
Stefan Schubert. *Narrative Instability: Destabilizing Identities, Realities, and Textualities in Contemporary American Popular Culture*. Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019, 301 pages.

Judging from the popularity of various recent movies, series or video games, being duped or tricked is a source of particular enjoyment for modern audiences. Twists, which put into question the “reality” presented to viewers or gamers, force them to interact with texts (understood as cultural documents), to watch or play them again, and try to either reconstruct the stories, or check if the turning of the tables could be expected. In a way, the audience not so much watches or plays during the first watching or gameplay, but simply learns in order to apply the knowledge gained during the initial contact with the text to fully understand and appreciate the same text. This occurs despite the fact that the only new thing the second time around is the change of perception, so desirable that it becomes the ultimate (and sometimes only) cause of engaging with a text. The commercial success of such works as *Fight Club*, *Bioshock* or *Westworld*—which, despite their differences, are constructed the same way and use the same techniques, with the ultimate goal being to trick—positions them as notable and important, hence worthy of an in-depth analysis. The main appeal of these texts is not so much about the story itself, but more so about how it is presented, serving as proof of a certain sophistication characterizing present-day viewers and gamers. The narrative tools are primarily concerned with experience, one’s subjective perception of events, with *what* one is experiencing considered to be secondary. This allows modern audiences to indulge in such narratives, allowing them to understand the complexity of their own situation.

This transmedial trend is identified and characterized by the titular phrase of Stefan Schubert’s book, *Narrative Instability*. Within this trend the author recognizes three types of instabilities, regarding: identities, realities and textualities. The texts concerning unstable identities usually revolve around the mental state of their subjects, in consequence questioning the notion of “self” as something more than a social construct. An important characteristic of these texts is their relationship with the idea of the norm, being understood as that of white, male and middle-class characters. The norm, conveniently, is in agreement with the idea of a stereotypical American citizen, who finds himself threatened by the narratives of minorities that have come forward only recently. Whether confronting a different race, gender or class, the normative subject has to constantly affirm himself of his importance in these supposedly unstable times. Presenting the second type of instability, an unstable reality, is quite a task, as when it comes to books it can be conveyed through words, with the constructive work left to the imagination of the reader, while the movie/series or game must be more persuasive, due to the common notion that seeing is believing. To witness something means that one has proof of its physical existence. To achieve that, Schubert argues, one must focus on the relationship between time and space, as these two are crucial in duping the viewer. In games there is another factor at play, which involves perspective—FPP, first-person perspective, allows the player to believe that it is himself who finds himself in a particular world performing particular actions. The third type of instabilities, regarding textualities, are based on

understanding narration as experience. In these texts the narration influences our perception of the world, knowingly pointing our attention to the importance of stories. This applies to texts well aware of their narrative potential, using instability as a device to engage the viewer or gamer by redirecting him to other sources, stressing their own status as texts.

Schubert's thorough analysis of selected cultural works highlights an important development in the postmodern world, involving the adaption of narrative devices used by esteemed experimental authors in earlier decades to other, visual media. By focusing solely on American texts, he highlights the influence American culture has on global consciousness, as well as global understanding of the present-day moment. This is in accordance with the idea of norm, which permeates the book, further embedding the analysis in the discourse about the state of the national consciousness. Since all the stories have seemingly been told, it is the way they are told that now comes to the forefront. The fact that modern audiences derive such pleasure from analyzing and appreciating the tools used to tell stories is representative of a new way of thinking about the world. Schubert's suggestion is that the focus should be precisely on instability, as it is the willingness to be tricked, the hunger for twists, that disrupts the appeal of linearity.

Schubert divides his book into four sections (plus a conclusion), the first of which serves as the theoretical basis for his discussion of the idea of narrative instability. In this chapter he presents various approaches towards and explanations of the declining popularity of regular narratives, in favor of devices and tricks which were first introduced in the sixties and seventies by postmodern writers. The theoretical part is followed by three analytical chapters, each devoted to the aforementioned types of instability, in regards to: identities, realities and textualities. The second chapter is a discussion of three texts: *Fight Club*, *Bioshock* and *Black Swan*. The protagonists of the three are in the wrong when it comes to their understanding of who they are, which, in consequence, influences the viewer's/gamer's perception of the world presented in these works. It is only after a big reveal that the audience truly learns that it fell victim to an (unintentionally) unreliable narrator. The fourth chapter is about unstable realities, so texts which purposely trick the audience that things are a certain way, only to expose that they are indeed quite different. The works analyzed in this chapter are: *Interstellar*, *Inception* and *BioShock Infinite*. *Inception* is more concerned with disrupting the notion of space, while *BioShock Infinite* achieves its goal by misguiding the audience's understanding of time. *Interstellar* combines both of these characteristics, hence is a perfect introduction to that notion. The fifth chapter stresses representation, as it highlights the importance of narration in/to the stories presented. Two video games, *The Stanley Parable* and *Alan Wake*, either use devices from literary texts or simply allude to them, underlying their own status as texts. The final work analyzed in this work, *Westworld*, serves as an example of the rising importance of instabilities in television series, which are the main source of entertainment for modern audiences.

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