view about the world. He estimated that 75% of the total contributions were submitted via Youtube.com (Dodes 2011). The producers reviewed and selected excerpts from more than 80,000 submissions to compose a 95-minutes film.⁵ It can be questioned if the participants would qualify as audience members when they submitted their contributions before the movie was even in post-production.⁶ Participants become collaborators, as it could be with any other member of the crew, before being part of the audience. More interestingly, this raises the question as to whether a single collaborative work would present an example of world expansion or world sharing. These expressions are more related to world-building than world sharing since, as it will be explained later, participatory worlds are formed by multiple works from multiple authors.

World expansion

This section addresses the production of official content towards the expansion of story-worlds. As one of the key characteristics of participatory worlds, audience members can expand the worlds with canonical contributions. This approach mainly takes into consideration the production of narrative fictional content submitted by audience members through the channels for participation since they show in a more explicit manner how user contributions serve to expand a story-world. Other types of contributions such as technical input, user feedback and the circulation of content may help to improve the rules of participation, consumer experience, popularity and sales, but it will be more complicated to determine their impact on the expansion of the diegetic world.

Generally, entertainment industries are quite reluctant to allow audiences to participate in the creation of content for their story-worlds and only

⁵ Although it may be argued that this movie does not represent a fictional world, the example has been chosen for its popularity and with the aim of examining the practice, more than the project. Other fictional works made in collaboration between producers and potential consumers are Paul Verhoeven's film *Tricked* (2012) and David R. Ellis' movie *Snakes on a Plane* (2006).

⁶ It can be argued that contributors are not audience members since, in the moment when the collaboration took place, the work had not been completed. In this case, it may be better to talk about intended or prospective audience. The term "user" would only apply to the first example, *A Million Penguins*. For being a user or an audience member it is understood that a system, product or world should be in place.

practices like “modding”⁷ and beta testing are being considered by software and game developers. Customer feedback has been adopted by all industries as a practice to add value to their commodities and services. Customer reviews, social media, viral marketing campaigns and brand communities have been used to promote sales and test ideas. However, the industry has closed the door to user-contributions to develop and expand their franchises. Audience members’ fictional narrative contributions are considered fan-fiction. One of the main reason for this approach is the determination of entertainment industries to keep the full control over their IPs in order to profit from the same idea over and over again. The need to “grow” in order to maximise the revenue while restricting the risk has been made more visible since the 80’s and 90’s with the shift from a synergetic model of exploitation of the IP resources to the franchising model (Johnson 2013). Media franchising consists in opening the IP to third parties or, how Johnson describes it:

Franchising occurs where creative resources are exchanged across contexts of production, where sequels, spin-offs, and tie-ins ask multiple production communities to work in successive or parallel relation to one another. This makes franchising better conceived in the terms of world-sharing than world-building (Johnson 2013: 109).

Therefore, “franchised worlds” are shared worlds because the IP owner and/or creator shares the world with other authors with the purpose of generating more extensions⁸ and bringing more revenue to the franchise. World sharing helps world owners to create extensions to the fictional world more effectively by generating multiple sources of production and distribution of content. Media conglomerates do not allow audiences to participate but remain open to cooperation with selected professionals, companies or licensees who will share a common story-world, brand and/or trademark. In this context and broadly speaking, three general approaches can be mentioned, which

⁷ In computer science, ‘modding’ refers to a user’s practice consisting in making modifications to software and/or hardware.

⁸ Jenkins explains the concepts of “extension”, “synergy” and “franchise” by saying: “Industry insiders use the term »extension« to refer to their efforts to expand the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems, »synergy« to refer to the economic opportunities represented by their ability to own and control all of those manifestations, and »franchise« to refer to their coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content under these new conditions” (Jenkins 2006: 19). When referring to participatory worlds, in this article, “extension” is used to refer to the official texts, created by the audience and the producers, which are produced to expand the story world.

may be combined to share a world with other participants (Blázquez 2016): (1) Authors who share the world with other selected authors – a model that, sometimes, implies a more informal and looser control over the IP, for example in *Thieves' World* and *Cthulhu Mythos*; (2) IP-owners who share the world with authors, licensees and companies, working within (synergy) and without the company boundaries (the model used by media franchises such as *Marvel Universe* and *Star Wars*); and (3) world owners who also share the world with the audience (participatory worlds i.e. *Grantville Gazette* and *Runes of Gallidon*). Since shared story-worlds are fictional worlds shared by a number of authors, we consider participatory worlds a subset of them: “[m] any worlds are shared worlds, built from the work of multiple contributors; so such worlds can be said to be participatory at least in one sense” (Wolf 2013: 281).⁹

The way that audiences can expand the participatory worlds with their contributions differs from one project to another. The stories published in *Grantville Gazette* expand the *1632 Universe* since they are added to the story-world canon. “Publishable” contributions are limited to written texts that follow the rules of participation. Once a story is selected for publication, authors are required to accept a purchase agreement. They retain the copyright of their works while granting *Grantville Gazette* the exclusive world rights for five years following publication and subsequent nonexclusive world rights. Both the copyright protection and the rules of participation may work as a barrier to interconnecting stories and characters since most published contributions expand the *1632 Universe* by focusing on minor events. Participants should book one or more *Grantville* characters (those who were transported in time and space from the contemporary USA to the 17th-century Germany) from a list of available characters, called “the grid”, so they can use them on their stories (Flint 2014). “The grid” is a resource available for contributors, a spreadsheet that specifies the main details of every *Grantville*

⁹ Some shared worlds are interactive worlds. Likewise, some interactive worlds are shared worlds. A game, a typical example of interactivity, can present a world produced by a single “author” (e.g. the card game *Citadels* (2000) by Bruno Faidutti) but also can present a world shared among different “authors” (e.g. *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974)). In the first example, the IP owner did not share the world with other authors. In the second example, the current IP owner, Hasbro via Wizards of the Coast, has built a media franchise allowing selected authors to create more products rooted in the universe. Similarly, shared worlds may be or may not be interactive. For example, *Thieves' World* (1979) is based on a story-world shared by several authors but the audience are simple readers who cannot participate in how they experience the world. In contrast, *Silent Hill* (1997) has also been shared with other authors and audiences can have an interactive experience of the world when playing the video game. However, none of these examples are participatory worlds, which are both, shared worlds and interactive worlds.

citizen who was transported to the Old Europe.¹⁰ If a participant wants to use a character booked or created by another contributor, (s)he must request permission. Perhaps this system has promoted the creation of isolated stories rooted in the story-world. Although some main events depicted in the novels may be used as a broad narrative context, the stories published in the *Gazette* are generally loosely connected with each other, describing unrelated events ranging from love stories between Grantville citizens and locals to the introduction of contemporary technology into the 17th century culture. When stories are strongly intertwined, this is usually because the same participant is behind the contributions.

In contrast, *Runes of Gallidon* used a system which encouraged participants, called “artisans”, to fill gaps between different stories, depict characters, places and objects, and reuse other authors’ characters and objects to create new contributions. Contributions ranged from illustrations and comics to short stories and novellas and each of them acted as an extension of the fictional world. All approved contributions were posted on the official website, but before that the participants were contacted to request their acceptance of the “Artisan Agreement”. The “Artisan Agreement” was a publishing agreement where the author allowed the world owner to publish and profit from the author’s work, but also enabled other participants to reuse the ideas presented in the text.¹¹ This model revolved around the differentiation between works and ideas. According to the “Artisan Quick Guide”:

works are complete projects: images, stories, etc. Your accepted submission is a work. You own the work you create. Ideas are elements within a work: a place, character, creature, sword, magic ring, ship, etc. The *Runes of Gallidon* creative community shares ideas (Runes of Gallidon NDa: 2).

On the one hand, works were protected under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (CC BY-NC-SA), which allows everyone to copy, redistribute, remix, transform and build upon the material by using the same licence as the original, provided that the material is used for non-commercial purposes and the original author is given an appropriate attribution. On the other hand, the “Artisan Agreement” stated that ideas (fictional elements within the works) could be reused by other artisans, even for commercial purposes, to create new works (Runes of Gallidon NDb).

¹⁰ “The grid’ can be downloaded from this link: <http://1632.org/1632tech/grid.html> [accessed: 28.07.2019].

¹¹ The “Artisan Agreement” can be found here: <http://runesofgallidon.com/artisanagreement> [accessed: 20.01.2017].

Runes of Gallidon shared revenues with the contributors but also encouraged participants to seek alternative ways to profit from their works. By doing so, authors only needed to give a small percentage of the transaction to the project. Through this model, *Runes of Gallidon*'s world owner tried to encourage participants to create extensions more interconnected with each other since participants would not need to request permission to use ideas from other contributors. However, the outcome was quite different because most of the published contributions presented unrelated events. Both case studies suggest that the world expansion produced as a result of the audience's direct participation in the creation of stories tends to be formed by dispersed texts more than strongly connected storylines. Therefore, although participants are granted the opportunity to expand the world with their contributions, these extensions would probably open new narrative paths more than filling the gaps of previously published contributions.

Canon

The extensions produced by audience members in participatory worlds may become part of canon. By canon, it is understood the character features, settings and other world elements as well as the "body of work that establishes its own internal storylines and/or character history, [which are] deemed to be »official« by either the creator or publisher" (Chaney & Lieber 2007: 3). To be part of a canon, the world owner/creator should validate the content. This validation can be implicit (as part of the business logic or the rules of participation) or explicit (communications or direct mentions about it).¹² For example, Lucasfilm stated that all the content of the *Star Wars Expanded Universe* (which has been recently rebranded as *Star Wars Legends* and includes a wide range of assorted media), is not part of the *Star Wars* canon (StarWars.com 2014). The works that are official but are not part of a canon, such as those forming the *Star Wars Expanded Universe*, are considered non-canonical works. Although these works may be published under the same brand and legally share the same IP resources, generally it can be said that non-canonical but official works are part of an alternate universe, which differs from the official "path" chosen by the IP owner. For example, when asked about the *Star Wars Expanded Universe*, George Lucas stated in an interview:

¹² As it will be explained later, *Runes of Gallidon* used two categories to identify canonical and non-canonical content, called 'official' and the 'alternate history', respectively.

I don't read that stuff. I haven't read any of the novels. I don't know anything about that world. That's different than my world. But I do try to keep it consistent. The way I do it now is they have a *Star Wars Encyclopedia*. So if I come up with a name or something else, I look it up and see if it has already been used. When I said [other people] could make their own *Star Wars* stories, we decided that, like *Star Trek*, we would have two universes: My universe and then this other one. They try to make their universe as consistent with mine as possible, but obviously they get enthusiastic and want to go off in other directions (Starlog 2005: 48).

Sometimes, the IP-owner deliberately decides to use multiple universes, or multiverses, to develop "what if" stories. This has been explained by Jenkins in terms of continuity and multiplicity:

The media industry often talks about continuity in terms of canons – that is, information which has been authorized, accepted as part of the definitive version of a particular story [...]. Multiplicity, by contrast, encourages us to think about multiple versions – possible alternatives to the established canon (Jenkins 2010).

For instance, while most of the storylines published by Marvel Comics are located in a universe labelled as "Earth-616", there are other in-house publications which present alternative universes.

In addition to the official texts, we may also find unofficial texts based on a story-world. Unofficial texts are non-canonical works which have not been authorised by the world owner. In many cases, these texts are considered fan fiction works. Contributions submitted to participatory worlds differ from fan fiction since the latter is, by nature, non-canonical. Generally, fan fiction works are not-for-profit texts based on an existing IP and produced in the context of a fan community. Very rarely, fan fiction texts are authorised by the world owner who can even allow the monetisation of the work, such as the case of some *Star Trek* novels and short stories published commercially (Schwabach 2009) or the stories available through Kindle Worlds¹³. In these situations, the authorisation may place the text of fan fiction as part of the 'official' content (although they may not be authorised to use the brand name or the logo). Following this distinction, contributions submitted to

¹³ Some academics would probably argue that the contributions written for Kindle Worlds should not be perceived as fan fiction but as "user-generated content" (Jenkins 2007). Either participatory worlds and Kindle Worlds, the rules for participation and decision-making process rely on the producer/world owner. However, contributions submitted to Kindle Worlds and accepted for publication are not considered canonical.

participatory worlds should not be considered as an extension of fan-fiction activities, since they did not originate within the fandom¹⁴; participatory channels, rules of participation and decision-making process come from the world owner. From a broader perspective, participatory worlds give the opportunity to audience members to make their contributions canonical, which does not happen in the previous two examples, where fan fiction is non-canonical.

However, another interesting discussion may arise from cataloguing contributions to participatory worlds which are not accepted to be canonical. Are they fan fiction or official content placed in an alternate universe? There is no direct answer to this question. When contributions are submitted through the channels for participation, the official route to get audience members' submissions considered to be part of the world's canon, the classification may depend on the treatment that projects based on participatory worlds give to them. *Runes of Gallidon* had a channel for participation based on a web-form where participants included their contributions as attachments or links to the content (in the case of YouTube videos). All contributions were accepted to be published as long as they complied with the rules of participation. These rules involved requirements that the works submitted should be original and coherent with the story-world (no elves or orcs, for example, since it was a human-centric fictional world), and should avoid the use of copyrighted elements (such as characters from other worlds) or pornography in the texts (*Runes of Gallidon* 2009). Similarly, stories should not address important matters which affect the whole story-world (such as initiating a war or destroying a civilization). Submissions were reviewed by the producers and, if accepted, were posted on the official website and catalogued either as canonical or "alternate history". Canonical works were coherent with the story and events so far. When clashes were detected, authors were contacted to suggest some changes. When changes were not possible or authors were not willing to make any amendments to the contribution, the work was labelled as "alternate history". This label catalogued the work as part of an alternate universe. According to the website, the "alternate history" label was for:

Works that do not fit within the world of *Runes of Gallidon* (they conflict with established continuity, kill off major/popular characters, etc.) but are too good to ignore or pass up. These types of Works will fall into a category called,

¹⁴ In some cases, fandom may encourage the creation of the channels for participation. Eric Flint recognized that the main reason why he created *Grantville Gazette* was because of the large amount of fanfic he received (Flint 2004b).

»Alternate History«. This category is for Works that we want to share but which contain elements that do not or cannot integrate with the current ongoing stories of the world of Gallidon (Runes of Gallidon NDc).

This classification would be slightly more complex in *Grantville Gazette*. Similar to *Runes of Gallidon*, contributions submitted to *Grantville Gazette* have to comply with some rules in order to be considered for publication (Flint 2014). Participants should avoid high politics, the use of copyrighted elements in the story (unless the author is the IP-owner) and the use of other contributors' characters unless permission is given by them. Besides, new original *Grantville* citizens cannot be created. Participants must pick them up from "the grid". Another rule for participants is to be coherent with the story-world, its elements and the stories already published on it. For doing this, contributors can make use of the "story time-frames" spreadsheet, a document which keeps track of all the stories published to date and the diegetic period they cover.

As explained before, participants have to post their contributions on the forum so other community members may give feedback to their authors. Stories in their final form (after the feedback and modifications) remain on the forum where the *Grantville Gazette* editorial board can read them. The editor may decide to include some of them in a future issue of the e-zine and, therefore, would contact the author(s) to propose a purchase offer. All the published stories become canon. However, unpublished stories would remain on the forum where they may be picked-up in the future. This basically places the non-published works as prospective publications since the editorial board does not normally provide notification of rejections. Besides, this idea is reinforced since registration is needed to access the forum (the information is not publicly available). A submitted story may not be published today but it may be published in the future. However, if unpublished texts were available somewhere else than on the official websites (for non-commercial purposes), these texts may be considered fan fiction.

As the two case studies have shown, audience members' fictional contributions in participatory worlds are different from fan fiction. The consideration that non-published contributions obtain depends on each project. The channels for participation in both case studies use a submission-review-based model. The difference is that *Grantville Gazette* makes the review process more transparent to involve audience members, while in *Runes of Gallidon* this was made internally by the producers. In both cases, the producer has the authority to validate the contribution.

Conclusion

So far, the study of participatory worlds has been neglected in academic literature. While they can be seen as practices which combine the participatory tradition embedded in projects such as Wikipedia with the expansion of fictional worlds, the way participatory worlds operate is more complex than what this simple definition may suggest. Participatory worlds present a different approach to world expansion from other creative practices, with the use of audience members' contributions in the creation of canonical extensions, which involves the active collaboration between the producers and consumers of these worlds. This paper attempted to define participatory worlds by drawing a comparison with other relevant creative practices through the analysis of their three key aspects: audience participation, world expansion and canonical content.

Participatory worlds are interactive worlds, since they allow interaction with the world by using the channels for participation. These channels should be enduringly available to all audience members who wish to contribute. Participatory worlds are different from co-creation practices between producers and users such as some collaborative writing projects (the "networked book") and crowdsourced films. Two reasons were provided: the dubious role of contributors as audience members and the perception that participatory worlds are formed by multiple works produced by multiple authors based on the same story-world. This statement suggests that these collaborative projects are more related to the act of collaboration and/or world-building, rather than to world sharing. Therefore, participatory worlds have been defined as a subset of shared worlds. However, participatory worlds have also been distinguished from other practices of world sharing, such as media franchising. It was explained how audience members' contributions expanded the participatory worlds by using two case studies: *Grantville Gazette* and *Runes of Gallidon*. Additionally, it was acknowledged that fictional worlds can be expanded through official and unofficial texts. An important part of the unofficial texts is fan-fiction. Contributions submitted to participatory worlds differ from fan fiction in a number of ways, the most significant one being the canonical status of the works. Contributions submitted through channels for participation in participatory worlds may be part of a canon, while fan fiction is inherently non-canonical.

Although this paper approaches the definition of participatory worlds and presents a non-comprehensive comparison between them and other creative practices, more research would be needed in order to understand how they work as spaces to produce social value and fictional content, and to analyse the social interactions and complex negotiations which take place in them.

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Narrative Mechanics: World-building through Interaction

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Abstract

The narrative potential of video games extends beyond thematic retellings and branching paths of authored stories. Without a doubt, non-linear narrative structures find a comfortable position in games that is congruent with the very nature of the medium. The possibilities of multiple pre-constructed endings, however, are eclipsed by the less structured play that occurs on the periphery of plot points in the second to second interactions of the player - the procedural, experiential development of narrative through gameplay. The agencies of the player can be conceptualised as verbs of interaction; devices that enable players to engage beyond a world's pre-authored narrative to convey meaning through play itself. Ludonarrative consonance heightens mechanics as functional tools of navigating a text to devices equally as important as existing literary and visual narrative techniques. This paper explores a variety of video games and the intertwining of their ludic and narrative elements, culminating in a case study of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*; a game that can be seen to display traditional approaches to world building, reinforced by mechanics that reveal historic lore, religious practice and socio-political facets of the game's fictional world.

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Introduction

Video games, as an interactive medium, present a plethora of possibilities for storytelling that stand apart from other forms of narrative. In particular, world-building potentials extend beyond textual elements, and even environmental storytelling, to the design of game mechanics themselves. Player agency within a system presents the opportunity for narrative to be revealed through gameplay via the careful design of interactions. This paper explores a number of approaches to narrative in video games and considers some of the potential pitfalls of interactive storytelling as well as those aspects in which the medium flourishes. Against this backdrop, the discussion of how mechanics themselves can be imbued with narrative qualities emerges and is examined through a number of theoretical lenses and case study examples.

Within the frames of this paper, a broad definition of game mechanics may be necessary to contextualise discussion. A design oriented approach, such as that offered by Richard Rouse, may satisfy this requirement. Rouse defines mechanics as “what the players are able to do in the game-world, how they do it, and how that leads to a compelling game experience” (Rouse 2005: 310). There are, of course, a number of different ways that game mechanics can be conceptualised. In this instance, however, the intention is not to challenge definitions but to discuss mechanics in a broader sense of player agency and interaction within a virtual space. Similarly, the usage of world-building and storytelling are not poised to protest existing discourse but rather serve as a wider narrative context that mechanics can be applied to. The simplicity and inclusiveness of David Herman’s definition of storyworlds seems like an appropriate angle to frame this dialogue:

I use the term storyworld to refer to the world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative, whether that narrative takes the form of a printed text, film, graphic novel, sign language, everyday conversation, or even a tale that is projected but is never actualized as a concrete artefact (Herman 2009: 72).

In this sense, worlds are constructed through all aspects of a video game, including written dialogue, characters, level design, art assets, and, most importantly, game mechanics. Thus, interaction between a player and a game's world can be seen as a potential narrative device.

Interactivity

While game mechanics bear relevance towards world-building in all video games, reference to transmedial worlds becomes a resounding entry point as these worlds seek to expand their narrative by exploiting the possibilities unique to each outlet. Jenkins describes that “in the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best” (2006: 2) – each rendition of a storyworld expands its universe in different ways that exploit the affordances of each medium through which that world is approached. A book may easily provide a detailed account of historical events – who was involved and their motivations – while the advantage of film may be displaying the emotion on a face or the beauty of a vista with a level of immediacy unattainable through text. The synthesis of auditory and visual elements facilitates a space of possibility not necessarily better but inherently different than what may be found in a written text. This same notion can be considered true for video games. While audiovisual components play a vital role in this medium, it is interactivity (the shift from viewer to player) that most significantly defines the form. It is then the design of this interaction that surely shapes how narrative worlds are built and conveyed in a game, not simply the mere existence of interaction itself: after all, a feature-length script displayed as a scrolling text on the screen does not quite constitute the successful expansion of a novel into film.

Video games are unique among other mediums in that they are interactive – requiring the continued input of a player for their worlds to be actualised and experienced. The term ‘interactive’ can be precarious at best as it is used in a variety of contexts to an array of different ends. Manovich considers the ways in which all forms of media could be interactive in the sense that all readers, viewers or participants are experiencing their own, unique instance of any particular work: “All classical, and even more so modern art, was already »interactive« in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art and other representational shortcuts required the user to fill-in the missing information” (Manovich 2001: 71). While this approach also applies to games, it is useful to clarify more specifically the kind of interaction that occurs given the differences in expected agency between watching a film and playing a game. Zimmerman (2008)

conceptualises four approaches to interactivity to distinguish the potential differences in this interaction. All forms of media text can be considered cognitively interactive, meaning the interpretive interaction between a reader and a text that Manovich references. Video games, however, are unique in their explicit interactivity which requires “overt participation” with the “designed choices and procedures of the text” apart from the functional, utilitarian interactivity of pressing the play button on a video or turning the pages of a book (Zimmerman 2008). As a medium, it is this explicit interactivity that sets video games apart in a wider ecology of media, what Aarseth describes as the ergodic, non-trivial effort required to navigate a text (1997). It is then interactivity, the salient quality of video games, which becomes essential in the way worlds are built and narratives are conveyed within this medium.

Narrative context

Long standing criticism of the capacity of video games to tell stories has been directed towards the tensions between the explicit interaction and the intentions of an author. Authorial intent is sent spiralling into disarray when the potential for the player to circumnavigate the plot becomes a very real possibility that must be designed for. Ernest Adams once suggested that “interactivity is almost the opposite of narrative; narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power” (Adams 1999). While this conversation may in some ways have moved beyond these primordial concerns, it is essential to keep these sentiments in mind when discussing world-building in video games, as what Adams problematizes certainly frames a heritage of approach to narrative design.

A classical and often criticised route of narrative in video games (trans-medial or otherwise) has been the overlaying of existing narrative tropes and conventions from pre-existing mediums on top of systems that are agnostic to the significance of their context. *The Lion King* (Westwood Studios 1994) expands the world of the Disney film by challenging players to navigate through a series of platforming levels which are aesthetically derived from the source film. While this certainly presents a new way to experience the storyworld, it can easily be argued that the interactive potentials of the medium are not fully being exploited by this particular work. The game bears more resemblance to *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985) than the world from which it derives. In fact, anyone who has seen the film can attest that lions do not fare very well falling from great heights – an amusing irony in making the game a platformer. It may be unfair to judge a game two decades old as a convenient source of criticism towards narrative in video game de-

sign, but, nevertheless, *The Lion King* is one of many titles that demonstrate the ways in which texts can and have been aesthetically remediated while doing little to expand their narrative worlds through meaningful interaction.

In discussions regarding interaction and narrative, it is unsurprising that one of the first touchstones is the capacity to tell stories that are non-linear and able to be affected by the player. The agency afforded by interaction opens up the possibility for multiple discourses that may be experienced in different orders and often to the exclusion of other narrative arcs. A classic example of this approach can be seen in games such as *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2004) where the player's actions allow them to pursue either a good or evil path, affecting the outcome of various events in the story. The potentials provided by such a system present an abundance of storytelling and world-building possibilities as a single text can now present a number of perspectives, side quests and divergent paths that are largely inaccessible within other mediums. Interestingly, many of these possibilities are often reduced to a number of limited 'forks in the road', where a decision made feels more reminiscent of a pick-a-path adventure book than a rich narrative setting. An example of this can be seen in the *Mass Effect* series (Bioware 2007, Bioware 2010, Bioware 2012), sci-fi role-playing games in which players are able to make a vast amount of decisions that have implications later in the story. Notably, the series spans three games with continuity between the titles where actions in one game extend to consequences in its sequel. Despite the rich tapestry of potential arcs involving different characters and political decisions, the original ending of the trilogy distills the outcome of potentially hundreds of hours of game time down to three scripted endings – each a single cutscene with only slight variations between them. Due largely to a discontented fan base, these endings were later supplemented with downloadable content providing further exposition. Ultimately, the ending of *Mass Effect* is symptomatic of the difficulties that non-linear narratives of this kind face. There is a sense of impracticality surrounding the number of actions that can significantly affect the story as the number of authored outcomes can grow exponentially with each option given.

The authored narratives of games like *Mass Effect* are in many ways elaborate pick-a-path adventure stories. This is not to demean the potentials of interactive fiction or visual novels, but rather to point out that the supposed interactivity of video game narrative is not far removed from the ground that has already been well-tread long ago. It is ironic that the authored, textual narrative of video games, that which is told and most akin to literary forms, often occupies a comparatively short amount of time compared to the hours of gameplay that may lead to each plot point. For *Mass Effect*, one hundred hours of game time concludes with a four-minute cutscene. What may be most exciting, then, is not the forks themselves but the roads leading to them.

Narrative play

The remediation of literary worlds into film presents a host of structural as well as technical implications that affect the ways in which stories are told and universes unfolded. Cinematography, editing, lighting and composition are all cinematic devices that shape the worlds of the silver screen. In a similar sense, the interactive aspects of video games prompt a language of their own that can be understood and interpreted analogously to how a film theorist may discuss *mise-en-scène*. Jenkins's notion of the game design as a narrative architecture offers a useful perspective from which to consider narrative in video games beyond that of dialogue or text. Through environmental storytelling narrative can be suggested while evocative spaces exist in dialogue with prior experiences to shape new or existing storyworlds (Jenkins 2004). The idea of a player enacting a narrative puts more agency on a player in terms of interactivity but also heavily prioritises spatial navigation and the design of environments. With this sentiment in mind, it is worthwhile to consider not just how a player may navigate a space as a disembodied virtual camera but how the mechanics of explicit interaction that a system may offer can communicate narrative as intently as the aesthetic design of an environment itself.

Salen and Zimmerman emphasise that:

[...] recognizing games as narrative experience means considering them not just as bits of plot that are arranged and rearranged through interaction, but instead considering them as an ongoing activity in which a player engages with a core mechanic (Salen & Zimmerman 2004: 26; 13).

The associations between interactivity and narrative can be decoupled from decision trees and alternative endings, instead looking to the occurrences in-between, the moment to moment gameplay that shapes and defines the very experience of play. Instead of mapping plot points or even the distances between them, how the player navigates these spaces on a ludic, moment to moment basis can be deliberated. Game designer Jesse Schell defines the 'verbs' of game mechanics as operative actions that can be introduced and combined for new kinds of interaction and emergence in the possibilities of a game space (Schell 2008). Thinking about game mechanics in this way can be useful in that it prioritises gameplay as a narrative tool in ways more comparable to the use of literary devices in storytelling. A similar idea is expressed by indie game developer Anna Anthropy who uses actions as verbs to discuss games. Actions as mechanics can be described as "any rule that gives the player liberty to act within the rules of

the game” (Anthropy & Clarke 2014: 15). While this approach is useful in the ways challenge and progression within games can be designed, it also has immense value in a narrative context as different mechanics can be used to convey implicit aspects of a storyworld. Consider the implications of shooting as a mechanic – ‘to shoot’ may serve a very specific gameplay purpose (challenge or competition for example) but what does this action say about the wider narrative world? Perhaps it is a dangerous place? What events have led to this character being in these circumstances? Is the player avatar a hero or a villain? Certainly the way we understand an environment is affected by the player’s agency within it – the world looks completely different if our lens to view it is exclusively down the barrel of a gun and its feel depends, for instance, on how the mechanics of that gun are designed.

As previously discussed, the relationship between game mechanics and narrative can be contentious at times, and the association that the verbs of interaction have with the wider world of a game is fairly easy to criticise when the two motivations fail to align. Certainly, criticism can be directed towards the marrying of narrative and the chosen actions through which it is expressed: “it is clear that some fictional genres lend themselves to interactivity better than others. The key to success seems to be the appropriate pairing of story genre with play mechanic” (Pearce 2002: 22). This concern has previously been described as ludonarrative dissonance – where gameplay and narrative appear to work towards opposing ends (Hocking 2007). This term itself has been popularised (and often misconstrued) in discourse within the public sphere as well as games journalism and so it is used here simply to point to its inverse – ludonarrative cohesion, unity, and resonance: where mechanics are congruent with the narrative context presented or story being told. On its own, there may be a number of ambiguities surrounding what this actually means or how it is quantified, but in addition to the other perspectives presented ludonarrative cohesion provides a clean and concise means for considering spatial design, player agency, and game mechanics within a single umbrella. An example of this can be seen in the original *Silent Hill* (Konami 1999), an early entry into 3D horror games that is symptomatic of the camera and control schemes of the time. By today’s standards, its tank-style controls are unwieldy with a difficulty in aiming and moving only exacerbated by an inconsistent perspective and tilted camera angles remediated from horror cinema. Whether intentional in design or not, these elements that would typically make for a poor user experience effectively empower the narrative of the game. The protagonist of *Silent Hill* is a typical average Joe with no military training, confronted by undead horrors in what appears to be a ghost town. The obnoxious controls make aiming difficult, each confron-

tation a moment of panic made worse by the scarcity of ammo players are faced with. Shooting as a mechanic may have very different implications in other games, such as multiplayer first-person-shooters, where gameplay is more about action and heroism. The design of this control scheme in *Silent Hill*'s instance disempowers the player and is thematically cohesive with the dark and foreboding atmosphere of the game. In this case, 'to shoot' is contextualised within the wider narrative of the world and resonates with the player character and their circumstances.

An example of a different kind of ludonarrative cohesion can be found in the adventure platform game, *Ico* (Team Ico 2001). A core mechanic of the game is that the player character (a small boy) must lead a princess named Yorda by the hand through a winding, multi-layered castle that they are attempting to escape. The game could have taken a number of approaches with this mechanic; Yorda could follow the player automatically (as non-player character companions often do in video games), the player could have been given control of both characters and even the act of holding hands itself could have been done based on proximity or through a toggle. The implementation of 'to hold', however, is established by the player having to physically compress a button on the controller to maintain a grip. This seemingly minor point underpins the action depicted on screen as the player must quite literally 'hold on' and letting go of the button will make the characters let go of one another. The player's input is cohesive with the ludic elements of the game, which champions the notion that mechanics themselves offer the potential to situate a player in a world, rather than simply allowing them to move through it.

Ico establishes cohesion between player input and the design of mechanics, while *Silent Hill*'s control scheme emphasises the disempowerment of the player to situate gameplay in the horror genre. Both of these examples demonstrate the ability of game mechanics to communicate aspects of narrative, both explicit and implied, through play. The question is then raised: if mechanics and actions are able to offer narrative cues or situate the player, then how could this notion be extended towards larger scale world-building? Given the ludic nature of gameplay, it is perhaps easier to communicate something broad or tangential about a world through interaction than it is to convey an intricate or motivated plot point through the same means. If the player's potential interactions within a space are to move, shoot and pick up ammo, a plethora of information is immediately communicated about this world without the need for explicit discourse. In this sense mechanics become world-building tools that could be seen to be as valuable as more traditional approaches of dialogue, text, spatial design and environmental storytelling.

Case study: *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind (Bethesda Game Studios 2002) is a game in the *Elder Scrolls* series, the third of (currently) five high fantasy, open world, role-playing games. The series has a strong emphasis on world-building. While all of the games contain main quests that could be said to resemble a more traditional, linear form of storytelling, it is entirely possible to neglect these parts of the game in favour of exploration, joining various factions, and completing an excess of side quests and plotlines that have the potential of engaging players for hours. One strength of this type of game design is that even if the player circumnavigates all of the written dialogue and textual elements, the gameplay itself contributes significantly to the overall verisimilitude of the world, making the series an ideal candidate for discussing narrative through mechanics. Selecting one of the older games in the series for analysis may appear odd, but this is entirely intentional as *Morrowind* holds certain gems within its world-building and narrative design that stand out among the other titles. This notion is exemplified further when juxtaposing the game against the newer releases in which the same mechanics have evolved as time has progressed.

Morrowind is set on the island of Vvardenfell, a swampy, wild and dangerous province inhabited by disparate peoples with as equally varying intentions. Complex aspects of Vvardenfell's society, such as religious beliefs, slave culture, social and political standings, can be seen to be communicated through a variety of game mechanics. Particularly, the ability to read books in the game, the design of playable races, and the implementation of a fast travel system are examples of interactivity being used to reinforce the existing narrative context and further build the world.

Books and religion

The Elder Scrolls seek to establish a sense of place and history. Hundreds of books can be picked up, from scientific journals and historical accounts to personal diaries. Some books serve as means to increase the player's proficiency in certain skills: reading *The Art of War Magic*, for example, will provide an increase to the player's destruction magic attribute. While books serve this particular ludic purpose of increasing the player's statistics, what is perhaps more intriguing is that each of these books can also be explored as a readable text. Spread across multiple pages, players can read stories of the world with cross-references between characters and places that exist in other games in the series as well as those that are yet to be developed – the stories and mythos of Tamriel (the setting of the series) are not signposted or placed conveniently;

rather they are buried in damp caves, ancient ruins, and trade markets to be uncovered through play. The ludic consequences further extend as the textual elements of these books also implicitly serve gameplay. For example, alchemy books contain information about how to craft certain potions while notes left by characters may indicate directions to hidden treasure caches – instances of building the world while encouraging the player to perform and interact with these texts so that they become less about exposition and more sources of meaningful information that can drive gameplay.

A particularly notable example of textual information serving gameplay exists within an in-game book titled *The Pilgrim's Path* – a religious text detailing a pilgrimage to several holy sites. Most memorably, the player can follow this path and re-enact the pilgrimage detailed in the text. The player may find or steal this book and explore these religious sites themselves but the journey becomes necessary if they wish to join The Tribunal Temple, the religion of the native Dunmer. As opposed to simply joining this faction through a sequence of dialogue, what better way to express the ideals of this belief system than have the player perform this pilgrimage themselves. YouTube video game critic MrBtongue exemplifies this further by describing how upon performing this pilgrimage, he removes all of his armour and combat equipment, not because it is required, but because “the Tribunal faith has an ascetic quality” and it feels as though “this is what a religious pilgrim would actually do” (MrBtongue 2012: 6:50-7:05). Ludonarrative cohesion between this world and the player's actions within it facilitate what Pearce describes as an “ideal case” where “the play mechanic is synonymous with the narrative structure; the two cannot be separated because each is really a product of the other” (Pearce 2002: 22). The Dunmer religion certainly exists in this world as a static narrative backdrop but it is through the interaction of the player that it is made meaningful and becomes actualised through play.

Subjugation and slavery

The Dunmer are a fantasy race in *The Elder Scrolls* that are akin to dark elves, they are intelligent, unsympathetic, withdrawn and are xenophobic of other races. Slavery is both commonly accepted as well as legal in *Morrowind* with slaves found in private residences as well across a number of wealthy Dunmer plantations throughout the land. Most of the slaves are Argonian and Khajiit; lizard and cat-like beast races that are outsiders to Vvardenfell and in turn subjugated by the Dunmer. This narrative context enriches the world of the game by introducing a deeper socio-economic layer to the setting. This cultural context is conveyed in most of the expected ways: dialogues with non-player

characters reveal prejudices, in-game books describe histories of peoples and their beliefs, players can encounter (and even choose to free) slaves from their shackles, visit slave camps, and even partake in quests focused on slavery. The world is built in such a way that the narrative context informs and inspires the content of the game itself so that even the most unobservant player will begin to understand the world without explicit exposition. This being said, all of these ways in which *Morrowind* incorporates slavery into its world are fairly conventional – including histories and quest lines is the bread and butter of any fantasy role-playing game. Where *Morrowind* truly exemplifies world-building through mechanics, is in the intersection of lore and ludic elements.

If the player chooses to play as one of the subjugated beast races they will find that they are unable to equip certain pieces of armour on their character. In particular, both Khajiit and Argonians are unable to wear boots or equip the majority of helmets in the game; the armour available for purchase in Vvardenfell is not made to accommodate their large digitigrade feet and extended snouts. Consequently, the equipment options are more limited for these characters, which results in a lower armour rating when fully equipped. This is significant because it is an example of what could have been a purely aesthetic or thematic element extending to the core mechanics of the game: the player's statistics and combat capabilities become intertwined with the social construction of the world and the race they choose to role-play as. Interestingly, the proceeding titles in the series, *Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) and *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), remove these differences between races. One could speculate Bethesda's reasoning (game balance, production costs) but ultimately the juxtaposition between the systems serves to only further emphasise the value of mechanical narrative of this kind: textual cues and environmental design are underpinned by the fact that the player is not simply visiting the world, but inhabiting it, subject to and subjugated by its rules, cultures, and customs.

Fast travel and public transportation

The Elder Scrolls series prides itself on offering immense environments to be explored that are vast as well as continuous – a player can walk freely from one location to another as opposed to other games that may feature only key areas as playable regions. Interior sections such as caves and buildings are loaded as separate maps but are linked with a sense of scale that implies a Euclidean design in the connectedness of the world. Exterior sections are explicitly joined and the space is perceivably unbroken, allowing players to traverse the world unrestricted. This approach enables numerous

world-building opportunities by filling the landscape with characters, abandoned dwellings, hidden caves, treasures, religious shrines, and geographical points of intrigue.

Through an open world design a narrative tension is introduced in that certain quests may ask the player to travel to a distant location to retrieve an artefact or speak to another character. This makes sense in terms of an expansive, fleshed out world, where it may take days of travel to reach a destination. However, this also introduces a difficulty in sustaining quest lines as walking large distances becomes tedious after a particular route has already been discovered and well-travelled. Maintaining a sense of narrative flow may also become problematic as the time between plot points in a quest can become more drawn out than perhaps some storylines warrant. For a film, periods of insignificance can be passed over, a luxury not always afforded by games (Juul 2001: par. 34). *Skyrim* (and many other games) mitigates these potential concerns by presenting players with a map screen that allows them to fast travel instantaneously to any previously visited location. *Morrowind* is interesting in that while it too includes a method of fast travel, the form that it takes arguably, exhibits more ludonarrative cohesion and in turn contributes to a deeper construction of the world. In *Morrowind*, the player is required to take various forms of transport to reach desired locations. Stilt striders (gigantic armoured arthropods), can be boarded to travel between cities, while boats service Vvardenfell's coastal settlements. Both of these forms of transport require conversation with a caravaner who will charge a small fee that can be bartered in order to utilise their services (intimidation is also an option). While this system is by no means a fully fleshed out set of mechanics (you cannot buy or steal a boat or stilt strider for example), it services the ludic need for fast travel while weaving this mechanic into the narrative context of the world. Perhaps most interestingly, using these transportation networks behaves similarly to *Skyrim*'s fast travel in that after boarding the vessel the game simply loads the player to their destination. This is significant because the mechanical function of teleporting the player could be seen as being identical between the two games – the difference being that *Morrowind* grounds the system within its world.

Beyond narrative justification, transportation systems in *Morrowind* can be seen to reveal socio-political information within its setting. Expectedly, only coastal regions offer boat services but the nuance of other methods says a lot about the society in *Morrowind*. Vvardenfell is a melting pot of different cultures and as the homeland of the Dunmer Imperial (a foreign, pseudo western-European faction) settlements, law, and influence exist in pockets throughout the island. Cities influenced by Imperial laws contain services such as mage guilds where guild guides offer exclusive magical transportation services unavailable to ordinary citizens. Inversely, locations that are

more xenophobic toward outsiders, such as the lands of House Telvanni, are inaccessible by guild guides. By considering the connectedness of different methods of transport, players are given insight into social and political leanings within the game: stilt striders are reserved for Dunmer cities on the western side of the island, coastal towns have boat access, and those regions more hospitable to outsiders tend to offer magical transportation. All of these factors are scaled by the size and importance of locations with small towns often being accessible only by foot, while large cities may offer a variety of options. This can be extended to include a hidden network of teleporters within ancient Dunmer strongholds. The transportation options in *Morrowind* begin to look like an intricate urban transport map as opposed to the typical high fantasy world that might ordinarily be expected. While *Skyrim* addresses some of these same observations through options to travel between cities by carriage, the emphasis of this example is not for the sake of holding one title over the other, but rather to illustrate how an example of a seemingly minor mechanic, such as fast travel, offers a range of world-building potentials dependent on its implementation.

Conclusion

A well-constructed storyworld promotes “inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse” (Herman 2009: 73). It is in this sense that while interaction within video games may be explicit, the narrative invoked is often implied. *Morrowind* demonstrates this by conveying complex aspects of the world such as religion, oppression, and socio-political contexts through its game mechanics. While these are not the only means by which the world is built, they are aspects worthy of discussion as it is the interactive elements of video games that open narrative potentials apart from other mediums. Thus, the agency of a player and the actions made available to them become vital devices in a narrative toolkit when exploring storytelling and world-building within any explicitly interactive setting. Ludonarrative cohesion underpins this sentiment while signalling the importance of looking beyond interactive narrative as a series of branching paths and seeing it rather as a complex system of actions. Careful design of these interactions is essential; it is not so much what the player can do but how they do it. The arguments and examples presented here are by no means exhaustive, and this discourse would undoubtedly benefit from further investigation into the relationship between narrative and mechanics across future case studies. What is ultimately intended to be suggested is that interaction needs to be understood

as something nuanced, iterated, and meaningful – a space of possibility. To once again echo Jenkins (2006), in order for the medium to do “what it does best”, it must actually be designed to do so. Simply telling a story in a video game does not inherently entitle that narrative to reap the benefits of interactivity. The design of a button press, a control scheme, an aiming mechanic, a movement or equipment system can be elevated alongside familiar cinematic and literary devices of storytelling, through which interactive worlds can embody the nature of their medium to an absolute extent.

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Evaluating the Coherence of a Cinematic Universe as a Prerequisite for Worldmaking in Digital Cinema

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Abstract

The concept of worldmaking in cinema is closely connected with the use of special effects, especially computer-generated imagery (CGI). Digital technology has dramatically increased the level of detail and complexity of synthetic movie worlds, with a dual outcome: on one hand, it is much easier now to sever the connection with a pro-filmic reality, allowing room for synthetic worlds to arise as potentially autonomous; and on the other, viewer experience of cinema needs to accommodate this new technological reality. Following these observations, the present paper is a contribution to worldmaking theory with special focus on cinema; it assigns primary importance to coherence, understood here as the threshold level of unity among the composed elements in a movie, which essentially renders the worldmaking credible and, therefore, successful. Coherence is discussed as a desired feature of the cinematic universe, a generic concept that applies to any given movie and is comprised of the cinematic story and the cinematic world, both of which need to be made with acceptable coherence for the sake of proper worldmaking. The paper first establishes the nature and significance of these three concepts in relation to proper coherence, and the challenges posed to them by

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CGI. Then, it draws a distinction between local and universal coherence in worldmaking: the former refers to the viewers' experience of worldmaking as a cognitive process which works in real time during movie watching, whereas the latter refers to worldmaking as a literary or creative term, i.e. the expansion of single movies into much wider franchises. Therefore, the paper aims at enhancing worldmaking theory by clarifying the different contexts of coherence, i.e. viewer experience and artistic creation; and by doing so, the purpose is to provide the approach with a kind of interdisciplinary impact that can further support its applicability.

Keywords

worldmaking, coherence, cinematic universe, cognition, franchise, CGI

Introduction

The concept of worldmaking over the past few years has become a focal point of interest for cinema theory. The obvious reason for this has been the significantly enhanced world-building capacities of contemporary moviemaking, increased and facilitated tremendously with the use of computer generated imagery (CGI). The incomparable easiness, in both technical and financial terms, of creating more expanded and detailed cinematic worlds has liberated the creative impetus of production design, inevitably leading to an increase in the quantity of movies that are set in environments that clearly depart from real-world backgrounds, such as e.g. science fiction and fantasy. One of the main characteristics of these technically new cinematic worlds is their complexity and detail potentials, which can endow them with a level of internal coherence that solidifies their credibility as fictional worlds. The immediate side effect of this has been the even more ardent return of issues related to the ontology of cinematic or generally fictional worlds, their juxtaposition with pro-filmic reality, and the position of spectators relative to those worlds, especially when the latter become more immersive as in e.g. 3D renderings, etc. Therefore, as a consequence of this apparent acceleration of the use of high technology in moviemaking, cinematic worldmaking transgresses the confines of the medium and calls for a theoretical framework that will allow it to be situated opposite reality itself.

Taking these reflections into consideration, the present paper aims to approach worldmaking in cinema through an assessment of the notion of coherence. In agreement with older established approaches such as the one by V. F. Perkins (1972), the argument here assumes that coherence is a necessary quality for cinematic worlds to become credible for audiences. Furthermore, an effort to establish coherence obviously entails constant complementing, with the use of details and features that will keep bringing the fictional world as close to a sense of completion as possible, as far as spectators are concerned. The discussion unfolds in three parts: the first part defines the na-

ture and constituents of cinematic worldmaking by deploying the concept of a unified Cinematic Universe, comprising the Cinematic Story and the Cinematic World. The second part explores the notion and importance of coherence in relation to the Cinematic Universe and its two constituents. Finally, the third part delineates and explains the two distinct ways in which coherence as a world-building process, both in a movie and its by-products, should be understood. More specifically, the argument establishes a differentiation between cognitive processes, specifically the comprehension mechanisms employed in real time while watching a movie, and creative processes, which are related to the industry and the means that it uses to build and expand a Cinematic Universe for public consumption. This differentiation is meant to contribute to a resolution of issues related to world-building practices, while at the same time providing a cognitive parameter which aims at expanding the applicability of the model.

This paper is based on a number of presuppositions. The first and perhaps most important of these is that cinema has always been by default a high-tech medium; as such, despite the various experimentations and changes, it would be naïve to claim that it is the sudden and unprecedented high-tech turn inaugurated with digital cinema that creates more elaborate world-making. Lucia Santaella Braga's model for discussing the evolution of image production, for instance, which distinguishes between the prephotographic, the photographic and the postphotographic¹, is explicitly based on "the manner in which images are materially produced, and which instruments, techniques, means, and media are utilized in image production" (1997: 121-122). Braga's comprehensive model is based on the technological aspect of imaging media for an obvious reason, which is well exemplified by cinema: the shift from puppetry, cardboard, and animatronics to CGI, far from being a transformation of cinema, is perfectly aligned with the default, technically creative nature of the medium. Therefore, it is not only unnecessary, but also probably mistaken to approach a theoretical question on the nature of cinematic worldmaking under the assumption that contemporary cinema is differentiated from cinema of older times; to consider it as naturally evolved instead of different is much more appropriate and accurate, sparing any implications that would separate the two. The second presupposition is related to this potential search for an appropriate theory. Specifically, if one is looking for such a theoretical framework that unifies the past and present of the

¹ In Braga's model, the prephotographic refers to representations of the mental or the real world in handmade creations, connecting "nature and the subject's imagination" as Braga aptly puts it (1997: 128); the photographic refers to capturing images of actual objects from reality with some kind of recording apparatus; and the postphotographic refers to synthetic images of objects, created entirely with digital technology (1997: 121).

medium, resorting to the physical mechanics of vision should be a priority; no matter what expressive and thus also creative outlets are used in any kind of movie, vision still is the main point of reference for the entire experience of cinema as a whole. Third, CGI worldmaking has gone so far already, that, if done right, can in fact be more visually impressive and elaborate than the real world as far as those few hours that the movie lasts are concerned. As such, synthetic worlds in cinema should be seen a lot more as a wider experience rather than simple entertainment, let alone an ordinary visual encounter.

Finally, a significant issue in worldmaking is where exactly the fictional world stands in relation to the real world, an issue further accentuated in postphotographic imaging, which, as Braga defines it, is a key aspect of contemporary digital cinematic production. Answers to this question may vary, as categorizations of fictional worlds also vary across theories. James Walters, for instance, discusses movies where characters interact within the same narrative with more than one separate worlds which are in some way contrasted to one another, and provides a useful terminology: he distinguishes among Imagined, Potential and Other cinematic worlds, depending on the ontological relation of each type to the world that the characters understand as real and their position within it (2008: 10-11). Expanding this terminology outside the narrative of a movie, i.e. to the relation between fantasy cinematic worlds and the reality of spectators, the fictional worlds in the present discussion would be probably closer to Other worlds, which, for Walters, present “an ontological zone discontinuous to the real world that is left behind” (2008: 157). The difference is that Walters seems to stress a travelling of characters from their own real world to an entirely different one, whereas in fictional worlds, as they are understood here, this procedure is hardly a prerequisite, as the focus definitely includes cinematic worlds that function independently of our reality or, for that matter, of a fictional reality that represents our own. Still, the common denominator in all such cases of worldmaking, and especially in the variation used here, is the tendency to define the fictional world as partly established on knowledge from the real world. Kendal Walton with his Reality Principle, as well as Marie Laure-Ryan building on David Lewis’ principle of Minimal Departure, demonstrate this kind of knowledge as the binding agent that receivers, in this case spectators, resort to when they encounter gaps in a fictional text that they have to somehow comprehend; and that the source of this knowledge is real life, which includes one’s training, so to speak, in worldmaking practices through a previous exposure to other fictional worlds through the arts. All these pre-suppositions are issues that reverberate through the present study.

The Cinematic Universe

Understanding world-building in cinema essentially means conceiving it through the notion of the Cinematic Universe (CU), which is the sum of its two constituents, the Cinematic Story (CS) and the Cinematic World (CW)². Broadly speaking, the CS refers to the non-tangible, one may say, aspect of the fictional world, i.e. all actions, events, concepts, etc., whereas the CW refers to the more tangible aspect, i.e. anything that relates to the way the fictional place and its constituents are visualised. The purpose underlying this model aims at supporting individual movies as well as franchises, series, sequels, etc.; i.e., not only the world-building processes within movies themselves, but also the wider world-building that is, or may be, potentially created around them.

More specifically, the CS is a concept that encompasses those sets of elements inside a CU that form the matrix of things not seen, in the strict sense of the word, but play an important role in the credibility of the worldmaking as a whole. The list includes any kind of element related to events and their implicit background. An important element that is included in the CS is that of narrative events: all actions and their equivalent reactions, as well as events that take place within the storyline and the ways or reasons that connect those events to others, establish patterns that should be normally recognizable by spectators, regardless of their degree of resemblance to possible real-world equivalents. It should be stressed here that narrative events are not the only ones included in the CS; the term “story” would tempt one to think so, but its meaning here is obviously much more encompassing. The purpose is to comprehend that events in the fictional world, as in the real world in fact, are manifestations of underlying social and personal dynamics, which also must be taken into consideration in worldmaking. Consequently, implicit yet integral aspects of events are all elements that are associated with characters and how the latter are constructed: their general or specific traits, their variations in behavioural patterns, the relationships among them, etc. The CS also includes other elements of this sort, such as e.g. general beliefs or customary behaviour, established, common or scientific knowledge, background information, histories, etc. All these elements form a network that, if made strong, coherent and credible enough, can hold together an aspect of the fictional world that in the real world would approximate a society or culture. The fact that the latter concepts have significant impact in the real world makes it both reasonable and logical to expect a level of complexity in its fictional counterparts that will be relatively convincing.

² For reasons of convenience, acronyms will be used for these three terms throughout the paper.

The other constituent of the CU, the CW, comprises the physical world of the movie. Simply put, it is the more visual or haptic elements of the CU, or the place in which storylines happen, with all its encompassing elements. The most immediate concept that comes to mind is that of setting or physical background. This is possibly the part which has received the most attention from production design teams, as it lies at the heart of the cinematic medium, i.e. the use of visually appealing imagery. Of course, it extends beyond the notion of setting to include all objects, clothing, natural elements, flora and fauna, technology and its related equipment etc., as well as all other paraphernalia that may or may not exist in real life, but have a specific usage and reason for existing inside the operational rules of the fictional world. This visual part of the CU normally needs to be made with an aesthetic as well as functional uniformity that not only does not disrupt but actually enhances the perceived coherence of the fictional world. The spectator will not immediately relate to a made-up object, for instance, because it has no equivalent in real life; therefore, its existence inside the fictional world has to serve a convincingly specific purpose which will enable it to align with what would be normal to see inside that CU. Finally, as in the CS, the elements of the CW also require a threshold level of convincing complexity so that the fictional world of the movie appears as functionally complete as possible.

Successful world-building is a concept that normally expands far wider than a specific storyline, which means that the CU as a concept is also much wider than whatever can be included in the runtime of a certain movie. This means that one should understand both the CS and the CW as including and encompassing sets of elements that are much more than what gets any screen time for whatever production-related reason. In fact, in successful world-building, all but a handful of their elements are assumed or implied; it is impossible as much as it is unnecessary to screen either the CS or the CW in its entirety. The screened part of a movie, i.e. what the spectators get to see on screen, is one of the potentially infinite yet narrow areas where the CS and the CW intersect, contributing parts of their presumed sets of elements for realising the specific storyline that spectators see on screen. In other words, in successful worldmaking the CU, like the real world, may contain an infinite number of events, stories and their intersections, as well as locations, characters and objects, and the movie that audiences actually get to watch contains only a fragment of those. In this sense, successful worldmaking both invites and enables spectators to be able to imagine the storyline taking place within a much wider CU, which they do not see and have no experience of:

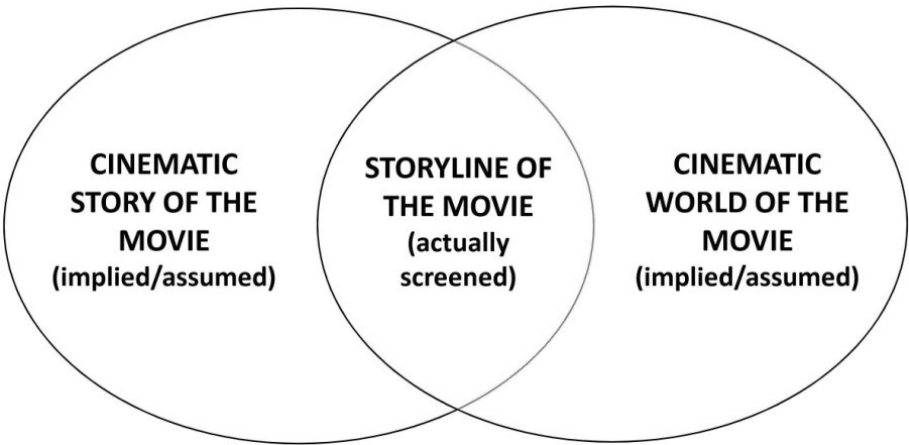


Figure 1:
The CU of a specific movie

This conceptualization of the CU, as seen in Fig. 1, not only explains the storyline of a specific movie within its wider CU, but also conveniently explains its position within its franchise, in cases where there is one. The expansion of a specific movie into a franchise is fuelled by elements that are related to that movie, drawn from its wider CU:

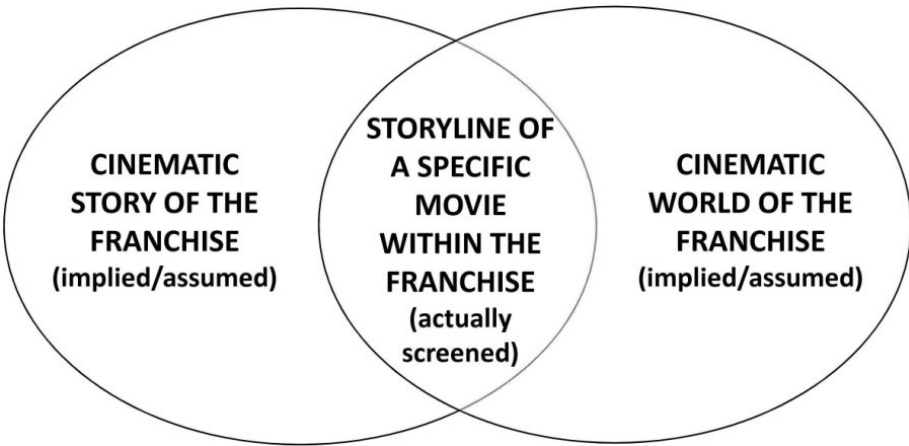


Figure 2:
The CU of a movie within a franchise

In Fig. 2, the same concepts from Fig. 1 work just as well for movies that belong to franchises. When expanded to the level of entire franchises, the specific movie that the spectators see on screen is an overlapping of those parts of the CS and the CW that coexist in the narrative that takes up

screening time, and are still connected to other parts of the franchise that may appear in other movies or products like e.g. games, books, etc. All other elements of the CU that do not appear in any part of the franchise remain contextually implied parts of the wider worldmaking of the movie.

Taken one step further, these traits of the CS and the CW not only delineate but also necessitate the adequacy of coherence among them, accentuating its importance for a successful world-building practice. During the creative process of a fictional CU, especially one that companies intend to market further using a franchise, coherence among elements should normally ensure that the existence of everything included within the imaginary worldmaking of the movie is justified and matched or at least that those elements are compatible with one another. When the complexity of such a CU is gradually realized in the fragmented product lines that comprise a franchise, there is an increased need for keeping track of significantly more details that have to remain coherently connected. With companies normally creating franchises to capitalize on projects they trust in terms of expected revenue, coherent CUs are essential for building the loyal fan base necessary for fuelling financially those projects. In both cases, i.e. individual movies and franchises, the challenge is that this compatibility among elements needs to be self-explicable on the basis of the rules and norms that are considered normal or expected within that specific worldmaking. Coherence is thus probably one of the most important features in ensuring the level of truthfulness of the world of a movie, and consequently a critical parameter that may affect the overall impact that the movie will have on audiences, and thus its box-office value.

Coherence and credibility

The main purpose and value of coherence is the fact that it will provide the credibility of CUs that will eventually meet with the approval of spectators. When V. F. Perkins discussed the notion of coherence in moviemaking, he understood it as a “prerequisite of contained significance” (1972: 117), i.e. of the desired quality in a movie that should emanate from the complex coordination of the qualities that are intrinsic to the cinematic medium. In fact, for Perkins this concept of significance lies somewhere between understanding the fact that each constituent element in a movie has its own given and pre-existing meaning, and the dynamics that arise from their correlation in the way that the moviemaker handles and fuses them together. Correlating these pre-existing meanings is based on the fact that “a movie draws non-stop on the values and knowledge which we bring to it” (1972: 117). The

appreciation of a movie is thus established on such correlations of elements, which constantly strive towards maintaining a balance between credibility and significance:

The movie is committed to finding a balance between equally insistent pulls, one towards credibility, the other towards shape and significance. And it is threatened by collapse on both sides. It may shatter illusion in straining after expression. It may subside into meaningless reproduction presenting a world which is credible but without significance (1972: 120).

For Perkins, despite the fact that the experience of the real world provides spectators with the toolbox to comprehend the cinematic one, the relationship between the two is not one of faithful correspondence, and credibility should not be confused with authenticity. The latter is effectively negated as a concept once spectators respond positively to the made-up world of a movie, as credibility within the world-building of a movie means faithfulness to the laws that govern that made-up world (1972: 121-122). Specifically with regard to fantasy cinematic narratives, Walters stresses the significance of Perkins' argumentation, asserting that making creatively bold decisions in the construction of a fantasy world should never be at the expense of the internal consistency of that world, as such steps could throw it off balance and compromise the illusion of credibility (Walters 2011: 117).

It is obvious that fantasy CUs are significantly more fragile in this respect, and that acquiring and, even more so, maintaining the approval of spectators is a much more delicate issue in this kind of world-building. In movies, either older or contemporary ones, that rely on shooting on location or at least use settings based on real-life locations, spectators are able to acknowledge what they see based on their own familiar past experiences from real life, such as screened settings, props, and event actions and behaviours. Also, in the past, movie production containing fantasy elements was nowhere near as ample as it is today. Contemporary moviemaking on the other hand demonstrates a rapidly increasing usage of digital graphics used for rendering elements not existent in the real world. The constant introduction of visual or functional novelties puts stress on the balance between the CS and the CW, as normally the former is still modelled more faithfully on real life patterns whereas the latter keeps getting more extravagant, causing such movies to manifest a varied degree of distance from the real world. Spectators will recognize familiar patterns in the CS such as events and their connections, intentions, behaviours, etc., but not as many elements in the CW, such as settings, characters, props, etc. Many of the latter are entirely artificial, i.e. most probably digital and not drawn from pro-filmic reality. It seems therefore that the in-

creased use of CGI and the complexity of franchising makes contemporary moviemaking in general far more vulnerable to problems of coherence and thus also of credibility compared to the past. Nevertheless, this lack of balance between the CS and the CW which makes credibility more fragile also has the interesting side effect of revealing an insistence on the preservation of elements from the CS specifically. This effectively shows that it is mostly the CS that underpins the coherence on which worldmaking is established.

It becomes obvious that, in building a theoretical model of cinema comprehension based on cognitive grounds, coherence and credibility are established on the preservation and reinforcement of the rules that govern the CS in a movie or franchise. Before anything else, such a model requires a recognition that spectators primarily encounter visual stimuli, the meaning and function of which they are called to handle during the process of movie watching. The elementary tool that spectators use in that process is the knowledge that they come pre-equipped with when they enter the movie theatre, which comes from real life as well as from exposure to similar genre or type of movie narrative. This latter kind of experience is effectively an unconscious training into a set of features that, in time, acquire an expected functional normality within a certain kind of CU. The spectator's anticipation for such a threshold level of normality is what makes this negotiation of visual meanings a constant effort to accept the CU as a coherent, credible realm.

Especially in digital cinema this threshold normality is at stake, exactly because coherence itself is permanently at stake as well. The visual novelties in the CW of such movies clash with the functional familiarities in their CS. Elements in the CS will normally draw on the matrix of real life functions, whereas the creative tendencies in the CW would do the exact opposite, thus calling for much more elaborate cognitive operations on behalf of spectators. Nevertheless, this unbalance between CS and CW elevates the role that the former plays in these cognitive operations: it seems that this familiar matrix of the CS provides the elements that actually compensate for the unfamiliar ones in the CW. This essentially means that the CS will create a framework of familiar patterns on which any unfamiliar elements of the CW will be situated. In a way, this process is similar to what Ryan has called the "Swiss cheese ontology"; the rationalities of a text are its solid parts, containing the hollow or irrational ones, thus allowing the receiver to hold on to something rational in order to make inferences while trying to comprehend the fictional world (2013: 145-146). Similar rationalities will endow coherence in a CGI movie, provided by the CS which will support like a kind of invisible functional infrastructure the extravagant, visual surface form of the CW.

Under this scope, coherence is an overall sense of a movie rather than a set of pre-defined checklist of rules. It is essentially secured by the specta-

tors grasping and holding onto things they can recognize immediately and effortlessly, so that they can handle the things that they might have trouble with, in this case the CS and the CW respectively. As spectators are obviously guided through the rules of a synthetic universe on screen much more slowly compared to watching movies that represent aspects of their normal, familiar reality, the same reliance on recognizable patterns of events or behaviours from real life even in digital CUs becomes more mandatory for the cinematic experience, and at the same time more precarious. This essential process is described by Kendal Walton's Reality Principle, which states that the resources used in processing information are the same in fiction as in the real world, since we utilise "whatever knowledge of human nature we may think we possess, and any relevant life experiences we have had", thus assuming a kind of internal consistency in the fictional world which resembles the one in the real world (2008: 34). Similar to Walton's position, Ryan's comment on the way spectators understand worldmaking with the use of their previously acquired knowledge and experience also entails such an effort towards coherence:

[W]e reconstrue the world of a fiction and of a counterfactual as being the closest possible to the reality we know. This means that we will project upon the world of the statement everything we know about the real world, and that we will make only those adjustments which we cannot avoid (1980: 406).

These adjustments made to the reality that spectators project on this process of reconstruing newly encountered fictional worlds aim at establishing the latter as functionally credible. In simpler words, they mould the CU into a coherent, to the extent possible, entity, which will necessarily draw heavily on previously known elements. The source for those elements, based on the discussion so far, is more easily mapped on the CS and far less on the CW.

The notion of coherence as it has been used so far means that whatever is presented on screen meets certain expectation standards that spectators have. Having such standards by definition implies that the worldmaking in the movie will constantly be measured against knowledge, the weight and importance of which are not really debatable as far as spectators' comprehension is concerned. When David Bordwell describes the spectators' search for usable information during movie-watching, he cites one of the Formalist types of "motivation", specifically "realistic motivation", as a "notion of plausibility derived from some conception of the way things work in the world" (1985: 36). Regardless of the highly structure-driven framework for cinema comprehension that Bordwell develops, and although the concept of the CS, which is the focus here, is much wider than the confines of narrative only, the

value of the concept in the present discussion lies in its dependence on “what seems lifelike to someone versed in specific conventions”, also remaining pertinent to individual traditions of storytelling which also create expectations about the way action will progress (1985: 149). Using this feature as context for the points raised so far, it becomes obvious that the CS can function as a central axis of features that are lifelike, to use the words of Bordwell, around which the spectator will gradually build the worldmaking of the entire CU in a way that will heavily draw on past personal experiences both of one’s life as well as previous exposure to narrative structural normalities.

The value of coherence conceived in such a way is beneficial for the quality of the fictional world itself, but it does not need to be limited to the strict rules or narrative composition only. Walters has commented on the fact that artificial universes, as they are composed in fantasy movies in particular, are made of things that spectators normally do not know and cannot recognize, but “[t]he make-believe must still make sense” (2011: 113). He also notes that our sense of the overall aesthetic success of such a movie depends on elements composed with “coherent relationships” to one another, in a process where a creatively bold worldmaking should aim towards “significance and meaning” (2011: 113). Walters comments on George Wilson’s account, who approaches coherence as a more structure-oriented factor. Wilson refers to the macrostructure particularly of the classical film narration as an agent of “global reliability” that connects shots both to one another and to the overall flow of a storyline in a movie as a kind of “promise to depict a set of events, acts and situations which will turn out to have an internal explanatory coherence” (1986: 40).³ Based on Wilson’s account, Walters explains that promise as the kind of coherence that exceeds simple attention to micro-structural narrative details, eventually being based on a much wider “framing logic”, an overarching fictional world within which the events and actions shown in the movie make sense and become meaningful. This ensures a kind of coherence in which “the particular and the general become inextricably related” (Walters 2011: 114).

It has been stressed so far that the CS is a concept that includes narrative structure but stretches beyond its limits; still, the function of narrative within the CS in terms of providing internal coherence, as described by Wilson, reflects the same role for the entire CS. In fact, the macrostructure of a film narrative is based on the internal consistency of the same individual social, behavioural and, generally speaking, functional elements that constitute the concept of the CS. Narrative structure includes, among other things, a specific assembly and ordering of such elements in a way that the storyline pro-

³ Emphasis in the original.

gresses in a satisfactory manner. What is also important to mention here is that the inclusion of these familiar constituent elements in a narrative does not automatically guarantee coherence; they indeed establish credibility, but their success depends on the overall manipulation of the storyline by writers and moviemakers. This probably explains the prominence that Wilson assigns specifically to classical narrative structure; the clear delineation of the latter can normally minimize the chances of making mistakes that would fragment the infrastructure of a movie, undermine the credibility of the CS, and thus affect the coherence of the entire movie, as well as contaminate the entire franchise. As such, it serves as a very accurate example of the binding potentials of the CS as a whole.

Local vs. universal coherence

So far it has been pointed out that both the screened and the non-screened elements of the CU contribute to establishing coherent worldmaking in a movie, with emphasis on the CS specifically. Concerning the contribution of non-screened elements, a common explanation that has been given over time attributes their usability to functions of gap-filling that spectators perform during movie-watching. Nevertheless, the distance that has been widening between reality and movies with the increasing production of visually excessive synthetic worldmaking seems to dictate a revision of the concept of gap-filling so that it reflects more adequately the present situation.

At the core of this revision is the realization that gap-filling has two forms: it should be differently understood on one hand in terms of the perception of spectators during movie watching, and on the other in terms of the cinema industry and the position of a movie product within it. This distinction is remotely related to the one Jiří Kotešný used in order to separate story worlds from fictional worlds respectively (2010: 47). Ryan explains Kotešný's distinction essentially as one between the cognitive handling of that world, i.e. how it is "constructed and »simulated«" inside the minds of the audience, and the philosophical approach to the actual ontology of a fictional world (2014: 31-32). In the context of the present discussion, this distinction ultimately creates a difference between worldmaking as a cognitive process vs. a literary or creative concept. Within this dual context, the effort towards coherence is also slightly redefined. On one hand, it maintains its general etymology-based meaning which connects it to concepts of unity and completion, but on the other it denotes different understanding of gap-filling in each case.

Gap-filling as a cognitive process seems to be rather far from any assumption that spectators recreate the narrative in their minds in a certain

detail. Although such an assumption would answer several issues concerning movie comprehension, it is probably not accurate. Julian Hochberg and Virginia Brooks have demonstrated that, due to the cognitive capabilities of the human mind, whatever mental formation spectators make of the narrative inside their minds will have nothing to do with what they see on screen either in physical terms or in terms of appearance. In fact, what the authors note as the source of previous knowledge that spectators utilise in movie comprehension is much more and much wider than simply overall story structure, thus stretching as wide as the genre, the characteristics of the medium, and even facets of life itself (Hochberg & Brooks 1996: 271). Humans encounter movie events like they do with the real world, i.e. by consulting “major plan schemas”⁴ that codify the world as a set of intentions, normally manifested in purposeful motion; they will also generally prioritize those schemas over anything minor that does not immediately reflect that kind of overarching knowledge, effectively keeping only a fragment of information from the physical and social environment which will be all they need in order to respond to it (Hochberg & Brooks 1996: 267). In the same manner, while watching movies the cognitive functions of spectators are more preoccupied with local comprehensibility; if there is no noticeable inconsistency, spectators neither fill any non-screened narrative gaps with specific information nor consult any overall narrative structure for that purpose (Hochberg & Brooks 2007: 388). Surprisingly, this limitation is actually what makes coherence possible in CGI worldmaking: if the flow of the movie only needs to be locally comprehensible, spectators will only draw meaning from these wide and non-specific “major plan schemas” and this wider reservoir of abstract knowledge will sew together the pieces of CU which are actually screened. Using this schematic background instead of the strict and detailed narrative structure, the CU rises as a relatively coherent and thus credible fictional world. As a cognitive process, therefore, gap-filling simply means anchoring the CS and the CW to previous knowledge. After all, gap-filling would not be able to mentally reproduce elements that are entirely unknown to spectators, nor can any CU be recreated in every detail, either physically and visually, or mentally.

Gap-filling as a literary or creative notion, on the other hand, is a different case altogether. In the context of worldmaking as a process of creating a fictional world, circulating it to the audience and further building on it within a franchise, gap-filling is essentially the ways in which the success and popular demand of a movie trigger the marketing of additional prod-

⁴ The authors use the term as used in the work of Lichtenstein and Brewer (1980) who conducted experiments of viewers identifying actors’ purposeful actions.

ucts that expand its original content. When successful movies expand into wider franchises, apart from sequels and prequels, a number of other pop culture items such as games, toys, novels, TV series, theme parks etc. contribute to the constant worldmaking of the original. This normally happens with successful fantasy or science fiction movies, especially now that CGI makes this expansion across media immensely easier and more accessible, and wears out only when the fan base drops under a certain threshold that renders the profits of the franchise non-viable. Until that happens, though, the world-building practice of a movie can in fact expand to such a degree that it becomes a highly complex network of official and unofficial products and information connected to the original world of the movie. Considered in terms of gap-filling, therefore, the franchise is a potentially significant volume of products containing information that presumably comes from the world of the original movie and is attached to it in some way. Apart from adding new elements to the CU for creative purposes, this new information often also resolves inconsistencies in it, thus filling in conspicuous or problematic gaps that undermine its coherence.

Although it is normal for studios to follow the canon for franchises, i.e. the officially sanctioned body of information about the fictional world which is also normally used in franchise products, the lore of that world is significantly wider, especially in successful franchises. Most of the information contained in the lore is not even screened, nor has much chance of ever being screened. Both canon and fan-made material are usually included in the lore, which might end up comprising a very complicated, at times even self-contradictory network of elements, which, nonetheless, often provide inspiration or material for the further expansion of the franchise. In terms of the wider CU, as defined here, the lore is included in it and subordinate to it in terms of content. The reason is that the CU is a non-finite realm that contains both the existing material as well as all the possibilities that may occur or exist within the fictional world, thus allowing the lore to expand indefinitely inside it. Any new piece of information in the worldmaking, therefore, draws on the possibilities of the CU, and is eventually realized as lore, and perhaps even as canon if it is embraced by the official creators or owners of the franchise.

This version of gap-filling, therefore, means introducing information to a cinematic universe that will contribute to its coherence when spectators come in contact with the fictional world of a movie. Such information is normally introduced while the franchise is alive or trending; this essentially means that this kind of literary or creative gap-filling is a constant process that takes place even long after the original movie is released and potentially through various media forms. Both the canon and the lore, each in its own

way, aim at enhancing the coherence of the original CU for the sake of drawing inside synthetic worlds all spectators of various levels of fan-based loyalty to the franchise. From a certain point onwards, a specific movie might even be reduced to only a fraction, not necessarily the most important one, of the wider world of a franchise.

The many faces of coherent worldmaking

Coherent worldmaking may not be a chimeric aspiration of movie makers, given the technology currently available, but may in fact prove a rather elusive concept to theorise. The concepts of the Cinematic Story, Cinematic World and Cinematic Universe can provide a framework to comprehend world-building practices, especially in the context of digital technology which has radically transformed the rules of creation and production within the industry. Following the comparison of the two types of gap-filling discussed earlier, i.e. the cognitive and the creative processes, and the way each of them contributes to the notion of coherent worldmaking, it becomes obvious that coherence should be approached both as a process of the mind and as an industry-related practice. Still, it seems equally problematic to diminishing the function or importance of each and to confuse them with each other. Attempts to explore viewer experience should consider both, as long as their essential differences are acknowledged: the former is a local experience of a fictional world, based on cognitive operations that take place during movie watching, whereas the latter refers to the wide, creative and practically unrestrained practice of worldmaking by creators of a movie or franchise.

Coherence is thus best understood as a multi-faceted concept. Much more than a simple experience of movie-watching, it is the collective result of a number of factors: careful worldmaking and attention to detail in terms of the way the CS and the CW of a movie will be first set up and further developed later; the cognitive operations of spectators that compensate for meanings that will help them with real-time comprehension; and the contribution of pre- or post-release world-building through the establishment of the franchise, which will expand upon the worldmaking of an original movie. The concept of Cinematic Universe and its constituents can prove to be a helpful tool in comprehending and acknowledging the nature of fictional worlds in cinema, especially now that digital technology gradually shrinks the gap between the experience of fictional worlds and that of the real world.

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Wandering Monsters. Serial Peregrinations and Transfictionality

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Abstract

The post-modern gothic simultaneously makes reference to already well-grounded experience, such as the repertoire of motifs and narrative prefigurations which have entered the artistic canon of the convention for good. A lot of figures and characters identified with horror become a part of the transfictional process of allocating them in new settings and re-designing their fictional biographies. Although in TV series reinterpretations of classical literary narratives quite often focus on instilling a positive image of erstwhile impersonation of numinosum, they do offer in return a construal of more contemporaneous fears, aligned with today's socio-political-economic landscape. This article will include the following series based on literary prototypes representing the very canon of gothic fiction: *Dracula*, *Penny Dreadful*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Second Chance* and *Sleepy Hollow* as well as elements of productions connected with literary narrations of horror, such as *Once Upon a Time*.

Keywords

transfictionality, TV series, horror, literature, gothic fiction, narrative

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The Gothic has had a uniquely rich cultural tradition, with the history of its changes simultaneously inscribed in a chronicle of civilization and cultural transformations. As the authors of *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2012) emphasize, certain motifs are closely related to the subversive character of this aesthetics, which – on the other hand – was shaped by the paradigm of social discourse resulting from common, yet hidden fears and worries associated with the given age. In the article *The Contemporary Gothic: Why we Need it* Steven Bruhm asks a very significant question about the need of examination and justification the way the narrative convention¹ of horror is realised. While addressing this issue, the scholar points out not only its aesthetic appeal, but also stresses the non-artistic implications such as economic, political, or ethic contexts. As he concludes:

Since its inception in 1764, with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the Gothic has always played with chronology, looking back to moments in an imaginary history, pining for a social stability that never existed, mourning a chivalry that belonged more to the fairy tale than to reality. And contemporary Gothic does not break with this tradition: Stephen King's *IT* (1987) and Anne Rice's vampire narratives (begun in the 1970s) weave in and out of the distant past in order to comment on the state of contemporary American culture. (Bruhm 2002: 259).

Thus, the sources of contemporary horror should be examined among a number of discourses. As Bruhm elucidates:

One of these anxieties, taken up by Stephen King is his nonfictional *Danse Macabre* (1982), is political and historical. He discusses at length the degree

¹ In this article it has been used use a „narrative convention” or „artistic convention” to avoid framing gothic or horror fiction as a genre or, even more structurally, as a subgenre of fantastic fiction.

to which the Second World War, the Cold War, and the space race gave rise to particular kinds of horror in the 1940s and 1950s. Central to this horror is the fear of foreign otherness and monstrous invasion. [...] Another anxiety, not unrelated to the first, is the technological explosion in the second half of the twentieth century. Advances in weaponry – both military and medical – have rendered our culture vulnerable to almost total destruction [...]. Third, the rise of feminism, gay liberation, and African-American civil rights in the 1960s has assaulted the ideological supremacy of traditional values where straight white males ostensibly control the public sphere. In the midst of this onslaught comes a further blow to Euro-American culture: the heightened attack against Christian ideology and hierarchy as that which should “naturally” define values and ethics in culture (Bruhm 2002: 263).

At the same time, Bruhm indicates a problem of connecting this motif of popular social fears, or even traumas, with an overlying narrative related to an individual, making this relation significant to the viewer or the reader.

The postmodern gothic, however, despite commonly reflecting contemporary social or economic perturbations, simultaneously makes a reference to the well-grounded experience, such as the repertoire of motifs and narrative prefigurations which have entered the artistic canon of the convention prenamently. Many figures and characters identified with horror genre became a part of transfictional process of allocating them to new settings and re-designing their fictional biographies. As Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon accurately observe, “Popular culture has accustomed us to narratives that refuse to leave the stage, returning repeatedly for another round of applause and for another pot of gold” (Ryan & Thon 2014: 1). Indeed, although in TV series reinterpretations of classical literary narratives quite often focus on instilling a positive image of the former *numinosum* impersonation, they do offer in return a more recent interpretation of current fears, aligned with today’s socio-political-economic landscape. Fred Botting, among others, notices the aforementioned predilection towards a “bonization” (from Latin *bonus*, ‘good’) of incarnations of evil, indicating that these trends have appeared in our culture until the end of the twentieth century. Images of characters have been explicitly transgressive until they underwent a distinctive softening. As the scholar states:

Where the restoration of symbolic, normative boundaries was celebrated in the violent climaxes to older tales of terror, monstrous figures are now less often terrifying objects of animosity expelled in the return to social and symbolic equilibrium. Instead, they retain a fascinating, attractive appeal: no longer objects of hate or fear, monstrous others become sites of identification, sympathy, desire,

and selfrecognition. Excluded figures once represented as malevolent, disturbed, or deviant monsters are rendered more humane while the systems that exclude them assume terrifying, persecutory, and inhuman shapes. The reversal, with its residual Romantic identification with outcast and rebel, alongside its feeling for liberation and individual freedom, makes transgression a positive act and diffuses the negative charge of spectral paternal prohibition. Transgression becomes just another permitted social activity (Botting 2002: 286).

In the process of these transformations, the “otherness” is no longer the untamed “alienness” and becomes a standard or an element, a subject to parodical interventions. In the similar contexts, the present analysis will include the following series based on their literary prototypes representing the very canon of gothic fiction: *Dracula* (2013-2014, prod. Universal Television, Carnival Films, Flame Ventures, Playground Entertainment for NBC), *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016, prod. Desert Wolf Productions, Neal Street Productions for Showtime and Sky), *Jekyll and Hyde* (2015, prod. ITV Studios for ITV, STV, UTV), *Second Chance* (2016, prod. Teakwood Lane Productions, Kara Inc., 20th Century Fox Television for Fox) and *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-, prod. Mark Goffman Productions [seasons 1-2], Sketch Films, K/O Paper Products, 20th Century Fox Television for Fox) as well as the elements of productions connected with literary narrations of horror, such as *Once Upon a Time* (2011-, prod. ABC Studios, Kitsis/Horowitz for ABC).

However, in order to precisely indicate the elements contributing to a transfictional relationship between all the mentioned television narratives, the term has to be specified and defined in the most optimal way. According to Ryan, transfictionality “refers to the migration of fictional entities cross different texts, but these texts may belong to the same medium, usually written narrative fiction. Transmedial storytelling can be regarded as a special case of transfictionality – a transfictionality that operates across many different media” (Ryan 2013: 366). Methods of transferring the well-known elements to new narratives, following her definition, are recalled after Lubomir Doležel, who, operating from the perspective of possible worlds theory, has distinguished between expansion, modification and transformation (Ryan 2013: 366). Although, this classification clearly does not exhaust the creative potential of transfictionality. That is why – also due to its complex relation to transmediality – I would suggest acknowledging the definition proposed by Richard Saint-Gelais, who maintained that:

Two (or more) texts exhibit a transfictional relation when they share elements such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds. Transfictionality may be considered as a branch of intertextuality, but it usually conceals this

intertextual link because it neither quotes nor acknowledges its sources. Instead, it uses the source text's setting and/or inhabitants as if they existed independently (Saint-Gelais 2008: 612).

Transfictionality then, includes in particular cross-overs, retellings, reboots, or any other narrative phenomena requiring knowledge transgressing the boundaries of a given diegetic representation (i.e. a story or a plot), for instance one that can be derived from an encyclopedic manual for a traditional table-top RPG. In short, transfictionality occurs when two or more storyworlds, or, to be strict, their encyclopaedias (as Umberto Eco likes to call them), interfere with each other. For example, when Alan Quatermain from well-known Haggard novels appears in comic book and movie adaptation *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, it is an example of transfictional "character migration" as it does not point at an intertextual deixis 'Alan Quatermain', but the whole Alan Quatermain character in his fictional entirety. Similarly, it works also for reappearing locations, worlds, universes, or even aesthetic codes.

Furthermore, the definition proposed by Saint-Gelais meticulously describes a variety of ways that affect or shape the elements of the given text, or – more broadly – the universe. Since the relations binding new plots with the reinstatement of well-known characters are multi-level, it is worth examining which of these rules can be applied to the classical gothic. In order to comprehend the motives that often run the creators engaging in a transfictional play of relocations, it is necessary to explain what factors determine the creation of new biographies of established literary (or non-literary) characters. Obviously, a peculiar receptive sentiment and the awareness of an influence that literary works have had on the evolution of the gothic conventions remain a key factor here. Perhaps referencing the familiar imaginarium as a set of motives that can be linked, merged, or connected freely and, thereby, refreshed thanks to the shift in the focalising perspective, has been equally important. Unquestionably, the fact that many gothic and horror figures embody universal rules and dilemmas is not without significance either – and framing them in the contemporary discourse has, consequently, a far greater meaning than designing new ones and attempting to implant them in the collective imagination. TV series representations offer thus an opportunity to tell something new about heroes with whom almost every erudite recipient is already familiar with – in a way different, sometimes even perverse or contrary to the one used in the past. The pleasure flowing from dipping in a seemingly familiar context or setting all the more favours immersion, which "literally means [...] sinking or plunging, however, metaphorically describing an act of reception which boils down to getting lost in the storyworld" (Maj

2015: 372). This idea of getting lost or losing oneself seems to be at the very centre of screenwriters' endeavours, who in a more or less successful way strive for making the viewers take part in a transfictional play of ideas.

It is worth adding that the possibility of functioning a related model of TV series communication is addressed also in a relatively comprehensive way by Henry Jenkins in his famous monograph *Convergence culture*. He claims that:

Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives. Because there is more information on any given topic than anyone can store in their head, there is an added incentive for us to talk among ourselves about the media we consume (Jenkins 2006: 3-4).

It is convergence that – through bringing closer to itself and, in consequence, blending, intertwining, and matching a variety of factors to one another – is based on the foundation of the multilevel existence of individual elements of culture. Moreover, the transfictional modal frame of TV series is constituted by more than the very properties of a serial narrative itself, which were analysed by Elisabeth Evans:

A television drama series constructs a narrative world in which potentially hundreds of episodes can be situated, the locations and characters that inhabit this world binding the events of individual episodes together. Drama invites a particular form of engagement from its audience, one that is based on their interaction with a fictional world. [...] The dramatic camera works to bring the audience into that world in a way that seems natural. [...] this kind of engagement, best described through theories of immersion, was particularly important to how the participants in this research engaged transmedia drama (Evans 2011: 10-11).

Identification of different semiotic or aesthetic codes is possible also due to the transmedial nature of such implemented communication. As Evans underlines:

Transmediality plays with this central construct of a fictional world in terms of what Matt Hills has called a 'hyper-diegesis', or 'the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, *only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encoun-*

tered within the text' [...]. With moments of transmedia storytelling new media platforms such as the internet or mobile phone are used to provide access to the parts of the text that are not available through the television episodes. Transmedia storytelling makes particular use of fictional worlds, exploiting the fact that the viewer only sees part of that world and will be encouraged to subsequently seek out information on those hidden parts via the extensions onto multiple platforms (Evans 2011: 11).

Viewers, thus, do not have to affirm a full-scale encyclopaedic knowledge and readily recognize allusions or quotations, as they can predict a transfictional character of the given production, for instance by readdressing the knowledge granted throughout different media channels. The scene from *Penny Dreadful*, in which an old actor brings Frankenstein's Creature to the theatre, where they are just rehearsing *Sweeney Todd*, can serve as a good example here. Although the title of the play is mentioned only once, that recall is linked to the violent picture of false blood gushing out of the sham slit on the actress's throat. The visual aspect may incline the viewer to reference another medium in order to find information on the play itself and fill-in the diegetic gap. Paradoxically, the fact that the very series itself (even if the title evokes the nineteenth-century penny dreadful novels) exemplifies a transmedial tendency to comment on the situation of the protagonists by the means of theatrical representation, only alluding to the problems they encounter in the first place. Almost in every episode of the first season, the authors execute an exegesis of the characters' vicissitudes with the use of staged performances at the theatre. Meanwhile, in the second season the crimes which one of the heroes – the werewolf Ethan Chandler – is involved in, as well as attacks launched by the witches – who, in this way, put their intrigues into effect – are transposed onto dioramas displayed at the wax figures exhibition, where Frankenstein's Creature is also employed.

Transmedial communication remains significant also in the case of linking the series with literary texts widely acknowledged as gothic fiction classics. After all, over the decades each of the analysed narratives has acquired its film or serial versions, which are frequently alluded to or referenced by contemporary producers or screenwriters. Visions or images of characters encoded in the collective imagination are, thus, migrating from one narration to another, while current attempts to pivot them around a transfictional nexus are often entangled in aesthetics or motifs present in the former interpretations. For instance, the laboratory of the doctor appearing in the series entitled *Jekyll and Hyde* largely resembles the representations of this topos that were present in the cinematography of the past. Similarly, the appearance of Frankenstein's laboratory in the second season of *Penny Dreadful* is a reflection of the series' former instantiations. Yet, these details do not testify to a lack of competence

or poor creativity on the part of contemporary screenwriters, as “transmedia texts have become less about promoting a central television programme or film, and more about creating a coherent, deliberately cross-platform narrative experience” (Evans 2011: 20).

It is worth to emphasize that, while writing about transmediality, Colin B. Harvey has also pointed to transfictionality in the context of relocating characters’ practices or the adaptation’s aspects. The author claims: “We ordinarily think of adaptation as retelling *existing* stories, whereas transmedia storytelling tends to be characterised as telling *new* stories in different media but set within a consistent diegetic world. Yet since the very nature of adaptation involves some elements of invention, the distinctions are not as clear cut as they might initially seem” (Harvey 2015: 3). Indeed, the notion of transfiction reflects the specifics of reference to prototypes of the cultural texts in a better way, encompassing in a much more detailed way all the aspects of functioning of not only the very narrative itself, but also the problem of transposing a character. Transfictionality broadens the range of possibilities associated with summoning codes connected with the given storyworld, by more means than only a concrete character or elements of a diegesis.

That was the way the screenwriters tried to make amends vampire motifs in the TV series *Dracula*, wherein they attempted to explore the subversive potential of the literary prototype, referring directly to the question of sexual identity of women. Therefore, they have interpreted Bram Stoker’s oeuvre as addressing the issue of emancipation and pointed at the aspects conditioning the above-mentioned endeavour. The construal rendered by the screenwriters did not depart too far from the concept of transgressive sexuality, widely discussed as an integral part of the gothic romance (Cameron 2010; Glennis, Townshend 2014; Muskovits 2010) as a result of accumulation of fears associated with eroticism and implications of physical love (also the homosexual one). In the series, these questions are pictured by the following relationships: Mina-Dracula, Mina-Lucy and Mina-Jonathan, where the binding point is the character of Miss Murray as the one, to whom various eventualities of the choices related to erotic love are being revealed. What is interesting, the homosexual aspect was exposed in the series in the relationship between Lucy and Mina (the first one shows a strong, yet unrequited, inclination towards the other), not – as acclaimed interpretations of Stoker’s novel suggest – with reference to Dracula himself.² Although sexual-affection motifs are a very important story component in the production, the new biography of Dracula gains an intellectual and world-view-related dimension, since vampire is

² This is the approach taken, among others, by L. Andrew Cooper in the book entitled *Gothic Realities. The Impact of Horror Fiction on Modern Culture*, Jefferson, North Carolina and

fascinated by sciences, in particular due to the problem of electrification among urban agglomerations. Such exposure of the character is nothing more but a transfictional excuse for creating a new biography of the widely-recognized character, which harmonizes with the tendency shown by contemporary authors to instil a positive image of the departed embodiment of *numinosum*. Transgressive elements not only lose their primary meanings (since it is difficult to sustain, in the postmodern version, e.i., the nineteenth-century fear of homosexuality as a deviation ruining the socially binding heterosexual order), but what is more, the showrunners try to reassess the characters' motivations that were heretofore considered negative, so that they could attract the attention of recipients.

Revitalization of the old monsters does not negate, on the other hand, the existence of a more universal context, especially visible in the construction of the show's version of Dracula. It is hard to decide to what extent the screenwriters got familiar with the different readings of Stoker's novel, but in the context of the unsuccessful and sabotaged project of electrification, which was finally proposed by Dracula, it seems only too suitable to mention Franco Moretti's conception, according to which the vampire makes:

an excessive form of capitalism – its surplus which reveals its origin at the same time. The stench rising in the places of the vampire taking shelter [described in the novel – K.O.] may be the stench of money and hidden (impure and primitive) accumulation. Dracula, in Moratti's opinion, is not [...] a noble, but degenerated aristocrat. [...] He is rather a monstrous, greedy and predatory entrepreneur, or indeed [...] a despotic monopolist (Marcela 2015: 66).

Meanwhile, the actions of the vampire appearing in the series resemble a fight with the resistance to the technological progress and, simultaneously, reveal the capitalist weakness in this character.

In the TV series *Second chance* (akin to *Dracula*, merely one-season-long, though), the transfictional life was also given to Frankenstein's monster, who – as interpreted by the showrunners – was transformed into an officer of the law, having, moreover, an entirely different origin story from its literary counterpart. As L. Andrew Cooper argues, "Shelley's Gothic imagination makes it possible to make a success by Frankenstein's reproduction method, still this success of »evil education« cannot be an »effective achievement«. Instead of the divine light, Frankenstein can generate merely terrifying darkness" (Cooper 2010: 64). Nevertheless, in the version proposed in the series,

the experiment is carried out by a rich genius not in order to – as Anne K. Mellor (Mellor 1988) suggests when analysing Shelley's novel – violate the order of reproduction, but to obtain a medicine for the terminally ill twin sister. The very aim of the experiment itself is founded on noble motives, yet a penetrating analysis of the plot allows grounding it in the corporational paradigm. The research project becomes the object of desire for the company-behemoth which competes with the one run by the executor of the experiment and sends another version of Frankenstein's creature on a spying mission. In the interpretation offered by the creators of the series – rather freely dealing with the source material – these creatures called to life are simply younger, genetically improved clones of deceased elderly people. The heroes do not have much in common with Shelley's literary conceptions, which invests them – in spite of everything – with a new fully transfictional profile. After all, the creature itself that is called to life³ is placed in the screenwriters' version of a criminal procedural in the character of an avenging vigilante. What is more, the appearance of this hero often has a comic reflection, associated for instance in the need of hiding the identity of the resurrected one from the other family members or with its inclination to abuse an alcohol.

A decidedly more doleful and, at the same time, profound in the philosophical-ethical dimension entourage was attained by the version proposed by the authors of the show *Penny Dreadful*, wherein the Frankenstein's creature, abandoned by Victor as soon as it was brought to life, compensates this abandonment by immersing in writing poetry and drama. Furthermore, following the initiation of contacts with the outside world, it initially makes use of the alias 'Kaliban', borrowed from William Shakespeare's drama, to subsequently take on the name of 'John Clare', after the nineteenth-century English poet. In Creature's talks with another heroine of the series, Vanessa Ives, quotes from Alfred Tennyson's, William Wordsworth's, John Keats', or Percy Bysshe Shelley's (the husband to the authoress of *Frankenstein*) poetry frequently appears – which simultaneously proves a liking for literary works expressed often by the showmakers. This also finds confirmation in the case of some other references. For example, in one of the scenes of the sixth episode, season first, Victor Frankenstein quotes a poem by Shelley and at the moment Abraham Van Helsing (in the series featuring as a haematologist) is disclosing to him the existence of vampires, he is looking at the first (as implied by the cover which is iden-

³ I.e. the police officer obtaining the eponymous "second chance" and being involved in a scandal, who is given the chance of redemption on both the professional and private grounds, through reconciliation and cooperation with his formerly neglected son.

tical with the original) edition of *Varney the Vampire* by James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest – which, again, shows a world-building and referential power of subtle, transfictional references.

The variety of literary connotations is also visible in the series entitled *Sleepy Hollow*, referring to the writings of Washington Irving, such as *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*, but also to some historical events or mythology. The Headless Horseman, well-known for its literary and film realizations, was given by the screenwriters an extensive biography fitting in the aforementioned tendency of taming monstrous representations. Thus, while it is true that the Headless Horseman is a transgressive being, making a pact with evil which binds him with its forces, he is also a deeply hurt human being who has transgressed: it was the unfulfilled love to Katrina Van Tassel which lays at the source of his decision and his vicissitudes as shown by the screenwriters in a close relation with the lives of Ichabode Crane and Katrine. Thereby, a demonic manifestation of the power of darkness is presented as Abraham Van Brunt – an ill-fated individual seeking revenge on his rival (Ichabode), who later on, as a result of coincidence which turns out fortunate to the protagonists, becomes a loyal ally to Crane.

Transfictional predilections could not have omitted the iconic prefiguration of the duality of human nature from Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In an ingenious way, once again going along with the trend of taming the horror, the screenwriters of the series *Once Upon a Time* managed to relocate Jekyll and Hyde, interpreting the original dualism in a literal manner. After introducing in the fifth season the figure of Jekyll and his alter ego, Hyde, they have split the hero into two separate beings functioning in dedicated physical bodies. Implications of a similar conception are fairly obvious: the recipient is given a clearly outlined monster which – having come out of, nomen omen, his retreat – becomes an imminent threat devoid of any mysteriousness or psychological sophistication. This framework, however, remains linked to Cooper's most compelling interpretation, which assumes that Jekyll is an uterus from which Hyde – like a satanic spawn – emerges to free himself (Cooper 2010: 74). This ghoulish birth does not come about exclusively in the symbolic sphere, but is transferred onto the biological frontier, entering the territory of literal-ity, so significant to the artistic convention of *Once Upon a Time*.

The showrunners entitled *Jekyll and Hyde* treat ambivalence of human nature slightly more thoughtfully, though still not sublimely enough. They did not so much recreate the happenings of the characters known from the literary prototype as presented the history of their descendants. This is an inventive operation, however not easy to realize, since Jekyll's young offspring does not bring anything new into the novel, bereaving it of any suspense. The

series, therefore, despite its potential – does not make full use of possibilities offered in transfictional modules and falls into a procedural banality.

A fairly characteristic feature of transfictional narratives widespread in TV series based on gothic fiction, is the creators' predilection towards intertwining fictional biographies of individual characters, sometimes in a surprisingly complicated manner. At the foundation of similar decisions one may see an underlying belief that the more plausible and coherent the relationships between characters from different (narratively, aesthetically, psychologically) storyworlds are, the greater "cognitive investment" (Ryan 2013: 385) the viewer may contribute to the show. It is necessarily to remind that figures firmly inscribed in the culture often represent simply a set of traits or values, constituting many a time a symbol or a metaphor of a specific discourse. This issue is exemplified in the most multiparametral way by *Penny Dreadful*, where ties and interactions between the characters are constructed in a very advanced manner. May it be enough to say that these relations are not always direct and evident to the other protagonists, which builds up an atmosphere of secrecy enveloping the existence of each of the transfictional heroes.

When writing about transfictionality, one should not forget the aesthetic codes and artefacts (culture, art, mythology) which identify the given message, often contributing to its recognisability, and "passing" it altogether to another narrative. This principle is scrupulously observed by creators of the majority of series' reinterpretations of literary prototypes, who consequently allocate the diegesis in a space temporally adjusted to its original instantiation. This predilection is connected with the concern for meticulously designed costumes and scenography (alongside with the artefacts that can be associated with the given character⁴), which are reproduced by specialists employed by the creators and world-builders.⁵ Details of this sort are characteristic for *Penny Dreadful*, and become all the more significant in this context as they often go beyond the mere reproduction of the visual entourage of the given period of time. An important role is played here by visual codes connected with concrete char-

⁴ As long as they function as a designate. I agree here with the comment put forward by Christina Ljungberg, who writes: "In the triadic semiotics of Peirce, a sign is anything that stands for (represents) something, called its object, to generate another sign as its interpretant. According to this definition, the sign is itself a mediator or medium, acting, so to speak, as a translator between its object and its so-called interpretant, which is the result of its interpretation. [...] The sign initiates a process which makes it interact relationally or *functionally* with its object. Signs are not necessarily material objects, nor even a class of objects: they exist in the mind of their interpreters, in other words, they have a cognitive *effect* on their interpreters. In signification, a sign dialogically interacts with its various sign aspects, the iconic, the indexical and the symbolic, in an ongoing flow of signs mediating between the life-world we live in and our interpretation of it" (Ljungberg 2010: 83).

⁵ Aesthetic visualizations make the key world-constituting element in realizations. As Alli-

acters, since each of them is complemented by suitable props – not only ones ascribed to the prototypical storyworld, but also those closer to the recipient's reality. Hence, for instance, Dorian Gray's house is filled with genuine works of art: portraits and self-portraits coming from different epochs. The viewer who is intent on searching for information on the collection will find there such masterpieces as Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man* (also known under the title *Portrait of Man in a Red Turban* of 1433), John Everett Millais's *Dorothea Thorpe* (1882) or Frédérique O'Connell's *Rachel dans le rôle de Phèdre* (1850). They are – like the references to the literary works mentioned earlier – deeply hidden allusions, which give the chance of unravelling their heteroreferential nature only to those educated and erudite enough.

The theatre plays the role of an aesthetic identifier and, at the same time, a source for the commentary on the social roles that the heroes of *Penny Dreadful*, being different from the majority of humanity, must perform. In the first season, it provides shelter to Creature, whose (mis)fortunes are in many details convergent with the biography of the title character of Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1910). Similarly to Eric, Creature also has his lodgings in the theatre and like his elder counterpart bestows his unreturned love upon a young beautiful actress. However, as *Penny Dreadful* is a production maintained in a very pessimistic aura, in the end Creature's chosen one turns out – in contrast to the innocent good-hearted artist from Leroux's novel – to be a petite woman who rejects the protagonist's advances and contributes to his dismissal from work. Moreover, she shows an affection for this equally petite and egocentric young actor.

The circle of props which identify specific characters as transfictional individuals includes also objects from Victor Frankenstein's laboratory, reproduced in compliance with movie representations of the creators of the cinema in the first half of the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, inclinations towards copying the style of scenography, costume, and makeup of the day manifest themselves also in images of the vampiresses that attack the protagonists in the first season of the series. The pallid-faced long-haired blondes with their eyes encircled by black lines and with tinted lips bring to mind the representations of the vampiric seductresses of old.

son Oddey and Christine White write, "The potentials of spaces for performance are necessarily spaces where the reality and illusion are both a simulation of the material world but also, and simultaneously, real. Therefore, there is a combination and interaction of fictional events, actions, all global utterances and presentational means that construct and present these two senses of reality, and which mark the segmentation process at all levels. Subsequently, it is this interplay between language, space and scenography which is then activated. What remains meaningful and global to some extent (in terms of the event's communication), is made significant within the space" (Oddey & White 2006: 15).

Furthermore, we need to count the gothic styling of the witch's place in the second season of *Penny Dreadful* into the circle of transfictional imaginations. Its maze-like corridors are filled with figures of lurking gargoyles and piles of human skulls. The mist enfolding the manor and the characteristic low-lying full moon complement this composition well-known in the classics of horror. Similar aesthetic procedures are applied by the creators of *Sleepy Hollow* when showing the heroes struggling against the forces of evil. The nineteenth-century London featuring in the series *Jekyll and Hyde* appears misty and illuminated with a pale light of the moon.

All these visual codes representing the storyworld are presented to the perception of the recipient, who recognizes the aesthetic model of the prototype which is revealed in well-known elements. Ryan and Thon comment on this phenomenon as follows:

David Herman describes narratives as “blueprints for a specific mode of world-creation”, but it would be more appropriate to say “world imagination,” for while the author creates the storyworld through the production of signs, it is the reader, spectator, listener, or player who uses the blueprint of a finished text to construct a mental image of this world. The convergence of media around a common center that we may call “narrativity” – a center that is itself organized around a storyworld – will serve as an opportunity to capture their distinctive narrative resources. In this case it is not convergence per se that we are interested in but the divergences that the common center reveals (Ryan & Thon 2014: 3).

It should be noted that I use the term “storyworld” as interpreted by Ryan, that is as a narratological concept that:

differs from this interpretation of “world” in at least three major ways. First, it is something projected by individual texts, and not by the entire work of an author, so that every story has its own storyworld [...]. Second [...] it requires narrative content, so the applicability of the concept of storyworld to lyric poetry is questionable. Finally, it cannot be called the “world of the author” because in the case of fiction, authors are located in the real world while the storyworld is a fictional world. If a storyworld is anybody's world, it is the world of the characters. [...] Storyworld is a broader concept than fictional world because it covers both factual and fictional stories, meaning stories told as true of the real world and stories that create their own imaginary world, respectively (Ryan 2013: 32-33).⁶

⁶ This interpretation can be complemented by the well-known statement of David Her-

The presented instances of transfiction examined throughout a number of TV series seem to exemplify the definition in its full meaning, since their creators do not merely invent new biographies of well-known figures, neither allocate them into new plots, but transpose them along with visual, temporal, and topical narrative components, reconstructing certain elements in compliance with eventual aesthetic needs of recipients, tailored to the chosen convention. The multiplication of transfictional narratives in gothic – or horror-themed TV shows is not linked exclusively to the rise in the demand for productions of this kind, but also to the extra-aesthetic aspects of the functioning of TV industry, which is closely connected with nowadays problems. As Evans puts it:

The development of transmedia narrative strategies speaks to the industry's desire to regain control in this changeable media landscape and demonstrates the intersection between narrative and the industrial and technological context from which it emerges (Evans 2015: 112).

The consciousness of possible ways of distribution of serial narratives and an increasing interest in this type of storytelling creates a solid creative base for the showrunners. Producers set out to look for plots which could satisfy receivers' expectations and fit precisely within the current aesthetic trends. The post-gothic that has been so fashionable of late, appears to constitute a perfect foundation for horror narratives sustaining their intertextual liaisons with classical source material. Solutions of the transfictional ilk – increasingly present in popular culture – seem an apt choice, although their realizations are not always (even if because of omission or unfortunate exposure of concrete discourses) satisfying to the majority of recipients, the proof of which are low viewer ratings, or taking off a series after merely one season.

Transfictionality, as an aesthetic mechanism, is not the key to immediate success itself, since it has to be realised in a multi-level, multi-parameter way, engaging not only the stem of the given plot or characters of the key

man: "I use the term *storyworld* to refer to the world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative, whether that narrative takes the form of a printed text, film, graphic novel, sign language, everyday conversation, or even a tale that is projected but never actualized as a concrete artifact – for example, stories about ourselves that we contemplate telling to friends but then do not, or film scripts that a screenwriter has plans to create in the future. Storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of the situations and events being recounted – of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner. Reciprocally, narrative artifacts (texts, films, etc.) provide blueprints for the creation and modification of such mentally configured storyworlds" (Herman 2009: 106-107).

importance to it, but also the setting and other strata – all of this in order to create a mosaic, though internally coherent narrative steeped in psychologically justified and feasible character motivations and avoiding clichéd or second-tier storytelling. As a result, only two of the discussed series fulfil the given assumptions, *Penny Dreadful* and *Once Upon a Time*, since their creators make use of transfiction with expertise, joining in a balanced manner biographies, fictional universes, and aesthetic codes alike. The references proposed by them are not always obvious or readable – however, this is precisely due to the fact that they are not intertextual clues which, when deciphered, offer an intellectual satisfaction, but transfictional links expediting immersion in the storyworld, exploration of its frontiers, and identification of all its intertwined narrative components.

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Narrative in Virtual Reality?

Anatomy of a Dream Reborn

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Abstract

When the big leap forward of computer technology took place for the general public in the 80s and 90s, virtual reality technology (VR) was touted as the “next big thing” that digital media would bring into our lives. Janet Murray’s influential book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) explored the possibility of turning narrative into the “immersive, interactive experience generated by a computer” that defines VR. But VR did not live up to its expectations, and after the year 2000, it faded from the radar of popular interest. It regained attention around 2011 when Mark Zuckerberg, the founder/CEO of Facebook, bought Oculus Rift, the maker of a relatively cheap and lightweight head-mounted display. Currently available VR narratives are distinguished from other digital narratives through three-dimensional images, interactive panoramic representations, and the ability to manipulate our experience of our own body. In this article I discuss three projects that use some of these resources in order to assess the storytelling potential of the medium: *Clouds Over Sidra*, a documentary about a camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan; *Hard World for Small Things*, a fictionalized version of the shooting of an unarmed black man by white policemen; and *VRwandlung*, a project that puts

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the user in the situation of the hero of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, who wakes up one day to discover that he has been transformed into a giant insect. Basing my judgment of this limited corpus, I assess the potential of VR narrative with respect to four kinds of immersion: ludic, spatial, temporal and emotional.

Keywords

Virtual reality, narrative, interactivity, immersion, panoramic representation, experience of embodiment

When the great leap forward of computer technology reached the general public in the 80s and 90s, there was a pervasive sense that we were witnessing the birth of a new medium of representation, a medium that would make as significant a difference for art and entertainment as the great inventions of the past, such as writing, film, and television. One of the forms that this new medium was expected to take was Virtual Reality (VR), a technology which was promoted at the time as the “next big thing” that the computer would bring into our lives. VR was conceived by its advocates as an “immersive, interactive experience generated by a computer” (Pimentel & Texeira 1993: 11), and the key notion was that of presence. Participants would experience an image created by a computer as if it were “the real thing”, this is to say, as if it were a material reality. They would be able to modify the simulated environment through gestures of their own body, or perhaps even through voice command. The notion of presence means that the computer should disappear from active consciousness and be replaced by the object of the simulation.

VR: the first wave of publicity

In 1997, Janet Murray’s popular book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* explored the possibility of turning narrative into the kind of experience that defines VR. The Holodeck is a fictional technology from the TV series *Star Trek*. It consists of an empty cube on which a computer projects a three-dimensional world simulation. The user steps into this world and interacts with synthetic characters operated by artificial intelligence. No matter what the user says or does, the system responds coherently and integrates the user’s input into a narrative arc that sustains interest. The user thus becomes a character and experiences the narrative from a first person perspective.

If the Holodeck represents a valid model for digital narrative, this means that the computer does not have to rely on a fixed story, as do most comput-

er games. A coherent plot must emerge from the live interaction between the human participant and the computer-generated environment. Narrative is about the actions of people, about their relations to other people and to their environment, but not every sequence of actions and events constitutes a well-formed narrative. As Aristotle observed in the *Poetics* (paragraph 5.1), stories must have a beginning, middle, and end; they must represent some kind of conflict that comes to a resolution. In regular stories, the author has complete control over the plot, but in interactive stories the plot must emerge from the interaction between the user and the computer. This means that the story must be partly generated by the user and partly by artificial intelligence. A lot of effort has been devoted since the year 2000 to develop a so-called “narrative intelligence” (Mateas & Sengers 2003), but the results have been meager. I do not know of any computer-generated narrative worth reading for its own merit.

As I argue in *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2. Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Ryan 2015), if computers still cannot generate entertaining, non-interactive stories when the machine has total control over the storyworld, the difficulty of the task is taken to a much higher power when the story must integrate the unpredictable input of the user. In the Holodeck, for whatever the user says or does, the computer must understand the action of the user, respond in an appropriate way, and steer the storyworld toward an appropriate ending that brings narrative pleasure to the human participant. The dynamic generation of interactive stories is not the kind of problem that could be solved in the future by a more advanced AI, because it is not a technological but a logical problem. The AI researchers Ruth Aylett and Sandy Louchard describe this problem as “the interactive paradox”:

On one hand the author (in this case the computer) seeks control over the direction of narrative in order to give it a satisfactory structure. On the other hand a participating user demands the autonomy to act and react without explicit authorial constraint (2004: 25).

There is no solution to the paradox but only acceptable compromises: either restrict the freedom of the user in order to create a coherent narrative; or expand the freedom of the user and sacrifice narrative form.

As the year 2000 neared by, it became evident that neither the vision of VR developers nor the Holodeck narrative were going to materialize anytime soon. Jaron Lanier, one of the pioneers of VR, told an interviewer:

As for the waning of virtual reality from public attention, I bear some of the blame for it. I always talked about virtual reality in its ultimate implementation

and when that didn't happen, interest declined. Because everyone wanted the Holodeck from *Star Trek*, virtual reality could not fulfill its promise so quickly (Ditlea 1998).

After 2000, VR continued to be developed in the scientific sectors, and it found a number of practical applications (Slater & Sanchez-Vives 2016). But the public expected new forms of entertainment, and when they did not materialize, VR disappeared from the radar of the media.

The two poles of digital entertainment

Instead of *Hamlet* on the Holodeck, we got two types of digital entertainment. At one pole is the esoteric domain of electronic literature, represented by hypertext fiction as well as by three collections of texts on the Internet gathered by the Electronic Literature Association. Hypertext fiction enjoyed for a while a cult following in academia, and it was touted as the future of the novel, but it never caught up with the general public, because by breaking up stories into fragments, and by giving the reader a choice of links to follow, it implemented interactivity at the cost of immersion. Far from turning readers into creative co-authors, as its early advocates claimed (Bolter 1991; Landow 1997), hypertext deprived them of such basic narrative effects as surprise and suspense (Sternberg 1992), which depend on a precise authorial control of the release of information. Such control is impossible when readers can choose multiple paths through a network of interconnected fragments. As for the texts gathered in the ELO collections, most of them are dominated by a "textualist" aesthetics, inherited from postmodernism and deconstruction, which locates aesthetic value in self-reflexivity and attention to the medium rather than in world construction. These texts make the computer visible through the exploitation of dysfunctionality, such as deliberate glitches, vanishing inscriptions, nonsense generation, pointless interaction, parodies of digital tools, and heterogeneous collages of data randomly fished from the Internet (Emerson 2014; Ryan 2015). As a general rule, electronic literature endorses the interactive dimension of VR, but it rejects its immersive ideal because the precondition of immersion is the disappearance of the computer. Yet, according to VR researchers Mel Slater and Maria Sanchez-Vives, illusion in VR is never total. They argue that users only experience presence when they remain aware that the object of their perception is a computer-generated image. In real life, we take the presence of the environment that surrounds us for granted and we do not reflect on it; in VR, by contrast, the experience of presence should become a cause of wonder and a source of

potential pleasure. It is paradoxically the awareness that the environment is computer-generated that makes participants notice and appreciate the disappearance of the computer.

At the other pole of digital entertainment is the wildly popular genre of computer games. Judging by their addictive nature, these games fulfill the VR ideal of an “immersive, interactive experience generated by a computer” (Pimentel & Teixeira 1993: 11). While in hypertext fiction interactivity came at the cost of immersion, in games interactivity has an immersive effect, since players are consumed by the desire to solve problems. The immersivity of computer games comes not only from the agency given to the players and from the desire to beat the game or other players. It also comes from the construction of sensorially rich game worlds, which players can explore and where they feel at home. In contrast to traditional board games or sports games, such as chess or football, computer games do not place players in an abstract space but in a concrete environment full of recognizable objects and characters. The tasks given to the players are not actions that receive meaning only by the rules of the game, such as kicking a ball into a net, but rather they are inherently meaningful and beneficial actions, such as killing dragons, rescuing princesses, or escaping enemies. There are few princesses and no dragons in the real world, but if dragons existed, and if the situation presented itself, surely most people would jump at the opportunity to save a beautiful and rich princess from an evil dragon? This concrete, representational dimension creates a connection between computer games and narrative, for if games construct worlds, and if players can perform actions that change the state of these worlds, there must be some kind of story that unfolds in the game world, thanks to the player’s activity.

But even though they are both interactive and immersive, computer games are not the Holodeck, because they subordinate narrative to gameplay, and as a result, their underlying narratives are not the focus of attention but a means toward a goal – the goal of motivating a player to play. This subordination to gameplay explains why there is not much variety in game narratives, compared to the amazing diversity of book or film narratives. The most common narrative pattern in computer games is an adaptation of the archetype of the hero’s journey, as defined by Joseph Campbell (2008), Vladimir Propp (2018), and others: a solitary hero accepts a mission, goes on an adventure, passes a number of tests, and returns home victorious (or sometimes defeated, as may be the case in computer games). Standard game narratives follow pre-defined scripts that force players to pass through the same sequence of checkpoints, but every player creates variations on the fixed pattern, since no two players will perform the exact same actions. Branching structures can produce different stories, especially stories with different end-

ings, but even though the player's actions determine how the story will end, the various possible endings are built into the system rather than created on the fly.

With electronic literature and shooter-type computer games, digital entertainment has reached the two poles of the cultural spectrum – the pole of experimental, avant-garde literary forms, frequented by a rarefied, mostly academic public; and the pole of popular culture, frequented by the masses. But between these two zones, which I have called the North Pole and the Tropics (Ryan 2007), lies a third area, which I call the Temperate Zone, and which is frequented by an educated but critical public, a public that desires neither the deconstruction of narrative, nor its reduction to stereotyped forms and its subordination to gameplay. All significant narrative media have conquered the Temperate Zone, but this conquest has been particularly problematic for digital technology. Independent games have been working to fill this gap, especially through the development of a game genre known as environmental storytelling, and represented by such games as *Dear Esther* or *What Remains of Edith Finch*. This genre follows a pattern that I call epistemological, the pattern of the detective story. The player explores a computer-simulated world and uncovers a story that took place in this world, often by finding tell-tale objects such as letters and diaries, or simply by listening to voices that narrate past events when the player reaches certain locations in the game world. The pleasure of these games is not meant to lie in an original or exciting gameplay – the player's activity is limited to moving through the game world and looking at objects – but in curiosity for the story, in the satisfaction of extracting it from the environment, and above all in the visual appeal of the game world.

Yet, in a polemical article titled “Video Games are Better Without Stories”, the prominent game theorist and game developer Ian Bogost questions the value of the narrative experience provided by environmental games. He argues that the story told in *What Remains of Edith Finch* would be better served by making it into a movie or telling it in a novel. And indeed, if a story truly captivates the reader, the effort needed to discover it by finding a way to progress through the gameworld may be more annoying than gratifying. Movement through the gameworld is restricted by an invisible code, and the player must find the proper paths or points of access to uncover new information. But while the game genre of environmental storytelling may frustrate people who play for the plot exclusively, I cannot agree with Bogost that video games are better without stories. As already mentioned, these games owe much of their success to their ability to give narrative meaning to the player's actions; without narrative structure, we would still be playing Tetris or tic-tac-toe. On the other hand, I tend to agree with Bogost that game

stories have not reached the artistic heights and diversity of the best novels, dramas, and films, and possibly never will. But even if their narrative potential does not rival that of novels or film, computer games still have much to gain by trying to realize this potential.

The rebirth of the VR dream

The three genres I have discussed so far – electronic literature, standard games focused on gameplay, and independent games focused on the discovery of a story – were pretty much the state of the art of digital textuality in the mid two thousand tens. But then VR made a surprising come-back. The trigger to its rebirth was the development of new hardware to replace the clumsy, heavy equipment of the 90s. In 2014, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, purchased Oculus Rift, the maker of a relatively cheap and lightweight HMD (head-mounted display), for two billion dollars. The supposedly imminent second coming of VR spurred renewed talk about the narrative potential of the medium. But where are the applications, where is the content?

In the remainder of this article, I propose to discuss some of the existing narrative applications of VR in order to assess the storytelling potential of the medium. But as a preliminary, it will be necessary to return to the experience of immersion.

Types of immersion

Immersion can be conceived in two ways: as a technological effect or as a mental state. The two cannot be totally dissociated, since the immersivity of a technology is always a measure of its ability to induce immersion as a mental state. In VR interactivity leads to immersion because it connects the user to the environment. But immersion is also pursued by means of two visual features: a 3D representation; and a panoramic, 360 degree image of a virtual world. These two properties can be implemented separately: for instance, a non-interactive 3D image is found in film or in the old-fashioned technology of the viewmaster, while an interactive, 360 degree representation of a world is found in many screen-based computer games, though without presenting 3D effects. While 3D representation can be passive, as film demonstrates, 360 degree representation is always interactive, for without the ability to look around and to alter the field of vision the user will not appreciate the panoramic nature of the display. The

total angle can be less than 360 degrees, but the display remains interactive as long as it allows some freedom to look around.

As a mental state, immersion can be divided into several categories. First, there is ludic immersion – the passion a player brings to playing a game, solving problems, and beating opponents. This type of immersion presupposes an interactive environment and is independent of any kind of concrete world and narrative content; it is experienced by chess and bridge players as intensely as by players of computer games such as *Word of Warcraft* or *Grand Theft Auto*.

Then there is what I will call mimetic immersion, or narrative immersion, which is a response to the concrete representation of a world that evolves in time. This type of immersion can be provided by a variety of media: by a literary narrative, by film and TV, by drama, and by narrative computer games. It comes in several varieties (Ryan 2015):

Spatial immersion: a sense of place, of connection to the environment. In a computer game it can also be a strategic appreciation of the configuration of space and of how this configuration can be used to reach one's goals. Or it can be the pure joy of being able to move through space, of exploring it and discovering ever new regions.

Temporal immersion: an experience that can also be called narrative tension. It resides in the burning desire to find out what happens next, and it covers the three fundamental narrative experiences of suspense, curiosity, and surprise. In an interactive environment temporal immersion can also result from the sense that you have only a limited time to perform certain actions, as for instance when you must kill your enemy before he kills you.

Emotional immersion: the main form of emotional immersion is empathy, which is an emotion directed at others, such as feeling vicariously happy when good things happen to people or characters you like and sad when bad things happen to them. But as tragedy demonstrates, emotional participation in the sad fate of characters is not deep enough to prevent aesthetic pleasure. In computer games emotions can also be directed at oneself, such as feeling excited, frustrated, dejected, or elated, depending on one's success.

In real life we find all four kinds of immersion, though the concept of ludic immersion must be extended to cover not only the playing of games but also absorption in useful tasks. In virtual life, as I will call the experience provided by all kinds of representations, different media provide different kinds of immersion, and we can use the four kinds described above as a criterion for comparing the expressive potential of narrative media (Table 1).

	Spatial	Temporal	Emotional	Ludic (interactivity)
Written narrative	High	High	High	None
Film	High	High	High	None
Theater	Low	High	High	None
Music	None or low	High	High	None
Video games	High	High	Low	High
VR	High	Low	Medium to High	Medium

Table 1
Types of immersion in various media

This assignment of values describes general affordances rather than rigidly distinctive features, and it does not prevent individual texts from challenging the limitations of their medium.

Written narratives score high with respect to the three mimetic kinds: they can provide spatial immersion through the description of places; they provide temporal immersion through suspense, curiosity, and surprise; and they can bring readers to tears over the fate of characters. But since they are not interactive, they scores zero on ludic immersion.

Movies can achieve the same types of immersion as written narrative: high on spatial, temporal, and emotional (even higher in this respect than written narratives: crying is much more frequent when watching films than when reading books); but no ludic immersion.

Theater is high on emotional and temporal immersion, but it scores lower than movies and written narrative on spatial immersion. This is for two reasons: the phenomenon of the fourth wall separates the spectators from the stage; and the fact that the spatial point of view cannot be changed reduces the setting to a largely static image. In film, by contrast, the camera can move, and in written narrative the narrator can alter the perspective from which scenes are described.

Music, though not representational, is the strongest medium in terms of emotional and temporal immersion, but it scores low on spatial (I am thinking of stereophonic effects) and null on ludic – unless one takes into consideration the performer’s experience.

Standard video games are by definition strong on ludic, and they score high on both kinds of spatial immersion: sense of place and strategic. On emotional immersion we have a hung jury. As noted above, games inspire self-directed emotions, which depends on the player's success. Players may also develop strong affective relations to their avatar in games such as *Second Life*, where they create their avatar, or in games whose purpose is to take care of a virtual creature such as a pet or a baby. But these games do not follow the standard script of defeating enemies in order to fulfill quests, and in the case of *Second Life* the player's emotions for the avatar can be regarded as self-directed. The kind of emotional immersion that is directed at characters is more problematic, at least in standard competitive games, because non-playing characters are generally seen not as persons but as obstacles to the achievement of the player's mission or as providers of help. In one case they must be eliminated, in the other they only matter because of the useful objects or information they can give to the player. When gamers rescue princesses, they are not motivated by love, as are the heroes of romances, but only by the desire to progress in the game. Much effort has been recently devoted by game designers to involve players in emotion-rich situations, for instance by creating moral dilemmas: should I kill this character who has helped me before or sacrifice these innocent civilians in order to save my life? But emotional involvement conflicts with the pursuit of game goals: if the player chooses the more ethical option, it may put the continuation of the game in jeopardy.

What kinds of narratives will the affordances of VR produce, and how will they perform with respect to the four forms of immersion? There is no doubt that a 3D, 360 degree representation of an environment will enhance video games by intensifying spatial immersion. One of the available applications for the Oculus Rift is a climbing game (*The Climb*; Crytek 2016) that allows players to scale rock walls without fear of heights nor risk of getting hurt, and that lets them choose the setting (the canyon, the Alps, and the bay). But adding VR effects to computer games does not require a rethinking of the role and form of narrative; what worked for standard screen-based games will work even better for VR games, and the same pre-scripted narrative archetypes (or stereotypes) can be used in both cases. We can safely say that most of the games that work on a screen will work equally well, if not better, with the visual effects of VR technology. But here I am interested in the medium-specific narrative applications that fill the void of the Temperate Zone.

I will restrict my discussion to applications that actually exist, rather than trying to imagine VR in its ultimate form. This means that we must give up on the most distinctive property of the Holodeck, namely the gener-

ation of narratives in real time. All the examples I will discuss are based on a pre-scripted scenario and pre-recorded data. What makes them VR is the two properties I have already mentioned: 3D images and interactive panoramic representation. 3-dimensionality cannot be experienced on a regular computer screen but interactive panoramic representation can. It is therefore possible to get an idea of what is being promoted as VR narrative by watching flattened examples on the Internet, especially on YouTube.

VR as panoramic representation

A panoramic representation of a storyworld means that a lot of data must be generated that the user will probably not see. In everyday life we do not look around all the time; rather, we focus our attention on certain points of interest (POI, in the jargon) (Tricart 2018). In a narrative film the camera does it for us: it shows where the action is, which means that it follows the characters. It would make no sense for the camera to show the ceiling when the hero and heroine are kissing, or if it does, it is a calculated effect on the part of the director. In a VR system with panoramic representation there is no director who decides what the user should see; the user can look around all the time, but if the system relies on a strong narrative script, the user will focus on the POIs, and most of the data will be wasted. Alternatively, if the user decides to take full advantage of the opportunity to look around, he may get the feeling of missing out on what is important to the plot, because as he takes time to explore, narrative time keeps moving forward, and something important may be happening where he is not looking. The art of VR narration thus requires a compromise between the user's instinctive tendency to focus on the heart of the narrative action and his desire to exercise his agency by exploring the scene. Or, to put this differently, the art of VR narrative must find the right balance between temporal immersion, which relies on interest in the evolution of the storyworld, and spatial immersion, which relies on interest in the environment.

One way to avoid the conflict of time versus space is to turn the spatial environment itself into the center of interest, so that the user will find something worthy of attention in all directions. A case in point is *Clouds Over Sidra* (Arora & Milk 2015), a 6 minute documentary about a camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan. The purpose of this film is to show the living conditions of the refugees, the boredom, the hopelessness, but also the determination to prepare for a future life of freedom. For the boys, this determination consists of getting physically fit for the return to Syria or of engaging vicariously in freedom fights through computer games; for the girls, more specifically for

the heroine, it consists of making the most of their time in the camp by being good students. Gender divisions remain strong: the boys will not let the girls play computer games or exercise in the gym, while the classroom seems to consist exclusively of girls. But there is one small exception to the traditional gender roles: the girls are allowed to play football, which they could not do in Syria. Through this scene, the film subtly points to a future when women will have more opportunities open to them.

The film consists of several distinct scenes, each focused on a specific place: the desert, the classroom, the living quarters of individual families, etc. The user can manipulate the camera, scroll left or right, up or down, and explore the entire scene. There is no doubt that the images are documentary but the status of the narrator is more questionable. She is presented as a twelve-year old girl named Sidra, and she speaks in fluent English though with a marked accent which is supposed to give authenticity to her testimony – a technique commonly used in voice-over of foreign speakers in television news. But where does the text come from: is it an adaptation of what Sidra may have told orally to an interviewer, or was it written by a scriptwriter who imagines what it is like to be Sidra? The perfect coordination between the images and the narration suggests this second solution. But most spectators will regard the narration as the authentic voice of Sidra. By giving an identity to the narrator, even if this identity is not genuine but acted out, the film strengthens its emotional impact, because we are more inclined to be affected by the experience of one particular individual than by the experiences of thousands of anonymous people.

Through its focus on the living conditions of Syrian refugees, the film foregrounds spatial environment at the expense of time and description at the expense of narration. There are suggestions of the past and of the future that bring changes – the crossing of the desert to reach the camp and the anticipated return to Syria – but between these two events time is suspended, and life is an endless repetition of daily occupations. This lack of eventfulness, which also means a lack of narrative action, means that the various scenes have no outstanding points of interest beyond the space itself where they take place. The user does not risk missing something important when exploring the setting.

My next example contrasts with Sidra on two points: it is a fiction, not a documentary; and it relies on parallel events which cannot be seen at the same time; it is therefore necessary to replay the movie to get a more complete understanding of the action. This example, titled *Hard World for Small Things*, was commissioned by the VR firm WeVR to filmmaker Janicza Bravo (2016). *Hard World* focuses on a dramatic, literally life-changing event, rather than on a static, ongoing situation. This event is a fictionalized version

of the kind of incident that inspired the Black Lives Matter movement: the shooting of an unarmed black man by white policemen.

The film begins by showing two black men and a Hispanic woman driving through Los Angeles in a convertible, engaging in small talk and obviously enjoying themselves. The dialogue sounds very natural and seems to be at least partly improvised by the actors. By manipulating the controls, we can get an idea of the kind of neighborhood they are driving through. After a while, the people in the car notice two women they know standing on the sidewalk. They park their car in front of a store, and the male passenger gets out and starts talking to the two women while the driver and the woman passenger remain in the car. At this point there are two conversations going on simultaneously. You can hear them both, but when you focus on one conversation, the other becomes background noise and cannot be clearly followed. A new line of action develops when the driver leaves the car to assist an old woman who is crossing the street, and brings her into the car, promising to take her home. Meanwhile, the female passenger has started talking on her cell phone, adding a third conversation. Depending on where you are looking, you may or may not notice that the male passenger leaves the two women on the sidewalk and enters the store. But then something happens that you will not miss, even if you are looking elsewhere, because it immediately attracts everybody's attention and interrupts all the other conversations. Two white men walk toward the car, tell the driver extremely rudely to turn down the music on the radio, and ask him how he got the car: did he buy it or was it given to him? These two men are obviously cops, even though they are wearing civilian clothes. So far the action has been presented in one continuous shot. Then a cut occurs, and we are inside the store. From that moment on things happen very quickly. The point of view depends on what you have been looking at before, and you do not have time to change it. If you have been looking at the cops, you will still be looking at them once you are inside the store; you will see one of them pull a handgun and shoot; you will hear the victim fall down and moan as he is dying. But at first sight you do not really know who he is and why he was shot, though you may guess that he is the man in the car, because this assumption gives more coherence to the plot. If you have been looking at the people in the car, you will be looking at the victim after the cut. You will see that after he pays for his purchase, he accidentally bumps into one of the cops, and this collision, which is interpreted as aggression, is what motivates the other cop to shoot. If you want to play detective, you can even select a point of view and move in slow motion, shot by shot, to reconstitute the event.

The idea of presenting an event from several different points of view has been made famous by the 1950 film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa, where various characters provide subjective and self-serving versions of an apparent

murder in order to demonstrate their innocence. But the several versions are still controlled by the director. Here it is the spectator who controls the point of view, but the various possible perspectives correspond to objective locations within the storyworld and not to subjective motivations. By manipulating the point of view, we get a better idea of what happened, but not of why it happened. For the task of representing subjective motivations and explanations movies and novels remain better media.

Another limitation of this film (and of the preceding example) resides in its reliance on camera-produced images that are stitched together. Every camera shot is taken from a certain distance, and the user cannot change it. We can move right or left, up or down in the storyworld (though the up movement is rarely interesting), but we cannot get closer to objects in order to inspect them in greater detail, nor can we pick up and manipulate objects. Such operations are common in computer games, because these games rely on computer-generated graphics rather than on filmed data (except in the non-interactive cut scenes). Slater and Sanchez-Vives have argued that only systems based on computer-generated graphics are truly VR. According to their view, the examples I have discussed are nothing more than a new kind of film technique.

VR as an experience of embodiment

One of the strengths of VR systems based on computer-generated graphics is their ability to manipulate our experience of our own body. The film *Avatar* (Cameron 2009) is a case in point. The hero is a disabled soldier confined to a wheelchair, but when he enters the planet Pandora as an avatar created by VR he has full control over his virtual body. By manipulating the brain's image of the body, VR is able to lead to new experiences of embodiment. It can create an out of body experience by projecting to the user an image of its own body; it can allow users to see themselves from the back; and it can place them in entirely different bodies: for instance into a black body if you are white, a disabled body if you are healthy, and a healthy body if you are disabled. One of the first attempts to use VR for an artistic purpose was an electronic art installation named *Placeholder*, created around 1994 by Brenda Laurel and her team. *Placeholder* was never fully implemented, and even the parts that were realized fell far short of the creator's vision, but the idea was to make the participant re-discover the world through the body of a mythical creature inspired by Native American myths. If you were Crow, you would have enhanced vision; if you were Spider, you would have eight eyes capturing eight different points of view; if you were Snake, you could see in the dark; and if you were Fish, you could see underwater.

One recent project that explores this ability of VR to provide alternative experiences of embodiment is an installation sponsored by the Goethe Institut in Prague (2018) based on Franz Kafka's story *The Metamorphosis*. It is called *VRwandlung*, a pun that blends the German title of Kafka's story (*Die Verwandlung*) with the VR initials. The project puts the user in the situation of Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one day to discover that he has been transformed into a giant insect. A major theme in Kafka's story is Gregor's progressive acquaintance with his new body, how he uses it to move around his room, and how space is reconfigured to fulfill the needs of an insect body. For instance, Gregor can now hide under the bed to spare his mother the awful sight of his body, and he can crawl on the walls to entertain himself. Thanks to VR's ability to place users into a virtual body, which they can activate through the movements of their physical body, Kafka's story is uniquely suited to the affordances of the medium. The user should be able to experience what it feels like to control a body with six legs and giant antennae that impede his movements. He will be able to explore the room. And if he moves in front of the mirror, he will also discover his new body from a third person perspective. There is no mirror in Kafka's story, and Gregor only sees his body from a first person perspective, but this departure from the text intensifies the user's experience of discovering his new body. But one thing the installation cannot do is to recreate the plot of the story in its entirety, the way a text or a movie could. If the user who plays Gregor is going to have some agency, he cannot be forced by the system to behave exactly as Gregor in Kafka's story does. *VRwandlung* should not be considered a retelling of Kafka's story but rather an illustration. Just as the pictures in a storybook propose visual interpretations of some aspects of the story they illustrate, but without capturing the whole plot, so does the VR adaptation of Kafka's story: it may deepen the experience of people who already know the story, but it cannot replace the text.

VR as immersive experience

How does VR narrative score with the four types of immersion that I have defined? Based on the very limited corpus I have examined, I rate the technology as follows (see last row of Table 1):

MEDIUM on ludic immersion. All three projects allow a mild degree of user agency, but this agency does not affect the plot, and it does not compare to the Holodeck or to standard computer games.

HIGH on spatial immersion. All three projects foreground the experience and exploration of space.

LOW on temporal immersion. Neither *Sidra* nor *VRwandlung* can sustain a plot that develops in time; and in *Hard World* it is necessary to replay the movie several times and to alter the perspective to fully understand what is going on.

MEDIUM to HIGH on emotional immersion. All three examples create empathy for the characters by giving the participant a sense of what it is like to live under certain conditions, though for the first two examples this seems to be due more to the subject matter than to the technology. It is only in the Kafka example that the technology allows participants to identify with a character. By default, I give a MEDIUM to HIGH on emotional immersion.

All three examples are very short (about 6 minutes). To be commercially viable, a VR narrative would need larger time frames. But could the user's interest in active participation be maintained any longer? In computer games based on competition and problem-solving, people play for hours at a time, but they are driven by the desire to achieve specific goals, a motivation which does not come into play in these examples.

One possibility would be to create a large world that can be explored in short sessions, the way large novels can be read. The film *Russian Ark* (Sokurov 2002) provides an example of how this could be done. Shot in one continuous camera take, the film shows 33 rooms of the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg, focusing on various scenes before moving to another room and to another scene. The ballroom, site of fleeting group formations, social interactions, and amorous encounters, is a particularly good example of the kind of parallel action that justifies 360 degree film technology. In a VR adaptation, if 360 degree representation can be called VR, the spectator would freely move around the rooms and select which people to follow and which conversations to overhear. Would this freedom improve on the original *Russian Ark*, or would the spectator quickly tire of it? It all depends on whether or not the partial information gathered by the user could be fitted into a larger, meaningful whole.

Conclusion: the storytelling potential of VR

In October 2017, Mark Zuckerberg announced the goal of getting “one billion users in virtual reality” – a goal that seemed disproportionate with the sales of the Oculus Rift HMD, which reached only about one million in the summer of 2017. It is certainly not with narrative applications, such as the ones I have described, that Zuckerberg hopes to reach that number, but rather with presence effects that connect users to remote people and venues such

as the sites of rock concerts and sports events. VR has a great potential for tourism: it will allow people to visit exotic landscape and to explore famous monuments without leaving the comfort of their home. There is also the always powerful lure of pornography. A bad omen for the future of narrative in VR was the announcement, in May 2017, that Facebook was shutting down the Oculus story studio, despite producing two award-winning 360 degree films, *Dear Angelica* (Unsel 2017) and *Henry* (Dau 2015).

Measured against the technological overhead they require, the narrative examples I have discussed remind us of the mountain that gave birth to a mouse. Could it be that the vocation of VR as a medium of entertainment does not lie in storytelling? It all depends on whether we understand storytelling and narrative in a broad sense, as these terms are used in mass media, or in the narrow sense endorsed by narratology, according to which narratives represent a sequence of events involving human or human-like characters and following a pattern of conflict and resolution. In this conception narrativity is a matter of plot

In 1996, Monika Fludernik proposed a different definition of narrativity, a cognitive definition based on what she calls experientiality. For Fludernik, what makes a medium artifact a story is that it gives its audience a sense of “what it is like” to experience a certain situation. I find this view a little too broad, because there are many artworks that capture human experience without telling stories – for instance music, lyric poetry, and certain kinds of paintings. But the conception of narrative as a representation of experience describes very well the examples I have presented. All of them give the user a sense of “what it is like” – what it is like to be a refugee in a camp; what it is like to have a carefree outing with friends interrupted by a senseless shooting; what it is like to have the body of an insect. Experiencing a situation or an environment does not, however, require a narrative in the plot-based sense of the term. The strength of VR as a medium of entertainment is not to tell the story of Hamlet or of Little Red Riding Hood, but to take us to mountaintops and under the sea, to let us fly or walk on the moon, and to give us new bodies. Forget the storytellers: there are good reasons why VR developers prefer to call their projects “experiences” rather than narratives (Marantz 2016: 88).

I will conclude with two quotes. The first is from a TED talk by Anthony Geffen on YouTube promoting this “amazing new medium”:

VR has a huge potential in terms of being a storytelling medium... We have the technology, but it's the story that's going to drive this medium. Let the storytellers push this medium. This is without doubt a step in human evolution... Let the storytellers take up the opportunity in what I think will be a very [inaudible M-R.L.] medium (Geffen 2019).

Who are those storytellers who are going to drive the medium? It could be that by storytelling Geffen means simply “content providing” – any type of content. Alternatively, if we take storytelling as meaning “providing narrative content”, then a parallel could be drawn between the current state of VR and the early days of cinema: when film was first invented by the brothers Lumière, it was mainly used to record theater, and it took a while for filmmakers to understand how to narrate in this new medium. The same could happen with VR, we just need to be patient. This is one possible interpretation of the modesty of the current achievements of VR narratives. But according to another interpretation, the distinctive affordances of VR are not necessarily good at telling stories. As a commentator who goes by the name Cannibal Kid responds to Geffen’s talk:

I’m not sure, if ‘storytelling’ will work properly in this medium. To me, the most astonishing VR-experiments are more ‘experiences’ to me. There is nothing wrong with that, and it works fine. But I kinda want to see what is beneath the craze of “oh my god I’m in a submarine” or: “Dude, I’m standing on Mt. Everest”. Will games with a complex story work? Or will they make gaming just more attractive to the “non-gamers”, because of this new technology? It’s gonna be interesting (Cannibal Kid 2019).

As a narratologist, I sincerely wish that the first quote were the right one, and that the storytellers someday will make VR into a major narrative medium, on par with literature, film, comics, and TV. But my sense of the nature of narrative aligns me with the second.

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The Design of Imaginary Worlds. Harnessing Narrative Potential of Transmedia Worlds: The Case of *Watchmen of the Nine*

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Abstract

Today, more than ever, audiences are surrounded by imaginary worlds in which a wide variety of products and activities can be fully explored through multiple media windows. Imaginary worlds allow members of the audience to enter vicariously in the narrative space, spending a certain amount of time in speculative and explorative activities, experiencing the ‘possible world’ through the stories set within it. According to this, it is possible to differentiate between story and storyworld. While ‘stories’ are self-enclosed arrangements of causal events that come to an end in a certain period of time, ‘storyworlds’ are mental constructions shared between recipients and authors in which new storylines can be developed.

This paper aims to discuss the implication of world-building activity for the design practice. Considering narratives and world-making practices as a matter of design, this essay will tackle the following question: how can a designer use the creation of storyworlds in his practice to activate new perspectives on specific contexts?

In doing so, the first part of the essay is a brief summary of how imaginary worlds have evolved through the decades. Then, the second part is devoted to the

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presentation of the so-called Storyworld Canvas, one of the narrative design tools developed in our research group in order to support both storytelling practice and storyworld creation. Finally, the paper describes the project Watchmen of the Nine with the aim of analysing its storyworld from the perspective of the design domain, considering storytelling and world-building activities as ways to enrich the design practice.

Keywords

Transmedia Design, World-building, Narratology, Narrative Design Tool, Design Practice, Communication Design.

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From storytelling to world-making

More than ever, today people live in a highly mediated context and audiences are surrounded by imaginary worlds, in which a wide variety of products and activities can be experienced through multiple media windows. Imaginary worlds allow members of the audience to enter vicariously into the narrative space, spending a certain amount of time in speculative and explorative activities, and experiencing the imagined world through the stories set within it. As a consequence, it is possible to differentiate between ‘story’ and ‘storyworld’. While stories are self-enclosed arrangements of causal events that come to an end after a certain period of time, storyworlds are mental constructions shared between recipients and authors, in which new storylines can be developed. The experience of storyworlds includes tactics of consumption that are led by the audience itself (de Certeau 1980), and participation is based on the concept of “world gestalten” (Wolf 2012: 52).

This paper aims to discuss the implication of world-building activity for design practice. Considering narratives and world-making practices as a matter of design, this essay will tackle the following question: how can a designer use the creation of storyworlds in his practice to activate new perspectives on specific contexts?

The starting point for answering this question will be a brief summary of how imaginary worlds have evolved through the decades, to aid understanding of how creators tackled the process of world-building. As identified by Wolf (2012), people have been building storyworlds for centuries “to amaze, entertain, satirise, propose possibilities, or simply make an audience more aware of defaults they take for granted” (2012: 65). The earliest examples were story cycles in which either historical figures acted as transnarrative characters (e.g. King Arthur), or mythical characters (e.g. pantheons of Greek and Roman gods) were featured within fantastical and unknown worlds. The difficulties for characters in reaching these possible worlds (Ryan 1991; Bradley & Swartz 1979) led authors to the development of a traveller’s

tale that opened up the “age of exploration” (Wolf 2012). In this case, the imaginary worlds became a way for people to read fictional and non-fictional stories related to either realistic places or fantastical and mysterious ones.

While the traveller genre focused on aesthetics and cultural differences, utopian fiction concentrated much more on the descriptions of everyday life, and political and socio-economic systems. This is the case of Plato’s *Kallipolis* and its usage as an educational and reflective tool. Wolf went further, and noticed that “[m]any utopias, however, also included an increased reliance on technology, reduced autonomy for individuals, and greater regulation and control by the state” (2012: 94). The failure of utopias led to dystopias, a term which was introduced in 1868 by John Stuart Mill to describe utopias that went wrong. It is not by chance that the blurring boundaries between utopia and dystopia rely on the personal desires and beliefs of people who are experiencing that world. While traveller’s tales allow people to reach other possible worlds, and utopias are able to activate new perspectives on specific contexts, the genres of science fiction and fantasy are the ones that really encourage the audience to enter vicariously into the narrative space.

Design practice and world-building: methods and tools

According to scholars such as Ryan and Thon (2014), and Wolf (2012), storyworlds are mental constructions shared between recipients and authors, whose development is guided by three main properties. The first one – invention – is related to the elements that make a constructed (secondary) world different from our own (primary) world. According to Wolf, “[i]nvention, then, is what makes a secondary world »secondary«” (Wolf 2012: 38). In that case, changes can be related not only to the nominal and the cultural realm – in which authors can give new names to things or invent new artefacts, objects, technologies, and cultures – but also to the natural and the ontological realm, in which new flora and fauna appear in worlds ruled by new physical laws. The second property – completeness – refers to the degree of development and feasibility that a world attains through details and additional information. If a world is sufficiently complete – or rather a sense of completeness can be achieved – audiences will continue to find answers to their questions and the narrative space itself will be believable (Wolf 2012: 61). In the end, the feeling of completeness is connected to the third property – consistency – i.e. the degree to which a storyworld is arranged according to interrelated and non-contradictory elements. This means that not only is completeness connected to consistency, but in fact all three properties are interrelated and must be consid-

ered simultaneously. As stated by Wolf (2012: 154), “[i]t is through the completeness and consistency of these structures that world gestalten are able to occur” Wolf (2012: 154) also points out that “narrative is the most common form of structure”, especially because imaginary worlds are usually experienced through stories set within them. Despite this, it is possible to recognise several elements which, all together, allow both authors and audiences to think about pieces of information as a whole world.

In the following paragraphs, three different frameworks (Figure 1) that label organisational tools for the design of imaginary worlds are described as a possible basis for both analysis and design practice. These different frameworks were conceived by different authors in different times; however, they present many common elements. In fact, the dimensions which constitute the three frameworks include elements that can be organised according to three basic components: 1) a space, 2) a time, in which things exist, and 3) one or more characters who populate the imaginary world.

The first framework was developed by Lisbeth Klastrop and Susana Tosca (2004; 2014) and is based on three main dimensions: *mythos*, *topos* and *ethos*. *Mythos* describes not only the established story, lore, and legend of the imaginary world, but also the background story that gives meaning to the storyworld itself. Additionally, *mythos* can be seen as the necessary knowledge for interacting with the world or correctly interpreting the events. *Topos* shows how spaces and events unfold over time, while *ethos* refers to the explicit and implicit moral code that allows people to understand the characters’ behaviours, by living the experience of “worldness”.

The second framework considered in this paper was developed by Mark J. P. Wolf (2012). Wolf stated that there are three main elements used in building storyworlds: maps, timelines, and genealogies. He highlighted how these three organisational tools are enough to create the feeling of completeness: maps enable readers to visualise an imaginary world, the construction of chronologies helps them connect the events temporally within a whole history, and ancestry lines provide the means of connecting characters. However, Wolf then went further and added five more structures serving to finalise the world-building activity: nature, culture, language, mythology and philosophy.

The last framework was defined by Davide Pinardi and Pietro De Angelis (2006). They identified seven elements – *Topos*, *Epos*, *Ethos*, *Telos*, *Logos*, *Genos* and *Chronos* – taken from the work of the Italian philosopher Carlo Tullio Argan, and which allow for the description of the storyworld in which the characters move. *Topos* refers to the natural and artificial environment and its physical description. It describes in detail not only the different environments comprising the whole world, but also the place

where a particular character lives, which in turn has its own characteristics. Maps and images complete the description, giving a visual dimension to the imaginary world, and helping with the mental construction of the secondariness (Wolf 2012). Epos refers to the historical memory, the sharing of past events or the personal story of the character(s). Epos can refer to external events, for example accidents or natural events, or to a character’s personal experiences. Ethos represents the rules, values and norms that regulate behaviours within the crafted world. The personal ethos of one character can often be in conflict with the values of the society in which s/he lives, and this can generate an inner struggle. Telos refers to the personal goals and purpose of the character(s). The telos is able to shape the direction toward which a character moves, defining his/her intentions and agency. Logos refers to the language, both verbal and non-verbal, which makes communication possible within the imagined world. Genos represents the set of relationships in the narrative world: the way characters interact with each other. Finally, chronos refers to time, and is instrumental in defining the temporal dimension in which the storylines unfold. Expression of the epoch, historical period, or era gives the storyworld a temporal dimension, which articulates the beginning and the end of the narrative strands.

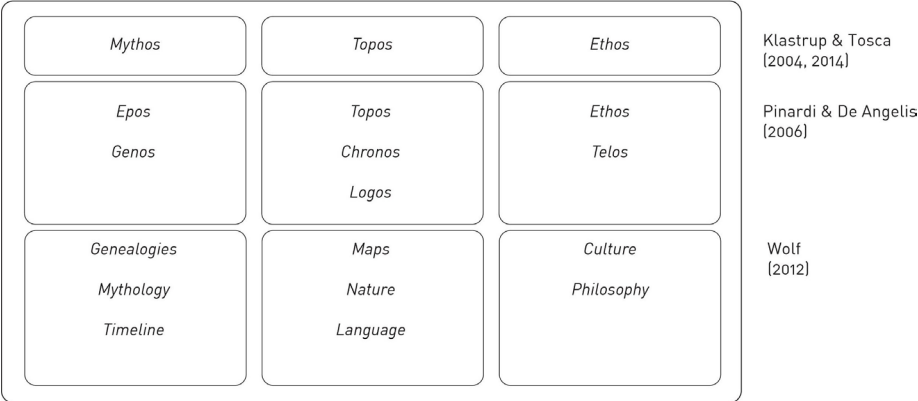


Figure 1.
Frameworks that label organisational tools
for the development of imaginary worlds.

This last framework constitutes the basis upon which the design practice was conducted, as part of the research activities of Imagis Lab¹. A set of design tools was developed, and subsequently tested and refined within both educational and research activities, to support the world-building activity.

¹ A design-research group based at the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano.

The aim of the research is to provide designers with a useful structure, by creating a design tool which includes a qualitative description of a story-world (Figure 2) based on the variables identified by Pinardi and De Angelis.

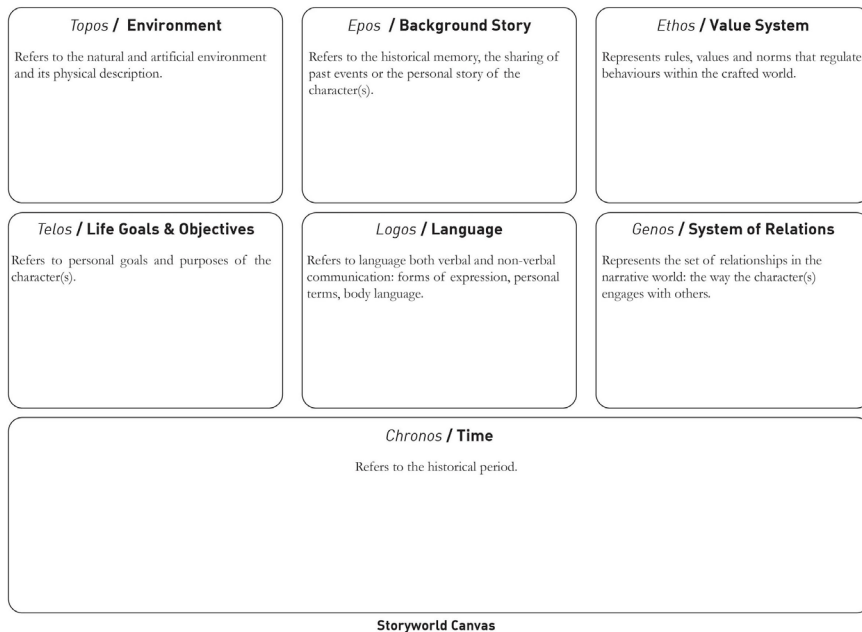


Figure 2.
Storyworld Canvas.

The Storyworld Canvas represents the result of this phase, and is part of a set of tools developed in order to support both storytelling practice and storyworld creation. The design process is guided by a user-centred approach so that the hero's journey can easily be translated into the user's journey, and the transformative arc of the story can fruitfully become the structure of a design scenario proposing to the stakeholders possible and preferable design solutions.² The set of tools was tested in workshops with both researchers and professionals (Piredda, Ciancia & Verditti 2015), and during teaching activities with both design and non-design students. The following paragraph presents one of the storyworlds generated by a group of design students using the Storyworld Canvas, and the stories subsequently generated from the starting-point of this created narrative world.

² The role and contribution of storytelling and the narratives within design practices are the subject of ongoing debate within the design community at international level (Bertolotti, Daam, Piredda & Tassinari 2016).

Case study: *Watchmen of the Nine*

The narrative world was built as a pilot experience, in 2015, by a team of design students³ taking the “Communication Design” studio course at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano.⁴ The students developed the imaginary world using as their starting-point Zona 9 (District 9), a suburban area of Milan in which the University campus is located. The team of design students developed a transmedia world that can be conveyed through several media, reaching different target audiences. They began by exploring the neighbourhood, meeting local people, shooting video interviews, and collecting pictures and stories from the residents about their memories and anecdotes. From all of this, the designers developed a dystopian imaginary world and created five main characters, which give the project its title: *Watchmen of the Nine*. The storyworld was created starting from this research conducted by the students in the field. Inhabitants of Zona 9 were interviewed, as were local associations of citizens who were developing actions to report on the lack of green spaces in their locality. Many interviewees perceived and declared environmental issues as being the most urgent to resolve in order to move towards a better quality of life. As a consequence, the main goal of the transmedia project was to raise awareness about the environmental situation in the Zona 9 district and engage citizens to take an active role in improving the suburban area. The research led to the creation of the storyworld *Watchmen of the Nine*, a sci-fi adventure that tells the story of five heroes who are sent back from a dystopian future (year 2115) to the present (year 2015) in order to save the world. In the year 2115, the future presents a world in which nature is almost completely extinct and the few remaining green areas represent a privilege enjoyed only by a rich élite.

Building the storyworld

The storyworld of *Watchmen of the Nine* was constructed using the Storyworld Canvas and applying the variables of Topos, Epos, Logos, Genos and Chronos. The design process followed a complex method, which started from the analysis of the current situation, not only for the specific suburban area in which the main storyline takes place (Zona 9), but also giving consideration to trends and news affecting the world. The creation of the storyworld started by imagining an “over-world”, a term which describes the future in 2115. As is typical

³ Simone Carnevale, Andrea Fossaluzza, Gionata Marengi, Pedrag Stajevski, Luca Tantimonaco.

⁴ Final Synthesis Design Studio, Prof. Marisa Galbiati, Francesca Piredda, Katia Goldoni and Marco Ronchi (Twig Agency), with Mariana Cancia, Simona Venditti and Gabriele Carbone.

for the science-fiction genre, the future scenario takes inspiration from an analysis of the present and, using cause-effect relationships, describes one possible world of the future (Ryan 1991). The over-world of *Watchmen of the Nine* describes a future in which energy resources have been completely depleted, forcing people to use nuclear energy on a massive scale. As a consequence, water and air pollution increased exponentially, forcing people to minimise their interactions with nature and between each other. Digital relationships are the only kind possible and people are completely addicted to technology. The clichés and elements of science-fiction imagery are recognisable and allow the audience to fill in the gaps in the narration and enter the narrative world, guided by the three distinctive properties of invention, completeness, and consistency (Wolf 2012). The main point of access to the narrative world is the website D9News⁵, which represents the news website of Zona 9 and the world of 2115 (Figure 3). Using the metaphor of the news website, the world of the future is described using text and images, and the website allows viewers to enter this world and activate the process of world gestalten (Wolf 2012).



Figure 3.

Author - Simone Carnevale; photo title - Screenshot from D9News website.

The design process continued and focused on creating the storyworld in which the main storyline takes place. The authors used the framework categories defined by Pinardi and De Angelis (2006) in order to describe the main continents of the future, then focusing on the city of Milan, and narrowing to the specific area of Zona 9. The description of the latter offers a dialogue between the real world, such as the places in the neighbourhood as its citizens know them, and the imaginary world, which preserves some

⁵ <http://d9news.imagishub.it>; www.d9news.polimi.it.

elements of reality and removes others. The topos describes the main landmarks and their role in the future, for instance the train station, the University and the local library. The logos focuses on the massive presence of foreign people, generating a mix of different languages. The genos describes the difficulties people of the future have in creating bonds and relations between each other, due to the ubiquity of digital technologies. The epos focuses on the backstory and describes how the suburban zone evolved in a dangerous and mostly abandoned area. The chronos refers to the temporal dimension of the future in 2115, while the telos and ethos are described through the main characters who populate the storyworld.

Creating characters

The same framework used to create and describe the storyworld (topos, epos, logos, genos, chronos) was then used to create the five main characters who are the focus of the story in the fictional world. Moreover, each character presents some specific traits connected to the identification of personal telos and ethos, through which their background stories were developed. The five Watchmen result as five archetypal anti-heroes; they are, in fact, a group of social outcasts, who in 2115 joined a venture to travel one hundred years back in time (to 2015), for different personal reasons (telos). For example, the character of Marquise Jonathan William De Marchi, nicknamed "The Short" (Il Corto), decided to travel back in time because of money problems, and he acts as an infiltrator committed to sabotaging the Watchmen's tasks in return for money. This character plays the narrative role of the shapeshifter (Vogler 1992).

The second character, Ivan, nicknamed "The Wide One" (Lo Spesso), decided to be part of the Watchmen in order to save his beloved Nadia. This character can be considered as the archetypal hero (Vogler 1992), but he starts out as an ordinary person; he is solitary and unwilling, honest and idealistic, with no awareness of his key role.

Similarly to the creation of the storyworld, the design process for the five characters took its inspiration from analysis of the real world. The exploration of the Zona 9 neighbourhood included meetings with some of the people there, documented through video interviews. These elements can be considered as the basis upon which the personality traits of the Watchmen were created.

Crossing the borders of reality

The project had the objective of producing a disruption between fiction and reality, capitalising on opportunities to let Zona 9 citizens meet the Watchmen. The story characters, wearing costumes which made them recognisable, met the citizens in the street and participated in local events and activities (Figure 4). Creation of the *Watchmen* characters involved defining their internal and physical characteristics and also designing their appearance, including costumes. The hypothesis of having the characters carry or wear futuristic objects was evaluated and tested during a workshop held in collaboration with LUCA School of Arts,⁶ in which the students made prototypes of gloves and visors with a futuristic aspect (Figure 5). Wearing these objects, the students went around the neighbourhood “in character” as the Watchmen, registering and observing the reactions of the citizens. As a consequence of this in-field experimentation, the costumes were then refined, in order to decontextualise the characters from the present time.



Figure 4.

Author - Andrea Fossaluzza, Simone Carnevale, Luca Tantimonaco and Predrag Stajevski. Photo title - Pictures of the students (Andrea Fossaluzza and Simone Carnevale) in character as the Watchmen around the neighbourhood.

⁶ Seven students and their professors, Virginia Tassinari and Wim Buts, visited the School of Design (Politecnico di Milano) joining our class and participating in a three-day workshop (27th-29th October 2015). The main goal of the workshop was to prototype key elements of the narrative worlds developed, enacting and performing actions in order to demonstrate the possible uses and interactions.

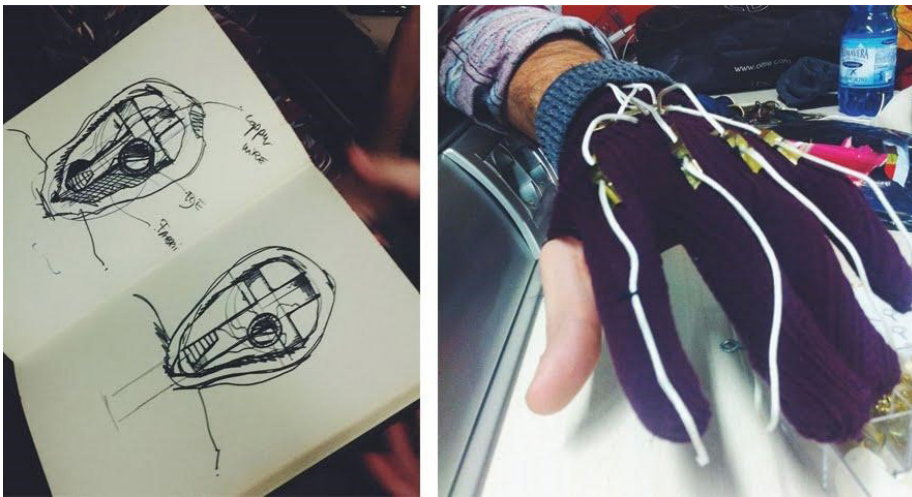


Figure 5.

Author - Simona Venditti and Francesca Piredda.

Photo title - Pictures from the workshop with Virginia Tassinari and Wim Buts.

The science-fiction genre's plot device of time travel represents a way to establish a relation between the real world and the imaginary world through a temporal dimension. There are no gates that allow the audience to enter the Future or the Present, or which keep the two worlds separated. Rather, there are many simultaneous actions whose consequences and effects are evident and perceivable in the future (e.g. in this case, the absence of green spaces and plants). The time travel undertaken by the characters also represents an inner journey, which on the one hand leads them to find a solution for saving the planet, but which also represents the ideal route the audience may undertake in moving from passivity to active citizenship. The narrative world of the future has a potential social impact; by showing a possible reality, it provides further interpretations about the present, stimulating actions and activities:

As we tell and listen to stories, they often prove to be a means of transportation into another reality. In foresight and design, they embody future changes we would like to see become reality, improvements to our context. As such, storytelling helps to trigger and guide processes of change. Change is not neutral however. It has a direction and stimulating the imagination through storytelling is what can inspire such direction (Baerten 2016: 188).

Storyworlds as narrative engines

In order to test the capacity of the crafted storyworld to generate infinite possible stories, and in order to stress the properties of invention, completeness and consistency, different groups of students were involved in storytelling activities during their educational paths. The universe of *Watchmen of the Nine* generated different but coherent storylines, and includes, in total, a short movie, a micronarrative (or proto-narrative, Turner 1996; Jenkins 2004) on Twitter, two Facebook fan pages, a digital “graphic novella”, a website, an event, a workshop, and an urban game. According to the concept of world gestalten (Wolf 2012: 52), people experience a story-world through the characters in the stories, using imagination to fill in the gaps and bringing the imaginary world to life. The different storylines are interconnected and fit perfectly in the storyworld. Figure 6 presents a map of the storylines, as well as the main key points and plot points.

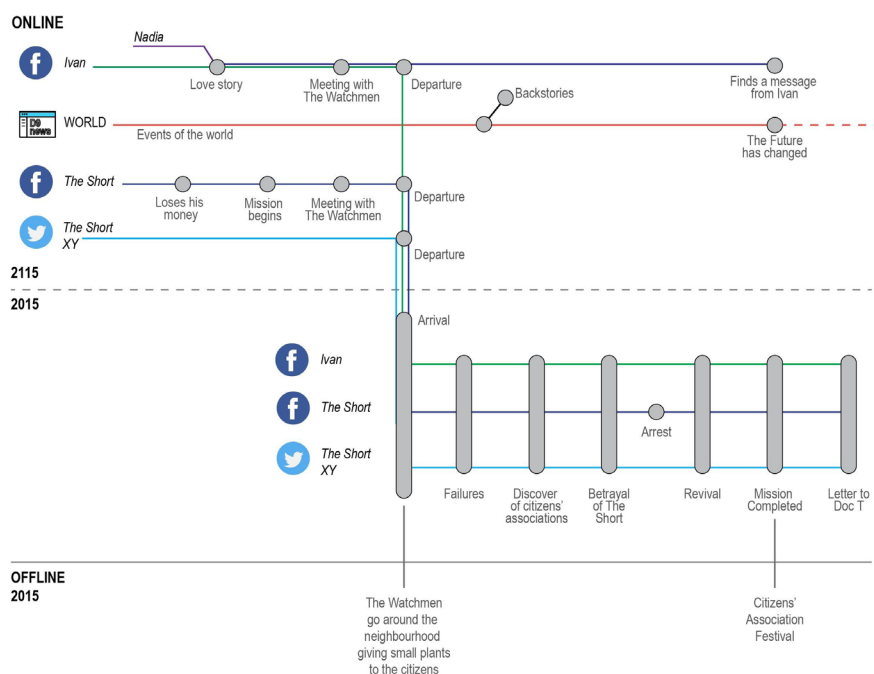


Figure 6.

Author - Simona Venditti.

Photo title - Media mix and plot points of *Watchmen of the Nine*.

Three storylines developed on different media are presented, in order to underline the relationships between the real (primary) world and the imaginary (secondary) world in terms of (1) partnerships with the stakeholders

and engagement of the local community online and offline, (2) visual representation and (3) relationship between reality and fiction.

Guardiani della 9 (Watchmen of the 9)

Author: Andrea Fossaluzza

Year: 2015

Platform: Facebook

Profile: <https://www.facebook.com/guardianidella9/>

Partners: Coltivando (the community garden at Politecnico di Milano, www.coltivando.polimi.it)

This spin-off focuses on the story of The Short, from his arrival at Zona 9 (in the present) to the completion of the time travel, i.e. the moment when the Watchmen understand that they are no longer able to return to 2115, but they are satisfied because they engaged the local community in concrete actions aimed at creating a sustainable environment. The Short is the narrator of the story and he publishes on Facebook his updates about the mission, which started on June 26, 2015 and finished on November 9, 2015.

In order to secure the engagement of the local community, considered as the main audience, the Facebook fanpage narrates the backstory of The Short and provides updates about the time travel. Moreover, blurring the boundaries between fiction and the real world, the fanpage promotes an event which was scheduled for real in the neighbourhood: the Citizens' Associations Festival. The narration itself was conceived as a way to engage with people from the local community, inspiring them to participate and promote the Festival themselves. The event was configured as an opportunity for the many associations present in the local area to introduce themselves and find possible collaborations. In fact, it represented an important moment for networking activities between different groups of active citizens. The Festival also had the goal of promoting the website D9News, giving participants the opportunity to play an active part in the narrative by influencing the online news with their actions and ideas. Thanks to the relationship created during the Festival between the public and the characters, the event had a high number of interactions on social media – considering the small scale of the event – (reach: 3300; 270 views and an average of 91 interactions).

In total, 51 posts were published on Facebook. The posts about events happening in the present show places that are familiar to the community of citizens, while the posts recounting past events in The Short's history

are more introspective. Six “teaser” videos are published, showing news reports from D9News channel about how the city appears in 2115. For designers, this storyline represents a way to nudge audience members to reflect more about environmental issues, and actively take part in local activities (e.g. participating in the Festival).

@Corto2115; @XY2115

Authors: Laura Ferreira, Chiara Miceli, Davide Povolo, Silvia Tremolada, Alessandro Zotta

Year: 2015

Platform: Twitter

Profile: @Corto2115; @XY2115

Partners: Coltivando (the community garden at Politecnico di Milano, www.coltivando.polimi.it)

This spin-off focuses on the background stories of two of the Watchmen as the main characters. The story genre is a modern form of the epistolary novel developed on Twitter: the team of students built an instant-messaging conversation between The Short (@Corto2115), who speaks from the present, and the assistant of the scientist who developed the mission (@XY2115), speaking from the future (Figure 7).

Stressing the properties of completeness and consistency (Wolf 2012) of the created storyworld, for this storyline the team of students was able to create a new character and to sustain narrative coherence through the visual representation. As an example of “twitterature”, the students focused on the creation of a specific logos for both the main character and the new character. In fact, these two characters are expressed through the manner in which they communicate: one character’s “speaking style” is characterised by a corruption of various languages, while the other character uses simple, very short sentences, resembling those in a telegram.

As for visual representation, even though this is mainly a copywriting project the team of designers decided to create new illustrations. Unlike the original visual representation (Figure 3), the new illustrations use a form that imitates 8-bit style. This deceptive contradiction, at least in visual terms, is on the contrary coherent with the narrative strand; coming from a future scenario characterised by limited resources, the transmission between the future and the present is represented using low-resolution visuals.



Figure 7.

Author - Laura Ferreira, Chiara Miceli, Davide Povolo,
Silvia Tremolada, Alessandro Zotta.

Photo title - Screenshot from the ig profiles @Corto2115; @XY2115.

Il Viaggio di Ivan (Ivan's Journey)

Authors: Gabriele Clemente, Rossella De Vico, Elisa Pintonello, Lorenzo Rizzoni

Year: 2016

Platform: Facebook

Profile: Il viaggio di Ivan,

<https://www.facebook.com/Il-viaggio-di-Ivan-1749654475262869/>

Partners: Coltivando (the community garden at Politecnico di Milano, www.coltivando.polimi.it)

Ivan's Journey is a science-fiction "graphic novella" published on Facebook. The narrative is composed of five chapters which were published on Facebook fanpage between January 28 and February 7, 2016. Chapters were published on the Facebook timeline twice a week for two weeks, as Facebook photo albums. The "graphic novella" tells the story of Ivan and his time travel from the future in order to save the life of his lover (Nadia). The story is told as a flashback from Ivan's point of view, with his innermost thoughts and feelings behind any decision and action he takes shown as notes in text balloons (Figure 8).

This story is based on Vogler's structure of the hero's journey (Vogler 1992). Ivan is overwhelmed by rage and desperation because he discovers that the time machine broke during the trip, preventing him from returning to the future. He is forced to stay in 2015, but he decides to leave a letter to his lover Nadia, in which he explains how his actions saved her. Nadia will read the letter in the future, but she will never be able to meet Ivan again.

While the narrative was unfolding on Facebook, a workshop⁷ was organised and the citizens of Zona 9 were invited to attend. They were asked to draw a picture on a postcard to express their wishes for the future, focusing on the environmental issues. The cards thus designed and produced by the citizens became part of the narrative content and were included in a final video, which shows Nadia reading Ivan's letter from the past. The message then is that Ivan was able to save Nadia thanks to the citizens' help.

In this case, the borders between reality and fiction were blurred by inviting the citizens to participate in the storyline and add their own contribution to the narrative by presenting their own visions about the future.



Figure 8.
 Author - Gabriele Clemente, Rossella De Vico, Elisa Pintonello,
 Lorenzo Rizzoni.
 Screenshot from the FB page *Il Viaggio di Ivan* .

⁷ "Cartoline dal futuro" ("Postcards from the Future"), 30th January 2016, Politecnico di Milano.

Final remarks

Watchmen of the Nine is a character-driven storyworld. To activate the world-building activity, the framework ideated by Pinardi and De Angeli (2006) constituted the basis for the creation of both storyworld and characters. In particular, the Chronos (Pinardi & De Angelis 2006) inspires and supports both the definition of the characters' personal growth, and the world's transformation. The case study presented in this paper is a good example of a transmedia narrative that combines entertainment with social purposes. Entering the universe of transmedia fiction projects represents for the audience a complex experience based on platforms, different types of content and the conveyed stories. The adherence to a genre allows the public to recognise and decode the references and clues that link the real world with the imaginary one, and to fine-tune their expectations. The storyworld defines, then, the constraints that both designers and prosumers (Toffler 1980) have to respect, in order to develop further storylines and to participate in grassroots initiatives: "[e]ven the implicit cultural bargain between author and reader introduced constraints on what could be thought, said, and understood in public" (Sterling 2009: 22).

In fact, some of the secondary characters who feature in the imaginary world are real people and citizens of the Zona 9 neighbourhood, and have been involved – online or offline – in the transmedia system. As underlined in the previous paragraphs, the project uses science-fiction elements and clichés (e.g. travelling in time, the time machine, the mad scientist) in order to elicit reflections about the present time by presenting a critical vision of the future. Narratives highlight the cause-and-effect relationships between the behaviour that the community has today, and changes that may arise in the future as a result of those decisions. In this way, the audience members become more aware of their environmental choices, and of the slow but progressive changes that individual behaviours can produce. This kind of perspective represents a weak signal heralding big changes in terms of cultural paradigms: after the Second World War and the atomic bomb, science-fiction stopped celebrating technology and science as advanced tools for defying nature and its laws. The positivist approach was abandoned in favour of so-called negative utopias and "sociological science fiction" (Sadoul 1973; Giovannoli 2015). Many questions and doubts arose, and the relationship with technology became pessimistic and unsettling, as the cyberpunk culture demonstrated. In our contemporary society, sustainability values are replacing technological positivism in prefiguring a possible positive future. There is still uncertainty and unrest – the heroes are still anti-heroes – but collaboration and widespread creativity, as values for the community, can make a difference.

Storyworlds can be considered as generative narrative engines, which allow for an infinite number of possible stories and are able to activate new perspectives on specific topics and contexts. In the design field, both storytelling practice and world-building activity can be seen as ways to enrich the design practice, giving the designer tools for the expression of ideas and creative solutions (storytelling) that can be set within a constructed world (world-making). The audience can immerse itself and participate in the meaning-making process, becoming part of the stakeholder system. In fact, world-building activity as a design practice can lead to the creation of narrative spaces that are able to unlock the potential of people and contexts. On the one hand, designers can create storyworlds for envisioning possible real-life worlds, using tools from the storytelling practice. On the other hand, constructed worlds are consistent with strategic goals, and the world itself enacts a value system, which should be meaningful and accepted by the target audience. In this way, people take part in the constructed worlds and contribute to developing a new glimpse of a situation through the use of tactics that encourage audiences to interact with the story.

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A Transmedia Overturning: Direct Address from Theatre to Cinema¹

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Abstract

A direct address – in visual and audiovisual forms of communication – occurs any time one or more characters inside the fictional world look straight at the spectators, blurring the threshold that separates the images from flesh-and-blood reality. However, different forms of direct address can take place in several media contexts, based on the specificity of each given medium.

This is particularly urgent with respect to two types of direct address: the theatrical and cinematic ones. While the former has studied thoroughly, mainly based on Bertolt Brecht's dramaturgy, the latter – also known as “look at the camera” – is arguably less understood. In the absence of a dedicated conceptualization, the cinematic direct address has commonly been treated merely as a transmedia counterpart of the theatrical one, thus overlooking the peculiarities of the two.

This article restores the autonomy of the cinematic direct address and elaborates on its specific non-the-

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atrical effects. First, it outlines the nature and functioning of the theatrical direct address as theorized by Bertolt Brecht. Then, by adopting a semiotic approach, it demonstrates that this type of direct address must not be confused with the cinematic one. Lastly, it introduces three non-Brechtian types of cinematic direct address: namely, the diegetic, the meta-filmic, and the documentary look at the camera.

Keywords

direct address, Brecht, look at the camera, cinema, theatre, medium specificity

An actor on the stage suddenly turning to the audience and acknowledging their presence, the blink of a superhero from a TV screen, the smile of Mona Lisa and Uncle Sam's pointing finger: they are all examples of what is defined as a direct address. In (audio)visual arts, and communication in general, a direct address occurs any time one or more characters inside a fictional world look straight at the spectators, turn their gaze at them, blurring the line that separates the realm of images from their reality of flesh and blood.

Although always jeopardising the radical opposition between real world and representation, not all forms of direct address are necessarily the same. As suggested, in fact, a direct address can take place in several different media contexts; and the nature and functioning of each medium tends to lend the act of looking at the audience very peculiar aesthetic meanings.

This is particularly important to bear in mind with regard to two types of direct address that have frequently been connected and even made equal in spite of their specificity in features and effects: the theatrical and the cinematic ones. While a quite widespread knowledge of the former exists, an in-depth and specific examination of the latter has often been lacking. Cinematic direct address, also referred to as the look at the camera, has commonly been considered merely a transmedia counterpart of the theatrical one, thus conflating and confusing the peculiarity of the two.

The present article aims to shed light on these separate objects of investigation, to restore the autonomy of the look at the camera, and to introduce some of its non-theatrical effects.

The theatrical direct address: an aesthetics of estrangement

Our knowledge of the consequences of the theatrical direct address is mainly based on the dramaturgic theory and practice promoted in the first half of the last century by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht.

The author's interest in the direct address was grounded in political reasons. He aspired for theatre to train spectators, transforming them into a group of active, critical citizens; but he was aware that he could not take any advantage of the traditional theatrical model he had at his disposal (Brecht 2001). This model hinged on the concept of identification: the audience had to be psychologically involved in the fiction, sharing the characters' emotions and feelings, crying or celebrating with them. In Brecht's opinion, this led spectators to a passive and sentimental attitude, which appeared completely inadequate when transposed to the field of politics. The audience had to be woken up.

Identification typically requires spectators to acknowledge a certain degree of truthfulness to the representation, indulging in the so-called illusion of reality: in order to partake in the grief or joy that are shown on the stage, they must at least temporarily accept what they see as if it were really happening. To defeat identification, therefore, Brecht needed to prevent the audience from this kind of illusionism; he was in need, to use his words, of "devices of estrangement", or "alienation". In a short essay written around 1936, the author explains his model of theatre:

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding (Brecht 1974 a: 71).

Estrangement devices contrast with identification by breaking the illusion of reality on which theatre normally bases its functioning, and thus, in the German playwright's opinion, they promote a more critical and distant approach to the events on the stage. In fact, once any possibility of considering them as real life is eliminated, the audience would not adhere emotionally to the characters' conditions anymore, but rather would analyse them to understand what they have been determined by and how they could be modified. Consequently, the performance would stop being perceived as a real time event to be lived together with its protagonists and would rather be considered as an explanation, a lesson to learn from.

In such a theoretical framework, direct address finds its place and meaning as a particularly powerful estrangement device. An actor performing a direct address, in fact, openly points at the presence of the spectators and, therefore, shows the artificial nature of theatrical actions. There is obviously no audience in real life; thus, when the spectators are revealed as such by the unmasking gaze of an actor, they are forced to admit that the

events that they are attending are prepared and staged for them. As the author states with regard to Chinese theatre, which deeply inspired his own:

Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place (Brecht 1974 b: 91-92).

Direct address, as any other Brechtian estrangement device, works against identification by undermining the illusion of reality on which identification itself should rest: when struck by a look from the stage, the audience cannot assign any degree of truthfulness to the representation anymore. By disturbing the stability of the fictional world, the theatrical direct address promotes a lucid distance from the representation, which is recognised as such: this is the reason why it can be said, in Brechtian dramaturgy just like in theatre in general, to have an anti-illusionistic effect.

(Mis)understanding Brecht in cinema

The Brechtian lesson had a very strong impact on contemporary dramaturgy, and its legacy remarkably persists to this day, often condensed into iconic formulas and ideas as the one of an actor looking directly at the audience. What is most interesting, however, is the fact that such lesson not only has affected the history of dramaturgy, but also has reached and influenced the field of film theory and practice.

Of great importance in this sense are the seventies, when a great revival of the German playwright took place. Several film theorists felt the urge, in this period, to call the established structures of cinema into question (Heath 1974; Mulvey 1975).² They accused Hollywood production in particular of transforming the spectators into daydreamers, sleepwalkers; of making them ready to accept as true and valuable whatever message a movie could convey. In their opinion, such manipulative power of Hollywood cinema was based on a particularly strong illusion of reality, imposing a high level of identification and empathic mirroring. In this ideological context, Brecht naturally came to be considered an undisputed point of reference. Most authors indeed felt they

² Most of these authors were gathered around the British journal *Screen*; thus, "the body of work in which direct address most frequently crops up as a subject of discussion is often referred to as »1970s Screen Theory«" (Brown 2012: 7).

shared the same need for critical attitude that had fostered the Brechtian revolution, and they basically aimed to dismantle cinematic illusionism like their master had dismantled the theatrical one.

Some of them also developed an interest in the direct address, as theorized by the German playwright, and started thinking of it as suitable for cinema as well. One of the authors who clearly exemplifies this tendency is the British film theorist Peter Wollen. In a brief essay first published in 1972, for instance, Wollen manifestly derives from Brechtian theory concepts and tools which he unproblematically transfers to cinema; and, importantly, he operates the same way with regard to direct address (Wollen 1982). In this essay, dedicated to the techniques Jean-Luc Godard employed in what is defined as an anti-Hollywood production, Wollen proposes a list of opposing terms referring to traditional and revolutionary values in cinema and links them to emblematic strategies through which they can be achieved. This is how the act of looking at spectators shows up in the essay: “Identification v. estrangement. (Empathy, emotional involvement with a character v. direct address, multiple and divided characters, commentary)” (Wollen 1982: 81). The author explicitly makes use of Brechtian vocabulary when addressing the two categories of identification and estrangement, and then maintains a Brechtian theoretical framework when connecting the latter to the device of direct address. The author does not even worry about clearly stating that a transposition has occurred between the two media contexts of theatre and cinema: their interchangeability is taken for granted, so that the direct address can simply be connected to estrangement, whether it is meant as a theatrical or as a cinematic one. The subsequent quotation includes an even more overt reference to the German playwright and confirms the impression that his lesson, in Wollen’s opinion, does not need to be discussed nor adapted when applied to cinema: “It is hardly necessary, after the work of Brecht, to comment on the purpose of estrangement-effects of this kind” (Wollen 1982: 82).

What Wollen and others in this period did was to establish an equivalence between stage and screen, between theatrical and cinematic audience; and to make direct address in theatre equal to its counterpart in cinema, the look at the camera.

The method they adopted, however, might need today to be questioned.³ Regarding the direct address specifically, and from an essentially aesthetic

³ The issue has been recently addressed by another British scholar, Tom Brown, already mentioned above, who has pointed at the widespread inaccuracy in Brechtian re-interpretations from the Seventies on (Brown 2012). The author’s framework and his interpretative tools, however, are mainly narrative ones and thus they slightly differ from the ones adopted in the present article, informed by aesthetics and media studies; the same is true, consistently, for the respective conclusions.

standpoint, such method authorised to select a device designed by Brecht with reference to the theatrical context and to re-use in order to obtain the same anti-illusionistic effect in a different representational situation. In this process the peculiar meaning of the cinematic direct address was neglected. This sounds problematic, since the implied premise is that a strategy devised to be employed in one medium would normally have the same effect in another one.

In what follows, this premise will be rejected. It will be argued, in consequence, that it is not possible to assume that the act of looking at spectators would maintain its nature and effects when transposed from theatre to cinema. It will be claimed, on the contrary, that such a transmedia shift of the direct address can provoke considerable variations, if not a complete overturning, in its aesthetic meaning.

For these claims to be supported, and for the cinematic look at the camera to be indicated as possibly very different from the Brechtian anti-illusionistic, anti-fictional device, both theory and examples will be presented. Firstly, an argument based on the concept of medium specificity will be proposed in order to explain why the theatrical and cinematic direct address should not be equated in their respective aesthetic meanings. Secondly, examples from selected movies will be described in order to introduce some of the non-Brechtian effects of the look at the camera.

Before the argumentation starts, however, a problematization of the definition itself of the “look at the camera” is required.

Which look? Which camera?

The term “look at the camera” implies the idea that characters must turn their gaze in the direction of the recording machine in order to establish a connection with the spectators. However, does merely looking in the direction of the camera always mean addressing the audience? A careful reflection easily reveals that this is not the case. Suppose a subjective shot, corresponding to the point of view of a first character, is showing spectators the entrance of a house. Suddenly, a second character opens the door and cheerfully greets the first one: the effect would be the greeting character looking in the direction of the camera. Since the camera is temporarily adopting the first character’s point of view, however, this act of looking at the camera would not translate into an act of addressing the spectators. This is because the same direction of a character’s gaze can actually correspond to different destinations. A gaze that is directed at the camera, in fact, is generally supposed to be destined to⁴ the spectators;

⁴ Here and below, the expressions “directed” and “destined” are used in order to establish

yet, in the case of the subjective shot, and in other situations in which the camera's point of view is appropriated by diegetic entities, a gaze pointing at the recording machine would actually be destined to these entities. Since the latter are not cases of a direct address to the audience, they will not be examined in the present article.

Still, why do such cases constitute an exception to the general rule, according to which the camera is normally assumed to lead to spectators or even to coincide with them? Why has the term the "look at the camera" come to be identified with the idea of addressing the audience directly?⁵ The field of film studies offers different answers to the above questions.

First, the camera could be said to lead to the spectators when referring to certain of this specific theoretical understandings. In this regard, it might be useful to draw on Edward Branigan's classification of eight possible conceptions of the camera (Branigan 2006). The author's aim is to "ask how the word »camera« functions in the language we use to talk about cinema" (Branigan 2006: 66), the assumption being that different discourses and theories use the same word differently. The look at the camera, for instance, might well be considered to constitute a direct address to spectators when the sixth of the possible conceptions listed by Branigan is adopted: when interpreted in its communicative conception, in fact, the device "provides the physical and psychological channel by which we enter and remain in communication [...] with a variety of implied authors, narrators, observers and characters, all willing to speak to us and provide information" (Branigan 2006: 82).

On the other hand, the place of the camera could be argued to coincide with that of the spectators' based on more factual and experiential reasons. One of these reasons is purely technical: given the dynamics of shooting and projection, an actor's act of looking toward the camera effectively results in the audience's impression of being looked at by him or her. In a more sophisticated way, spectators can be said to occupy the place of the camera if the concept of embodiment is employed in order to explain the relationship between the two. This is distinctive of several phenomenological and neuroscientific accounts of the filmic experience, in which the subjects watching a movie are claimed to get bodily involved in the perceptual and motor activity of the camera. The spectators would get to mimic and adhere to the camera's point of view by incarnating the human-like and yet invisible body outlined by the camera itself, and this is usually explained in terms of the recognition of an intentional consciousness at work

a connection with the notions of "direction" and "destination" respectively. That a gaze is "destined" to the spectators means that it is intended for, aimed at them.

⁵ This is true in relation to languages other than English, too. Consider for instance the Italian definition of "sguardo in macchina" and the French one of "regard caméra".

(Sobchack 1982, 1992) or in terms of processes of embodied simulation in more recent neuroscientific interpretations (Gallese & Guerra 2015).

These and other widespread understandings of the role of the recording machine and its relationship with the audience elucidate why normally it can be so smoothly implied that the act of looking at the camera equals that of addressing the spectators.⁶ Though it is not necessary for a filmmaker to consciously endorse one of these specific conceptions of the camera and its role, sometimes a precise choice with regard to this issue clearly lays behind certain kinds of direct address.⁷ After this quite lengthy discussion of the very definition of the “look at the camera”, it is possible now to go back to the two main lines of the present article.

Medium specificity and the nature of the signifier: the transmedia overturning

In order to understand the theatrical and the cinematic direct address respectively, it is useful to introduce the concept of medium specificity, which refers here to the peculiarity of the structural features and consequently of the representational outputs of any single medium. The starting point is offered by a brilliant article by the Italian semiologists and film theorists Vincenzo Buccheri and Francesco Casetti (Buccheri & Casetti 1999).

The authors compare theatre and cinema on the grounds of the kinds of representational agreement these two media require their audience to accept. By this notion, Buccheri and Casetti evoke the set of implicit rules and norms that spectators (and readers, for that matter) must accept in order for artistic and media representations to work properly. Different representational agreements variably define the general and well-known principle of suspension of disbelief: “I know it is not A, and yet I decide to believe it is A”. Thus, in virtue of the acceptance of a medium-specific representational pact, a medium-specific illusion is set.

⁶ Although its overall psychoanalytical framework suggests, due to its high degree of specificity, to keep it separated from the other ones listed above, it is hard not to mention another possible explanation for the phenomenon in question that has found exemplary expression in Christian Metz’s account of the spectators’ identification with the camera (Metz 1982). Since he is absent from the screen and thus he is completely located on the active side of perception, the author claimed, a subject watching a movie identifies with himself “as a pure act of perception”, “as look”; and once he does it, he “can do no other than identifying with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking” (Metz 1982: 49).

⁷ This is true, for instance, with regard to the meta-filmic look at the camera, to be introduced in the next pages of the present article: this kind of direct address seems to rest more patently than others on a communicative conception of the camera as the one outlined by Branigan and reported above.

What Buccheri and Casetti theorise is that a radical opposition exists between the theatrical and the cinematic representational agreements. The most important reason for such an opposition is linked to the material, to the texture of the representation, which is made of flesh and blood in theatre and is made of lights and colours instead in cinema. In the first case real objects and bodies move on the stage, while mere substitutes of them are shown on the screen in the second case. Buccheri and Casetti express themselves in terms, respectively, of “not-sign” and “sign” [segno] (Buccheri & Casetti 1999: 27-28); however, it is also possible to read these terms as “not-images” and “images” when semiotically interpreting an image as something that stands for, or substitutes for, an absent entity to be found elsewhere.

This is exactly what the cinematic signifier does, indeed, according both to the Italian authors and to Christian Metz, as the latter has clearly expressed in his fundamental 1977 book *Le Signifiant imaginaire. Psychanalyse et cinéma* (Metz 1982). The French writer specifically reflected on the imaginary status of the cinematic signifier, often comparing it to the theatrical one. Both media, he held, are based on a particularly rich and varied perceptual given: what they use as signifiers is equally made of vivid visual and auditory material. And yet, “the theatre really does »give« this given, or at least slightly more really: it is physically present, in the same space as the spectator. The cinema only gives it in effigy, inaccessible from the outset” (Metz 1982: 61). In theatre, in fact, actors and objects on the stage are actually present, sharing spectators’ status and environment; in cinema, on the contrary, actors and objects on the screen are already absent, because they are the recorded trace of absent entities for which they merely stand. They are, indeed, their image. Thus, as Metz aptly put it, “what is characteristic of the cinema is not the imaginary that it may happen to represent, but the imaginary that it **is** from the start” (Metz 1982: 44); and what best defines the specifically cinematic scopic regime is “the absence of the object seen” (Metz 1982: 61).

Going back to Buccheri and Casetti’s framework, the authors’ strong proposal is the following: what each representational agreement requires is a shift from “not-sign” to “sign” in theatre, and from “sign” to “not-sign” in cinema. As they themselves state: “In the theatrical agreement the spectator is required to negotiate the nature of »fiction« (that is of sign) of the reality on the stage” [“Nel patto teatrale lo spettatore è chiamato a negoziare il carattere di »finzione« (cioè di segno) della realtà sulla scena] (Buccheri & Casetti 1999: 27); while in cinema “the spectator is required to negotiate the nature of »reality« of an imaginary world” [“lo spettatore è chiamato a negoziare il carattere di »realtà« di un mondo immaginario”] (Buccheri & Casetti 1999: 27-28). So in the first medium, Buccheri and Casetti claim, the beholders face real actors but are encouraged to forget them in favour of the images

they are evoking. For instance, when they face actor Jimmy White perform, they must take him for the imaginary Merlin the Wizard he is referring to. They know they are seeing a concrete person, and yet they decide to believe that he is an image. In cinema, on the other hand, spectators literally face images, but they must take them for real bodies and objects. They know they are seeing images, and yet they decide to believe they are concrete entities.

Summing up, and opting for the sake of clarity in favour of the terminology suggested above, for theatrical representations to be effective “not-images” must be transformed into “images”; for cinematic representation to flow smoothly, instead, “images” must be converted into “not-images”.

What is proposed in the present article is to adopt Bucerri and Casetti’s framework in order to investigate the impact of direct address in relation, respectively, to the theatrical and the cinematic representational agreements.

With regard to the distinction above between the categories of “images” and “not-images”, it should be asked, firstly, which one of them better describes or suits a direct address. It seems plausible to consider a direct address as something rather related to the realm of “not-images”, the realm of flesh and blood, because this act is destined to an audience which is not imaginary, but concrete and present; importantly, this is true both for theatre and cinema. In fact, it makes sense to assume that the act of looking and speaking to spectators, as a communicative act, must imply in some way a structural homogeneity of the agents of the exchange. In other words, both the beholders and the character turning to them should be equally assignable to either the category of “images” or the one of “not-images”. Since the nature of the representation, and hence of the character, is arguably more elastic and alterable than the audience’s, it is the former that is more likely to adapt and adhere to the latter. That is, whatever its original nature, the representation, via and together with the character looking at the spectators, will manifest a “not-image” structure when a direct address occurs. In sum, when a direct address is performed, whether from the stage or from the screen, the representational situation can be said to acquire a non-imaginary, flesh-and-blood tinge.

The point now is that this leads to opposite consequences in relation to the representational agreements in theatre and cinema. If theatre, in fact, struggles to overcome the mere bodily reality of actors in order to affirm their nature as images, and so as characters, a direct address will on the contrary re-affirm the bodily one. Direct address contrasts the theatrical representational agreement, it weakens the suspension of disbelief that theatre as a medium should determine, because when it takes place spectators cannot convince themselves that they are seeing images anymore. Thus, and in perfect coherence with Brechtian theory, the occurrence of a direct address in theatre determines an anti-illusionistic turn. Conversely, cinema strives

for giving materiality and bodily presence to the images on a screen; and thus it is actually reinforced when a character, i.e. an image, starts acting like a real body, getting in touch with a real audience. The look at the camera is compatible with, and even fosters, the medium-specific suspension of disbelief required by cinema and therefore cannot be said to constitute a subversive, anti-illusionistic device.

Based on this argument, it appears evident that simply equating the aesthetic meaning of a cinematic direct address to that of a theatrical one is not acceptable: observations and analyses that take into account the principle of medium specificity demonstrate that the look at the camera differs intrinsically from its Brechtian ancestor due to deeply and highly peculiar features of its medium of reference.

This is not to say, however, that the cinematic direct address should be deprived of any interest or importance, nor should it be disregarded as a dull, irrelevant event in the context of a movie. On the contrary, it can produce a variety of effects, often brilliant and unusual. Therefore, in the second part of the present article, three of these possible effects are concisely introduced and discussed in order to show how the look at the camera can be fruitfully integrated in the narrative structure of a movie.

The diegetic look at the camera

Firstly, the look at the camera can be used to open a space for diegetic comments.

In several situations characters suddenly turn to spectators and give them a few words or a longer speech commenting on something happening in the world of the movie. Very often, characters try to establish an intimate contact with the audience in order to find understanding or even to share a sort of sneering complicity. This turning and speaking to the audience can become a permanent communicative strategy, and, in this case, the narrative structure of the movie is in fact partially dependent on direct address in transmitting its informative content.

This is true, for instance, for the quite well-known movie *High Fidelity* (Frears 2000). The main character, Rob (John Cusack), is a thirty-year-old capricious loser, constantly struggling against tragicomic tribulations that revolve around the break-up with his girlfriend. Throughout the movie, Rob often talks to spectators about these unlucky episodes of his life, searching for comprehension and support.

This kind of direct address has long been employed in the genres of comedy and musical, normally less tightly bound to (or independent of) the classic

cinematographic rules: it must be kept in mind, indeed, that the look at the camera constitutes a quite rigid taboo in the traditional Hollywood paradigm. This is precisely because this paradigm basically hinges on illusionism and identification, while, as explained, the act of directly addressing spectators has commonly been thought to disrupt both of these. It has been demonstrated above that this is basically not true from a theoretical standpoint; it is now possible to argue further that this is highly questionable even when concretely examining how the look at the camera works within a specific narrative context.

Focusing again on the case of *High Fidelity*, it is evident that the diegetic and winking kind of direct address described helps the spectators gain a deeper and more precise understanding of the narrative situation: by listening to Rob revealing his feelings, they can form a more complex opinion about his personality and his motivations, and so they can better calibrate their judgements and expectations in relation to the plot. Thus, more or less consciously, spectators end up hoping for things to happen or not, for words to be said or withheld, and they ultimately find themselves much more involved in the events on the screen. By getting closer to one or more of characters' secrets and thoughts, in fact, spectators become increasingly interested in their destiny and engaged in their stories.⁸ Consequently, and, in a sense, exactly in the opposite way than suggested by Brechtian film theorists, the stability of the fictional world is rather reinforced than undermined, together with the participation of the audience in the events that take place in it.⁹

The meta-filmic look at the camera

The second kind of the look at the camera being introduced suggests that this device, however inappropriate for destroying fiction, is very suitable for

⁸ It is worth remarking, however, as Brown correctly does (Brown 2012), that the mere fact that a character is confiding in the audience does not necessarily imply that he is being honest, nor that he deserves to be trusted. Consequently, although it generally provokes spectators to increase their involvement in the diegetic events, this kind of direct address does not always induce them to side with the character which it is being performed by. In the case of *High Fidelity*, for instance, spectators can decide either to trust Rob or not, and so to favour him or his ex-girlfriend, to take his parts or to blame him.

⁹ On the other hand, the idea of complicity this kind of look at the camera is able to elicit seems to connect the latter to the notion of "exhibitionism" as elaborated by Metz in his 1975 essay *Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)* (Metz 1982). In this essay the author defines exhibitionism as implying the reciprocal acknowledgment and the interactivity of the partners at play, while on the contrary describing cinematic pleasure as relying on the awareness that the object spectators are watching is unaware of being watched and unwilling to look back. Classic films, according to Metz, induce a form of voyeurism that does not comprise any element of exhibitionism and they conform to Benveniste's "story"

playing with it. Indeed, it can be brilliantly employed in order to realize not only diegetic, but also meta-filmic comments. This occurs when one or more characters talk to the audience, in the movie, about some aspects of the movie itself.

The meta-filmic potential of a direct address is due to the fact that it reveals the basic structural premises of any filmic product. A direct address, specifically, makes manifest the fact that a movie is created by someone and destined to someone else; in general semiotic terms, it materializes and clarifies the respective positions of sender and receiver.

Stimulating reflections about this kind of direct address are provided again by Francesco Casetti (Casetti 1998). The author's specific frame of reference is that of the "cinematographic enunciation", a term referring to "an appropriation of the expressive possibilities of the cinema which give body and consistency to a film" (Casetti 1998: 18). The enunciation process is based on a triad of "abstract categories that derive from the filmic text's fundamental articulation" (Casetti 1998: 46): the "I", standing for the "enunciator" or the origin of the enunciation; the "you", standing for the "enunciatee" or the recipient of the enunciation; and the "he, she or it", which refers to what is shown on the screen. Differently from the latter, the two former elements of the triad are normally present and yet invisible. However, when a direct address occurs, a specific disposition of the element of the triad is triggered: the "I" becomes visible by coming to coincide with the "he" or "she" of a character, and the "you" is overtly acknowledged as the recipient of the communication. So, the look at the camera can be said to figurativise the enunciator and also to highlight the presence of the enunciatee, although the latter remains absent in the visual field.¹⁰

rather than "discourse", since they present themselves as closed and unresponsive objects in which actors behave as if they were not conscious to be seen. Based on these premises, it can be expected that a look at a camera would produce a shift from "story" to "discourse" and from voyeurism only to exhibitionism. This gesture would probably have, in the context on Metz's theory, an anti-fictional effect as long as it would undermine consolidated ideas and expectations about how cinematic fiction should work. While worth considering, this possible interpretation of this kind of look at the camera is not problematic in relation to the theses exposed in the present article, in which the psychoanalytical assumption that fictional cinema must function as a voyeuristic device is not embraced.

¹⁰ The concept of enunciation and its use have been widely discussed in the field of film theory (Eugeni 2014).

With regard to Casetti's book cited in the present article, specifically, a fundamental critique has been made by Christian Metz (Metz 1991). Above all, the French theorist contests Casetti's use of deictics, such as the personal pronouns of the first and second person mentioned. In Metz's opinion, in fact, cinematic enunciation "does not give us any information about the outside of the text, but about the text that carries in itself its source and its destination" (Metz 1991: 762) and, therefore, it is better expressed in reflexive rather than deictic terms. When strongly influenced by deixis, any enunciation model forces the nature

Both a general semiotic analysis and Casetti's specific contribution suggest that a direct address provokes the structural elements of the filmic communication to be unusually emphasised and peculiarly disposed. Once such disposition has been set, and a meta-filmic space has been opened, the look at the camera can be used to amplify it and to play with other premises or aspects of the construction of the fiction. Often the focus shifts from theoretical semiotic issues to playful and more concrete allusions to behind-the-scene aspects of the cinematic production. Indeed, light-hearted comments, or more penetrating observations, about the differences between fiction and reality are very common too. Also, sometimes, simply revealing the representation as such can provoke a subtle kind of amusement.

In the final scene of the movie *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Black 2005), for instance, the main character, Harry (Robert Downey Jr.), sitting at a desk, directly speaks to the spectators and tries to sum up the most important themes of the movie so that they can leave with a message from it. Another character, his colleague Perry (Val Kilmer), shuts him up and takes his place, giving the spectators more information about the movie and even reminding them to validate their parking tickets when leaving the cinema. Some of the characters' comments in this scene are, as in the case of *High Fidelity*, diegetic ones; yet, the aim of the scene as a whole is clearly to underline the presence of the audience and the fact that they have been attending something prepared for them.

It must be stressed that playing this way with fiction, and also revealing it, is not the same as breaking it. On the contrary, the efficacy of a meta-filmic look at the camera very often rests exactly on the overall persistence of the cinematic illusion. In the instance of *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, it is precisely because the spectators perceive the diegetic world as still organic and autonomous that the main characters' allusions feel puzzling and thus hilarious: the meta-filmic direct address does not require a complete disruption of the fiction, but on the contrary must stand as a figure on the ground of fiction itself. With no doubt, cases exist in which reflections about the structural premises of the filmic representation are pushed so far that the credibility of the representation itself is irreversibly undermined; and in such cases a Brechtian reference is more appropriate, although inevitable discrepancies in the functioning of the device remain, due to the medium specificity of the cinematic context. Nonetheless, meta-filmic tricks that expect spectators to keep believing in what they see are definitely widespread if not prevalent,

of the cinematic representation and thus contains "three main risks: anthropomorphism, artificial use of linguistic concepts, and transformation of enunciation into communication" (Metz 1991: 758).

which definitely allows to rule out any easy equation between this kind of look at the camera and Brecht's paradigm of breaking the fiction.

The documentary look at the camera

The last effect of the cinematic direct address being presented shows the possibility of this device to function as a genre-converter. The look at the camera, indeed, sometimes confers a documentary tinge on the conventional diegetic situations in which it is employed: this is because a certain kind of addressing the audience is a well-established genre feature in most documentaries, especially the traditional ones. The "genre-converter" kind of look at the camera occurs when one or more characters look and speak to the audience manifesting an explanatory attitude toward specific subjects in the movie. By performing such peculiar direct address, characters deliberately copy the behaviour of scientists, journalists or experts in general who conventionally converse with spectators in documentaries.

In similar filmic situations, the use of a specific genre feature inevitably triggers a connection to the targeted genre. Spectators cannot avoid superimposing a documentary filter over the diegetic scene they are attending; therefore, the characterisation of such situations slightly shifts from fictional to non-fictional, and thus to referential.¹¹ Movies in which this happens are not documentaries. However, because of the documentary form they adopt, they tend to be approached as if they were such. Consequently, they invite the audience, if not to take what is shown for real, at least to consider it as if it were real. When a documentary look at the camera occurs, what spectators see does not become true, and yet it is not entirely fictional anymore. Therefore, this specific use of the look at the camera gives rise to a hybrid genre that, while fictional, can also aspire to convey a quasi-referential content.

Since a quasi-referential content seems simultaneously to aim at a correlative worldly object and to miss it, it might be worth it to clarify the relation between such ambiguous content and reality. The issue can be explored by considering the functioning of the television series *House of Cards* (Willimon 2013).¹² The main character, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), is a democratic congressman in the insidious world of contemporary American politics and shows the audience the mechanisms and traps of the latter, by system-

¹¹ Needless to say, such shift cannot be considered an anti-illusionistic one, since the fact that the filmic contents are referential constitutes an illusion itself and might only be true from the audience's standpoint; paradoxically, spectators abandon the first fictional situation just to be transferred into another fictional one.

¹² A television series is associated here with movies, since arguably a substantial similarity

atically making use of the direct address. The explanatory nature of Underwood's speeches is markedly reminiscent of the documentary genre and gives this precise tinge to the television series, questioning its purely fictional nature. Thus, the relation between *House of Cards* politics and the real political scene becomes complex: the series never overtly states that the represented world is the real one, and yet it constantly invites spectators to establish connections between the two. By inducing, via acting, an attitude of receptivity that would better fit a referential situation, *House of Cards* offers a fictional path, or interpretative frame, to the non-fictional object of contemporary American politics.

This actually mirrors the widespread tendency in contemporary media to blur the line between fiction and reality, and to refer to the latter by means of the former. Such tendency is obviously most dangerous not when the audience is instructed to take the media product as ultimately fictional, as in the case of *House of Cards*, but when it is offered a fictionalized product that is nevertheless declared as informational and referential. It is evident, in this second case, that merging fiction and reality to describe the latter easily allows concealing what, in a supposedly referential presentation, is actually a fiction-based manipulation or bias. A deeper investigation into the documentary look at the camera, considered as a symptom and an instance, could possibly help clarify the origins and the impact of the tendency described.

Conclusions

In conclusion of this article, and recollecting what has been sketched above, it has been observed that a cinematic direct address can show at least three possible declinations: it can coincide with the sneering look and words of a character, giving rise to a diegetic comment; it can be performed as a meta-filmic move, offering spectators a glimpse of the functioning of the cinematic representation; or it can suggest a link with another genre, particularly the documentary one, by imitating one of its formal features. All these possible aesthetic meanings of the cinematic direct address, it has been noted, are equally independent of, if not contrary to, the anti-illusionistic function this device is supposed to support when treated as a mere translation of the Brechtian theatrical direct address. Therefore, although limited, the range of types of the look at the camera introduced in the present article should be sufficiently persuasive for the need to reject similar simplistic and uncritical interpretations of a device that, even if derived from theatre, has developed in a completely autonomous way in its new media context. Confiding in spec-

between the two categories exists on the level of media features and structure.

tators or imitating a referential genre does mean performing an anti-illusionistic act, nor playing with fiction must necessarily provoke any rupture in the case of the meta-filmic look at the camera. Thus, the transmedia move of the direct address from theatre to cinema can truly be said to constitute a transmedia overturning.

This should actually come as no surprise, if the hints provided by Buccheri and Casetti's article and the following discussion are kept in mind. Indeed, when the concept of medium specificity is brought to attention, theatre and cinema reveal themselves as peculiar in their structure and functioning. The Italian authors were helpful in clarifying this point by concentrating on the respective representational agreements these two forms require; and their observations made it possible to provide a strong semiotic argument about the reasons why, given the distinct media premises and contexts in which it takes place, a direct address determines different overall effects in theatre and cinema. It was within such a theoretical framework that the subsequent analysis of the non-Brechtian functions of the look at the camera became both conceivable and fruitful.

A wider aim of the present article, after all, was precisely to show, through the case study of the direct address, how important it is to take into account the specific media context of a communicative strategy when it comes to identifying its aesthetic meaning. This can be considered a methodological cornerstone to be always borne in mind when conducting any investigation in the fields of (audio)visual arts and media studies.

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A “Savage Mode”: The Transmedial Narratology of African American Protest

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Abstract

This article explores narrative in African American protest art by examining Richard Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son*, alongside 21 Savage (Shayaa Abraham-Joseph) and Metro Boomin’s 2016 rap album *Savage Mode*. I open with a discussion of *Native Son* as a project of protest and with James Baldwin’s criticism of the novel, and of protest fiction at large. Centring Baldwin’s critique, this article explores the violence and horror of the narrative worlds of Wright’s *Bigger Thomas* and Abraham-Joseph’s *21 Savage*, in an effort to discover if these works are capable of complicating Baldwin’s claims and expanding notions of what protest is and how it operates.

By applying Marie-Laure Ryan’s concept of storyworlds, and the attendant “principle of minimal departure,” the article lays out a narratology of protest. The social protest of these works, I find, is rendered uniquely efficacious by the violence that takes place within their storyworlds, violence that operates as a visceral, unignorable force urging real-world change. Because of its impact on the reader or listener, violence and discomfort within these narratives directs that user toward extra-narrative action. In building on the transmedial approach that Ryan encourages, and examining

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Savage Mode as a contemporary work of protest that shares a narrative technique with *Native Son*, the article also discusses some recent engagements with rap music in traditional scholarship and popular writing.

Throughout, I put forth the argument that both *Savage Mode* and *Native Son* function as powerful works of protest against real-world conditions, protests that operate via narratives that empathically involve their users in violent storyworlds. Abraham-Joseph's protest, then, furthers Wright's, as both are works that operate in a "savage" narratological "mode"—one of intense violence and discomfort which, read as protest, has the capacity to prompt an activist response in the user.

Keywords

rap and hip-hop; storyworld; Richard Wright; *Native Son*; James Baldwin; African American literature

“The world, the real one, was civilization secured
and ruled by savage means.”
— Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015: 32)

Introduction

Protest has been a central focus of African American literature and art since before the time when it began to be categorized as such. Writers in the modernist period, such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, carried on and refined the struggles against slavery and legalized segregation of their forebears, reacting to the racial violence, hatred, and discrimination they encountered in their own time. As they did so, these writers outlined an approach to artistic social critique that became a foundation for African American art to come. This article, which is founded on a narratological examination of protest in Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son* (2005b), draws out some key elements of the narratology of protest by focusing on the various “worlds” created in African American protest projects. That is, it explores the machinery of protest by focusing on narratives through which protest is conveyed, especially on the reader’s (or “user’s”) experience of the characters, events, and sensations that make up those narratives, and the resulting experiential worlds constructed for an audience.

By using the world-building theory of Marie-Laure Ryan (2014) to ground the distinction between the real world, in which an artist lives, and the artistic world they craft in order to critique reality, there is fleshed out below a widely applicable structure of the form of protest. This structure provides a framework from which to initiate discussions of realism, violence, and performance in Wright’s protest work and in that of other protest artists. The article also uses this framework to work transmedially – a technique encouraged by Ryan’s theory and her drive for wider consciousness of narrative in media – by investigating world-building as an act of narrative protest in contemporary rap

music, through a parallel examination of artist 21 Savage's 2016 album *Savage Mode*. The project demonstrates, as it explores these narratives, both the mechanics of protest in narrative-based art at large and the continued workings of African American protest in the contemporary moment, showing how current African American art accesses a historically established "mode" of protest that emerges in forms and genres often discounted from scholarly discussions of social critique. Though each of these works possesses its own narrative world, with its own set of characters, conventions, and circumstances, their narratives participate in a shared endeavour to reflect critically on the real world.

Native Son and Wright's protest

"The Negro writer", Wright argued in 1937:

who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary (1999: 86).

In publishing *Native Son* three years later, Wright sought to do just this, bringing his own "complex consciousness" of the history and circumstances of African American life to bear on the struggles of protagonist Bigger Thomas. These struggles – from the opening scene of the cramped apartment Bigger shares with his mother, brother, sister, and a "huge black rat" (Wright 2005b: 5), through Bigger's employment by Mr. and Mrs. Dalton and his subsequent murder of their daughter Mary, through Bigger's murder of girlfriend Bessie and his flight from and capture by police, all the way to the trial that follows and ends in a sentence of death – mark *Native Son* as a quintessential novel of protest.

As Wright put it in his essay on the origins of the novel's central figure, "the conditions of life under which Negroes are forced to live in America contain the embryonic emotional prefigurations of how a large part of the body politic would react under stress" (2005a: 447). David Britt, reflecting on *Native Son* as a "watershed" moment in African American protest writing nearly thirty years after its publication, frames this protest a bit more specifically (1967). Britt notes that in *Native Son* it is "clear that white prejudice has instilled into Bigger the rational fear which results in the Dalton tragedy" (1967: 4). That is, by displaying the horrific conditions of Bigger's life and bringing their impact on a human subject to a logical conclusion through the character, Wright sought to demonstrate that immense social and political changes were needed.

Baldwin and critical responses

Native Son was and remains controversial because of the brutal lengths to which it goes in demonstrating the monstrosity of what it meant to grow up African American in the first half of the twentieth century. As Kadeshia L. Matthews put it, “Bigger Thomas’s answer to the question of how a Negro becomes a man is violence” (2014: 277). James Baldwin, in his famous attack on *Native Son* and the protest novel at large in *Notes of a Native Son*, focused his critique on Bigger’s “hatred and his fear”, through which “All of Bigger’s life is controlled [and] defined” (1984: 22). It is this fear that “drives [Bigger] to murder and his hatred to rape” (Baldwin 1984: 22). Robert James Butler opened a 1986 article on Wright’s novel with an overview of critical responses to the brutal violence in *Native Son*, including discussion of several critics who, like Baldwin (1984), have lamented that Wright’s use of overt violence is detrimental to the efficacy of *Native Son*’s protest of systemic social injustice. Butler, however, uses a different tactic, mounting a case that in *Native Son* Wright “uses violence extensively but as a necessary and powerful reflector of the deepest recesses of its central character’s radically divided nature” (1986: 10). The novel is one of incredible brutality and contains, for example, a detailed description of a young woman’s head being sawed from her already-dead body (2005b: 92). In Butler’s approach this empowers, rather than hinders, the novel’s message of protest.

Baldwin concluded his takedown of the protest novel by claiming that its “failure [...] lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (1984: 23). This article responds to Baldwin’s criticism by posing two questions; first, can a work that rejects life within its narrative affirm life outside of it? And second, can a work insist on an internal reality without its creator therefore insisting on the solipsistic primacy of that reality? In the following sections, there is outlined a theoretical approach to multiple realities that reveals the narratological machinery of protest, a machinery that operates precisely by rejecting life within a narrative in order to affirm life in reality. Violence in this sense emerges in *Native Son* and *Savage Mode* as Butler describes it: “a necessary and powerful reflector” in a fictional world of the horrors perpetrated on African Americans in the real world (1986: 10). The power of the artistic violence lends power to the protest; through the intensity of brutality in a narrative, the real-life social and political brutality that “inspired” the work is brought to the forefront of the user’s experience.

Narrative worlds “across media”

Marie-Laure Ryan, in her work on transmedial world-building theory (2014), outlines a narratological approach to texts across media by parsing these texts in terms of the worlds their narratives create. Ryan’s approach is a critically rigorous take on a popular way of talking about art-worlds; Ryan’s “worlds” are posited against the concept’s “traditional but informal sense”, where “»world« stands for various ideas: the social and historical setting typical of the author’s works [...] the major themes and recurrent images of this work [...] and the author’s general ideas and philosophy of life [...] what we call [...] a »worldview«” (2014: 32). In contradistinction to these understandings of “worlds”, Ryan uses the term “storyworlds” to refer to worlds that are “something projected by individual texts [...] so that every story has its own storyworld” (2014: 32). A storyworld, furthermore, “cannot be called the »world of the author« because [...] authors are located in the real world while the storyworld is a fictional world” (Ryan 2014: 32). The concept of storyworlds provides a narratological tool for separating out the world of an author and that of a text, which can in this case help both to explain how narrative functions in protest art, and to draw out the ways in which storyworlds reflect the real worlds of their authors and influences.

Besides the essential theoretical grounding that Ryan’s work on world-building provides, it also affords a critical basis for making fruitful connections between the worlds that emerge in various forms of media. Ryan’s interest in narratology at large leads her to encourage the comparison of “storyworlds”, as the title of her edited volume with Jan-Noël Thon indicates, “across media” (2014). Inviting works and texts from visual and graphic arts, music, films, and more, can only help to enrich understanding of narrative. Inspired by this aim, this project moves to bring the protest found in current rap music into conversation with the protest of Wright’s Bigger Thomas.¹ Rather than focusing on the obvious social and political critique that is directly presented as such in the work of artists like Kendrick Lamar, Common, or Talib Kweli, the discussion here draws on the recent work of an artist whose persona does not immediately present its world as one of protest, but who is what might be called a Bigger Thomas of rap. In doing so, the connection is made here between the history of African American protest and the subtle ways in which that legacy continues in contemporary popular media, demonstrating the continued efficacy of Wright’s narrative

¹ The term “rap”, rather than “hip-hop”, intentionally to avoid accessing the prestige markers often conveyed by references to “hip-hop”, as these markers are both superfluous and exclusionary.

approach, the potential for revealing perspectives on the social to be found in forms that are often critically invisible, and the wide-ranging critical utility of a transmedial world-based perspective.

A Savage Mode

In July of 2016, Atlanta rapper 21 Savage (Shayaa Abraham-Joseph) teamed up with producer Metro Boomin (Leland Tyler Wayne, known for his work with artists such as Drake and Future), and together the two released the collaborative album *Savage Mode* (2016). Abraham-Joseph's lyrical work on the album is powerfully violent, pseudo-nihilistic, and brooding, and it is delivered in a gruff, menacing mumble that staggers through Wayne's minimalist production. As Micah Peters put it in an article for *The Ringer*, Abraham-Joseph "hisses about drinking codeine and murdering people over sparse horror movie scores" (2016b). The rapper sounds largely detached from the meanings and the frequently violent implications of what he says, as when, to select one example from many, he matter-of-factly threatens to "wet your mama house, wet your grandma house, / keep shootin' until somebody die", as if this is simply the way things are done (*No Heart*). And it isn't only the threats that come across as cold and dead-eyed in *Savage Mode*. Peters has called attention as well to the moments of supposed pleasure on the album, places where even the most nihilistic rappers typically take a moment to enjoy themselves: "The first non-ad-libbed line you hear on *Savage Mode* is, »I smashed the skrippler in the hotel wit' my chains on« [*No Advance*]. On paper, that reads like another rapper boasting about a predilection for using women as disposable playthings" (2016a). However, within the album's aesthetic, "the boast feel[s] labored and joyless; like a coping method for all the messed-up shit he's seen and done" (Peters, 2016a).

Protest and the rejection of life

The miserable physical and psychological conditions that Abraham-Joseph describes throughout *Savage Mode* construct a storyworld within the album that overlaps a great deal with the bleak, vicious storyworld in which Bigger finds himself.² While fictional and distinct from the real world lived in by Wright and Abraham-Joseph, these storyworlds do not exist independently

² Although *Savage Mode* does not relate a single unified story with the traditional narrative progression that *Native Son* does, it still asserts a fractured narrative that the listener expe-

of that world; in fact, the intersections and divergences between these multiple realities are precisely what make protest art work. Although rap music, especially that in the trap-rap vein to which Abraham-Joseph's work mostly belongs, is rarely tied explicitly to protest of real-world conditions, in creating a fictional world different from but related to the real one – a storyworld full of the violence, hatred and fear that Baldwin found so distasteful – Abraham-Joseph distills this negativity into a work where it can be analysed and reflected on, as Wright does through *Native Son*. Where Baldwin contended that protest art fails because of its rejection of life, it is essential to the protest projects of Wright and Abraham-Joseph that this rejection of life takes place only within the storyworld and by its protagonist, and need not entail a rejection of life outside the work. Whether *Native Son*, and protest art in general, does in fact so completely reject life in the way Baldwin describes is debatable,³ but it is argued here that, even if Baldwin's premise is accepted, by examining the narratology of protest in *Native Son* and *Savage Mode* it will be found that his conclusion – that rejection of life invalidates protest art – is incorrect.

In fact, precisely the opposite is true: if Bigger rejects life when he rapes and murders, and 21 Savage when he kills, robs, and vows to “cut off your hands” (*No Advance*), each is rejecting life within their storyworld. The potency of this rejection is that it leads to questions of why these characters would reject life, and in these questions are the aims of protest itself, for this “why” leads to an examination of the horrors of their storyworlds – horrors like the viciously racist language used to animalize Bigger by the state prosecutor Buckley, who calls him a “black mad dog” – and their origins (Wright 2005b: 409). This leads the user to further questions of what it was that Wright saw in his own world that led to the terrible state of Bigger's world, and what Abraham-Joseph experienced that pushed him into his “savage mode”⁴. Protest in this form operates via affirming life in the real world by calling attention to aspects of it that require change. This is to say that protest, by unabashedly confronting a user with horrors that require mending, and thus arguing for change, contends that the real world and the people in it are worth saving.

periences in disjointed succession.

³ There is a fleeting, life affirming beauty, for example, in Bigger's contemplation of “the tiny plane [that] looped and veered, vanishing and appearing, leaving behind it a long trail of white plumage, like coils of fluffy paste being squeezed from a tube” (Wright 2005b: 16). That this beauty is marred by the social impossibility for Bigger of pursuing it only adds to *Native Son's* critique.

⁴ Abraham-Joseph explores precisely this issue in a 2016 interview, and how, following his own shooting and the accompanying death of a close friend, he “turned into a savage” (VladTV 2016: 4:57-5:09).

“Minimal departure” and transworld overlap

To measure the distance between the real world in which works are crafted and the various levels of reality in storyworlds, Ryan applies what she calls “the principle of minimal departure” (2014: 35). Storyworlds are “an imaginative experience. In the case of fiction, this experience is a blend of objective knowledge and make-believe; the user [...] pretends to believe that [a storyworld] exists autonomously or, in other words, that it is real” (Ryan 2014: 34-35). The principle of minimal departure provides a way to gauge the extent to which the user, in this case the reader or listener, can fill out and understand the details of a storyworld by extrapolating from and applying knowledge they have of the real world, and to what extent the user must learn new details and attempt to fill in gaps of comprehension by extrapolating from information provided within the storyworld. This principle operates in such a way that “when a text mentions an object that exists in reality, all the real-world properties of this object can be imported into the storyworld unless explicitly contradicted by the text” (Ryan 2014: 35). What this allows for is not the needless ranking of the realities of texts and worlds, but the grasping of their spatial separation and overlap, which is especially appropriate to discussion of Wright’s realism and of artistic works that comment on the real-world situations of their creators.

In the case of *Native Son* and protest art, the central narratological utility of the principle of minimal departure is to help in parsing out to what extent and in what way the “objects” of social conditions can be directly imported from the real world into that of the narrative, and thus to describe the degree of overlap between the two. There is, in virtually every kind of text, an element of the storyworld and of unreality, even in biographies and depictions of real-world events. “Nonfictional stories”, Ryan clarifies, “are told as true of the real world, but they do not necessarily live up to this ideal” (2014: 33). Because of this, it is “necessary to distinguish the world as it is presented and shaped by a story from the world as it exists autonomously” (Ryan 2014: 33). In the case of realist fiction like *Native Son*, it is obvious that the novel constructs a storyworld, that is, that the characters and events are fictional. Even though Wright’s text, as realist fiction, is crafted to allow for a high degree of importability of real-world information and objects, be they places, political/social circumstances, or literal physical objects, there are aspects of unreality that Wright himself acknowledges. In *How “Bigger” Was Born*, Wright notes for example this scene:

Bigger stands in a cell with a Negro preacher, Jan, Max, the State's Attorney, Mr. Dalton, Mrs. Dalton, Bigger's mother, his brother, his sister, Al, Gus, and Jack [...] I knew that it was unlikely that so many people would ever be allowed to come into a murderer's cell (2005a: 458).

It is, of course, also unlikely that this large group would all fit simultaneously in Bigger's jail cell. In terms of the principle of minimal departure however, such a scene does little to detract from the novel's realism; while some of the details of this scene seem unusual, they are not so far removed from reality that they cannot still be easily imagined.⁵

Spencer Hawkins, in a superficially dissonant study published in 2016 that explores overlap between the worlds of musical works and that of their listeners, arrives at a description of this overlap that is strongly aligned with Ryan's principle, although he does not use her terms. Hawkins' work compares the rhetorical performance of rapper Snoop Dogg (Cordozar Calvin Broadus, Jr.) with that of ancient Greek sophists (2016). In what is largely a study of how rap music functions as persuasion, Hawkins also gestures to the way that rap creates worlds, and the protest that can derive from them, although he is cautious about attributing the latter to Broadus: "I charitably read his bravura as an act of defiance against institutionalized racism" (2016: 134). In terms of worlds, Hawkins claims that "Gangsta rap builds what Josh Kun calls an »audiotopia«, a musical fantasy space populated only by the likeminded" (2016: 132). With reference to Ryan, it is argued here that like-mindedness is essentially another phrasing of the principle of minimal departure; that is, how "alike" are the user's real-world and the "fantasy space" created in the artistic world? If they are largely unlike, this does not mean that the musical space (world) is permanently inaccessible to the user; it will simply require a greater imaginative leap for the user to access that world.

The narratology of imported experience

Where *Native Son's* storyworld creates social critique, in scenes where its reflection of Wright's world constitutes specific protest, the principle of minimal departure is a tool for gauging and discussing the impact of that protest. In the scene with the rat that opens the novel, the reader is accosted immediately by the ringing of the alarm clock, which signals the reader's own awakening

⁵ There should be added here the caveat that realism, and a close relationship between the real world and a storyworld, are not the only ways to create protest. In his 1952 novel *Invisible Man* (1995), for example, Ralph Ellison crafted protest fiction using precisely the opposite technique by pointing out the absurdity of social conditions.

in Bigger's world. Gradually, distress builds as the details of the Thomas family's living conditions are disclosed. The "dark and silent room" echoes a "surlly grunt"; the reader explores the uncomfortably crammed area of the "narrow space between two iron beds"; the reader discovers the lack of partition or additional rooms as the boys must turn away to allow their mother and sister privacy in dressing (Wright 2005b: 3). All of this comes in the novel's opening page, and the overall sensation created – even before the reader is assaulted, like Bigger and his family, by the gigantic rat – is one of claustrophobic discomfort and jarring emotional unease. "The narrowness of the Thomases' room reflects the narrowness of their lives", Matthews reflects (2014: 281), and Wright's protestation of the restriction of both is reflected in the empathetic discomfort experienced by the reader.

There is little in this opening scene that cannot be easily and instantaneously imported from the reader's own experience.⁶ The objects that are encountered in this scene the reader has likely come across in their own daily life, and the cramped conditions can be extrapolated by the reader from uncomfortable spaces they have found themselves in previously. In other scenes, the reader may or may not have had experiences that correspond to those experienced by Bigger. When Bigger first visits the Dalton's to interview for a position as their driver, he wonders upon his arrival, "Would they expect him to come in the front way or back?" (Wright 2005b: 44). He worries, "Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody. He grew angry" (Wright 2005b: 44). In this case the reader may or may not have experienced Bigger's line of thought. Even if the reader has not, Bigger's emotions and worries in the scene do not constitute an un-importable departure from the worries, uncertainties and frustration that anyone experiences when confronted by new situations, or when one finds themselves to be somewhere where they are not wanted.

It is important to clarify here that none of this discussion is to trivialize the racial terror Bigger experiences in a white neighborhood, knowing that he could easily be arrested, harassed, or attacked for simply being black. Nor is it intended to generalize or universalize what Bigger feels here, to say that because everyone has at one time or another been uncomfortable or angry that everyone has therefore been subjected to the sort of humiliation that Bigger experiences, that the reader "knows his pain". This is clearly not the case, and this discussion hopefully avoids falling into the trap David Britt describes when he argues that "[b]y discussing Bigger Thomas in human/universal terms rather

⁶ This statement (and the principle of minimal departure in general) is of course subjective. If one was to imagine a hypothetical reader at the time of publication, however, perhaps a middle-class recipient of *Native Son* as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, that may help provide a baseline for the subjective importation of the reader's experience in this case.

than as a social phenomenon one does violence both to the text of *Native Son* and to the terms as parts of a meaningful critical vocabulary” (1967: 5). Instead, what this conceptualization of departure and overlap draws out is how protest functions in narrative; by extrapolating from lived experiences in order to make an attempt at understanding those undergone by Bigger, the reader is forced to regurgitate instances of his or her own discomfort, whatever those may be.

Parsing the worlds of rap music

The question of overlap between real world and art world is one that also frequently arises in critical commentary on rap music. Particularly because real-world violence is often directly cited by artists as motivation for their music and referred to explicitly within rap narratives, moves to relate real-life trauma experienced by a rapper to the violence which emerges in their work are common. Israel Daramola’s review of *Savage Mode* for *Pitchfork*, for example, opens with a catalogue of tragic events in Abraham-Joseph’s life, events which serve as “an explanation for so much of the bleakness of the music and the performative apathy in how he treats violence; he’s been consumed by it in the most formative years of his life” (2016). For Daramola – and, to a lesser extent, for Peters – the rapper’s biography justifies the musical content, and the latter is in many ways a retelling of the trauma in the former. Contrary to these biographical approaches, which at least attempt to address the underpinnings of contemporary art that may not universally present itself as worthy of critical inquiry, are approaches to rap music like Toby S. Jenkins’ (2011). Jenkins looks to confer value on “hip-hop” artists as thinkers and intellectuals by pointing to lyrics by Jay-Z, Mos Def and others, lyrics that reveal a thoughtfulness and depth that Jenkins feels, is not properly accorded to rappers. Jenkins’ defence of rappers’ intelligence and genius is enthusiastic and, in general, commendable, but it is in the end short-sighted. His focus on the need for lyricism as evidence of intelligence and thoughtfulness, and on the necessity that rappers move “beyond glorifying one-dimensional and often fake identities in their music and lyrics” – the purview of the “thug” – means that his criticism actually participates in the stereotyping that he is fighting against by privileging artists within the form that provide easy evidence of their “intelligence”, while those that do not are relegated to thuggery, and their music is discarded as “harmful art” (Jenkins 2011: 1248).⁷

⁷ Also at issue here is that Jenkins’ criticism of gangster rap rests in large part, as popular-media attacks on rap music often do, on the oversimplification that people simply seek to repli-

Though Abraham-Joseph was still years away from notoriety in the United States when Jenkins' article was published, it can be said with a good deal of confidence that his music would probably be lumped into Jenkins' category of "harmful art", and it does not appear likely that any amount of insistence on *Savage Mode's* biographical accuracy would help to make a case otherwise.⁸ To escape such dualistic reduction necessitates the incorporation of Ryan's principle of minimal departure. Art need not – and, as Ryan's principle demonstrates, likely cannot – exactly correspond to the real life of its creators, or describe real-world events with such precision as to render the two worlds identical. Ryan's narratology therefore preserves the critic or listener from being forced to make distinctions of whether a piece of rap music "authentically" reflects reality – see Jenkins' "one-dimensional [...] fake identities" (2011: 1248) – and makes obvious, direct commentary upon it, or fails to do so and therefore must be cast aside. In encountering the degrees of distance or similarity that can be parsed out through the principle of minimal departure, the user experiences different degrees of narrativity via different approaches to art, protest, and representation in general within various storyworlds.

From this perspective, it becomes apparent that whether Abraham-Joseph's persona of 21 Savage is, in fact, "fake" or not, is not the question. What is, is whether the conditions of the narrative world of *Savage Mode*, and its connection to the real-world in which it was conceived, can be used to extrapolate a push for social change. Protest art, as has been argued throughout this article, need not declare itself as protest, it need only display conditions of an unlivable narrative world in such a way that it causes the user to reflect on their own world and be moved to see this unlivable quality in it, and prompt them to push for change. As in *Native Son*, the experience of bleak horror⁹ that permeates the world Abraham-Joseph has created in *Savage Mode* leads the listener to question why such a world was shaped. Through the principle of minimal departure, it can be seen, not how closely the world of 21 Savage represents the world of Abraham-Joseph, but how closely it represents the world of each individual listener. By then extrapolating themselves into the nightmarish situations of *Native Son* and *Savage Mode*, readers draw lines between their own experiences,

cate behaviour they see in art and in others, and that art that does not therefore demonstrate "good values" is essentially harmful.

⁸ There is perhaps a case to be made based in trauma theory – one which Daramola and Peters lightly gesture to – that violent rap music allows insight into the process of recovering from and dealing with trauma that alone makes it worthy of further critical examination.

⁹ Peters goes so far as to classify *Savage Mode* as a work of "trap horrorcore", along the lines of Three 6 Mafia's early records (2016a).

those of Bigger Thomas, and those of 21 Savage, a Bigger Thomas of our contemporary moment. Instead of rashly relegating art like *Savage Mode* to the supposedly critically-irrelevant realm of ignorant thuggery, the user should instead engage with this work and inquire why such art arises, and ask if there is something they can learn from it about their social and political obligations.

In recent scholarship, the reductionist rejection of non-“lyrical” or “unintelligent” rap music has thankfully begun to fall away as scholars have embraced the nuance and potential of worlds that operate outside of traditional scholarly forms. Mukasa Mubirumusoke, for example, has lately brought the work of rapper Nas (Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones) together with Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy on the variability of truth in a way that brings out the protest performance of an art form where being “honest” sometimes means being dishonest:

a rapper such as NaS [...] often raps honestly in this Nietzschean sense about his experiences in an anti-black world, that is, rapping “frankly” about the conditions of life as a black person, even when the entire content of the lyrics [...] may be untruthful or lies (2016: 177).

In terms of protest, such an approach “provides a critical, extramoral edge for interpreting and understanding the life-denying and morally depraved circumstances of black life” (2016: 177). Though the intention here has been to go further than Mubirumusoke, who in his discussion of Jones still lights upon an artist who often does present his art as explicit social critique, Mubirumusoke’s approach applies to *Savage Mode* as well. The world Abraham-Joseph crafts for his 21 Savage personae to inhabit is most certainly “morally depraved” (2016: 177), and as such it provides a narrative window for engaging with real-world moral depravity. Mubirumusoke points especially to the necessary separation of art from life, as described by Ryan’s principle of minimal departure, and it is this separation which makes rap music effective protest, rather than the opposite: “Black rappers should not be tried as criminals because of their lyrics but, instead, seen from [an] outlaw perspective, which forces the listener to rethink the sociological status quo of the pathologically criminal and undesirable black American” (2016: 191). The listener who enters the rapper’s narrative world, like the reader who is thrown into Bigger’s, undergoes a transformation of perspective that makes it much more difficult to simply pathologize these individuals.

Protest and empathy

The understanding of protest used throughout this article is based in affect and empathy; the user feels what they know of Bigger's and 21 Savage's experiences by importing relevant experiences of their own into their comprehension of the narrative, and these experiences become tied to the protagonist's as the reader explores the narrative world. The mechanics of empathy in transmedial narratology have been explored by scholars like Marco Caracciolo (2014), whose "empathetic perspective" on works such as William S. Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch* and the 2003 video game *Max Payne 2* examines how, in visceral narratives of this kind, "characters' experiences can be represented only because stories tap into the experiential reservoir shared by the recipients" (2014: 231). *Native Son* and *Savage Mode* in this manner multiply the feelings of discomfort and terror that users have imported into the storyworld from their daily lives in a way that confines, attacks, and contorts the user unflinchingly and repeatedly. In both works, the user experiences the sheer unlivable horror of constant captivity, constant distress, and constant hatred and fear as they empathically interpolate these sensations with the protagonists. It is this experience that makes Wright's and Abraham-Joseph's protest effective; they make the reader feel that such conditions cannot be withstood and must be changed. As Caracciolo puts it, "in temporarily adopting the characters' perspectives, we afford them a chance for interacting with – and leaving a mark on – our broader outlook on the world" (2014: 236). The user turns then, it is hoped, from their experience of these storyworlds to the real world, where they have the capacity to make changes.

Closing: revisiting Baldwin

Before concluding, it is necessary to briefly address the second part of Baldwin's critique of the protest novel, and the second question posed above regarding it – that protest fiction fails "in its insistence that it is [the human being's] categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (1984: 23), and whether the insistence on a particular perspective within a work does in fact necessitate the privileging of this perspective outside of it. By applying the preceding formulation of the various levels of reality that operate across different worlds and collaborate to shape the experience of a work, and the principle of minimal departure, it is now possible to counter Baldwin's claim of the solipsism of Bigger's reality. In *How "Bigger" Was Born*, Wright actually doubles down on Baldwin's criticism, but he does so as an argument for the strength of *Native Son's* protest:

Wherever possible, I told of Bigger's life in close-up, slow-motion [...]. I had long had the feeling that this was the best way to "enclose" the reader's mind in a new world, to blot out all reality except that which I was giving him (2005a: 459).

Wright here is describing precisely that elision of narrative distance that has been repeatedly pointed to in the above discussion; as readers experience *Native Son*, they "feel that there was nothing between [them] and Bigger" (2005a: 459). Baldwin's critique becomes instead an astute appraisal of Wright's technique (and Abraham-Joseph's); of course it is Bigger's "categorization alone which is real" (Baldwin 1984: 23), as this is by design the only categorization afforded by Wright within the storyworld. Inside that world this perspective cannot, and should not, be transcended, or the oppressive conditions that drive the reader to act on the work's protest will fall away. Where Bigger's "categorization" can be transcended is outside of the reality of his storyworld, in the real world, but understanding the need for this move arises only through violent, direct, and prolonged experience with Bigger's life.

Conclusion

It has hopefully been demonstrated in the preceding discussion of *Native Son* and *Savage Mode* that there can be positivity in negativity, and affirmation of life in its rejection. To so powerfully say "no" to life, as do Bigger Thomas and 21 Savage within their storyworlds, should lead the user to say "yes" to improving life outside of those worlds. The user should embrace this violence and horror as visceral rejections of the conditions of their own existence, as symptoms, and then – recognizing that the deplorable conditions of these storyworlds are not purely narrative fantasies but distillations of real-life conditions – seek these symptoms out at their sources. The race-based confinement, hatred, and fear that permeate *Native Son* continue in the claustrophobia and inhumanity of *Savage Mode*, and both works operate in the narrative "mode" of the latter. As Ta-Nehisi Coates states in the epigraph that opens this essay, "The world, the real one, was civilization secured and ruled by savage means" (2015: 32). The cruel storyworlds of Bigger and 21 Savage force the user to turn from these worlds to "the real one", to look at how civilization has been "secured", and, hopefully, to pursue a course of action that can begin to free it from those bonds.

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Interview

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Interview: Film History as Media Archaeology¹

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interviewed by Fryderyk Kwiatkowski

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Abstract

The interview centres around Thomas Elsaesser's book *Film History as Media Archaeology* and is divided into three thematic blocks. Focusing on the origins of the book and its composition in the first part, the discussion uncovers Elsaesser's engagement in numerous research initiatives, teaching at the University of Amsterdam, and his contribution to the emerging area of early cinema studies. Further exploration of the latter gives an insight into his views on the development of the discipline and outlines his distinct position in the field of media history. The second part concentrates on Elsaesser's approach to the study of cinema and its interaction with other media. With the discussion of study cases presented in the book, speakers explore the ways in which non-teleological models can enhance our knowledge of forgotten or obsolete technologies and their origins. Clarifying his position, Elsaesser shows how these approaches also transform our perception of contemporary media and their history, and how digital technology shapes our understanding and the use of past inventions. The conversation within this group of subjects also touches upon hazards and limitations of

Thomas Elsaesser is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Media and Culture of the University of Amsterdam; from 2006 to 2012 he was Visiting Professor at Yale University and since 2013 he teaches part-time at Columbia University, New York; he is an author and editor of some twenty books, among his recent ones are *Film Theory – An Introduction through the Senses* (with Malte Hagener, 2nd revised edition, New York: Routledge, 2015, Polish translation 2016), and *Film History as Media Archaeology* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016). His latest book in English: *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and in Polish: *Kino – maszyna myślenia. Refleksje nad kinem epoki cyfrowej* (2018).

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¹ Transcription of the interview by Barbara Szymczak-Maciejczyk.

applying archaeological perspective to studying media history and moves to the speculations on the future of the archaeological approach in the humanities. In the third part, the interview shifts towards broader issues, in particular: the technological transformations in cinema over the last decade, the significance of digital devices in reconfiguring our relationship with the past, and the potential contribution of media archaeology to the development of non-linear historiographical models in scholarship.

Keywords

Media archaeology, early cinema, digital media, film historiography

of Groningen; he has recently contributed a chapter to the multi-author volume *The Gnostic World* (Routledge 2018), and published several articles in peer-reviewed journals such as “Canadian-American Slavic Studies” (Brill), “Journal of Religion & Film” (University of Nebraska at Omaha), or “CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture” (Purdue University); he works as an editorial assistant in the “Facta Ficta Journal,” and is a fellow member of the “Titus Brandsma Instituut” (Nijmegen) and the “Theology, Religion and Popular Culture Network”; his scientific interest center around the reception of Gnosticism, with particular attention to Hollywood, philosophy, and Western esotericism, and its conceptual as well as historical intersections with utopianism and conspiracy theories.

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Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Can we start by talking about the origins of your latest book *Film History as Media Archaeology* (2016)?

Thomas Elsaesser: The book is the outcome of several occasions and intellectual developments. First of all, it was timed to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of Film and Television Studies at the University of Amsterdam in 1991. The



Photo published with written agreement of Thomas Elsaesser and Fryderyk Kwiatkowski

book was also to be the fiftieth volume in the book series I edit for Amsterdam University Press, called *Film Culture in Transition*. The series pays quite a lot of attention to “early cinema”, film history, media history, audiovisions, and related topics, focusing mainly on the mutations of the cinematic apparatus and the relocation of cinema. We, in fact, have about sixteen titles that relate broadly to film history and media archaeology by authors like Siegfried Zielinski, Francois Albera, Maria Tortajada, Malte Hagener, Kristin Thompson, Pasi Väliaho, Eivind Rossak and others. So it seemed a good idea to bring the particular approach that Amsterdam has pioneered – both via my series at Amsterdam University Press and with the courses that some of my colleagues and I taught at the University’s Media and Culture Department – to the attention of an international public in a concentrated fashion, and to show what distinguishes our approach to “film history as media archaeology” from others who use the term media archaeology. Originally, the book was meant to be a joint publication by the three members of the department teaching media archaeology to the Masters’ students: Michael Wedel, Wanda Strauven and myself. But by 2016,

we had all left the University of Amsterdam: Wedel is now professor in Potsdam and Berlin, Strauven teaches in Milan and Frankfurt, and I teach part-time at Columbia University. Wanda Strauven had already edited a multi-authored volume, called the *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (2006), which celebrated Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault's pioneering work on refashioning how we understand early cinema and what its afterlife and effect has been on the media culture of the present. So in the end I decided to produce a book that was authored only by myself. At the same time I did want to make sure that the discoveries and insights gathered during the years of our joint research project called *Imagined Futures* were also adequately reflected. So while *Film History as Media Archaeology* contains a number of chapters that I had already published elsewhere, there are also five chapters specifically conceived and written for the book. For instance, the introductory chapter, called *Media Archaeology: Foucault's Legacy*, a chapter on *Cinema, Motion, Energy and Entropy*, one called *Media Archaeology as the Poetics of Obsolescence* and especially *Media Archaeology as Symptom*, which is both a summary and lays out an agenda for further research, are all original essays. One final point regarding the origins of the book: 2016 marked thirty years since I wrote an article called *The New Film History* (1986) which was widely discussed as signalling a "turn" in Film Studies to film history and especially a turn to the study of early cinema. The result was a collective volume, which I edited in 1990 as *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*. Therefore, *Film History as Media Archaeology* is something like a sequel to both my 1986 review essay and my 1990 edited volume.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: So *Film History as Media Archaeology* also reflects on thirty years of early cinema studies?

Thomas Elsaesser: Yes, early cinema as a distinct subject is now regularly taught at universities and has become an integral part of how we understand the history of the cinema. This is a major shift, because when in the late 1970s and 1980s writers like Noel Burch, Barry Salt, Kristin Thompson, Tom Gunning, Charles Musser, Richard Abel and others started to do archival research, the first two decades of the cinema were still a very neglected field, hardly existing at all. In fact, films from the period were usually denigrated and dismissed as "primitive", hybrid and somehow not really (narrative) cinema. I myself became very involved in the debates, edited the first book that had *Early Cinema* in the title (*Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, 1990) and a few years later published a volume called *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades* (1996). All this coincided with changes in film archive policies made necessary by the physical state of the films in the archives, their material deterioration, the perishable nature of nitrate stock, and the need to raise public awareness of

our common filmic heritage – a task magnificently fulfilled by the extraordinary festivals devoted to early cinema in northern Italy.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Can you tell a little more about those festivals? What role did they play in the development of early cinema studies?

Thomas Elsaesser: The two most important ones take place in Pordenone, whose Le Giornate del Cinema Muto have been held annually since 1985, and in Bologna, where Il Cinema Ritrovato has been celebrating film restorations and rediscoveries since 1986. It was in Pordenone, during my first visit there in 1989, that I made the acquaintance of scholars, archivists and film specialists from all over the world. The film shows, often well past midnight, allowed one to see a very broad spectrum of films, especially from the period between 1907 and 1917: crucial years, as it turned out, for the cinema's consolidation and internationalisation. But also crucial years for encountering a cinema that was very different from classical Hollywood. One very quickly realised that these films did not want to be either "anti-narrative" or "avant-garde". Rather, their ways of representing the world clearly had their own logic, their own internal rules: working in a rich trans-media environment of sound, image and spectacle, the directors seemed suddenly incredibly inventive and bold, and so it was as if one was discovering a lost civilisation: a cinema that was vigorous, vital and surprisingly self-assured: early cinema.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: How archaeological approach was imagined when scholars begun to discuss its application to studying media history?

Thomas Elsaesser: Already in my introduction to *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, I used the phrase "from linear history to mass media archaeology", and explained that we needed a "new archaeology [...], because of the fundamental changes that film had brought to the notion of time, space and material culture" (1990, 1). But at that moment in time – 1990 – different interpretations of media archaeology were already in circulation. Most originated with German scholars: Siegfried Zielinski initiated a debate with his book *Audiovisions* (1989; English edition: *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as Entr'actes in History*, 1999) which differed from the more philosophical approach to media history with an archaeological emphasis that first emerged around Friedrich Kittler and his disciples, in Berlin at the Humboldt University, under the name of "Medienphilosophie". Later in Weimar at the Bauhaus University the IKKM was founded, whose name International Research Institute for Cultural Techniques and Media Philosophy indicates yet another direction. However, both Siegfried Zielinski and the schools around Kittler were not

primarily interested in the cinema. The subtitle of Zielinski's book was *Cinema and Television as Intermezzi in [Media] History*. By contrast, we in Amsterdam still believed that the cinema was the key to understanding both the media configuration around 1900, and the rapid changes that the media landscape was undergoing around 2000. One person who was trying to mediate between those of us who were interested in doing cinema history as media archaeology (the Amsterdam school) and those who were more interested in media archaeology in relation to digital media (the Kittler school) was Jussi Parikka who had studied with Kittler but also spent half a year with us in Amsterdam. But I must not forget that there was also a group of scholars with an interest in media archaeology, but with a primary focus on television. One could count Zielinski's *Audiovisions* among the inspirational publications, but a person closer to us geographically was William Uricchio at the University of Utrecht, who was a key figure in the study of the origins of (German) television. There were other important figures, for instance, Erkki Huhtamo at Berkley and Wolfgang Ernst in Berlin, and, as several chapters in my book show, media archaeology to this day can mean very different things to those who are engaged in it.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: What particular goals did you want to achieve with your team in Amsterdam?

Thomas Elsaesser: Our main emphasis in our research initiatives in Amsterdam – both *Media Archaeology* and *Imagined Futures* – was on the cinema as the royal road to media archaeology. For Kittler and others, such as Bernd Siegert, it was the genealogy of the digital. Kittler's book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986; English edition 2006) took these three "recording systems" ("Aufschreibssysteme") as possible ways of understanding the technologies that underpin any symbolic system: not just the electronic relays that generate the "on-off", "zero-one" of the digital system, but going back to the materiality of the immaterial, and the technologies of intimacy: alphabet, printing and the personal typewriter, the postal service and love letters, music notation and the gramophone, celluloid and film, mathematics and coding. By contrast, we were primarily interested in the different modes and materialities of vision, of visualisation, and of how these connect to optics as well as to the dispositifs through which the visual is actualised.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Which thinkers have influenced you most? How has your approach to media archaeology developed through time?

Thomas Elsaesser: A strong influence was Michel Foucault, from whom we took the term "archaeology" in the first place. But equally strong was

the presence of Walter Benjamin in my own thinking, and a little later, after I had already published *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, I discovered Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (*Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 1990). People I have known and still value personally, and who were deeply committed to both film history and early cinema included: Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Charles Musser, Siegfried Zielinski and Tom Gunning. But there were also Michael Chanan, Barry Salt and Noël Burch. You cannot imagine two people more different in their intellectual interests and convictions than Salt and Burch, but I found them both extremely – in different ways – inspiring and challenging. When I came to write *Film History as Media Archaeology*, I wanted to give my respectful due to these friends and colleagues, as well as pay attention to the different strands that made up media archaeology as we currently use the term. But I wanted to put the emphasis on film, cinema and cinema history as they crystallised around the early period between 1895 and 1925, which – precisely because this period was so different – became paradigmatic for how I wanted to study all of cinema, that is, by emphasising cinema's interaction with other media. This makes up the first third of the book. At the same time I wanted to engage with those who were actually thinking through the origins of the digital. So the second third of the book is actually devoted to what I call "tracking the digital" by means of media archaeology. And the last third was to give due attention to those who in the creative field practiced media archaeology, that is, who came from filmmaking and from installation art, and were showing an extraordinary interest in the so-called obsolete media. This interest in obsolete media, which was not just nostalgia for physical, tactile objects in a world increasingly immaterial and virtual, was one of the key aspects of media archaeology in the art spaces, i.e. galleries and museums. So media archaeology has to do with recovering the multiple origins and deeply embedded media contexts of what came to be known as cinema; with accounting for the surprisingly quick and pervasive takeover of communication media by digital tools and digital thinking; and for the way the art world has responded to the – belated – realisation that it was the cinema which was the most vital and important art of the twentieth century.

In our courses at Amsterdam University we always made a point of starting with – and starting in – the present, taking as examples media practices and media objects that the students were already familiar with. We then made them strange by unfolding a genealogy of these phenomena back to other, earlier incarnations and configurations, while not afraid to draw parallels and even introducing anachronisms. So we had units that were called: "Archaeology of the Screen", "Archaeology of Sound", "Archaeology of the

Camera”, as well as “Archaeology of Colour” and “Archaeology of Audiences”, but also “Archaeology of Surveillance”, for instance, very much in the spirit of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975; English edition *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1977). By always teaching the contemporary with an eye to its genealogies and archaeologies, we treated the cinema – its technologies, its institutions, its social and physical spaces – in the way an engineer treats a machine or an appliance: we diagrammatically “exploded”, in the manner of a blueprint, the cinematic apparatus into its constituent parts and looked at them separately. But “archaeology” – as I said – of the screen, of the camera, etc. – was the guiding principle and we divided the different aspects up, so that for the fourteen weeks of the semester, we devised seven distinct “archaeologies”, devoting two weeks to each. Since the course was obligatory for all MA students, it was structurally conceived in very similar ways to the parallel course that MA students had to take, namely “Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses”, which ended up as a book (2009) co-authored with another former student-turned colleague, Malte Hagener.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Could you elaborate on what was the exact relationship between the courses on film theory and media archaeology that you had been giving?

Thomas Elsaesser: The “Film Theory” course was constructed similarly to “Media Archaeology” course. What in the *Film Theory* book is “cinema as window and frame”, “cinema as mirror and screen”, “cinema as eye and gaze”, “cinema as sound and ear”, “cinema as skin and touch”, “cinema as mind and brain” had its counterparts in the media archaeology course: the expanded, exploded cinematic apparatus. So the students had to take these two courses, and it gave them a very good grounding. Not only did they see how film theory and film history connect with each other, once one changes one’s angle of approach, but they also realised how the present connects to the past that is never “past” but alive in the present and how film and cinema have always been very aware of how to address and implicate the different perceptual senses, both via technology (the apparatus and the institutions) and via technique (the stylistic and formal means, the rhetoric of narrative, the staging and mise-en-scène). In short, we tried to convey to the students a coherent proposition about how to study cinema in the twenty-first century, without implying or endorsing a fatal break between the “analogue” and “digital”, in much the same way we refused a radical opposition between “classical Hollywood” and “art and avant-garde” cinema. We were interested in the common elements – the ontologies and archaeologies of the cinema – not the binary divisions or ruptures and breaks. This was the original idea: to produce

a parallel volume to *Film Theory on Film History as Media Archaeology*, also divided into seven chapters. It never happened, and instead I used the title, but produced an altogether different book. Now that *Film History as Media Archaeology* ended up being a much broader and more ambitious book, which addresses many more issues, perhaps we can go back and find a way for the three of us – Wanda Strauven, Michael Wedel, and myself – to put together our various lectures and presentations and revise them into a book to be called *Media Archaeology – An Introduction through the Senses...*

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Let's talk about some of the issues that you discuss in your book. Erkki Huhtamo suggests that we can think of media history as an area of constantly recurring phenomena. Tom Gunning perceives film history as a series of parallel histories. Although your approach to film history is slightly different, you also have contributed to this discussion by showing that certain uses of cinematograph from the early period can be seen as anticipatory for contemporary ones. You recall for instance the cartoon vision of Thomas Edison inventing the telephonoscope as an example of nineteenth century Skype. On what basis, however, are we allowed to make such comparisons since in many cases it would be difficult to establish a historical continuity between these forgotten, obsolete media and the contemporary ones?

Thomas Elsaesser: This is a very good question and it is a difficult one. First of all, those parallels – sometimes deliberately anachronistic or counterfactual – function as a kind of "Verfremdungseffekt": they try to make strange what we think we know and usually take for granted, or what we think is "brand new" and has never been thought before. One of the key pedagogical aims of media archaeology as applied to cinema is once more to make the past strange and to emphasise that the past is very different from the present. Even more important is that the past could have had a different future, and often believed it would have a different future from the one that came to pass. In other words, one of the methodological moves of media archaeology, which distinguishes it from film history, is that it assumes history as not necessarily linear, not a line of inevitable progress towards a specific goal, whether this is "greater and greater realism" (in the cinema), better and better technology (in the workplace, the office and the home) or even more perfect democracy (in politics). Therefore, to make these anachronistic comparisons is actually to force the researcher or the reader to ask exactly the question you ask – how can one draw a parallel between two distinct historical epochs? So, it is the shock of that surprise that the past may have had the same problems as the present, the force of the anachronism when the past seems ahead

of the present. In other words, it is also a way of getting you into the frame of mind for thinking that the past is yet to be discovered and not only there for you to derive the present from.

I think one of the most salient lessons we can learn is that the past is not there to service us in the present; we cannot just appropriate the past. And, therefore, the past has an important potential for telling us something that we may either have forgotten, that we may never have discovered, or that we may need to rediscover, in order to think about our own future in new ways. So it is a complicated relationship that we enter into, when we think of the past as an archaeological site, to be unearthed and delicately to be preserved and put on display, rather than something, you know, like a shop window or a shelf, or even a database from which we just serve ourselves. We should not have this hubris of appropriating the past to either legitimate ourselves, or to simply use those parts of the past that we find convenient, because they confirm or flatter us.

Let's take an example of how, because of a new phenomenon in our present – say, digital 3D cinema – we might rediscover parts of the past that previous generations thought obsolete and overcame: the stereoscope was in the nineteenth century a very sophisticated form of popular entertainment, in the sense of providing a very credible impression of multidimensional space by tricking the eye into thinking it was seeing depth, when it was just seeing parallax. And panoramas and dioramas were the IMAX of the nineteenth century. Obviously, they are not exactly the same, but, again, such anachronistic parallels are there to cure us of our linear, continuous, mono-causal way of explaining the world and explaining media. We have very different technologies at different stages, having different forms of reality, but answering to similar needs, desires, and hopes.

But the parallels can also demonstrate how adaptable human beings are in "naturalising" the unnatural and "moving with the times", so that there often is no need for dystopic visions, for technological doom scenarios or media panics. The example that I always give is from the history of photography. When by the mid-nineteenth century photographers moved out of the studio, abandoned portrait photography, and took their cameras into the street to take pictures of life in the city and of people, in other words, when exposure times became short enough to capture snapshots, people, including Charles Baudelaire, were at first shocked. They were disoriented by the amount of detail that could be represented in the photograph. And they feared that the human brain or the human perceptual apparatus could not take in so much detail without getting confused. It was assumed that such photographs were actually bad for you, they caused vertigo and headaches because there was too much detail or, as Baudelaire put it, "there was a riot of detail" – "*une émeute*

de detail” – an “insurrection of detail”. His choice of words was not accidental, because he did want to allude to the political implications as well. Now, to us this seems bizarre and extreme, until we remember that when the cinema first came on the scene in the eighteen nineties there was the same panic: too much detail, too much information, too many different sense impressions in the moving picture: the famous rushing out of the theatre when *L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (Lumière & Lumière 1896) was shown. And now, we have the same thing with digital media. People say we have to protect our children from staring at the screen all day – they suffer from eye strain and develop attention deficit disorder. In other words, the fear of sensory overload has, within the last one hundred fifty years, created panics at least three times over, across very different media: photography, cinema and now computer games and digital media. So again, we have to be very careful not to draw these linear, mono-causal sequences in order to explain specific phenomena.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: And also, by addressing this issue from another angle, we could say that by using this anachronistic mode of perceiving past inventions and technologies we could also understand better why some of them have been forgotten.

Thomas Elsaesser: Yes. This is an important issue, which I already touched on briefly. Namely, what did the past imagine its own future to be like? We tend to assume that because something happened that it “had to happen”, i.e. that it was inevitable. And of course it did happen, we cannot change that, not even if we were to time travel! Yet, nonetheless, there is a place for so-called “counterfactual history”. At the University of Amsterdam we deliberately called our second research project “Imagined Futures” precisely in order to return to the past its own future or at least to try and reconstruct what previous generations might have imagined their own future to be, rather than assuming that what happened was also what they expected to happen, because history is tied to the irreversible direction of time’s arrow. Film history as media archaeology actually tries to break open this unidirectional flow. And what one then discovers is that the mid-to-late nineteenth century was actually imagining something quite different from what we assume they were imagining. Therefore, the heuristic value of seeing in the telephonoscope the wish for the contemporary Skype is to realise that because of where we are now, we do understand some of the things in the past in a new way. We can then leapfrog and return to the past with a different appreciation of what might have gone on in the minds of the people who were thinking about the future around the 1880s and 1890s. The evidence that you gather from certain books, cartoons, that is illustrations and imaginings that were half-serious and half-playful, is

very often that the new media technologies which made the largest impact on the popular imagination at that time were the telephone and the telegraph – including fantasies of television – and not chronophotography or what we now understand by the cinema.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Can you specify how those who invented chronophotography imagined its use?

Thomas Elsaesser: Chronophotography was actually seen by its pioneers as an instrument of scientific inquiry. It was not regarded or envisaged as a possible entertainment medium. And so, once you realise that it might have been something else, you also realise that chronophotography was only a temporary technological support for moving images and for the creation of the illusion of movement, because now, of course, most of our images, both moving and still, are based on an entirely different technology – digital imaging, relying on mathematical calculus. But you could also say that our contemporary visualisation techniques are actually dependent much more on the telephone, the telegraph, and wireless or radio transmission than they are on photography, which once more connects us to those technological fantasies of the late 19th century, bypassing chronophotography and the cinematograph. In addition, it is electricity and electronics, relays and circuits that "produce" our images, rather than optics in the Newtonian sense, or the mechanics of the transmission of motion and energy. I address this in several chapters of my book, and it once more underlines that we can now understand the late nineteenth century differently because our technologies have not so much made theirs obsolete and useless, but because their technologies – and the ideas attached to them – can give us a different perspective on our own (media) technologies. Suddenly, it is the cinema that seems the odd one out, and we can appreciate how extraordinary it is that the cinema developed the way it did, or even that it was "invented" at all. And while some people go as far as to say the cinema was a "detour", that it was already obsolete when it was invented, I argue in the book that this so-called "obsolescence" is actually a golden opportunity for the cinema to continue into the digital age.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Can you elaborate on how this is possible?

Thomas Elsaesser: It is a complicated argument, and I spend many pages in the book on explaining how I see it. Especially, the concluding chapter *Media Archaeology as Symptom* tries to lay out my reasons. Basically, it is my way of saying that there is a special pay-off or benefit for the present, once you assume an archaeological perspective and liberate yourself from a linear model of history,

which goes beyond having simply a more respectful attitude to the past. But it is only now that we have digital media, which on the face of it represent such a major rupture and so many radical breaks, that we are free enough from thinking that there is only one way of writing media history, one way of conceiving film history. Some scholars, of course, accept the rupture as terminal and declare the cinema dead. Others consider digital projection or watching a film on a laptop “not cinema”.

For the rest of us, the digital may not be such a technological rupture – I have called it: “everything changes and everything stays the same” – but instead a unique chance to rethink cinema altogether. It liberates us to see all the possibilities and thereby to see certain historical figures who have so far been relegated to a very minor role in a new light: someone like Georges Demenÿ, or other forgotten pioneers like William Paul and many, many others. We can now see the richness of their imagination, and their determination to pursue a certain vision. From which we can conclude that not every use of the cinematograph has to end up in the movie house. The result is that in recent years we have seen enormously productive research being done into non-entertainment uses of moving images and the cinematic apparatus. In my book series “Film Culture in Transition” we published *Films That Work* (*Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, 2009), edited by Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, about industrial films, about advertising films, and many other “operational” genres of filmmaking. There is also valuable research on medical films and on the use of the cinematic apparatus for surveillance, especially for military uses. For instance, think of the filmmaker and installation artist Harun Farocki, who has devoted a large part of his career to the investigation of “operational images” – sometimes taking his lead from theorists like Vilem Flusser and Paul Virilio. In other words, we have considerably diversified our understanding of the moving image. For this, I coined a number of shorthands, talking about the “S & M” uses of the cinematic apparatus. By “S & M” I obviously do not mean sado-masochistic but: “Science & Medicine”, “Sensing & Monitoring”, “Surveillance & the Military”, and, of course, Gilles Deleuze’s senso-motoric understanding of the cinematic apparatus. In other words, there are the typically Foucauldian dispositives of power and control, matched and meshing with human physiology and the senses, involving the whole body, or if you like “the body as a total perceptual surface”.

So, you can see that suddenly this obscure past of the origins of cinema can open up into an incredibly wide field of networks and interconnections whose links we clearly see today, but which already existed throughout the nineteenth century, except that by trying to make the cinema into a high art form, historians of cinema isolated the films and the filmmakers from their contexts and connections, blocking them and even suppressing the facts. Once liberated from

the twin obsession of the “Seventh Art” – with its goals and teleologies, with its masterpieces and pioneers, its “firsts” and “great auteurs” – and of history as driven by linear causality and mono-causal explanations, we can finally take a fresh look at all of this, and paradoxically, it is the digital turn that has to some extent helped us open the door.

For instance, we can now place the so-called “coming of sound” in a much broader spectrum once it is known again that right from the start the cinema was never silent. There is now extraordinary evidence that makes it clear that, from the 1890s onwards, engineers and film manufacturers had been trying to synchronise sound with images. After all, Edison invented the kinetoscope as a companion apparatus to the phonograph, and not the other way round, but in both cases, sight and sound were always thought together. So, you see how, when you shift your attention, not only does the past open up onto new facts, but to what is considered to be pertinent facts, making this past so much more diverse, because you see new connections. The confusion and profusion of today is somewhat “tamed” when you discover the diversity of the past: scholars began to connect wax-museums and the cinema, they saw the links between Spiritism and the cinema, between hypnotism and the cinema, between world fairs and the cinema, between colonialism and the cinema. It was this tremendous liberation that we experienced, first with early cinema and then with media archaeology, once we no longer had to debate whether the cinema was “invented” by Edison or by the Lumière Brothers, and once we no longer clung to the idea that cinema developed from silent to sound, from sound to colour, and from 2D to 3D. Sound, colour and 3D were already in place around 1900, both as ideals and as practical experiments, but they were not ready for full implementation. What matters, however, is that their existence, even as failed experiments, shows that there is no linear progress to the history of cinema. And it was the shock of the digital turn that made it blindingly obvious. So, rather than saying that digital cinema is the death of cinema, I argue that the digital liberated the cinema in all its richness of the diverse pasts, which also implies that we cannot possibly know what the future of cinema holds, because only now do we really get a sense of its pasts, and discover new pedigrees and genealogies leading to the present.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: In your book you discuss several types of revisionism in film archaeology. One is aimed at re-examining the origins of cinema. But scholars have different approaches to this issue. What prompted film scholars to start asking new questions relating to the early years of cinema?

Thomas Elsaesser: Yes. One prominent revisionist trend has been to study the history of cinemas as opposed to studying the history of films. Which is

to say to study the physical spaces of cinema in the urban environment: where were movie houses located? What was the economics of selling snacks and soft drinks? Were the first cinemas in working-class districts or always aimed at middle class audiences? Were they in business districts, so people could catch a film after work? How did we get from penny arcades to multiplexes? What is the symbolic significance of the architecture of movie palaces, i.e., what does it mean that movie houses often have neo-gothic facades, Egyptian facades, sleek modern design or conjure up Orientalist associations, like the famous Grauman's Chinese Theater in Los Angeles?

Another aspect that has raised new questions for scholarship: what was the constitution of audiences? Was the cinema for women and children? Was it for family audiences? Was it for young men? Was it a place where you could furtively meet with members of the opposite sex? All those things have now become part of what we understand by the history of cinema or reception studies, with a special interest in recent years in the "film experience", which in turn relates to a film-theoretical interest in emotion, affect, empathy, atmosphere, embodiment.

All of this can be regarded as a turn to a more materialist film history, putting the emphasis not on the films, but on the conditions and structures that made films possible – the study of the mode of production, the studio system, business models as they differ from classical to post-classical cinema, or aspects of hegemony and globalisation in the cinema, and how to address very diverse audiences.

Scholars like Kristin Thompson, for instance, studied early cinema by also examining the figures for the export and import of celluloid, and of trade agreements, in order to determine the "influence" of American cinema in Europe. She took account of many other aspects that traditional film history never showed any interest in. From these apparently marginal but material aspects she was able to draw some very important conclusions about the migration of cinematic styles, of how and when the style of Hollywood film-making entered Europe. She also tried to explain how and why certain directors moved from France and Germany to Hollywood: Ernst Lubitsch, Friedrich Murnau or Maurice Tourneur – countering the idea that all foreign directors in Hollywood were political refugees or "exiles".

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: What is your particular approach within these discussions? So how did you approach studying cinema as a narrative medium?

Thomas Elsaesser: For my part, I always wanted to combine an understanding of films and an understanding of the contexts of film: production, exhibition, distribution, and so on. I have always wanted to see them as connected.

What helped me was that I was influenced by Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin. They taught me to read films as social texts and to understand film form as responding to certain external pressures as well as internal constraints. The example that has become very typical was the attempt to understand why and how the cinema became a narrative medium. Early cinema studies – notably by Charles Musser and Tom Gunning – established beyond any reasonable doubt that this was not a natural occurrence, this was not the inevitable destiny of the cinema, but was instead the result of an interplay of many different factors: some of them technological, some of them determined by the power relations between producers and exhibitors, some of them having to do with trying to capture a particular kind of audience, namely the “bourgeois” spectators used to the theatre, rather than to appeal to a working class audience that was interested in gags and showmanship: this is where Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” has one of its roots. So these different revisionisms that you mentioned, may have tended to downplay the significance of the film itself, but by offering a materialist explanation for narrative they can and did lead back to the films.

My particular contribution, if you like, was to examine these broader questions around certain specific films treated as case studies. I like to demonstrate how tightly film form and actual film content can be correlated with what appear to be entirely external factors. So, in my book there were to be three such case studies: one of a so-called “silent” film from 1914, a German film by Franz Hofer called *Weihnachtsglocken 1914 – Heimgekehrt*. Unfortunately, for reasons of space, it had to be left out, but it has been published elsewhere, in English (1999), German (2002), and French (2006). Included is the case study of an early German sound film from 1932 *Das Lied einer Nacht* (Litvak), which was a very popular musical, but shows an extraordinary degree of reflexivity about the relation between body, voice and technology. Also featured in the book is a case study of Walter Ruttmann and the “optical wave”, once again considering a completely different context for how we can apply fresh thinking to sound and image, avant-garde and mainstream, animation and real live action.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Let’s talk about another topic, which you partly touched upon, but by referring it to transformations in film narrative and aesthetics. In your book you show that some of the technologies, that were advertised as “new”, like 3D, were not such at all. Could you elaborate on how these technologies have been recently used by filmmakers and what effect they have on contemporary aesthetics and cinematic experience?

Thomas Elsaesser: I’ll give you an example that struck me: the film *The Revenant* (Inárritu 2015), which I found interesting for two reasons. One is that I’ve worked a lot on 3D and there’s a whole chapter in the book that discusses

what it might mean that this typical technology of the "cinema of attraction" has come back, after it had "failed" in the 1950s. Among the things I noticed, was that in 3D films filmmakers like to shoot in an environment that does not have a horizon line; stories that are set in outer space, in a kind of jungle-world, on the high seas or in desert landscapes – these are all environments without a clear horizon. Because 3D works much better if you do not have a horizon line or if you can immerse yourself in a natural element that slightly disorients your usual upright-forward linear orientation – examples that come to mind are water in *Life of Pi* (Lee 2012), primeval forest in *Avatar* (Cameron 2009), the emptiness of space in *Gravity* (Cuarón 2013). All these films try to create this non-bounded frame, to naturalise the absence of a frame, which allows 3D to surround and immerse you, because as soon as you feel the image is wider than your field of vision, you lose this sense of en-framing and with it, your sense of mastery and control. Now, what happens in *The Revenant* is that you do get this wide-screen, empty-spaces, no-horizon feeling, as the hero traipses through the snowy wastes, but you also have a different aesthetic at work which I call the "go-pro aesthetic": being very close, being absolutely viscerally close, because this, too, disorients us. Being too far without the horizon and being too close to have our own distance can produce a very intense impact. *The Revenant*, whatever you may think about its story, and obviously it is also a classic narrative (after all what is more classical than a revenge story?), uses this Aristotelian narrative architecture as a sort of scaffolding, because otherwise the visuals would be too disorienting. In this sense, the narrative is ultimately less interesting than what the filmmaker is able to do to us, and to our senses, by combining IMAX aesthetics with go-pro aesthetics. Most of the scenes with the bear and when the hero is struggling with the elements at close quarters is the go-pro aesthetics, whilst the other scenes, where he is a tiny speck in these vast open spaces, is the IMAX aesthetics. As far as I know, nobody has talked about this film in that way, but *The Revenant* would be my example of how a contemporary Hollywood blockbuster can be avant-garde, or whatever you would like to call it, because some directors set themselves technical challenges which are also aesthetic challenges, and the reasons for these challenges are a combination of external demands or pressures and internal constraints or self-imposed limits.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Media archaeology is usually presented in the context of its methodological advantages and even superiority over previous theoretical approaches to media history. Little attention, however, has been paid to its limitations. Do you think that media archaeology can lead to an overestimation of "lost" or "forgotten" inventions and practices?

Thomas Elsaesser: It is a very good point – both methodologically and with respect to nostalgia, or if you like “dead media necrophilia”. In my book I try to address both aspects. On the one hand, I make it very clear that media archaeology, as a discipline or as a subject, cannot solve our methodological or our historical problems. This is why I have a whole chapter called *Media Archaeology as Symptom*. It is a symptom – the very fact that we now have something called media archaeology is a symptom that we are no longer comfortable with traditional notions of history. And this is partly because of what we have been talking about, namely our primary models of history – linear and mono-causal or multi-causal teleological models of progress, of improvement, of “better and better” or always chasing the “new”. And we know that those models do not work, not only in film history. We know this in so many fields: while we are making enormous progress in some areas, such as life expectancy and medicine, this very progress is often coupled with potentially very negative consequences, such as cloning, or designer babies.

But we are also having our doubts about history because of the function that memory now occupies in our society. Not only as individuals we now have a tendency to think of memory as more authentic and truthful than history. Partly because so many individual lives are marked by very traumatic events which lodge themselves in our minds in a more distributive, non-chronological form. But also because we have so much machine memory through our computers, hard drives, cloud computing and so on, that we tend to overestimate the power of memory. We also tend to privilege random access to information over lining up information in a sequential way, which taken together with associative and traumatic memory gives us a sense that history as sequence of events no longer tells us what we need to or want to know. In fact, there is a real competition between memory and history.

In film and media studies, we are not the only ones grappling with new historiographical models. Sociologists, but also biologists or risk managers, tend to think and use history as an accumulation of data from which one can extract information about the past in order to predict or model the future. But as I have said before, this is a very limited way of dealing with the past. And so, history has in some sense come under a lot of pressure and suspicion, which means that we tend to overestimate or privilege non-linear ways of accessing information. And media archaeology – within the discipline of film studies but also within the discipline of media theory – is precisely a non-linear way of accessing the past. But we should not necessarily assume that this gives us a more accurate picture of the past: it simply means that we are now using and preferring a different organising system. History is basically a particular organising system of information strung along a time-line. Until now it has been a particular organising system that privileges linearity,

mono-causality and uni-directionality – teleology in other words. And it has served us well for a hundred and fifty years. But maybe it has come to the end of its useful life...

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: What other types of organising systems can you name?

Thomas Elsaesser: Let me put it in a slightly different way. What we now have are both different tools and different tasks, and it is their combination that requires new organising systems. Among the different tools are the computer, databases, the digitisation of vast amounts of information, of data, sources, forensic evidence – as I said, the explosion of information and the expansion of what we now call “evidence”, available at the click of a mouse or when consulting a database or having on-line access to a university library. These are the new tools which have radically changed the way we actually manipulate or organise knowledge. If you think of history as itself an organising principle in charge of managing (ordering) and manipulating (shaping data into a narrative), then it becomes clear that the tools of history may also have to be adapted: media archaeology is one such adaptation of the tools that change our state of knowledge.

But we also have different tasks, and among these tasks are how to not only understand but to manage and control processes happening in so-called “real time” and to appreciate the interaction of very different factors at different types of velocity and intensity. In other words, we know that events are shaped by a confluence and conjunction of very specific factors and variables that have different speeds, different intensities, different directions, different causes, et cetera, et cetera. And we need models that actually are multi-directional and multifaceted rather than mono-directional, models that can handle both negative (self-regulating) and positive (recursively amplifying) feedback loops.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: So what might be the role of media archaeology in this particular context?

Thomas Elsaesser: The relationship between tools and tasks has shifted and this means that media archaeology is one of the examples – or symptoms – of such a reconfiguration of these different tools and tasks. But it also means it only ultimately reflects those tools and tasks and not some higher truth or insight – which is why I sometimes call media archaeology also a “place-holder”: it gives us a sense of where the problems are, but it does not necessarily provide us with an answer. And there are many of those who ac-

tually practice media archaeology who say it should not become a discipline, it should not actually rigidify into a discipline. Its openness, in the sense of, and similar to “open software”, is what actually keeps it alive. And then, there are scholars who write books that I would consider to be contribution to media archaeology but who would not call themselves media archaeologists. For instance, Jonathan Crary does not call himself a media archaeologist, and Mary Anne Doane’s book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (*The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, 2002) is a very important contribution to media archaeology, but she would not call herself a media archaeologist. So media archaeology is both a powerful way of re-conceptualising the relationship that we have with the past, but it also signifies the relationship that we have with digital technologies as well as how artists deal with obsolete technologies, when they are resurrected as art objects or artistic practices. If some thinkers feel that they would rather not use the term because they do not want to limit themselves to its connotations, then they simply confirm what I find exciting about the field and the concept of media archaeology: namely that it actually has not consolidated and solidified into one specific thing. As a symptom or place-holder, it can actually be more productive than if it now forms a separate discipline that cuts itself off from film analysis, from cultural studies, from film history, media theory, art history, digital media studies and several other disciplines. It actually exists in order to both interact with these other disciplines and to give and receive new impulses.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: How do you imagine the future of media archaeology? Do you think that its explanatory power and lifespan are solely dependent on numerous crises of our culture, which you discuss in your book, such as the crisis of history and causality, the crisis of narrative, and so on?

Thomas Elsaesser: Yes and no. This is where, I think, the use that artists make of media archaeology complements and complicates what I have been saying so far. The interest that artists have shown in what I have called obsolete technologies is relevant under at least two separate headings. On the one hand, what attracts not just artists to the objects of media archaeology, is the fact that they are physical, tactile, they are materially present. As part of a new value assigned to materiality, the fascination with obsolete objects can either be explained by saying that such a materiality is only possible because of the digital – rather like the fact that vinyl records are only possible because of CDs and mp3 files – or it can be seen as a countermove and corrective to the digital world, as a protest against the latter’s tendency to make everything

virtual, abstract, conceptual, indeed invisible and untouchable. Electricity is not visible, you cannot touch it, in fact you would hurt or kill yourself if you touched it. In a world dominated by electricity, electronics and mathematics we are now very much attracted to objects, machines, and technologies that are physical: where you have wheels, cogs and mechanisms that turn, connect and interact. So the sheer physicality or the sheer sculpture qualities of a media machine that is no longer in use, such as the sixteen millimeter projectors that now proliferate in museums, elicits strong affective responses, as well as possessing philosophical value, and if it becomes "vintage" or a "classic", it even acquires monetary value.

This is one aspect of what I call in the book the poetics and politics of obsolescence. But the other aspect is that when media technologies or media practices become obsolete, they are liberated from economic constraints, they do not have to make money anymore for their owners and they are free from their ideological constraints – they do not have to "represent" something. So the fact they are no longer means to other ends but become ends in themselves lets us appreciate them as indeed ready to be reworked or valorised as works of art or as suitable materials for art works or installations. Because art is that which is no longer useful, therefore art has different ways of being in a world. If you follow Walter Benjamin you can claim that the origins of art are objects that once were either of practical use or were used in a religious cult, but which have outlived their uses or have been displaced from the site of a cult, as with so much so-called primitive art during colonial rule. In other words, art objects shed their ideological significance, their religious cultic significance or their economic uses. Once these are lost or stripped away, the object or practice can develop different qualities – which for Benjamin could include utopian qualities. And so, when artists now pick up sixteen-millimetre cameras or install slide projectors or display typewriters, they are probably trying to tap into the energy or potentialities inherent in these objects and these practices, but that were hidden while they had been put to use economically or ideologically. So this is where I see the place for obsolete technologies and obsolete practices and thus the advantage of media archaeology in the specific area of contemporary art spaces.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Regarding the teleological paradigm in film history, we can recognise a major tendency in our culture – or at least it has been presented as such – which shows that we have been constantly trying to create augmented reality technologies for a very long time. The emergence of cinema, 3D, Google Glass, the effect of immersion into virtual reality by interacting with CGI or by using Oculus can be seen as very recent examples of this phenomenon.

Thomas Elsaesser: You can have different ways of responding to the idea of a teleology, or goal orientation. There have always been two ways that human beings think about reality and their relation to or interaction with it. One is, if you like, the Platonic one and the other the Aristotelian one. The Aristotelian one has the most direct, material, pragmatic engagement with reality. And this would favour a generally goal-oriented approach, of which greater and greater realism would be the cinematic version. But let's be careful: there is realism and realism, one that wants to get deeper into the heart of things and gives priority to the material world, and there is one that wants to feel more real, i.e., seeks a more engaged, more immersed, more participatory experience, and does not mind that these "realism effects" are achieved by simulation, by tricking our senses, or otherwise transporting us into "heightened" states of consciousness.

But there is also a historical point to consider: the cinema became an object of serious academic study at the same time as Italian neo-realism and other, even more politically explicit modes of realist aesthetics, such as Brechtian techniques, were predominating. In other words, in the years between 1945 and 1965, when some of the European foundations of our discipline were being laid in France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Britain, realism was indeed the overriding concern. André Bazin and Georges Sadoul in France, Jerzy Toeplitz in Poland, or Ulrich Gregor and Enno Patalas in Germany, or Eric Rhode in England were all writing film history around realism, which means they tended to disregard other aspects, such as animation, and they adhered to a kind of orthodox binarism between "realism" and "fantasy", among which they favoured realism.

However, you could say there has also been a more Platonic way of thinking, which has to do with the idea that reality is only a simulation and that we can go straight to the simulation in order to get a more intense and possibly even more spiritual appreciation and experience of the world. So what in traditional film history are two contrasted tendencies – the Lumière tendency of realism and the Méliès tendency of fantasy – have to be seen in a much broader philosophical context. And what we are experiencing now is quite difficult to actually classify: are we more Aristotelian with our simulation techniques or are we more Platonic with our simulation techniques? But to line them up in one continuous strand is to seriously foreshorten and even falsify the complicated history of these different forms of realism and representation. What is also not fully appreciated is that there is a third strand of how we approach reality. It is to think of our reality as potentially modelled through mathematics, through codes. The paradox of digital media is that their "impression of reality" is generated by mathematical modelling, but they can simulate both Aristotelian realism, where it's all about tactile, haptic

contact, and also Platonic realism, in that we think we have these intense experiences, that we can “feel” digital images and seem much more bodily involved. What we tend to forget is that digital media are simulation media: we allow ourselves (and even beg) to be seduced and duped, so that we end up not unlike the prisoners in Plato’s cave parable who prefer to return to the cave, even after they have been “liberated” from their shackled state, because the cold light of reality is just too harsh and stark. Consequently, what makes digital images so difficult to classify in terms of either realism or fantasy is that they draw on both, while being determined by neither, and instead they demonstrate the mysterious capacity of mathematics to model the world increasingly in real time. And sticking with the Greeks, this points more to Pythagoras, to the Gnostics, to all kinds of ways of thinking about the world that are neither captured by the Platonic nor by the Aristotelian world view. What we are seeing now is this fascination with how far we can actually simulate the world through mathematical formulas or – as they are now called – algorithms, and get “real world” effects and results. This is where we encounter AI, which basically is made up of huge interconnected networks of algorithms that model the external world, so we can send men to Mars, predict climate change, manipulate the stock market, conduct global trade, etc. But algorithms also model our subjectivity, our likes and dislikes, our intentions, our thoughts. And the danger is that this modelling of the external world and the modeling of the inner world increasingly “mirror” each other and are “synchronised” with each other, creating the “bubble” that shields us from the “real”, but also seals us from the real.

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski: Professor Elsaesser, it was my pleasure to be your guest and thank you for your insights.

Thomas Elsaesser: Thank you.

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Reviews

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Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema.

By Thomas Elsaesser.

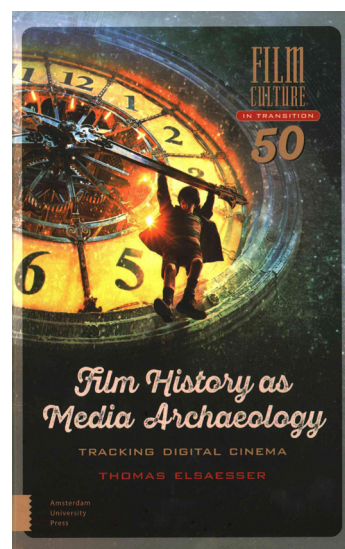
Fryderyk Kwiatkowski

Reviewed book

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Thomas Elsaesser produced a book in which he brought altogether his past academic experiences and intellectual influences, especially with reference to film history and other forms of audio-visual narratives. *Film History as Media Archaeology* is a collection of articles, most of which were initially published in various academic journals, supplemented by a few of chapters prepared specifically for the occasion of releasing the book.

All of the papers were based on years of giving teaching courses on early film, media archaeology, and film theory. Complemented by results drawn from numerous research projects, in which the author participated, they were also built on some earlier publications, among which a co-edited *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (1990) played a special role. The author's latest book can be seen as a summary and a retrospective of over thirty years of early cinema studies which rapid development and recognition were possible primarily due to the use of media archaeological approach. It also serves as an interesting record of a professional development of the scholar, who has observed the emergence of media archaeology and has had an opportunity to track its evolution.

Elsaesser begins with a statement that "cinema has been an enormous force in the twentieth century – it is the century's memory and its imaginary" (Elsaesser 2016: 18), but immediately adds that in recent scholarship "much of intellectual attention has undeniably moved to digital media, comprising digital television, computer games and hand-held communication devices, mobile screens, and virtual reality" (Elsaesser 2016: 18). One of the major concerns of *Film History as Media Archaeology* is to re-examine and restore the cinema as being now part of the digital media landscape. Thus, the book aims to fill the gap that media scholars have created after the digital revolution took place in as much as they forgot about the cinema by turning to new technological developments. Against this backdrop, it is worth mentioning two figures whose intellectual heritage has contributed into his work most significantly, shaping his approach to the study of both contemporary media and film.

One of them is Michel Foucault, and his name should be the initial point of reference, even for those readers who come across the term “media archaeology” for the first time. The thought of the French scholar has had a tremendous impact on all researchers, including Elsaesser, who started to believe that early cinema was a distinct period in film history. Those scholars have argued that early film should be studied by applying an epistemic framework constructed differently from the one linked with the so-called “classical cinema”. Foucault’s emphasis on the power relations, distrust of teleological narratives of historical progress, myths of single origins, and deconstruction of linear mono-causality are among issues which have had the greatest influence on Elsaesser’s scholarship (Elsaesser 2016: 32-38). He writes that Foucault’s method was almost an inevitable one to use once he “began thinking of the wider implications of what it meant to revise and rewrite traditional film histories, not simply by adding more ‘facts’ or adopting newly rediscovered films into the canon but by setting out to change the very framing of film and cinema within different intellectual, cultural, socio-economic, and technological histories, while positing that at each point in time, starting with the 1890s, one was dealing with an already fully constituted art form with its own logic and rules” (Elsaesser 2016: 53). Elsaesser explains that initially the application of media archaeology into film studies was conceived as a deconstructive project. It was directed towards unveiling presumptions of film history in order to show how it misinterpreted empirical evidence about various kinds of issues: modes of production, institutional organisation, technical advancements and their influence on film style, or narrative (Elsaesser 2016: 43).

Another key-thinker whose scholarship has had a significant impact on Elsaesser’s understanding of media and the way he has studied them, was Walter Benjamin. Elsaesser picks up his idea of modernity which is intrinsically intertwined with his view on city life – its dynamics, socio-economic transformations, transportation inventions, new types of leisure activities – and the cinema. Elsaesser argues that it was possible to attune Benjamin’s understanding of the cinema with archaeological perspective considering his focus on its technological basis and his emphasis on the societal relevance of cinematic experience (Elsaesser 2016: 29). The relationship between modernism and rapid development of technology in the first half of the twentieth century is especially discussed in the chapter *Going “Live”*. Elsaesser shows in it how media archaeology approach can be used to study film by analysing a relatively forgotten German work *Das Lied einer Nacht* (1932). He shows that various media – such as film, radio, or gramophone – were being used during the process of production and entered into an intermedia dialogue with the diegesis of the film. Elsaesser situates his case study

within the broader discussion on the institutional and political context of the process of interconnecting media, their effect on the aesthetic dimension of cinema and the process of fetishisation of technology. Benjamin's thought and the way how he approached cinema is clearly reflected in Elsaesser's examination. Later, for example in the chapter "Archaeologies of Interactivity", the author refers to Benjamin more directly by studying the social dimension of film with special attention to cinematic strategies of engagement and modes of sustaining viewers' attention in the age of modernity. Apart from dozens of other thinkers and academic methods, which have had influence on Elsaesser's scholarship, Foucault and Benjamin endowed him with the sensibility to study cinema both as a technological object and as a social invention.

In the extensive introduction, Elsaesser outlines a broad context of the history of the development of media archaeology with a special interest particular focus on the ways how this reflexive practice has been adopted by himself and by other film scholars. He shows various understandings and approaches to media archaeology by referring to thinkers who have also used the term in their research: Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka, Siegfried Zielinski, or Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan. This certainly helps a reader unfamiliar with media archaeology to reconstruct possible modes of using it, depending on the particular area of investigation. It also allows Elsaesser to clearly delineate his own way of understanding the term, the theoretical framework that stands behind it, and to discern research goals. The originality of Elsaesser's approach lies in the fact that he has been able to take advantage of theoretical elasticity of media archaeology and to offer a distinguished, but also methodologically consistent, way of studying media. For Elsaesser, bringing back the manifold modes of extinct media uses and exploring their possible future lives and developments is what film history as media archaeology is primarily about. He mostly focuses on the early cinema period, but he also discusses many other issues, given the fact that the book is a collection of essays: the problem of revising classic film thinkers in the light of new media developments, the use of media archaeology by contemporary artists, the dominant paradigm of teleological realism in the film history, the effect of "otherness" or amazement of media, the possible futures of cinema, the migration of cinema into museums, and the revision of media archaeology as an academic practice, among others. There is no point of reviewing all of them; thus, I shall focus only on two problems more closely: firstly, the relationship between media archaeology and digital media, and secondly, the research on the predicted and imagined use of dead media from the early cinema period.

Elsaesser perceives media archaeology as an approach that can be valuable for the studies in digital media. Indeed, after film scholars started to

look through archaeological lenses on dead or forgotten audio-visual media from the early cinema period, it soon appeared that they had been undergoing parallel or similar processes as digital ones in the past few decades. Elsaesser shows that media archaeology can now serve as a fine repository of approaches which could be fruitfully appropriated to studying digital media. He argues that some of the widely-shared assumptions in media archaeology can enhance our understanding of technological conditions that enabled the production of digital media, processes which have been involved in their growth, or the ways in which they have been experienced. He states that with respect to digital media, linear, mono-causal notions of history were not suitable for explaining “the changes one was witnessing, and something like archaeology – i.e., a spatialised concept of time and transformation – seemed more promising and appropriate. In other words, it was as if media archaeology had to step into the breach and – at least temporarily – fill this gap in explanation, confronting bafflement and possibly even panic, fuelled by these ominously short life cycles of almost every device connected with digital media” (Elsaesser 2016: 40). Doubtlessly, media archaeological methods, if incorporated into digital media studies, can be entirely beneficial.

One should acknowledge, however, the limitations of applying this perspective: its provisional character, and the theoretical indetermination or reluctance of their adherents to solidify it into a rigorous method. In academic terms this has strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, media archaeology does not, for instance, reproduce flaws of grand narratives, which is the case with teleologically centred film history. On the other, media archaeology cannot, by any means, offer or evolve into a new paradigm for studying media in the strict sense of the word. As the author puts it: “[m]edia archaeology is therefore perhaps nothing more than the name for the non-place space and the suspension of temporal flows the film historian needs to occupy when trying to articulate rather than merely accommodate these several alternative, counterfactual, or parallax histories around which any study of the cross-media moving image culture now unfolds”.

We should bear in mind, however, that Elsaesser’s view on the media archaeology practices and the ease with which they can be adapted to investigate digital media environment is historically anchored. The reasons why we are able to see now that digital media and their development fit neatly into non-linear, discontinuous notions of history or a dispersed trajectory of possible uses can be at least twofold. Firstly, the processes that stand behind the expansion of digital technology, which Elsaesser discusses in his book, are much more apparent to us now than they were for scholars who begun to study early film in new ways in the 1980s. This validates, of course, Foucault’s perspective and Elsaesser acknowledges that “his impor-

tance continues to grow in the digital realm" (Elsaesser 2016: 39). Secondly, media archaeologists had to deconstruct traditional film historiography and "excavate" overlooked issues in order to rediscover a complex landscape of audio-visual inventions and people's customs with reference to media experience in early cinema period. Digital media scholars did not have to invest so much intellectual work in order to see that similar phenomena have been defining digital world and its evolution. Had it not been for the emergence of post-Foucaultian approaches, we would have perceived the development of digital media in a different way. In other words, many features of digital technology would not be possible to conceptualise without having an archaeological perspective available in media studies. I am not concerned here with offering a counterfactual story but rather with highlighting that Elsaesser's account of digital media in light of media archaeology is expressed in a very specific moment of media history. The offer he presents, however, is very much understandable if we take into account that the rapid expansion of digital media coincided with the emergence of the archaeological approach. Elsaesser illustrates that media archaeology – and one can add that possibly every historically oriented research – "carries within itself the very principles it is supposed to investigate, thereby running the risk of producing not new knowledge *per se* but reflecting the prejudices and preferences of our present age" (Elsaesser 2016: 365).

Another vital part of Elsaesser's book has been built on the project *Imagined Futures*, which he co-established in Amsterdam (1993-2011). The author writes that the main challenge of the research which he depicts in his book "is to try and give back to a particular past – say, the 1890s or the 1910s – its own future: not the one that history subsequently conferred on it, which in the case of early cinema had been an impoverished and selectively appropriated one, but a future that was imagined (in popular magazines), predicted (by self-promoters like Edison), and fantasized as in Albert Robida's mock-dystopic *Le Vingtième siècle. La vie électrique*" (Elsaesser 2016: 55). This speculative approach has its merits, since it can provide a more complex view on the studied period and give a better understanding of the cultural milieu which it was embedded in: highlight problems that people wished to solve by using technology, their presumptions on science, etc. However, it is both more difficult and risky for a historian to draw conclusions from a speculative research because there are far less tools to verify one's results. On the one hand, the type of research strategy presented by Elsaesser can help us to better understand the possible imagined significance of examined dead media. On the other, it carries a risk of distorting the historical evidence of how a certain technology was originally used, how its purpose was envisioned, or what other advancements it could have anticipated. Elsaesser

does not go too far in his speculations, since he constantly reminds us about the provisional nature of conclusions he proposes. It is worth highlighting, however, the methodological dangers that are indissolubly linked with the type of research he promotes.

Another important aspect of Elsaesser's work is that he cautiously distinguishes all the problems that remain in the centre of every chapter. The author impresses with his erudition, but since the book is a collection of essays, it might be difficult for readers to navigate their way through all the issues, themes, and contexts he alludes to. Nonetheless, the greatest merit of Elsaesser's media archaeological practice should not be recognised in giving some false hopes for establishing a new "method" that could yield "facts" and "definitions". His offer is very rich in its modesty which is especially present when he genuinely exposes the essential concerns of his approach: "I have been inclined to treat media archaeology as a *symptom* rather than a *method*, as a *placeholder* rather than a *research program*, as a *response to various kinds of crises* rather than as a *breakthrough innovative discipline*. I ask myself to what extent is media archaeology itself an *ideology* rather than a way of generating *new kinds of secure knowledge*" (Elsaesser 2016: 354). Although these words can be found at the end of his book, readers should keep them in mind before reading the first chapter in order to grasp a very specific manner of thinking that stands behind his work.

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